

## Local Plant Motif of *Kain Suket Ajang*

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### Abstract

This study delves into the identity of Suket Ajang, a traditional craft in Sarawak, particularly among Rajang's Melanau population. Employing semiotics, the research deciphers the complex meanings and cultural nuances embedded in Suket Ajang's native plant motifs. Through an in-depth examination of literary and visual materials, the study unveils the symbolic language within Suket Ajang, showcasing how individual motifs are chosen, investigated, and classified based on their semiotic qualities. This method sheds light on the aesthetic and semiotic elements, revealing the intricate blend of local plant features. Notable motifs like buwak tula and tapok pedadah further contribute to Suket Ajang's rich cultural identity.

Keywords: Motif, Plant, Local, Songket, Culture

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### 1.0 Introduction

Suket Ajang's sophisticated design uses semiotics to convey nuanced meanings through patterns. Suket Ajang represents Sarawak's cultural diversity, influenced by Melanau traditions and nature. Like Sarawak's cultural tapestry, this cloth has basic forms influenced by local flora and patterns with profound Melanau cultural value. While visiting Kampung Rajang in Sarikei, Sarawak, I inspected Suket Ajang's unusual themes and decorations. The theme arrangement's indigenous flora highlights Suket Ajang's cultural diversity, making it a vital feature for a cultural study. Importantly, the motifs are stylized and converted into geometric patterns, a hard process that matches semiotic approaches, bringing several meanings to the design. Suket Ajang's painstaking theme development raises awareness of cultural items and Malay history's importance. These symbols, now geometric patterns, represent Islam and improve Suket Ajang's visual narrative. The abundance of signs and symbols in Suket Ajang helps preserve Sarawak's traditional history.

### 2.0 Literature Review

Sarawak has over 124,450 square kilometers of land, accounting for 37.5 percent of Malaysia's total area. Sarawak is separated from Indonesia's Kalimantan by a portion of the Borneo Mountain range. Sarawak likewise features tropical topography and an equatorial climate with two monsoon seasons: the northeast and southwest monsoons. This equatorial forest provides numerous logs and forest products and is an essential source of assets. Sarawak is one of the 600-kilometre-long states separated from Peninsular Malaysia to the west by the South China Sea. Thus, Kuching is Sarawak's first district, followed by Sri Aman, Sibu, Miri, Limbang, Sarikei, Kapit, Kota Samarahan, Bintulu, Mukah, and Betong. Sarikei, on the other hand, is one of Sarawak's eleven divisions, classified as the sixth portion in Sarawak by Sarawak Gazette Swk. L. N. 26, dated March 15, 1973. In 2010, Sarikei had a total area of 4,332.4 kilometres (1,672.7 square miles) and 116,290 inhabitants. Sarikei is also Sarawak's second-smallest administrative division, with four sub-district

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breakdowns in its administration: Sarikei, Maradong, Julau, and Pakan. Sarikei is a stopover town for those travelling from Kuching to Sibu, which may be reached by road or river transit, i.e., express boat. Sarikei is also located near the banks of the Rajang River, which is known as Malaysia's longest river (Abbas, 2019). Sarawak, which is made up of several ethnically diverse small cities, will be able to develop its own culture. Culture is referred to as the whole way of life of a community or a people. Al-Attas (2001) concludes that economic, social, and political thought, literature, language, attitudes, customs, values, and norms are included under culture. Suket Ajang has embodied the Melanau community's cultural identity and ideology. However, despite each pattern and ornament on each piece of textile art, society must also show components of cultural clash. In other words, there is a diversity of cultures in each originality of a work of textile art. The community and previous colonial influence generated a cluster of high levels of a compound that questioned the authenticity of the Suket Ajang itself. The overall composition of motifs is carefully considered and planned. The whole plant is shown in relief in some design regions and translated into a harmonious design. This principle of motif arrangement is also applied in other Malay crafts. For example, it is widely used in a text, batik, and silverware design, with each craft interpreting the motif according to its materials and techniques. Malay crafts have a prominent look because they use their elements and principles of design and patterns. They can easily be differentiated from the crafts of other countries and cultures (Rusli et al., 2021). Generally, a motif is the main character in a design, whereby it is arranged to fill a space and is thus known as a pattern (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1986). Most traditional Malay motifs are inspired by their surroundings, especially nature. They are cleverly translated visually into harmonious elements and principles of design, such as lines, shapes, colours, balance, textures, and repetitions of an object (Wan Hashim, 1996). Indirectly, they resemble the aesthetic character described by Zakaria Ali (1989), whereby the skills of seeing and perceiving could enable an artist or craftsman to generate functional products with aesthetic value. Rusli et al., 2021. The surrounding flora and fauna influence the development of the textile motif in Indonesia and Malaysia. Kari et al., 2017.

Furthermore, ethnic inter-mix marriages among Sarawak Melanau with different ethnic groups resulted in a clash of two cultures. As a result of this marriage, the clash in partnership in art and culture in the development of Melanau arts has been triggered. This is undeniably the unique sociocultural factor, with the highest percentage of other ethnic communities in Sarawak representing 40% of the state's total population. It can be seen in some of the decorative pattern art or motifs that are identified as having similar layouts and use of patterning techniques to those of bordering countries such as Indonesia and Brunei. Excerpts below can support this fact: almost all motifs and ornaments on the Suket Ajang are like the *Songket* from Brunei, but there is little difference in the pattern, layout, and weaving techniques.

*"motif dan corak songket masyarakat Melayu Sarawak itu sendiri mempunyai pengaruh Melayu serumpun yang amat kuat dari songket Negara Brunei seperti Kain Brunei, Kain Berturus dan Kain Belatak"*

"Sarawak Malay community Songket patterns and motifs itself have the strong Malay allied influence from Brunei Songket such as Kain Brunei, Kain Berturus and Kain Belatak" (p.47)

Therefore, the symbols define the songket pattern derived from the culture and daily activities of the colonisation and government of the previous empire. These influences are among the ones that contributed to the creation of the motif on Suket Ajang. Certain symbols on patterns and pieces of clothing include symbols of status, degrees, ethnic identity, beliefs, religious rituals, and so on. Zubaidah (1994) concludes that clothing became a charm and textiles were also a profitable commodity, especially silk yarn and natural materials, not just in songket or batik but also through other Malay textile crafts like pelangi cloth. Samin (2015) also mentioned these lovely designs and how kings and nobles frequently used delicate textiles for various purposes. However, only a few studies have been reviewed at length about the history of Malay textiles, even after being notified that during the empires of Srivijaya and Majapahit, empires in Malaya and Borneo existed (Suhana, 2016). Embroidered and woven silk was once a Malay tradition and a source of pride in diplomatic and trade ties after Johor (Singapore time) took over the role and power of the Malacca Sultanate. The cultural continuity in the tradition of dress is becoming more prominent. The Malay Archipelago, notably Sarawak, underwent major economic and geopolitical changes in the 19th century owing to Western influence on Malays' lifestyles (Suhana, 2016). Ancient Riau Malay Songket handicrafts evolved with these transitions. Once used in ancient rites, these finely woven textiles are now essential to government and corporate sector events. Riau Malay Songket contains many elements with deep meanings and ideologies that represent Malay culture and traditions. Local conventions for placing and using these motifs are anchored in history, and their worth comes from both the items' natural characteristics and Islamic religious beliefs. Understanding the cultural and historical backdrop of Riau Malay Songket is essential to understanding its importance in Malay culture. These textiles depict Malay identity via visual tales. The research findings from these textiles can also help identify Malay Songket project implementation difficulties. Beyond this, the findings can help promote Malay Songket's wider acceptance as a cultural treasure with profound historical and metaphorical origins, both locally and globally. Ds, S., AKKAPURLAURA et al.,2023.

### 3.0 Methodology

The methodology used for this study was developed according to the direction shown in Table 1. It is guided by the objective of this study, which is to identify the identity of the local plant motifs in Suket Ajang based on the Melanau community, especially in Rajang.

Table 1: The framework that directed the research.

Purpose	Methods	Outcome
To identify the <b>identity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Local plant</li> <li>● Suket Ajang</li> </ul>	<b>Visual Research</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interview (Cik Hajah Saa'nah Suhaili, Cik Hajah Salmiah Aba, Cik Jaoyah Razali, Cik Jauyah Kifli, Cik Halimah Omar, Cik Siti Hasna Husaini, Cik Jaenah Ojea)</li> </ul> - Observation <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recapture the Photo via a digital camera.</li> <li>2. Captured example of Suket Ajang via digital camera</li> <li>3. Captured the original motif drawing on a graph book via digital camera.</li> </ol>	Information about Suket Ajang The visual image of Suket Ajang motif and design

### 3.1 Visual Research

**Interview:** Interviews were conducted with the Melanau community, amateurs and professionals on the history and production of Suket Ajang, particularly the expertise on weaving at Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak, to support the data analysis. Some questions were divided among the respondents during the interview, particularly among the weaving and history experts. This is done to make it easier to determine the validity of the answer based on thorough research into each part of the question, mainly the motifs on the scarf pattern. The interview also focuses on the semiotic approach used in this section, where the relationship between beliefs and culture can be explained in detail when determining the motifs in the design of the Suket Ajang. This section is significant because it is the core of the in-depth data collected about the local plant motif on Suket Ajang. This part also affects the authenticity of the traditional Suket Ajang because of its appearance.

**Observation:** The detailed discussion will be shared in the segment. The observation method was used to look at the local plant motifs used in Suket Ajang and tools used in the manufacture held by the community's ancestors and are still retained as heritage material in this study. In addition, it is also used to study traditional culture, which can be defined as the reason for the tradition, regardless of whether it is still practised. This is done following the timeline outlined above to obtain a complete picture of the culture under investigation and to delve further into the implicit meaning behind the creation of the local plant motifs and the composition of these motifs on Suket Ajang.

## 4.0 Findings

This segment provides a clear explanation of the identity of the local plant motifs, which were discovered through systematic processes and appropriate methods to recognise the Melanau community's Suket Ajang motif design in Rajang. The result will expand through discussion, including an overview of the review of Kain Suket Ajang, local plants as inspiration for Suket Ajang, and types of motifs and characteristics.

### 4.1 Kain Suket Rajang

Songket has a lengthy production history in Malaysia, dating back to the 16th century. This fabric is commonly associated with the sultan's and his family's attire. Many Rajang residents need clarification about how to begin the songket, and there is no written record in Kampung Rajang. It was initially called the Bruneian fabric, undeniably a historical marker of its origins in Brunei. The solid historical connection between this songket and the Brunei Sultanate allows us to hypothesise that it may have originated in the 14th century, although pinpointing the exact chronology is problematic. It is also probable that this woven art was introduced to the northern shores of the Borneo-Kalimantan Islands with the spread of Islam in the region.

Furthermore, the physical location of Kampung Rajang, strategically located in Kuala Sungai Rajang, lends credence to this argument. Prior to establishing other cities, such as Sarikei, Sibu, and Kapit, only three significant villages, Rajang, Banyuk, and Kanowit, were commonly recorded in western records (Tanjung). Kampung Rajang, located in the Melanau hamlet of Kuala Sungai Rajang, has a long and distinguished history of Malay weaving. The rich arts and crafts of Malay weaving, as well as a strong influence from the Majapahit Empire and Islamic traditions of the Sultanate of Brunei, were among the many skills and crafts passed down from generation to generation in the hamlet. Surprisingly, the weaving of songket Rajang has never been documented or referenced in any Sarawak historical annals (Hamdan, 2006). Margaret Brooke made a hazy statement about it in her book, *My Life in Sarawak* (1913:30), in which she documented her futile attempts to learn to weave from Malay upper-class ladies in Kuching during the 1870s. Other districts, such as Mukah and Kalaka, have records, but Rajang still needs to. However, one fact that has piqued the interest of historians researching the history of songket in Rajang is that the village's weavers claim that weaving activities were already rooted and active in the village 180 years ago, during the reign of Sultan Abdul Halim II of Brunei when the Sultanate of Brunei was still in power. The Rajang Songket Weaving Centre was established in Kampung Rajang to ensure the continuation and preservation of the art of songket weaving and weaving processes. On the other hand, the practice has just recently gained popularity. It is now commonly referred to as an adult activity, with the Center of Tenun Songket Rajang being lauded as a cultural attraction by Kampung Rajang locals. As a result, Rajang has become connected with its own songket's creation (Hamdan, 2006).

### 4.2 Local Plant as Inspiration of Suket Ajang

Suket Ajang patterns are classified into "Bunga Tabor" and "Tabor Bepetak." Local plants like flowers, leaf shoots, trees, and fruits can be created by paying attention to the surroundings (Suhaili, 2021). The Malay culture includes the way of life and thoughts that influence the appearance of the motifs. The motif also functions as a messenger to deliver the idea of the artisan to spectators. Kari et al., 2017. The floral motif in traditional craft is pertinent (Kari et al., 2017). The motif not only demonstrates beautiful into two categories: "Bunga Tabor" and "Tabor Bepetak" Local plants like flowers, leaf shoots, trees, and fruits are examples that can be created by paying attention to the surroundings (Suhaili, 2021). The Malay culture includes the way of life and thoughts that influence the appearance of the motifs. The motif also functions as a messenger to deliver the idea of the artisan to spectators. Kari et al., 2017. The floral motif in traditional craft is pertinent (Kari et al., 2017). The motif demonstrates beautiful visuals and highlights the design's value, Kari et al., 2017. Native Melanau cuisine, such as the region's famous delicacy, Kuih Salak, has also influenced the designs. Following that, she plans to continue sketching the design on graph paper and utilising a mathematical calculation as part of the months-long process of completing the motif that will be woven. She feels that by doing so, she will better understand herself and the environment in which she lives. This Suket Ajang, according to her, is embellished with traditional nature themes. The following are a few of the most well-known reasons:

#### 4.3 Types of Motif and Characteristics



Figure 1: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021. The motif of *tapok pedadah* and adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'annah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.

In Figure 1, the *tapok pedadah* shows its characteristics; this motif is unique and passed down from generation to generation among weavers as a cultural and heritage motif. It comprises four (4) and eight (8) shattered petals and has a water rope in the centre. This is the traditional Melanau motif passed down from generation to generation and is synonymous with Suket Ajang fabric. This design exemplifies the nature of weavers' honesty and openness, particularly in the weaving and creation of this Suket Ajang. The Suket Ajang will only take place with honesty and openness, as seen in the weaving process, based on every inch of perfection of the woven yarn (Kifli, 2021). According to my observations, every weaver in Kg Rajang possesses these characteristics, particularly the nature of their openness to the process of assimilation and cultural mixing that occurs as a result of plural marriages and so on. As a result, the *tapok pedadah* pattern is a symbol of that nature and a reflection of the diversity of the people in Kg Rajang.



Figure 2: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021. The motif of *ros ayeng* and adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'annah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.



Figure 3: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021, adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'annah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.

The motif of *Ros Ayeng* shows their characteristics; this motif is shaped by four (4) fractured rose petals (see Figure 2). It is inspired by blooming roses and has thick lines forming the sides of the petals to make the motifs stand out more. The shape of roses has inspired these motifs. This is because roses are synonymous with similar Malay motifs. This is evidenced by rose motifs in the Malay textile world and Brunei. However, for Suket Ajang, according to the informant, this motif carries the meaning of softness and courage. Apart from that, it is a classic motif that is indeed one of the leading choices of weavers. Therefore, it can be seen why this motif is always beautifully arranged on the body part of Suket Ajang because when arranged on the body part of the fabric, this motif will stand out for its beauty and softness due to the distribution of the arrangement that fills in softness with firmness (Husaini, 2021).

Figure 3, the motif of *Usog Rebung Amut*, shows their characteristics. This motif was inspired by one of the creeping root plants in the vicinity of Kg Rajang. Therefore, this motif is shaped by a creeping root bond and a combination of geometric shapes. The position of each pattern is determined by the Sifir Ajang formula used. This motif is inspired by the shape of mangrove roots found in Kg Rajang's swampy area. This motif is distinctive in that it represents the clash of cultures between ethnic groups along the Rajang River and the collision of fresh and saltwater in the roots of the mangrove tree. Therefore, the Usog Rebung Amut motif is formed, which is beautifully arranged on the head of the Suket Ajang woven cloth. Apart from symbolising the clash of cultures, it also means strength and resilience because mangrove wood is synonymous with durability, especially in house making. Similarly, when it is used to make woven patterns, it shows how long and robust Suket Ajang is (Husaini, 2021).



Figure 4: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021, adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'anah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.

In figure 4, the motif of *Usog Rebung Pakau* shows their characteristics. As a symbol of the fern shape, the reflection on the fern pattern design has eight (8) combined foliage kites for each left and right. The shape of the fern plant inspired this motif. It is visible in the spiral shape and woven pattern design. This motif is also one of the main ones to be used. Because bamboo shoots and ferns are some of the main foods in Kg Rajang and the surrounding community, this motif reflects on the Melanau community's daily life. Therefore, the aesthetic value of the shapes of these bamboo shoots and ferns is very high. The process of weaving these motifs is also among the most complicated because the formula used contains more than five Sifir Ajang formulas to make the motif sit neatly at the root of the Suket Ajang (Razali, 2021).

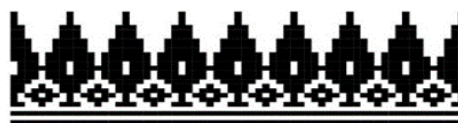


Figure 5: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021, adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'anah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.

In Figure 5, the motif of *bunga pisang* shows their characteristics. Inspired by the shape of pineapples and has four (4) layers of the pattern level that symbolise the uniqueness of pineapples. Banana in the Melanau language means "pineapple." Therefore, this motif is formed based on the shape of the pineapple. Pineapple is strongly associated with the Melanau community in Kg. Rajang. Therefore, the weavers have made the shape and texture of the pineapple itself into a weaving motif for the foot part of the fabric. This pineapple is a symbol of the weaving of woven fabric threads. Because according to him, each thread on the Suket Ajang fabric makes the woven motif more perfect (Omar, 2021).

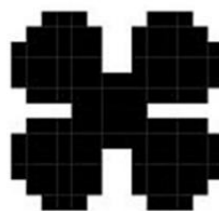


Figure 6: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021, adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'anah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.

In Figure 6, the motif of *buwak tulau* shows their characteristics. Four (4) fractured petals are used in this design. Because of its fundamental character, it became one of the first designs selected by the weavers. It portrays the Melanau community's traditions and clearly shows the sustainability of the culture and heritage of the Melanau community in Kg Rajang. It is critical to preserve Melanau cultural values and customs and to translate them onto woven fabric through the motifs that have been created because not all places have what Kg Rajang has. Therefore, it privileges the Suket Ajang woven fabric they produce (Kifli, 2021).



Figure 7: Motif is redrawn by Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, 2021, adapted from Cik Hajah Sa'anah Suhaili sketchbook from Kampung Rajang, Sarikei, Sarawak.

The usog rebung ram motif demonstrates their characteristics. This motif is a reflection of and synonymous with the state of Sarawak, in particular, the *midline* shoot in Figure 7. Characteristics have been made based on the shape of the circle on the *midrib* shoots and combined with a three-petal leaf pattern to enhance the motif further. The *pucuk midin* plant inspired this motif. The characteristics of *pucuk midin* are like those of *paku pakis*, but there are differences in texture, taste, and shape. Apart from that, *pucuk midin* can only be found in Sarawak. As a result, Kg Rajang weavers transformed the inspiration of *pucuk midin* into a symbolic original weaving motif on Suket Ajang fabric. This motif is significant to the Melanau community in Kg Rajang but to all ethnic groups in Sarawak. This is because this motif is a "taste" that complements a woven fabric. This is because the taste triggered by this motif will transform into a perfect taste that leads to satisfaction in weaving this Suket Ajang fabric. Because this motif shows how vital "taste" is to the wearer and weaver and the *Sifir Ajang* formula used to make this motif, she says it is a source of pride for both (Suhaili, 2021).

## 5.0 Discussion

The subject described in this research goes beyond just aesthetic or ornamental purposes; it signifies a broader significance in the cultural and historic portrayal of society. The cultural symbolism of the Melanau Malay population reflects their way of life, beliefs, customs, rituals, and daily living. (Noprisson, H et al. 2021) observe that the skill of identifying hand-woven Motifs is exclusive to the elder generation and has not been transmitted to the younger generation. In addition, computer technology may be employed to facilitate the identification of traditional woven textile motifs. In addition, the documentation strategy emphasizes the evaluation of songket by avoiding the misconception of perceiving it solely as an object, but rather as a symbol of a community. The focus shifts from merely recording the craft to documenting Suket Ajang as a community. This was achieved through a comprehensive visual ethnographic documentation of Suket Ajang motifs. This research employed a visual ethnographic technique to record the process of making Suket Ajang, which serves as a unifying element in the community. The documentation process involved the use of two observation methods: participant observation and non-participant observation. Consequently, it may effectively document Suket Ajang using visual ethnographic approaches, while still acknowledging the significance of traditional songket craftsmanship. Additionally, it portrays Suket Ajang as a representation of societal cohesion. The upcoming chapter will include a comprehensive examination of the discoveries, overarching deductions, and suggestions for future investigators.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, this research is expected to enhance researchers' comprehension of the emotional structure of Suket Ajang plant motifs. This study centres on the Suket Ajang motifs due to its significant impact on the preservation of the authenticity of Malay textile art. Specifically, it aims to safeguard the distinct structure and motif composition of Suket Ajang. Tracing the weavers' beliefs and practices in songket weaving in Rajang back to their ancestral methods is a fascinating endeavor. The observable patterns of seasons, flowers, cakes, local foods, medicinal herbs, and cosmos have elicited a collective reaction, frequently manifested in visually appealing and spiritually powerful products. Motifs frequently serve as allusions to exceptional skills, such as keen observation of nature, hunting, fishing, culinary expertise, and the art of presentation, as well as celebratory occasions. However, flora is the predominant emblem shown in their weaving art. Authentic Melanau consumption patterns and decorations are characterized by a diverse range of symbols and motifs that represent many parts of the sociocultural culture and the Melanau community in Sarawak. The elements encompass thus, it has the potential to enhance cultural and historical knowledge by highlighting the distinctiveness of Sarawak Malay arts in relation to other forms of Malay arts, both locally and globally. This might lead to heightened cultural and historical consciousness. This study is expected to serve as a valuable resource for future scholars, ensuring that great works of art are preserved and not forgotten in the contemporary day or in the future. The elder generation holds the unique capacity to discern hand-woven patterns, a skill that has not

been transmitted to the younger generation. Moreover, the utilization of computer technology can serve as a viable approach to discerning the patterns found in traditional woven fabrics. To prevent the loss of Suket Ajang, it is imperative to educate and motivate the younger generation to learn and engage in this distinctive art form.

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