



International Virtual Colloquium on Multi-disciplinary Research Impact (2nd Series)

Organised by Research Nexus UiTM (ReNeU)
Office of Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation)
Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia, 15 Oct 2021



Motifs of Iranun Siambitan Weaving in Sabah

Juita Jaafar Manap , Arba'iyah Abd Aziz

College of Creative Arts,
Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia

juita680@utim.edu.my, arbaiyah@uitm.edu.my
Tel: +60176299385

Abstract

Textile weaving is a main activity among Iranun women. There is a lack of research on Iranun siambitan weaving motifs. The objective of this paper is to highlight the motifs in the weaving and their underlying meaning. Data was obtained through observation and interview. The researcher will analyse the outcome using Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on signs and symbol. The outcome of this research is categorized into three: flora, fauna and geometric motifs. The outcome of this paper aims to bring awareness to the importance and value of the siambitan weaving as a piece of evidence of the Iranun people's cultural heritage.

Keywords: Motifs; Iranun; Siambitan; Weaving

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2022. The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioural Researchers on Asians) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iS17.3792>

1.0 Introduction

The Iranun tribal community in Sabah is said to be a descendant of a group of people from the Sulu and Mindanao islands in the Philippines. There is a theory that a volcano eruption in 1765 forced the Iranun to migrate, and they dispersed widely as far as Tampasuk, known today as Kota Belud, situated on the west coast of Sabah (Waren, 1981). Even among the Iranun, there is still significant uncertainty about their people's historical place and origin (Smith, 2011).

The elders and leaders in the Iranun community believe that they originated in Sabah and that some fled to the Philippines because they feared Sultan Makatunaw, who ruled Tampasuk in the 13th century (Raja Ali, 1965). According to McKaughan (1996), linguistic evidence shows the Iranun of Sabah language is older than the Maranau language in southern Philippines. He believes that the Iranun of Sabah is closer to the Proto-Danao than is Maranau in ways that there are linguistic features such as medial consonant clusters and beginning consonant clusters found in the Iranun language in Sabah, but not in Maranau. He also believes languages tend to lose such clusters over time rather than introduce them. Thus, the clusters represent older forms in Iranun of Sabah than forms without such clusters found in Maranau (McKaughan, 1996) (Smith, 2011).

1.1 Iranun Weaving

Iranun weavers are still found in Kampong Rampayan Laut, Kampong Rampayan Ulu and Kampong Marabau. It takes approximately three and a half hours drive to get from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah state capitol, to Kota Belud. From Kota Belud to these villages takes approximately an additional forty minutes by car to Kampong Rampayan Laut. Kampong Marabau is the most accessible and Kampong Rampayan Ulu being the furthest. The weavers in the Iranun community are women of all ages. Most weavers make products such as *selendang* (shawl), skirts, and hangings. The most well-known weaving from this community is the *siambitan* cloth which is usually folded into a headgear

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2022. The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioural Researchers on Asians) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iS17%20\(Special%20Issue\).3792](https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iS17%20(Special%20Issue).3792)

worn by men. The *siambitan* woven headgear is also known as the *dastar*, and it is worn not only by men from the Iranun community but also by Bajau men. Motifs on the *siambitan dastar* is in geometric form and are brightly coloured in red, orange, yellow, black, and white.

The Iranun people have specific symbols and meaning in their tradition. Until today the Iranuns use colour to show a person's status and rank in their community which is seen during marriage ceremonies and funerals (Asmiaty, 2019). For example, the colour green signifies rank, status, and leadership. This colour usually represents royalty, a *Datu'*, or a noble person. This person's grave will be adorned with 15 layers of green umbrellas. Yellow represents a *Syarif*, a pious or religious person who will also have 15 layers of umbrellas over their grave. In comparison, ordinary folks will have 8 layers of white umbrellas over their graves. The colour red represents passion, bravery and is a symbol of heroes. Purple represents unity, and blue symbolizes cleanliness and purity (Asmiaty, 2019).

The Bajau people have been buying this cloth from the Iranuns for hundreds of years. As such, it has become part of their cultural heritage too. Traditionally the *kain dastar*, better known in the Iranun language as *tubau siambitan*, is not only used as headgear during wedding ceremonies but also during the harvesting season (*musim menuai*). The Pesta Kaamatan is a festival held to celebrate the harvest. On this day, the Iranun people dress in traditional costumes adorned with intricately ornamented accessories such as neck pieces, head dresses, and belts.

Iranun men dress up for this occasion and wear the *tubau-a-siambitan (dastar)* handsomely with a top and pant suit. They observe many traditions and customs during the festive season. During this occasion, they celebrate with song and dance accompanied by the *Kulintang*, a group of musicians playing the *kulintang*. The *kulintang* are percussion or gong-like instrument (Batahong & Dayou, 2003) similar to the gamelan played by the Javanese people.

2.0 Siambitan Weaving

The *siambitan* weaving today is used not only during the festive seasons but also as small enterprise products. Weavers have made pieces of home furnishing and decorative products. The Iranun weavers appreciate that the *siambitan* cloth is promoted as more than just a headgear, prolonging its life as a treasured cloth. Although they do have apprehensions about the traditional function of the *siambitan* being compromised once it becomes commercialised.

The Iranun weaving survives through the passing down of skills and design knowledge. The designs are inspired by their natural surroundings and some through a dreaming process. Because these motifs are woven, there are restrictions on the use of curved lines and shapes (Ismail & Humin, 2018). Most Iranun design and motifs appear geometric, although they are inspired by organic subjects such as flora and fauna.

An old Iranun master weaver dreamt that a snake had come to her. She was in shock and feared the snake would harm her. The snake convinced her that it was not going to harm her. It told the women that there was something it had to show her. The snake said that it is an unusual piece of weaving where the front and back of the cloth look the same. The snake then demonstrated and showed the woman how to weave the *siambitan*. There has been an evolution and improvisation to the *munsalah-a-siambitan*, which created another type of *siambitan*, one with borders called *tubau-a-siambitan*. This is the *siambitan* used to fold and make a *dastar* (headgear) (Pandian, 2011).

There has been an evolution and improvisation to the *munsalah-a-siambitan*, which created another type of *siambitan*, one with borders called *tubau-a-siambitan*. This is the *siambitan* used to fold and make a *dastar* (headgear) (pandian, 2011).

3.0 Methodology

This qualitative research is carried out to study the motifs in Iranun *siambitan* weaving. The data is collected through interviews and observation. There were 3 pieces of *siambitan* weaving selected and used to observe the use of motifs. There are two primary informants during this process: Tuan Haji Masrin Haji Hassin, Head Representative of the Iranun Community in Sabah, and Hajjah Pandian Bte Sulaiman, the most respected master weaver among weavers from Kampung Rampayan Laut, Rampayan Ulu and Marabau. The researcher used the theory of signs by Ferdinand de Saussure to analyse the data.

4.0 Structure of Siambitan Weaving

There are two variations of the *siambitan* weaving. The *siambitan* weaving is square with no division of design areas. At the same time, the *tubau-a-siambitan* which is also square, is divided into three main areas: the centre, border, and corner. The centre area is usually designed in a grid pattern, the border in a stripe pattern, and the corners in an emblem like floral or geometric design. There are also some *siambitans* with distinct flora, fauna, and figurative motifs as part of the centre weaving design.

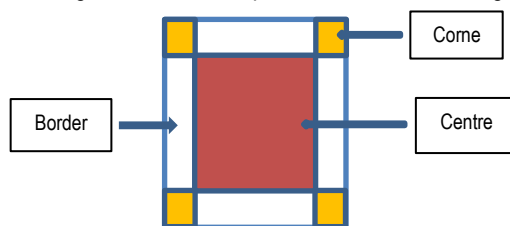














Figure 1: Basic structure of *tubau-a-siambitan* weaving

4.1 Tubau-a-Siambitan 1


Table 1: Motifs analysis on *Tubau-a-Siambitan* For Sample 1.







Colours: Red, orange, yellow, green, purple, white, black			
 <p>Source of image: https://www.mycraftshoppe.com/products/angtnikd?lang=bn</p>			
Types of Motif	Area on Cloth	Symbol	Meaning
Floral Motifs			
1. Tapioca leaf (<i>Raun Kalinguan</i>)	Comer		Weaver's adaptation of the surrounding environment (Ismail, Humin, 2018) - A person who is observant and appreciates beauty (Pandian, 2011)
2. Lotus flower (<i>Unga teratai</i>)	Border		Weaver's adaptation of the surrounding environment (Ismail, Humin, 2018) - A person who is observant and appreciates beauty (Pandian, 2011)
3. Cotton shoot (<i>Sumping kapas</i>)	Comer		Life and medicine/healing (Ismail, Humin, 2018)
4. Cotton flower (<i>Unga kapas</i>)	Border		Life and medicine/healing (Ismail, Humin, 2018)
5. Tuaran flower (<i>Tuarah</i>)	Border		Food source/traditional recipe (Ismail, Humin, 2018) - As an element to complete a setting/occasion/activity (Pandian, 2011)

6. Gardenia (<i>Unga Kina</i>)	Centre		Beauty (Ismail, Humin, 2018)
7. Flower shoot (<i>Umbus</i>)	Border		Weaver's adaptation of the surrounding environment (Ismail, Humin, 2018) - A person who is observant and appreciates beauty (Pandian, 2011)
8. Wintermelon (<i>Kundur</i>)	Centre		Food source/traditional recipe (Ismail, Humin, 2018) - As an element to complete a setting/occasion/activity (Pandian, 2011)
Motif Geometric			
1. Star (<i>Bituon</i>)	Comer		Religion, faith (Ismail, Humin, 2018), Symbol of Islam (Pandian, 2011)
2. Elbow (<i>Siku</i>)	Border		Status and wealth, fertility and growth (Ismail, Humin, 2018)
3. Four squares (<i>Pecah empat</i>)	Centre		Unity (Ismail, Humin, 2018)

4.2 Tubau-a-Siambitan 2


Table 2: Motifs analysis on *Tubau-a-Siambitan* For Sample 2.





Colours: Red, orange, yellow, green, white, black			
			
Source of Image: https://www.google.com.my/search?q=iranun+dastar+kuda&tbm			
Types of Motif	Area on Cloth	Sign	Meaning
Floral Motif			

1. Lotus flower (<i>Bunga teratai</i>)	Border		Beauty in surrounding environment (Hajjah Pandian, 2011)
2. Cotton flower (<i>Unga kapas</i>)	Border		Life and medicine/healing (Ismail, Humin, 2018)
3. Tuaran flower (<i>Tuarah</i>)	Border		Food source/ cooking/ medicine (Ismail,Humin, 2018) - As an element to complete a setting/occasion/activity (Pandian, 2011)
4. Flower shoot (<i>Umbus</i>)	Border		Weaver's adaptation of the surrounding environment (Ismail, Humin, 2018) - A person who is observant and appreciates beauty (Pandian, 2011)
5. Wintermelon (<i>Kundur</i>)	Centre		Food source/traditional recipe (Ismail,Humin, 2018) - As an element to complete a setting/occasion/activity (Pandian, 2011)
Fauna Motif			
6. Horse (<i>Kuda</i>)	Centre		Beast of war, farming, transportation, marriage, sports and entertainment (Ismail, Humin, 2018)

4.3 Tubau-a-Siambitan 3

Table 3: Motifs analysis on *Munsalah-a-Siambitan* For Sample 3.

Colours: Red, pink, blue, yellow, green, white, black			
			
Source of image: https://www.mycraftshoppe.com/products/rs9dyfg3?lang=bm			
Types of Motif	Area on Cloth	Sign	Meaning

Floral Motifs			
1. Wintermelon (<i>Kundur</i>)	Centre		Food source/traditional recipe (Ismail, Humin, 2018)
2. Mirrored Fruit (<i>sumping tinubau</i>)	Centre		Beauty (Ismail, Humin, 2018) protection (Hajjah Pandian, 2011)
3. Single Shoot (<i>umbus tinubau</i>)	Centre		Growth, belief (Hajjah Pandian, 2011)
4. Shoot 1 (<i>umbus tinubau</i>)	Centre		Growth, belief (Hajjah Pandian, 2011)

5.0 Discussion

The involvement of the Sabah State Government in supporting Iranun weavers to run workshops and showcase their weaving is essential to educate the public, locally and abroad. For the *siambitan* weaving practice to sustain and survive, more workshops can be organized to introduce the beauty behind *siambitan* weavings and the *soumak* method. *Soumak* is an old and intricate interlocking weaving technique can cannot be lost to time. The Sabah State Government can collaborate and organize tours and visits to Iranun textile weaving workshops in the villages to raise awareness of the existence of Iranuns and their cultural heritage. These tourism activities will also generate income for the weavers and community through a small or medium enterprise (SME). Academicians can also encourage future researchers to study and write about Iranun textile weaving and practices.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Almost all Iranun motifs appear in geometric style because of the weaving structure. The grid-like movement in the weaving process limits the possibility for curved motifs to be constructed. It is not impossible however, it will take much longer to produce. The limitation in the construction of curved shapes in motifs has created a geometric style in the design of most Iranun weavings. The motifs in the *siambitan* weaving are mostly inspired by the natural environment and daily objects. This shows how the motifs are important in documenting Iranun people's common objects, activities and environmental setting. This documentation is a record of their way of life and is significant in ensuring that the history and existence of such cultural heritage is preserved.

Many motifs were inspired by the same object but rendered and arranged differently, creating a variation in motifs, pattern and design. Some symbolize the same meaning, some change based on the combination with other motifs. Overall, the motifs in Iranun *siambitan* weavings are informative of their lifestyle and daily routine. They portray the importance of women in their community through combination motifs that symbolize fertility, food source, recipe ingredients, status, power, wealth and beauty.

The motifs shown on the three samples of *siambitan* weavings are very positive in meaning. There is no negative connotation in each motif and in combination pattern repeats. The positivity in symbolic meaning shows status, wealth, knowledge in medicine and the use of transportation tells us that the Iranun people are civilized and peaceful. Although most weavings depict positivity, there are combination motifs which represents war and conflict.

The depiction of horse motifs on the *siambitan* weavings vary in function depending of the combination of the horse motif with figures of men, flora and geometric motifs. Depending again on how the figures are placed on or near the horse, it can suggest that the weaving tells a story of war, agriculture activities or marriage. These images of horses and figures are commonly used in the past however, the use of motifs and the arrangement of pattern today shows a more abstract design which may have been influenced by the Islamic belief of not portraying figurative and animal forms in objects of art and craft.

The Islamic influenced abstract motifs and design with no fauna and figures make the *siambitan* weaving more marketable among Iranuns and Bajaus, as well as the international market. The marketability of these weavings will help Iranun weavers sustain their practice while promoting their cultural heritage.

The use of colours and motifs come as a conscious decision while the weaver is weaving the *siambitan*. It is also a conscious decision to choose similar colours of yarns each time a weaving is constructed. The colours applied are still similar to the colours used by their elders and the weavers before them. This ensures the authenticity of the Iranun traditional heritage. The bright colours reflect a celebration which is can be seen as pride in their heritage and custom. There is repetition in the use of a few colours such as black, red, yellow, green and white which is seen on each sample of the *siambitan* weaving. These sets of colours are used in other Iranun textiles and craft. Traditionally, the Iranuns believe that colours symbolize meaning. For example, green is used to represent royalty or people of the courts, while white is worn by commoners. The use of colour can be seen at wedding ceremonies, funerals and at the cemetery, and in traditional clothing.

While the *siambitan* is still practiced and produced, the Iranun weavers however, are facing an existential challenge. The art of weaving the *siambitan* is slowly diminishing, as the younger generation of Iranuns prefer to pick up other skills such as sewing, baking, teaching or find work at food outlets in bigger towns. Unlike the older weavers who inherit their skills from their mothers and are passionate about weaving, the younger show less interest. They do not want to stay in the village but would rather move to bigger towns to find work and money.

Traditional practices are sometimes forgotten and not even considered at times when planning an occasion especially a wedding ceremony. For example, the traditional way of decorating the dias with woven textiles, brass-wear and traditional ornamentation is replaced with urban contemporary design where none of the Iranun textiles are used as part of it. Even on special occasions such as the harvest festival or Eid (a celebration which takes place after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan), the Iranun people, both men and women, do not dress in traditional costumes or accessories. According to Hajjah Pandian, the Iranun master weaver, this is due to the hot weather where the slightly thick textiles become unsuitable materials as body coverings. Unfortunately, many of the masters in weaving, poetry, music and dance have passed away leaving no apprentice with sufficient skills and knowledge to train the future generation of Iranuns.

It is hoped that this research will benefit the Iranun people in particular, and other indigenous communities in Malaysia, by being one of many sources providing records for better understanding of symbol and meaning behind cultural heritage products. The documentation of symbolic decorative images and their meanings will be a reference for younger Iranuns and others who are interested to learn about the Iranun people's tradition and cultural heritage. Such visual documentations of traditional weavings can contribute to the preservation, conservation and protection of the Iranun cultural heritage.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia, for their assistance, as well as ReNeU UiTM, for the publication incentive provided through Program MEE 1.0.

References

- Asmiaty Amat (2019), Pelamin Iranun Masyarakat Iranun Kota Belud, Sabah, *Journal Antarabangsa Dunia Melayu*, 12(2), 164-180.
- Ismail Ibrahim & Humin Jusilin (2018), *Warisan Iranun: Corak dan Ragam Hias Objek dan Budaya*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
- Warren, James Francis (1981) *The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*, Singapore University Press, 1981.
- McKaughan, Howard P (1958), *The Inflection and Syntax of Maranao Verbs*, Publications of the Institute of National Language, Manila: Bureau of Printing.
- Ronald Yusri Batahong1 & Jedol Dayou (2003), *National Postgraduate Seminar*, UMS, Kota Kinabalu, 18-19 Mac 2003.
- Smith, Karla (2011), *The Iranun of Sabah: Language and Culture of an Endangered Minority in Malaysia*, Pelanduk Publications, Kuala Lumpur.