

## Exploring the semiotics of the Dayak Motifs in Sarawak

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### Abstract

Dayak traditional motifs once played as an important element in the non-verbal communication among the Dayak's people. Some of the motifs are still considered sacred and as medium of communication representing the spiritual beings or as a source of warlord power, which believed of capable to weaken their enemies or opponents. In addition to spiritual means, Dayak motifs also widely used in objects such as war artifacts, ceremonial arts, costumes, architecture and transportation. Complexity, inconsistency, and misinterpretation on semiotic of the traditions Dayak motifs were gradually suppressed its communicative significant, which eventually shifted to a mere manifestation of the modern Dayak symbolic identity. This paper aims to discuss the roles of the Dayak motifs in the current society of Dayak people in Sarawak. This paper will explore the accuracy and standardization in semiotic interpretation of the Dayak people's traditional motifs. This will also present semiotic theories as research method to define semiotic of visual sign or symbols within the context of the Dayaks visual communication. It hopes to facilitate better communications among the Dayaks of various regions in Sarawak.

**Keywords:** *Dayak Motif, 'Ukir Dayak', Sarawak Borneo, Semiotic, Visual Communication*

### 1. Research Background

Dayak visual arts are indeed very diverse. One of the famous Dayak art form is the art of 'Ukir'. The term 'ukir' which is used in the presentation of this paper refers to a term in the Iban language which, according to the book "*Bup Sereba Reti Jaku Iban, The Tun Jugah Foundation 2011*" (Iban Encyclopedia) means 'lukis' (a drawing): *rayuk* (curls), *gambar* (images), *garis* (lines) and *tukuh* (shapes/forms). On the other hands, the Orang Ulu Dayak called it '*kalong*' (Jeffrey Jalong, 2001) which referring to a form of a decorative and ornamentation of the 'ukir. In comparison to the Malay language, the meaning of 'Ukir' among the Dayak is beyond the basic meaning of the word 'Ukir' in the Malay language, which associates this term with carvings: engraving or tapping on the surface of wood, metal, stone and other materials with hard surfaces.

The Dayak 'ukir' is can still be seen throughout their application on building and architecture design and décor, daily utensils, traditional costumes, souvenirs and tourist products, and even being tattooed on the body for the various personal purposes; beauty, identity, recognition, power and belief.

Through these works of art, we can observe some variety of motifs that serve as content (display) of the 'ukir'. Each motif is displayed in a certain style with the typical character of the Dayaks; winding, curving, coiling tendrils, and striped.

Economically, Dayak 'ukir' is a commodity that can generate lucrative returns. It is undeniable that the uniqueness and intricacy of carving art ('ukir') of the Dayak can captivate anyone. Borneo Dayak motifs are indeed a very important element for the tourism-based industry. The Dayak-inspired artifacts are readily available from the souvenir shops, airports, tourism information centers, and often also sold during the local craft fairs.

In the context of modern society, the Dayak motif is a manifestation of the unique identity of the Dayaks. Apart from the commercial, the role Dayak 'ukir' was originally very different from what happens today. The big book that can be considered as the bible for the basic knowledge of the Dayak traditional 'ukir' design especially Dayak Iban, Kayan and Kenyah is a bi-language book entitled "Asas Ukiran Iban: Satu Pengenalan" (Iban's Basic Carving: An Introduction) by Augustine Anggat Ganjing, translated into Bahasa Melayu by Jonathan Singki, and published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (1991).

In the preface to the book, Datuk Amar Alfred Jabu Anak Numpang, Deputy Chief Minister (II) / Ministry of Agriculture and Community Development Sarawak (1989) has touched on the importance and meaning of the traditional Dayak's 'ukir' motif in context of sustainability as art forms, literature and interpretation, the history, the tradition and craftsmanship of the Dayaks.

Mr. Augustine started writing in the introduction by asking some questions arising from his personal curiosity; when the starting point and whether that inspired this 'ukir' in traditional Dayak community. He also wanted to know the main motivations that inspired 'tukang ukir/ pengukir' (artists) to produce their 'ukir' in a form and style of a particular motif; whether through dreams?, level of aesthetic appreciation?, demands of the Gods or Goddesses?, and, or as a manifestation of the knowledge gained or adapted from another country or 'menua bukai' (from another culture?/civilisation).

The author also requesting about the actual use of such inscriptions 'ukir' values for the Dayaks;

- Warfare / battle – to scare / weaken/ riveting opponents?
- Shows the ability of the sculptor (pengukir) / artist? (Praise and fame in society),
- Getting protection / against illness and pain?
- The form of writing? - (eg. Papan Turai)
- The symbol of social status?
- Meeting the demands of the gods / goddesses?

The author also briefly explains about the restrictions on the usage and the production of certain 'ukir' motifs on the grounds that were considered taboo by the Dayak community. The author states, as Dayaks do not have their own form of writing, the 'ukir' therefore being used as a means to describe their ethnic identity. Through a

distinctive style of the 'ukir', the Dayaks can distinguish their material culture with other races.

The "Asas Ukiran Iban: Satu Pengenalan" has generally concluded that the art of 'ukir' inherited from the ancestors must be maintained as one of the Dayak social fundamental. As a basic knowledge of visual arts branch of the Dayak, Mr. Augustine has tried to explain as much as possible basic design process of the 'ukir' by illustration and description as a reference for the new generation.

## 2. Dayak and Ukir



Figure 1: Organic motif on Ajat basket

Cave Complex, in Miri district, Sarawak, Malaysia. The Dayak peoples comprise over 50 ethnic groups speaking different languages. The highly cultural and linguistic diversity in many ways indicates the complexity of verbal and non-verbal communication within Dayak groups.

Dayak is a term originally coined by Europeans referring to the indigenous peoples of non-Malay inhabitants (Human of Borneo 2007) of Borneo Island, the third largest island in the world. Researchers suggest that humans have inhabited Borneo Island since Middle Paleolithic time based on the archeological findings at the Niah

Beside verbal communication, traditional Dayak also communicate using many symbolic visual signs which embedded in their traditional motif to signify certain meaning of communicative semiotic; to inform / notify, to caution, to direct, to persuade, to guide, to signal, to show prestige and classify objects or people and their social class. In contrast to the linguistic ability or verbal communication, using visual motifs as communicative symbol may be less discrete and more prone to misunderstanding. Likewise, as of communication significant, Dayak motif has begun to show diminishing role as an important elements of visual communication. The new generation of Dayak is indeed still appreciating their traditional motifs but merely for its aesthetic value and being regarded as decorative patterns or at the very least as a manifestation of their cultural identity.

The term 'motif' is referred to a form of visual sign or mark that being used within the Dayak groups as a symbol (Greek: Symbolos) that has semiotic value in interpreting certain meaning or idea. According to the Dayak warlords, Edy Barau, idea of having



Figure 3: Panglima Edy Barau (1961 – 2015) – Source: Blog Anak Urang Panggau

the motifs especially used by the Dayak (especially the Iban and Kayan) was obvious manifestations of close relation between this indigenous people with their natural realm; the forest of Borneo. Dayak tribe lives coexist in the interior in meeting all of their needs; a type of life very much dependent on nature. Hence, the characteristics and attributes design of the Dayak motifs were often taken in a form of nature such as plants, animals, and various symbols of their faith, which all have meaning and purpose in their social culture.

Dayak motif can be identified through their basic subject matter such as Mythical creatures (dragon), Anamorphic (hornbill, dog, birds, roaster, crustaceans, amphibians

and reptiles), Flora/Plants (wild fern, flowers etc.), Celestial/Cosmos objects (star, moon, sun, cloud etc.), Spiritual Beings (giant, ghost, ancestor images etc.) and sometimes just presented in abstract forms. Dayak motifs can also be defined through their swirl, spiral, and sometimes interloping and entangle characters. Depends on their application, the extended curls (loops) are normally organically florid and swirling towards pointy ends, and were normally applied on wall panels, wood carvings, traditional shields (terabai) and etc. The geometric and angular curls types of motifs character somehow, were commonly used on textiles and basket weavings.



Figure 2: Aso Motif (Dog)

‘Bunga Terung’ for instance which also known as a Borneo Rosette or literally the Eggplant Flower is one of most well-known kind of Dayak motif, especially when we discuss on the topic of Borneo Tattoo or Borneo Headhunters. Spiritually, Bunga Terung or coming-of-age tattoo motif means a journey of manhood. Whereby, looking from semiotic value, Bunga Terung motif signifying ‘freedom’, ‘protection’, ‘safety’ and ‘longevity’. Beside rosette-like motif, Edy Barau had also mentioned that there are seven other important motifs associate with body tattoo which strictly only to be placed or tattooed on the very specific location within human body and each motifs has its own specific meaning.



Figure 4: Variation of bungai Terung Motif.  
Source: Kingdom of Sarawak (Kelingai Iban Sarawak Tattoo)  
<http://robinsonmike.blogspot.com>

This topic is deliberately chosen in response to the insistence on personal experience of researcher who feel the need to highlight this subject to the attention of the general public. Its main aim is to educate the general public that each motif applied on any objects associated with the material culture of the Dayak people should be handling with certain degree of respect.

With the advancement of print technology and lack of basic knowledge on the Dayak motif among new generations today, those motifs are replicable easily and being used without embracing their basic philosophy. For example, a particular motif on printed T-shirt might fall into a category of sacred motifs which supposedly only eligible for a group of people of certain social status. Likewise, due to this ignorance and insufficient ability to appreciate those motifs in the context between the esthetic arts and their semiotic value, therefore, someone might end up adopting the prohibited motifs and may invite condemnation from society who is expert in the local knowledge concerning their traditional motifs.

### 3. Research Objective(s)

This research aims;

- To explore the meaning and purpose of the Dayak motif in the context of visual communications.
  - This objective is focusing on the semiotic of Dayak traditional motif as communication symbols and how they are being used/applied by the diverse ethnicity within the Dayak society.
  - This objective also investigates the correlation between the 'form/shape' of the motif and their meaning.
- To investigate the complexity, inconsistency, and misinterpretation on semiotic of the Dayak motifs affecting their communicative significant.
  - This objective concerning on the ability of the new generation of the Dayak to inteprete the non-verbal meaning of the Dayak traditional motifs.

- The diversity of the Dayaks in , give rise to many possible version of intepretation of similar motif.
- To validate the impact on the shifting roles of the Dayak traditional motifs from a communicative context to the manifestation of modern Dayak identity.
  - This objective will investigate the impact of rapid rural-urban migration, commnication medium, urbanised lifestyles and assimilation as attributes to the new perspective on the roles of the Dayak traditional motifs.

#### **4. Rationale for the Research**

There are numerous books and researches conducted on subjects related to the Borneo indigenous people such as material culture, linguistic, characteristic of the people, arts and crafts, spiritually and diversity of many aspects in the realm of the Dayak. Despite the mass, there are still untapped areas of discussion, especially in Dayak traditional motifs significant to visual communication.

There are past publication on traditional Dayak people living in Borneo. One of the earliest publications and most comprehensive reading material on the Borneo people (and of the Dayak) were written by Charles Hose and William McDougall. 'The Pagan tribes of Borneo' (1912) was the result of combining the twenty-four years Hose's relationship with the state government as a Resident Magistrate, and of McDougall, a member of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Borneo. In this book, both Hose and McDougall had recorded and documented the daily life of the Dayak during that time which comprised the social systems, methods of warfare, crafts, decorative arts, ideas of existence and spiritual practices, and had also been given a short treatise on myths, legends, and stories.

Several decades later, Bernard Sellato, a PhD in Anthropology from the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) in Paris, had spent many years in Kalimantan (Indonesian part of Borneo) traveled extensively, crisscrossing the forest walk Muller Range linguistic research, anthropology and material culture of the Dayak. 'Hornbill and Dragon' by Sellato (1989) is a bilingual art book that gives a clear space solely focused on the art of the island of Borneo - Borneo, Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei; featuring Borneo's landscape, people, scenes of life and longhouses. Works of art including home decoration, carving, container, faces the dragon, dart shields, weapons, textiles, baskets, hats, baby carriers, tattoos, jewelry dance, masks, figures, and architectural elements. In his latest edited book, "Art plaited from Borneo Rainforest" (2012), Sellato compiling the first comprehensive work of its kind for weaving arts subjects (weaving motifs and materials). This book is contributions of twenty-one contributors consist of leading experts in the world on the Dayak art and crafts; scholars and artisans who live in Borneo over the years and has been directly involved, on a personal and emotional level, with the islands and their culture.

In addition to the resources that have been published previously by the authors of non-Dayak, the Dayak academics and researchers had also recorded the results of their research pertaining to the meaning and spiritual classification of Borneo visual arts motifs into their academic papers and journal publications. Among them is Anna Durin (a PhD) who studied the roles of Dayak motifs on the ceremonial textile design (Pua kumbu) and traditional motif application on 'Bemban' mat woven by the people of

Saribas Dayak (Iban). Meanwhile, Noria Tugang (also a PhD) studying the customary significance of indigenous Iban motif on ceramic jars.

Another writer, Heidi Munan who is a humanist craft enthusiast living in Kuching, Sarawak Borneo had written about culture-related subjects for over 30 years and has published a book entitled "Sarawak Crafts: Methods, Materials, and Motifs" on carving, metalwork, plaiting and basketry, beadwork and weaving of the people of Sarawak Borneo reflect their environment.

## **5. Significant of Research**

The world is witnessing many indigenous' visual culture traditions now run the risk of lost and distorted, whether as a result of advances in communications technology, inter-ethnic assimilation, nationalization, or the demands of globalization. It is feared that the younger generation of the Dayak people are increasingly pay less attention to the importance role of the 'ukir' motif as an essential elements in their visual culture due to its level of complexity, inconsistency, and semiotically hard to understand.

The accuracy and standardization in semiotic interpretation of Dayak traditional motifs are very important in the ethnically diversifies of the Dayak. The standard interpretation system of the motif (if any?), would facilitate communications among the Dayaks of various regions in Borneo.

Documenting the systematic classification of traditional Dayak motifs according to the semiotic would uplift public understanding about the consciences of using particular motifs with respect embracing their basic philosophy.

## **6. Methodology**

Research and data collection methods to be used in this research are as follows:

### **6.1 Observation**

Observation method is chosen based on the nature of the study pertaining to society, culture, beliefs and traditions of visual communication. These observations will be carried out within two scopes of the Dayak community life that is classified as significantly different due to the physical position of political, cultural and traditional values. The first phase of observation will take place in several villages / longhouses in Sarawak, where the Dayak people is still keeping the tradition of producing the 'ukir'. In this real setting, the observation is used to systematically describe of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting.

### **6.2 Visual Research**

The visual research will be conducted simultaneously with the Observation research. The visual research will employed image capturing (still and video) to record the techniques and process of producing 'ukir'.

## **7. Conclusion**

Iban famous proverb goes, "*kelala buah ari langgu, kelala bangsa ari jaku, kelala basa ari penyiru*" (to identify the fruit by its inert, to identify the race by their language, to identify courtliness by the gentility) is an important proverb that has always been the guideline for many generations aimed to strengthen the Iban cultural identity. However,

in a multi-language Dayak, the language plays less significant to create their cultural identity. The existence of 'ukir' across the Dayak culture, indicates as if there is an understanding and acceptance in multiple languages / dialects Dayak to the visual elements of 'ukir' motif as a symbol of their cultural identity.

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### **Framework of study on Tourist Route and its Implication towards Island Tourism Development in Malaysia**

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#### **Abstract**

In Malaysia nowadays, route tourism is becoming positively developed, including connecting with each other the tourism resources of a number of smaller locations and marketing them jointly as an individual tourism destination area. Tourists destinations are in a condition of constant modify. This particular advancement is more extreme in the case of Island destinations due to their geographic restrictions. This research is a framework of the top concern areas for tourism development in Malaysia. The