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Social Fabric

Circulating Pua Kumbu Textiles
of the Indigenous Dayak Iban People
in Sarawak, Malaysia

PhD

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Abstract

Within Borneo, the indigenous Iban pua kumbu cloth, historically associated with headhunting, is steeped in spirituality and mythology. The cloth, the female counterpart of headhunting, was known as women's war (Linggi, 1999). The process of mordanting yarns in preparation for tying and dyeing was seen as a way of managing the spiritual realm (Heppell, Melak, & Usen, 2006). It required of the 'women warriors' psychological courage equivalent to the men when decapitating enemies. Headhunting is no longer a relevant cultural practice. However, the cloth that incited headhunting continues to be invested with significance in the modern world, albeit in the absence of its association with headhunting.

This thesis uses the pua kumbu as a lens through which to explore the changing dynamics of social and economic life with regard to men's and women's roles in society, issues of identity and nationalism, people's relationship to their environment and the changing meanings and roles of the textiles themselves with global market forces. By addressing these issues I aim to capture the fluid expressions of new social dynamics using a pua kumbu in a very different way from previous studies.

Using the scholarship grounded in art and material culture studies, and with particular reference to theories of 'articulation' (Clifford, 2001), 'circulation' (Graburn & Glass, 2004) and 'art and agency' (Gell, 1998; MacClancy, 1997a), I analyse how the Dayak Iban use the pua kumbu textile to renegotiate their periphery position within the nation of Malaysia (and within the *bumiputera* indigenous group) and to access more enabling social and economic opportunities. I also draw on the theoretical framework of 'friction' and 'contact zones' as outlined by Tsing (2005), Karp (2006) and Clifford (1997) to contextualize my discussion of the of the exhibition and representation of pua kumbu in museums. Each of these theoretical frameworks is applied to my data to situate and illustrate my arguments.

Whereas in the past, it was the culture that required the object be made, now the object is made to do cultural work. The cloth, instead of revealing hidden symbols and meanings in its motifs, is now made to carry the culture, having itself become a symbol or marker for Iban people. Using an exploration of material culture to understand the complex, dynamic and flowing nature of the relationship between objects and the identities of the producers and consumer is the key contribution of this thesis.

Preface

After traveling an arduous distance on a longboat, a narrow surf-ski-like craft that my partner and I had hitched a ride on, we enter a shallow point in the river. It looks particularly tricky and I think we surely have to get out with Melambir and Ensunot, our hosts, and push the boat. The couple tell us to stay on board. Ensunot, a robust middle-aged woman, shouts and gesticulates angrily to Melambir. He takes it in his stride, standing at the stern of the longboat, throttling the motor, and cutting it out just at the right instance. At the next bend, the river is much deeper, Ensunot gets off, and pulls the boat, her whole body straining with the effort. It is a losing battle. We decide to ignore their warnings, and get up to help. Our movements nearly capsize the boat, its heavy load in danger of falling on top of us. In the panic, we both step on a half submerged rock to steady the boat. Our flip-flops slip and the jagged edges of the rocks, much sharper than anticipated, cut into our bare feet. Blood pours out. Under water, it feels serious but I cannot tell just how bad. In the melee, Jackson's footwear floats away. To our embarrassment, Melambir swims down the rapids to retrieve it. We tell him to leave it. He reaches out, grabs it and forces his way against the rapids back to us, pleased he managed to save it. He helps us both back in the boat, checks out our injuries, sees the cuts and is pale with worry. After several more hours of exhausting physical work, we arrive at a gentle stream. The water is clear and it is not very deep. Colourful longboats are moored at the banks, and a set of concrete steps lead up to a clearing. He takes us up the stairs, and into a long row of wooden houses. We have arrived at Rumah Garie longhouse, home of Melambir and Ensunot, and two world famous weavers of the Iban pua kumbu cloth, Bangie Embol ¹ and Nancy Ngali ².

The journey began a few years ago. At an exhibition opening at the Art Gallery New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, Dr Barbara Leigh comes up to me hugging a brown paper envelope. 'Are you Malaysian?'. She shows me the contents of the envelop, the publisher's proofs of her book on Malaysian art and craft. I flick through the richly

¹ Bangie anak Embol, master weaver from Rumah Garie, pictured with one of her pua kumbus. In the background are some of her weaving trophies. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeunlimited.blogspot.com/>

² Nancy Ngali, with one of her pua kumbus. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeunlimited.blogspot.com/>

illustrated pages depicting batik and songket cloth, pewter, keris daggers, nyonya art work, ceramic jars, moon shaped kites and metalware. A photo catches my eye, it is a photo of an Iban woman from Malaysian Borneo weaving an intricately patterned cloth. What struck me was that I had never seen this object before.

My initial encounter with this object sheds light on how Sarawak and its indigenous populations ³ tend to be left out of the collective consciousness or the imagination of the majority and west Malaysian segment of the national community (Anderson, 1991). I was born in west Malaysia and was educated through the national education system in the medium of *Bahasa* Malaysia (Malay language). From primary school up to the end of secondary education the national curriculum was steeped in the history, society and cultural life of Malaysia. Yet, in all those years of education and exposure to national/government run television, the pua kumbu had never been mentioned in any significant way to me. To put this in context, other crafts such as batik, pewter, *wau bulan* (moon shaped kites), tops, the *kris* (the undulating Malay sword) and distinctive ethnic clothing, received saturation coverage on state run television channels. In writing the book *The Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts: Identity, Industry, and Ingenuity* (B. Leigh, 2000), Barbara was determined to go beyond the oft-promoted Malay crafts and explore the art of other ethnic groups in east and west Malaysia.

The more I learned about the object, the more I realised the important role this object played among indigenous Iban or minority *bumiputeras* of Sarawak. The dynamics that can be discerned are the assertion of distinction from Malay and/or Islamic *bumiputeras* rather than assertions of distinction from the Chinese, Indians, or the other indigenous tribes of Malaysian Borneo and west Malaysia. That chance encounter began my fascination with the pua kumbu object and what it symbolized about social dynamics in Malaysia. The pua kumbu can be seen to address some of this exclusion or forgetfulness on the part of the majority *bumiputera*.

³ Map of Borneo, showing Iban areas in Sarawak and major rivers which remain the main form of transport and communication for many interior residents of Sarawak. Map sourced from Sellato (Sellato, 1989) – entitled Ethnic Groups of Borneo.