

**Audrey Low**

# **Social Fabric**

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

**PhD**

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## Abstract

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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.



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## Preface

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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 <sup>1</sup> and Nancy Ngali <sup>2</sup>.

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Ngali, with one of her pua kumbus. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.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 <sup>3</sup> 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*.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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## Introduction

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I use the pua kumbu textile 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. I identify and discuss issues that the historical and contemporary production of these Dayak Iban textiles raise with regard to questions of the changing circumstances of material culture production and circulation, indigenous arts, museums and representation. I shift the focus of analysis from the culture on to the object itself and examine how meanings are constructed or articulated around the cloth. I explore the social dynamics that have evolved and arisen in place of original interconnections between gendered acts, namely the direct relationship between headhunting and cloth, and of the status and ranking of both men and women. Following the cloth allows us to examine how the Ibans assert distinctness from the majority Malay Islamic *bumiputeras* [the indigenous and Malay populations of Malaysia, as distinct from the later migrants, namely the Chinese, Indian and other races]. By studying relations constituted around the pua kumbu, changes in political status and cultural circumstances of the Ibans can be brought to light. This thesis explores new articulations around the pua kumbu using a combination of methods including analysis of ethnographic sources, structured and semi-structured

interviews, researching archival and government documents and popular media reports.

Sather and Sandin describe an Iban shamanic rite, called the '*Kara Pejuang*' which is used to recover a soul that has carelessly strayed too close to the roots of the *kara ficus* tree (Sandin, 1983; Sather, 2001). This tree is 'the favourite haunt of *antu gergasi*', a giant demon that loves to capture 'careless disembodied souls' (Sather, 2001: 227). 'A *pelian* [ritual] called *Kara Pejuang* may be performed using three pestles raised upright covered with a woven blanket [pua kumbu]. Here you must catch the patient's soul. After his soul is caught, it must be pressed into his head with bits of rice for its spiritual food' (Sandin, 1983: 240). This shamanic rite which incorporates the roots of the giant fig tree of the forest, rice as spiritual food and the act of catching souls in the pua kumbu, encapsulates the interconnected nature of the key elements in this thesis. By addressing all the issues listed above 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; Hall, 1996), 'circulation' (Glass, 2008; 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 (Tsing, 2005a), Karp (Karp, Kratz, Szwaja, & Ybarra-Frausto, 2006) and Clifford (Clifford, 1997a) to contextualize my discussion 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.

Articulation is discussed in relation to the Iban people in chapter one and the notion of circulation is examined in relation to the pua kumbu in chapter two. Articulation theory, normally applied to the study of cultural identity, is applied in this thesis to the study of objects. This engagement with articulation and circulation is based on an examination of the articulations of identity centred on an object, as the object circulates through socially active regimes and physical/geographic landscapes. Engaging with this combination of theories provides a conceptual tool for thinking about object and its relationship with people in the social landscapes. It provides a way for us think about what people communicate around objects. It also gives us a means to understand social processes and relationships constituted around the cloth. It enables

us to 'examine the ways in which art objects particularly are used to construct or deny identity and cultural difference' (Myers, 2001: 4) and to examine how they 'articulate in their circulation new relationships of power and self-revelation' (Myers, 2002: 6).

The concept of circulation is applied at three levels in this thesis. It is applied to the object, the historical circulation of Iban people through the Borneo landscape and to my journey while following the object. The chapters reflect my movement through Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak, Kapit, a regional town in interior Sarawak, Rumah Garie, a longhouse in the middle of the fast disappearing rainforest, to government and tribal museums.

Picture the pua kumbu circulating from where it is woven, in a humble home in a jungle longhouse, or a plush gallery in a city skyscraper, to its new incarnation as a wall hanging or piece of art in grand spaces in five-star hotels and the homes of the wealthy in Kuching and in Europe. It can be seen as demonstrating a link with historical cultural expressions through its role as a sacred and ceremonial object, or as a piece of art with economic value, or as a symbol of tribal identity. In each of these vastly different socially active régimes and locations, people give value and ascribe meanings to this object.

I use the theory of circulation to discuss different meanings for the 'object-in-motion' as things/objects travel through different stages of their life history - different facets of use and different ways in which community members may use the textile. This is inline with Appadurai's approach; '...we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things ... it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (Appadurai, 1986a: 5). In addition to circulating through geographical locations, the pua kumbu also circulates from its role as a sacred and ceremonial object to its incarnation as an art object moving in global art markets. This trajectory mirrors Myers observations of Australian Aboriginal acrylic paintings in *Painting Culture* (Myers, 2002). Artifacts, according to Errington are 'mute and meaningless'. She argues that 'their meanings are created by the categories they fall into and the social practices that produce and reproduce those categories' (Errington, 1998: 4). These categories or "regimes of value", however, are unstable. Myers argues that objects are not easily contained within single regimes of value. Objects circulate, eventually becoming 'more fitted to other régimes of value organized around the concepts of art and commodity, on the one hand, and identity and politics of indigeneity, on the other' (Myers, 2002: 6). In *The Comfort of Things*, Miller develops

and applies these ideas to a study of individuals and households from a street in South London (Daniel Miller, 2008b). He explores ‘the way that persons and things are mutually constituted, and how the study of relationships cuts across the animate and inanimate’ (Daniel Miller, 2008a).

In following the circulation of the pua kumbu, I journey through two features in the Borneo landscape that dominate physical life in the interior; forests and rivers. These physical characteristics also feature heavily in the imaginary and literary world of the Iban where notions of rivers and forests infuse mythology and spirituality. They have a history of being sites of contestation, even wars, and therefore, both physical features fit the description of being socially active regimes.

In giving an understanding of some of the physical difficulties and realities of movement in this state in east Malaysia, my journey through the landscape to Rumah Garie longhouse to visit pua kumbu weavers also provides the context for my experiences and understanding of life in the interior.

My own journey sharpens my understanding of a sense of the place (Basso, 1996). The travel on rivers through the rainforests forced a deep engagement with the landscape. My river journey helped me to view the landscape as being in process, what Tilley calls ‘structures of feeling’ (Tilley, 2006: 7). This view is in alignment with Bender’s perspective, which is to view landscape as ...

not just ‘views’ but intimate encounters. They are not just about seeing, but about *experiencing* with all the senses. An experiential or phenomenological approach allows us to consider how we move around, how we attach meaning to places, entwining them with memories, histories and stories, creating a sense of belonging (Bender, 2002a: 136).

Layering my journey over the circulation of the pua kumbu helps me interpret the social processes active around the object. It enables me to attribute social relations constructed during my travels as part of the social network of the object, to see the object ‘in process rather than static’.

Each geographical location, category or regime of value is examined as a socially active régime generating and stimulating different aspects of what Appadurai calls the “social life” of the cloth (Appadurai, 1986b) and what Kopytoff terms “the cultural biography” of things (Kopytoff, 1986). At this point, it is necessary to revisit



Appadurai's definitions of the "social life of thing" and the "cultural biography" of objects:

There are important differences between the cultural biography and the social history of things. The differences have to do with two kinds of temporality, two forms of class identity, and two levels of social scale. The cultural biography perspective, formulated by Kopytoff, is appropriate to specific things, as they move through different hands, contexts, and uses, thus accumulating a specific biography, or set of biographies. When we look at classes or types of things, however, it is important to look at longer-term shifts (often in demand) and large-scale dynamics that transcend the biographies of particular members of that class or type. Thus a particular relic may have a specific biography, but whole types of relic, and indeed the class of things called "relic" itself, may have a larger historical ebb and flow, in the course of which its meaning may shift significantly (Appadurai, 1986a: 34).

The circulation of the object therefore offers us 'a critical moment in which to reexamine the ways objects come to convey and condense value and, in doing so, are used to construct social identities and communicate cultural differences between individuals and groups' (Myers, 2001: 3).

The structuring of the chapters and framing of some of the data is inspired by local indigenous Iban metaphors. I use quotes, drawn from different time periods, as a literary device to express the transitory nature of culture and to demonstrate a movement through time. These quotes capture the continuing and shifting spirit of the material culture discussed.

The two introductory chapters stress the importance of migration and journeying in the history of the people and they also serve as an introduction to the theoretical framework of the thesis. In these early chapters, I combine historical data with a survey of the literature. These chapters have dual purposes; they function as a literature review and they also present the historical significance of the pua kumbu. The extensive historical background is crucial for the reader to understand why a mere piece of cloth carries such significance today. This background sets the scene for my examination of the object, and the social dynamics around it, in its circulation through socially active landscapes.

Chapter one examines the history of the Ibans from the time of their migration into Sarawak in the 1600s to the present day. This history of settlement is examined in relation to articulation theory. Within the context of Malaysia's political and social history, the discussion here focuses on pua kumbu textiles as symbols of cultural and indigenous identity and of issues of inclusion and exclusion - how the Dayak Ibans currently negotiate their positions within the majority *Bumiputera* category of privileged citizenship. It examines the various articulations and affiliations of Iban identity throughout their four hundred year history in Malaysia. This chapter on the changing articulations of identity provides a background to the migration and settlement of the Iban people in Sarawak.

Chapter two uses the concept of circulation to examine the historical context and mythology that enriches and forms the intangible cultural heritage of the pua kumbu. It explores the pua kumbu circulating in mythic circles and the historical context and the mythology that the pua kumbu is steeped in. I organized this material around peoples' and objects' relationships with mythic landscapes and discuss how textiles carry people's stories and myths and act as metaphors.

Chapters three to six are organized around the weaving loom and also around landscape features that dominate both individual and communal physical life as well as the life of the imagination in Sarawak. These chapters are not always organized around particular rivers or specific acreage of forests, instead, rivers and forests, longhouses and city museums form the backdrop, being the landscape features the pua kumbu circulates through.

Reflecting the importance of journeying to the Ibans, I use my journey upriver in chapter three as a theme to examine the pua kumbu in terms of its agency in constructing social networks. As part of my fieldwork research in Sarawak, I travelled upriver on a series of ferries and longboats in order to reach *Rumah Garie* [Garie longhouse]. The purpose of this journey was to visit two famous weavers widely publicised in the literature on pua kumbu, Bangie Embol and Nancy Ngali. I used my own experiences of travel up and down the river highways in search of the point of inception in creation of the pua kumbu and the routes these textile items now take, in search of recognition and a place in modern society. On reflection, this journey resonates with research experiences and dilemmas in the process of participant observation. This chapter discusses the nature of travel and networks in locating the sites of textile production and circulation, but it is more than a travel account. My personal journey in search of the pua kumbu, is akin to the object itself, and both have equal social currency as an item that articulate identity. By reflexively explaining the

challenges of organizing my research trip to the longhouse and the different types of reception and assistance I received (or did not receive) from the various players along the way, this chapter also engages with and contributes to social science scholarship on research methods.

Chapter four presents a discussion of gender, cloth and identity. It examines the pua kumbu object as the core around which the identities or individual status of weavers are enhanced and maintained. It examines how control over local knowledge, here the skills and knowledge of the technology of weaving and dyeing, enhances women's positions and is used to reposition themselves in society. I discuss the meaning and the current layering of religious beliefs with regard to pua kumbu production and use. Like other scholarship examining shifts in religious phenomena, this chapter demonstrates that people combine aspects of new and older practice. They maintain some customs and let others go as they reconfigure their personalized religious or sacred positions, and decide what objects to retain as their religious adjuncts. Stuart Hall's work on identity construction is used as a key theoretical framework throughout the chapter.

In chapter five, on the subject of forests, I examine the biodiversity of the jungle circulating through the pua kumbu. I argue that the cloth symbolizes the Iban's knowledge of the biodiversity of the tropical rainforest environment. The art originated from this deep knowledge, appreciation, understanding and cultivation of biodiversity in their surrounding environment. Highlighting this biodiversity underscores the threat, not only to the environment, but also to the pua kumbu art itself. With the disappearance of the forests goes a major fundamental source of the inspiration and the materials for making this artwork.

Chapter six examines the pua kumbu going downriver. It explores the cloth as a zone of friction in multicultural settings. The cloth plays the role of representing people and encapsulating social status and positionings in multicultural Malaysia. It is seen as a lightning rod which grounds or acts as a symbol that is read as representing attitudes towards the Ibans. I document the history and operation of the Sarawak Museum, the Tun Jugah Foundation and the Fort Sylvia Museum - of the challenges these institutions face with shifts in the role of museums and the vision of museum directors. I allude to the fact that the present Sarawak museum director's agenda and focus is to promote the Islamic history and aspect of Sarawak society, over and above the indigenous cultures. His attitude has caused deep consternation and divide in town. This chapter engages with the literature in Museum studies and contributes to the scholarship on material culture objects, museums and the politics of representation. I

discuss the different ways in which museums have used and are currently using and exhibiting objects to represent and teach about 'culture' - the politics of representation. My data contributes to the long history of these debates rooted in Museum studies scholarship and the topic of the changing cultural and political roles of museums and the question of who has the right to represent indigenous peoples through indigenous arts.

In Chapter seven I extend the discussion of the roles of art and cultural institutions began in Chapter 6. I document the ways in which contemporary artisans use the things they make to claim their voice for self-determination. This chapter uses the tension on the back-strap loom as a metaphor to capture the current tension between so-called traditional or indigenous textile production and contemporary production for global markets and the representation of both. I outline a range of products that are currently being produced (placemats, high-end fashion garments, sculptures). I identify new players who are engaging in the production and marketing of these goods (contemporary fashion designers, emerging young Dayak Ibans artists), and the contestation over who has the power and authority to represent culture. These topics are being addressed by scholars also exploring issues in the construction and representation of authenticity, tradition and modernity in ethnic art markets.

### **Historical practice, Cultural Production**

This section on the historical practices relating to the pua kumbu explains the ritual importance of the pua kumbu for the roles and status of women vis-à-vis men's activity of headhunting and later physical prowess. This interconnection between male and female headhunting and spiritual and earthly reciprocity makes the pua kumbu a crucial signifier to represent and highlight contemporary social changes impacting on the Iban subculture within the wider Malaysian society. The first segment explains the ritual meanings of headhunting and provides a brief history of the efforts to suppress the activity, until the last known occurrence of the activity in the 1960s. The second section explains the process called 'women's headhunting' and the final section discusses the significance of this reciprocity between these two gendered roles.

The historical function of the cloth connected gendered activities and ways of enhancing status, both of which required bravery on the psychological and physical level. This interconnection between the activities of the genders was a theme that was constantly reinforced by acts and connotations (Heppell et al., 2006). The pua kumbu,

tied to origin stories and the migration of the Iban people, was not only a forum to demonstrate women's ingenuity and expertise, it also bore witness to men's courage. Men and women's headhunting once formed the fundamental, inseparable and primary interconnection of Iban cultural institutions. It is important to stress that the pua kumbu existed only in relation to headhunting. Headhunting and the acquisition of prestige, male and female, were the primary reasons for the existence of the pua kumbu. The historical social and spiritual significance of the object can only truly be understood in terms of its relationship with men's headhunting. The pua kumbu connected a man's greatest act of physical bravery and the woman's most spiritually courageous act. Heppell ascribes the pua kumbu cloth with the role of inciting the men to go out on headhunting expeditions (Heppell, 2005). Two culturally sanctioned acts of headhunting and pua kumbu weaving together formed the primary fundamental interconnection in historical Iban culture. Men and women's headhunting were each considered the most significant gendered roles. Both were equal in status and spiritual function. This earthly reciprocity was mirrored in the spiritual world; Spiritual reciprocity, or Bordieu's "less tangible," was believed to have been reinforced by "the more tangible;" the gendered reciprocity on the earthly plane in the form of these two primary status activities (Bourdieu quoted in Daniel Miller, 2005: 6).

The Iban people in Sarawak have origin stories which date their 'creation' and large-scale migration from Kalimantan to Sarawak in the mid-1600s (Pringle, 1970: 38). This movement over the landscape, along rivers and through the tropical rainforest intensified about two hundred years ago. This centuries old migration pattern, crossing what is now a national boundary between Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo, brought Ibans into relationships of varying degrees of contact and conflict with native tribes. Internal conflicts among the Ibans were accompanied with external conflicts throughout their migration history. These consisted of contestations with local indigenous populations and other tribal groups who were either residents of the land or who laid claim to it. This contest also involved other races and various governments. This history of contestation over land continues up until the present day. Now it exists mostly within the context of the discourse of development. It involves all the previous stakeholders along with the addition of the Sarawak State and Malaysian Federal governments (Ngidang, 2000, 2002).

The pua kumbu, a sacred, hand woven textile, is one of the most spiritually laden and potent objects in the material culture of Ibans. The role of the pua kumbu in the Iban's centuries old migration history and resulting contest over land, lies in the

pua kumbu's interconnection and deep association with the cultural practices of headhunting.

### *Headhunting*

Headhunting was the historical and culturally sanctioned Iban method of waging war, settling scores, expanding territory and enhancing status. It is connected with the migration history of the Ibans in Sarawak and their violent encounters with local tribes already residing on the land.

The Ibans migrated from Kalimantan into what is now Sarawak, and spread along rivers, up the Rejang and Balleh rivers, displacing other tribes in the process <sup>4</sup>. Before the Europeans appeared on the scene, the Ibans were a colonizing force, and headhunting was their means of expansion. It was the chief means for males to acquire status (Wagner, 1972: 106-7). In this ritually powerful act, the men decapitated their enemies, and brought the heads home. The heads were believed to house the soul, spirit or *semangat*. These heads were treated as the prizes or trophies of war, and were a *tanda berani*, a sign or marker of bravery, physical prowess and skills with weapons (Gavin, 2004: 36).

Headhunting existed as a cultural institution until the latter part of the twentieth century. Even as late as 1959, although the practice was reported as dying, there were still some isolated incidences;

The use of violence to suppress headhunting without attempting to touch the religious and social causes was a failure. Headhunting continued as long as the houses of headhunters were burned and the country laid waste. For the last 30 years attempts have been made instead only to apprehend the individual culprits and more disputes have been resolved by judicial processes. The result is that headhunting appears now to be dying a natural death from the slow realization that it doesn't pay, whether reprisals are imminent or not (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 24).

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<sup>4</sup> Warriors undertaking journeys on Iban longboats. Detail from a mural gracing the entrance to the Fort Sylvia Museum in Kapit. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation).

The violent suppression Richards mentions referred to the efforts of the Brooke, or White *Rajah*, administration. The White *Rajahs*, James, Charles and Vyner Brooke, ruled Sarawak from 1841 to 1941. (For more on the Brookes rule, please refer to (Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, 1989; Pringle, 1970; A. J. N. Richards, 1959; Runciman, 1960; V. H. Sutlive, 1992; Wagner, 1972).) During their one hundred year rule, the *Rajahs* individually appeared to attempt to suppress headhunting officially. The practice however continued unabated throughout their reign and even well after the end of their rule in 1941.

Pringle and Wagner examined the reasons for the Brookes' failure to stop this practice of headhunting. Chief among the reasons, according to Pringle, was the fact that the *Rajah's* policies, designed to control and suppress opposition, were themselves encouraging the practice of headhunting. Pringle explained that the Ibans were required to fight the *Rajah's* enemies when ordered. The Ibans were essentially wielded as the *Rajah's* personal army against enemies of the kingdom. In return for fighting for the *Rajahs*, the Ibans, unlike the other tribal, ethnic or racial groups, were exempted from taxes (Pringle, 1970).

During the 'mopping-up operations against the Japanese' at the end of World War II, headhunting flared up again, according to Wagner (Wagner, 1972: 109). Finally, the prominence of headhunting faded in the years after World War II. However, judging from anecdotes of Australian servicemen who had served in Sarawak during World War II, and also during the confrontation with Indonesia in the 1960s, isolated incidents of headhunting continued well into the 1960s. Once viewed, the spectre of decapitated heads continue to haunt the nightmares of some unfortunate witnesses (Shirley, 2003). Eventually, the practice lost prominence and subsided.

### *Ngar*

The equivalent of men's headhunting for women was the *ngar* or mordanting ritual. This *ngar* ritual was called *kayau indu* or women's headhunting. It is also variously translated as women's war, campaign or journey (Gavin, 1996; Jabu, 1989; Linggi, 1999). Calling this ritual women's headhunting was an acknowledgement of the spiritual courage and psychological strength required of the women while performing this ceremony. According to Heppell, the ceremony was a way of 'managing the spirit world'; The weavers captured the power of spiritual forces and wrestled with them on the two dimensional plane on the face of the cloth (Heppell, 2005; Heppell et al., 2006). As such, only a select few gifted women knew how to perform the ceremony (Linggi, 2001).

Mordanting is the part of the weaving process where the natural oils present on raw or untreated cotton yarns are stripped away so that the fibres can absorb a particular type of vegetable dye. The role of the highly technical process of mordanting yarns, particularly in constructing and reinforcing women's status and spiritual courage, fits in with Appadurai's point that 'technical knowledge is always deeply interpenetrated with cosmological, sociological, and ritual assumptions that are likely to be widely shared' (Appadurai, 1986a: 42). Traude Gavin explains the complicated mordanting process which is summarised below (Gavin, 2004: 51-59). Vegetable dyes are made from a vast array of tropical jungle vegetation. This *ngar* process however, is specific to the engkudu, or *morinda citrifolia* plant. This source of red dye produces the most desirable shade of red suitable for the pua kumbu. Engkudu is a plant that is cultivated around the longhouse. Gavin explains that there are three stages to the *ngar* process, 'cleaning (or scouring), dyeing and mordanting. First, the cotton is cleaned with a solution of oil and alkali (or 'soap') in order to remove the coating of wax; then it is dyed with morinda [engkudu] while the dye is being fixed to the fibre with an alum mordant' (Gavin, 2004: 59). Raw untreated cotton has naturally occurring wax and oils (Kajitani in Gavin, 2004: 58). The oils act as a barrier to the dyes. With the presence of the oil on the surface of the fibre, the dyes will not take. The pre-treatment process essentially stripes away this layer of oil off the surface. This process was and, in its revived form, continues to be a highly ritualistic ceremony. There are many taboos to be observed in the long process which spans many days.

### *Reciprocity; headhunting and the pua kumbu*

The interconnection between men and women's headhunting was nestled within a network of subsidiary cultural institutions. Reciprocity on the earthly plane between men and women was a reflection of the reciprocity between the spiritual and earthly realms. Symbolic action on the physical or earthly plane affected matters in the spiritual world and vice versa. It was believed that the work of managing the spiritual realm through the cloth had a bearing on the success of headhunting expeditions, on the fertility of the land acquired by the men and on the success of farming activities (Heppell et al., 2006). From a survey of the following literature produced on the pua kumbu, the cloth was firmly ensconced in elements as diverse as oral literature, shamanism, Iban religion, farming, and fertility rites (Freeman, 1970; Gavin, 2004; Gill, 1971; Heppell et al., 2006; Jensen, 1974; Sather, 2001). This extended network further reinforced the interlocking gendered roles in historical Iban society where a



series of activities, incited by women, led ultimately to the enhancement of prestige and status of the family unit. Rice, heads and fertility were all interconnected.

The interconnection of men's work, women's work, and the social and ceremonial roles of the pua kumbu is demonstrated by *gawais* or status giving feasts/festivals. According to Heppell, the fact that a warrior was able to host the elaborate festivities at all was because there was enough wealth in the form of rice surplus. After the work on the battlefield was done, it was the women's work that sealed men's achievements. To enhance his status, a warrior needed to host festivals/feasts or *gawais*. The women in the family were the primary farmers, nurturing, cultivating and preserving the rice seeds and the specific methods of germination for each of the thirty or so varieties of rice they cultivated (Tsing, 2005b). The ability of the man to host these feasts was therefore predicated on his wife's ability as a farmer, as of crucial importance to the success of the feast, was a rice surplus. Having the resources to host festivals enhanced his own and consequently exalted his family's prestige (Heppell, 2005). Throughout the many elaborate rituals during the extensive *gawai* festivities, the pua kumbu's sacred use would be in demand, reinforcing again its multiple social, spiritual and ceremonial roles.

This reciprocity between the two most significant gendered acts was demonstrated in the welcoming ritual when the two genders reunited after the men returned from headhunting war with their trophies of decapitated human heads. The explanation below is a summary of what is known about the headhunters' welcoming ritual. The summary is gleaned from the following publications: (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Pringle, 1970; A. J. N. Richards, 1959).

According to Gavin, when the men returned home, they impaled the trophy heads on poles. The poles were then 'planted' in the soil in rows at the bottom of the longhouse steps. The women descended from the longhouse and symbolically harvested the heads from the poles. These heads were then nestled in pua kumbu cloths that bore the most powerful and sacred designs (Gavin, 2004: 35);

The women descend from the house each swathed with a shawl of native cloth and bearing a plate with materials for an offering. The heads are then taken from the stakes and each woman receives one in her plate, covering it over with the end of her shawl (Nyvak (1906) quoted in Gavin, 2004: 36).

After greeting the heads the women had to welcome them in a three-stage ceremony. This ceremony consisted of the reception, the welcoming and cradling (Gavin, 2004). Gavin describes the ceremony where women led a procession around the longhouse to the accompaniment of gongs and other musical instruments. They then performed dances with the heads, with the pua kumbu draped around their shoulders <sup>5</sup>; ‘Then follows the *naku* or head-dance performed by the women and kept up during the greater part of the day together with all sorts of frolic and merriment’ (Nyagak in Gavin, 2004: 36). Geddes transcribed a section of a Land Dayak epic depicting this scene of welcoming. (Although not Iban, this description of a Land Dayak trophy head ceremony is similar to what is known about Iban ceremonies.)

She danced holding a head in each hand. When she had danced with them for a while, she stopped to exchange them for another two. Then she danced again. She danced until she had danced with all the heads of Minyawai and his six brothers... But she danced without cloth. She should have had a cloth draped over her shoulders, with an end held in each hand (Geddes, 1957: 128-129).

The welcoming dance was a victorious celebration that also performed a spiritual function of coaxing souls residing in the heads to dwell within the longhouse of the victorious headhunting warriors, both female and male. According to Masing, the ritualistic welcoming of heads would ‘ward off ... potential threat and ‘placate the ghost of the victim’ (Masing in Gavin, 2004). Appropriately welcomed heads were necessary to confer spiritual blessings in the form of fertility to the longhouse and its inhabitants (Gavin, 2004: 36; Masing, 1981). The head welcoming ceremony had to be performed strictly according to protocol. If the welcoming ceremony was performed haphazardly by the women, it would reduce the effectiveness of the headhunting campaign by the men (Masing, 1981).

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<sup>5</sup> Women wearing the pua kumbu as shawls in a ceremony. Detail from a mural gracing the entrance to the Fort Sylvia Museum in Kapit. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation).

## **New meanings**

The cloth now exists in a changed cultural environment. Although headhunting is an obsolete practice, the pua kumbu continues to be made. While historical cultural elements continue to be actively articulated around the pua kumbu in Iban and non-Iban cultural institutions and commercial outlets, new meanings for the cloth are emerging. This section discusses some of these new meanings particularly in reference to how the current permanence of the location of Rumah Garie, by a river far in the interior, affects men and women unevenly. What was previously advantageous when headhunting was a valued practice is now in some instances proving to be a disadvantage.

### *Gender relations, status and location*

On the river boat journey with Melambir and Ensunot (our two guides), there was an observable shift in gendered roles played out in different locations. Melambir and Ensunot's relationship changed the further upriver we travelled from Kapit. The change in relationship seemed to correlate to distance travelled on the river from the urban centre. If we regard Kapit and Rumah Garie, our destination, as being distributed on both ends of a linear scale, connected by rivers, then the domains are marked out, varying between the urban domain and river domain - public and private, familiar and unfamiliar. Gender relations presented to the public correlate to a certain extent along this scale.

Reflections on various locations in the journey upriver highlight the theme of how positioning relates to the face of gender relations presented for the benefit of the public. By this I mean that the face of the relationship between the genders presented to the public or the outside world was determined by contexts, and contexts were determined in part by geographical positioning. In Kapit, Ensunot's mannerism with Garie the headman of her longhouse was deferential. She was not invited to sit, nor was she introduced. Business was discussed with Melambir, who was treated as the man of the house. Melambir's status, inflated in Kapit, was swiftly deflated in the capsule of the ferry, even before we had departed from the docks in Kapit, and degenerated even more as we got in the longboat, while Ensunot's status rose. The power relations subtly shifted and once we were clear of town influence and on the river, to all appearances, it became the woman's, or at least Ensunot's, domain. Although the dynamics of Melambir and Ensunot's relationship in the longhouse was well known to the residents, in town however, everybody, including Garie, played the situation in a performance

that made Melambir appear to be the man in charge. That was the public or external 'face' of their relationship and that was how it was portrayed to us, at least in the 'formal' setting of the cafe in town.

This change affected by domain was demonstrated to us by a peculiar conversation I had with Garie at the cafe in town. He realised that I was attempting to travel to his longhouse, and that I had come all the way from Australia, to visit his mother because of her fame and renown with the pua kumbu. I commented on the fact that out of all the longhouses around, his was unique in that it was famous, boasting several master weavers of international renown. 'A longhouse full of famous, successful weavers. How did Rumah Garie become so filled with talented pua kumbu weavers? So many of them in one longhouse?' His answer to that was; 'The women, they have nothing better to do'. This seemed a strange answer. The women, far from having nothing to do, are the farmers, growing the rice the whole family needs for sustenance. The weavers of this particular longhouse have the capacity to earn income, a situation not enjoyed by the men who choose to stay in the remote longhouse. I suspect the location that the exchange took place affected the answer given. I doubt he would have maintained the same attitude in Bangie's living room, surrounded by admirers. My interpretation was that this exchange was indicative of the position adopted for the benefit of outsiders, and the dynamics between the genders would probably be reversed in the (limited) privacy of the apartment in the longhouse. Nothing was made of the comment at the time, however.

Men's headhunting was ultimately about social prestige; heads were trophies and signs of success. They represented abilities that were necessary when war was a primary activity. Today prestige for men is expressed in more contemporary forms, including getting a well paying job, a powerful position in the government, or being a successful entrepreneur. For the women in Rumah Garie however, it is still possible to construct, acquire and reinforce status around the pua kumbu. The history and stories of headhunting continue to be emphasized, foregrounded and articulated around the cloth. It is evoked at cultural performances, in the form of dances, songs and art works and it is presented as content in publicity material for tourism promotions. A tourist can walk the 'Headhunter's Trail' for example, or see trophy heads hanging from the rafters in a longhouse visit (*Gawai Dayak: Where to Go*, 2007; *The Headhunter's Trail*, 2007; "Myths and Folklore Legends Can Be Attractive Tourism Products", 2003). Apart from headhunting, a network of other previous connotations and elements of intangible cultural heritage continue to be associated with the pua kumbu. These include the religious aspects of the art, the notion of the weaver's dreams giving

her divine permission to weave potent designs and her physical and spiritual ability to perform sacred rites and rituals including rice farming. In addition to all the previous connotations however, new meanings and affiliations have been found for the pua kumbu. These new meanings for the cloth have evolved alongside the construction of new meanings for headhunting and they most commonly take the form of prestige and economic activities for Iban women.

Although the Ibans were historically migratory, with changes in governments' policies regarding forests, the people were forced into a more sedentary lifestyle. The Rumah Garie Ibans are no longer pioneers at the forefront of a push upriver. Instead, the residents now live in what is considered essentially a cul-de-sac and an outpost isolated from transport and communication infrastructure including all the facilities that enable a person to earn status in ways that are relevant today. Now that Kapit is the regional centre of commerce and government administration, the longhouse is considered remote in regards to job opportunities, educational and medical facilities.

Previously, when the main activities for survival and status enhancement were centered around movement through the forest, the location of Rumah Garie was advantageous for men. It is precisely its location that now places the men at a relative disadvantage. In Rumah Garie's present location, there are few opportunities for men to participate in the market economy. Men living in the forested interior need to master a plethora of skills which are essential for life around the longhouse. A rural Iban man's job description includes boat handling, fishing, hunting and building skills. Part of their repertoire of skills includes knowing how to build the longhouse with other men, construct boats and mend nets. Motor maintenance skills are crucial and they also have to know how to log the forest in order to clear land for rice farming. The men have to possess skills to negotiate urban life when they travel to Kapit or other regional towns to purchase supplies or sell forest products or cash crops. Of added benefits are artistry in woodworking, as traditionally, skilful wood sculptors were valued.

Unfortunately, the multifaceted skills that men have to excel in for survival and comfort in the jungle environment are seldom directly transferable to the market economy in Sarawak. Skills essential for survival in the forest landscape do not earn money and therefore do not pay the bills for a modern life. They do not easily and reliably convert to cash income needed to pay for education, purchase text books, uniforms, outboard motors, petrol for transportation and generators to power all the DVD players, freezers and other consumer goods that people, even if they live in remote longhouses, consider essentials of a modern life. The most common transference of a rural Iban man's skills is a job as a labourer in a logging, palm oil or paper pulp

plantation. If a man decides to stay in the longhouse, he is effectively locked out of the market economy. To access regular paid jobs, an Iban man has to travel away from his home to regional towns and work for wages. There is one job, however, that indirectly leads to cash, and that is the crafting of a loom for his wife to weave a pua kumbu.

Against the foil of a pattern of more settled longhouses and communities Nancy and Bangie's present circumstances are starkly contrasted to the men's. Their skills with an old status enhancing artform take them, the cloth and a version of Iban culture downriver and out to global locations. Instead of the men going to war, journeying on forest product gathering expeditions, it is now the women who travel. Their travels are different from what men used to do in terms of distance and the status they earn as a result of their travels. Instead of being limited to regional areas, the women cover more of the globe, including visits to Australia, Asia and South America. They have exhibited in Paris, Seattle, San Francisco and Santiago, and have participated in events and promotions in Bangkok and Switzerland. For the men, traditional activities connected to farming have not translated to lucrative rewards in the market economy. Nor is there an established high-end market for Iban wood carving as yet. For women on the other hand, the pua kumbu, the most traditional of women's art and cultural activities, is sold in established art markets overseas and in Kuching and has facilitated some degree of participation in the market economy and enabled global travel. In the case of the Rumah Garie weavers, and Bangie and Nancy in particular, the weavers are able to make a good living for themselves. They are relatively well off compared to the other residents in the rural longhouse and this wealth has had an impact on their families.

Most such textiles have always had an 'economic' as well as a 'sacred/ritual' character. Weaving provides a different kind of fertility, a nest egg that allows some degree of social and economic mobility. Nancy and Bangie's skills with an art practiced by almost all the women in Rumah Garie, provides them with a significant earning capacity while they remain in the longhouse. The benefits of their affiliation with Edric Ong, a Chinese entrepreneur, have spread to the next generation. The financial proceeds from weaving enable the weavers to educate their children. Gregory asserts that 'many Iban weavers have sent their children through school and even to college from income derived from their textiles' (Gregory, 2005: 3). The evening we arrived after our river journey from Kapit town, Mula, Ensunot's friend, delivered bundles of undyed silk yarns to different weavers. They delicately lifted the big bunches of off-white thread out of their wrapping. Each weaver had several bunches, enough to weave a few small pieces of cloth. The yarns were to be woven into items that had been commissioned by the crafts council of Sarawak. The weavers told me they also create

pieces for organizations like the government craft council, Kraftangan. Some of the women are able to sell their pua weavings internationally to western (tribal art) collectors and some fulfil the occasional order from commercial enterprises in Kuala Lumpur.

The value of pua kumbus in the international art market is difficult to determine, and is beyond the scope of the thesis. (Heidi Geismar's *What's in a Price?* and Steiner's *The Art of the Trade* discuss some of these complexities about art pricing (Geismar, 2001; Steiner, 1995)). However, to give the reader an idea of the range of prices these cloths can fetch, I have listed a few example. One Tun Jugah publication lists prices of about US \$2000 to \$5000 for some antique cloths in Margaret Linggi's private collection, but they were 1998 prices (Linggi, 1998). The Nomadic Art Gallery in Sydney had an exhibition in 2003, and the prices listed there ranged around the AU \$3000 to \$5000 mark. In shops in the United States like *Jungle Arts and Flora* for example (a Seattle dealer closely associated with Edric Ong and the Rumah Garie weavers), newly woven silk and cotton pua kumbus, and smaller pua inspired shawls and wraps, fetch prices spanning under US\$500 for simpler (large motifs) or smaller cloths, to about US\$1000 for new full-sized pua kumbus with detailed and intricate designs, to more than US\$2500 for older puas. The weavers would not say what percentage of these prices they earned. Their share appeared to be different for different clients. However, earning even a small portion of these prices is contrasted with the general economic situation in rural Sarawak, where people find it hard to afford medical supplies, education costs and basic necessities.

Even though there are clear economic imperatives to weave full time and produce more pieces, for the women in Rumah Garie, rice cultivation continues to be relevant. Bangie and Nancy, although master weavers with sufficient sources of income emanating from their involvement in the global art market to buy all the rice they need, continue to farm Iban hill rice and grow their own food, like all the other residents. In fact, farming interrupts their income generating activity of weaving. When we arrived at the longhouse, the various families had just finished harvesting that year's crop. Nancy told us it was a very good harvest and everybody was exhausted but happy. Nancy was in fact so tired from harvesting all month that she found it really hard to weave, even though she had to complete a piece that had been commissioned by a local politician. Rice farming for Nancy was more than for physical sustenance, self-sufficiency, survival or subsistence. It tapped into the stewardship of the seeds and the sedimented meanings and significance of rice to the Ibans.

In Rumah Garie, it is possibly a combination of the presence of particularly gifted and talented weavers together with the remoteness of the longhouse that ensured the continued viability of the artform. Rumah Garie is unusual in that most of the women there weave. This is not the case in most of the other rural longhouses, and certainly not the case in the cities. It is unique in having connections to the global market through the activities of a Sarawak Chinese entrepreneur/culture broker called Edric Ong. Gading is a high-ranking weaver who is affiliated with an Iban organization called the Tun Jugah Foundation. Her pua kumbus are featured next to a photograph of her and a short biography, in permanent exhibition in the Fort Sylvia Museum in Kapit. Another resident, Mula anak Jama won the 2006 grand prize in the international natural dye textile competition in Daegu, Korea (McLanahan, 2007) <sup>6</sup>. None of the residents however, are as successful as Nancy and Bangie.

Remoteness is highlighted and forms an important factor in the ‘construction of authenticity’ of the pua kumbu. All the factors that proved disadvantageous to the men, namely the geographical remoteness and distance from facilities, work to the weavers’ benefit. The limited opportunities for paid employment create a situation where there are few competing activities that provide more financially lucrative rewards for their time, effort and skills. Remoteness provides Bangie and Nancy with their edge in participation in the global market economy. It can be argued that it is precisely Rumah Garie’s remoteness that ensured the women retained their weaving skills enabling the longhouse to create a reputation for itself as a longhouse that boasts several world class prize-winning weavers (*Rumah Garie is the Best*, 2003). For example, the marketing of their artwork in *Jungle Arts and Flora* relies on the romance of the remote positioning of the longhouse in the rainforest (McLanahan, 2007).

The constraints of remoteness that have proved beneficial applied to Bangie and Nancy’s mothers and their generation, and to a certain extent, these constraints / benefits apply to Bangie and Nancy’s generation too. Although Karama, Bangie’s mother, passed away in 2006, the silk technique she pioneered has been transferred to the next generation, and continues to be applied successfully by many of the weavers in the longhouse (Ong, 2006a). These techniques have now been practiced by three generations of weavers, from Karama, to her daughter, Bangie, and to Bangie’s daughter-in-law, Milin. It cannot however, be extrapolated that the opportunities

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<sup>6</sup> Mula, Bangie’s neighbour, in the interior communal passageway, working on the tying (*ikat*) frame. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>



created for Bangie, Nancy, and their mothers, will extend to the next generation, or that it will be conceived of as an advantage; Nancy's children live in Singapore and Bangie's son, Garie, the longhouse headman, lives in Kapit. Neither Bangie nor Nancy have children who have chosen to follow their footsteps and live in the longhouse on a full-time basis. Their life opportunities lie elsewhere, in towns and cities of the region.

### *Silk yarns*

Nancy's living room is dominated by a weaving loom with an exquisite pua kumbu in the process of being woven <sup>7</sup>. When I looked closely at the threads I saw that instead of the coarse homegrown, home-processed cotton that older puas are made of, this cloth was woven out of silk threads <sup>8</sup>. 'Edric gives us the threads. He buys them from China. Then we make the cloth for him'. Cotton which has been cultivated and sprouts from the rainforest is steeped in previous connotations relating to Iban religion, animism, spirituality and headhunting. The silk threads of the ceremonial poles pua carry their own sets of connotations, representing the intersection of old and new status enhancing activities. Instead of the historical complementarity between the construction of Iban men's status and women's status, the silk threads now represent new dynamics.

This section discusses the conditions of contemporary textile production in the longhouse and the new forums of textile use and representation. It aims to contribute to broader understanding of the extent to which artisans can draw on their local artisanal skills to make a living and maintain their social positions in commoditizing economies. Previously, mastery over the processes and techniques of weaving was one of the key ways for a woman to enhance her status and demonstrate her identity. Now, it is still weaving that distinguishes the weavers of Rumah Garie. The pua kumbu textiles, like many other Southeast Asian textiles, have both economic and ritual or ceremonial value. The raw material that the cloth is made of, silk threads, refer to the impact the introduction of the material has on Nancy's life and status.

In the case of the Rumah Garie weavers, the 'commodity context', as Appadurai terms it, has brought 'together actors from quite different cultural systems who share only the most minimal understanding (from the conceptual point of view) about the

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy's magnificent *tiang ranyai* ceremonial poles design pua kumbu on a loom dominating her living room. The 'poles' are a distinctive feature of this pattern. The poles on the pua kumbu represent physical poles constructed to create an Iban shamanic shrine, but they also represent a sacred space. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

<sup>8</sup> Another view of Nancy's pua showing individual threads dyed to depict intricate designs. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

object in question and agree *only* about the terms of trade' (Appadurai, 1986a: 15). He continues; 'In precapitalistic contexts, of course, the translation of external demands to local producers is the province of the trader and his agents, who provide logistical and price bridges between worlds of knowledge that may have minimal direct contact' (Appadurai, 1986a: 42).

In Sarawak, one of the most significant actors around the pua kumbu is Edric Ong, a Malaysian-Chinese entrepreneur and culture broker from Kuching. Bangie and Nancy's status and fortunes have become closely affiliated to global networks through the activities of Ong. This affiliation has led to the introduction of silk to the artform and contributed to improving the standard of living for both Bangie and Nancy.

Although Ong has an ambivalent relationship with the weavers and the Ibans, as will be discussed later in the dissertation, he is far from displaying minimal understanding about the object, having himself written many books and hosted academic seminars on the subject. Ong was not available to be interviewed the times I was there. Initially, it was easy for me to cast him as the antagonist; the Chinese businessman exploiting the indigenous women. But that attitude does not do justice to either party; it negates the agency and power of the women, and it negates all the good work Ong does. Edric Ong does not only use the voices of the weavers, he amplifies them to a global audience. It is easy to be overly critical of his role as middleman but the situation is a lot more nuanced than a cursory observation allows. Whatever one's attitudes may be towards Ong, I cannot say that his work with the object, the art and the weavers is negligible. In fact, it is hard to imagine the pua kumbu scene in Kuching if Ong is removed from the picture.

Ong fits into the paradigm of 'merchant bridges across large gaps in knowledge between producer and consumer' (Appadurai, 1986a: 43). The ambivalence in the relationship between producer and merchant bridge is nonetheless, caused by gaps in cultural knowledge. Steiner argues that these cultural gaps are deliberately cultivated: 'In the art world...the success of the middlemen depends upon the separation of buyers from sellers. Social, legal, and bureaucratic barriers are erected at every level of the economic system to maintain the distance between the primary suppliers of art and their ultimate consumers ... Art dealers earn their livelihoods as go-betweens – moving objects and artefacts across institutional obstacles which often they themselves have constructed in order to restrict direct contact or trade' (Steiner, 1995: 151).

The seed of the weavers' affiliation with the middleman was sown by Ong in collaboration with Karama anak Dampa. In the 1980s, Ong attempted to introduce

innovation to the art by commissioning weavers from several longhouses to create vegetable-dyed silk pua kumbus (Ong, 2006b). He supplied the silk yarns to several longhouses, and the weavers from all of these longhouses experimented with the complicated process of mordanting the threads and applying vegetable dyes to silk. However, only Karama, Bangie's mother, and the weavers from Rumah Garie longhouse, were successful in transferring the very complicated technique from dyeing cotton to silk (Ong, 2006b). It was this success with the process of dyeing the threads that led to the genesis of a mutually beneficial, and longstanding, collaboration.

Silk has arguably become the most significant factor in the weaving of identities around the pua kumbu, particularly in regards to Bangie and Nancy. Ong's role includes being a mediator between the weaver's artwork and their global audiences; the collectors, academics, museum and gallery curators from international cultural institutions. The weavers are affiliated with the local government craft promotion, tourism boards and hotels, but it is only their affiliation with Ong that delivers a standard of living that is, in comparison to the other residents in the longhouse, more luxurious. This success manifests in a lifestyle featuring world renown reinforced by frequent international travel.

At dusk, the generator at the back of the longhouse starts up and the natural sounds of the forest are replaced by the drone of machinery. Televisions, radios, deep freezers, fluorescent lights and electric fans come to life. The deep freezers are necessary because with electricity supply available for only several hours in the night, the freezers have to function as coolers during the day. This deep in the forest, there is no television reception and all the sets are connected to DVD players. I visit Nancy, singing karaoke along to her DVD of Iban pop music videos, in her living room. An object that enjoys a place of prominence in the living room is Nancy's set of photo albums. These cherished objects document her life over the past twenty years. They show pictures of all the cities around the world that she has visited on her travels with Bangie and Ong. The photos depict her as a textile artist demonstrating weaving techniques at an embassy. There are other snapshots of her as an Iban tribal ambassador promoting her culture in a gallery, performing dances in Iban finery, jewellery, regalia and clothing. Other images show her leading Iban dance workshops in schools. At the bottom of every page of the photo album was a photo of her son growing up. In the first few albums, he is a child, sporty and athletic, playing with friends out on the river and in the jungle. As he grows up the locations change. There he is, beaming in uniform, having won a scholarship to go to the prestigious Royal Military Collage in West Malaysia. Then there are others at university. He is now an engineer in Singapore.

The photo albums depicting her life created with the pua kumbu were very useful for me to get a sense of Nancy's life and biography. Hoskins in *Biographical Objects* observes how for the Sumbanese Indonesians that she worked with, objects are entangled in the telling of their life stories, they become, in other words, biographical objects. Local meanings are created and communicated through narratives. Similarly, the story of Nancy and Bangie's lives are interwoven into the cloth; they make the cloth and the cloth shapes, colours and provide depth to their lives.

The photo albums document segments of their lives when they travel internationally as a result of their work with the pua kumbu, and also as a direct result of their special relationship with Edric Ong. Like Hoskins, I found that 'I could not collect the histories of objects and the life histories of persons separately. People and the things they valued were so completely intertwined they could not be disentangled ... I obtained more introspective, intimate, and "personal" accounts of many peoples' lives when I asked them about objects, and traced the path of many objects in interviews supposedly focused on persons' (Hoskins, 1998: 2). As with the Sumbanese's relationship with their objects, the pua kumbu Nancy and Bangie weave are 'given an extraordinary significance by becoming entangled in the events of a persons life and used as a vehicle for a sense of selfhood' (Hoskins, 1998: 2). Things become not only a prop for life stories but play a pivotal role.

I encountered similar difficulties to Hoskins when talking to the Iban weavers about their lives. Having grown up in Malaysia, I was aware that it is indiscreet to ask the weavers certain questions, such as; how much money they earn, or how much they charge different people for the cloth, say for example, what Edric Ong pays them, as opposed to local politicians. As I was not in a financial position to buy one of those pieces of cloth for myself, it would have been inappropriate for me to ask how much they would charge me. Asking the price indicates the beginning of negotiations and transactions. As I was their guest, and researching the cloth, appearing to begin negotiations would place me in a different category and status relationship. So it was left unasked for the sake of continuing with the research, this time anyway.

My communication with the weavers was conducted very much in the nature of their communication with each other. I did not dominate our conversations with questions. In fact, a lot of our conversations was skirting and talking around the pua kumbu. Mostly, our communications consisted of jokes, ribbing and laughter. They knew I was there to study the pua kumbu. So although the pua kumbu was central for me, – it was, after all, the reason I had travelled to meet them - in our conversations, it was left at the margins. The approach taken when with the women in the longhouse is

influenced by James Clifford (1997a) in *Museums as Contact Zones*. Clifford relates how Northwest Coast Indian elders were invited by the Portland Museum to discuss ways to reinvigorate the exhibition of their collection of Indian objects. Clifford reports that, contrary to expectations of the museum staff and Clifford, 'the objects were not the subject of much direct commentary by the elders, who had their own agenda for the meeting. They referred to the regalia with appreciation and respect, but they seemed only to use them as *aides-memoires*, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs' (Clifford, 1997a: 189). 'The objects ... were left ... at the margins. For long periods no one paid any attention to them. Stories and songs took center stage' (Clifford, 1997a: 189). Likewise, I placed the pua kumbu in the centre and waited for the weavers' response, letting them tell me what they thought was important to relate about the object, without directing or forcing the conversation or the flow of information. This qualitative method naturally made it very difficult to predict, construct and sort the data into a cohesive structure. Nevertheless, this method reveals the artists' agenda, and helps me discern their articulations around the object.

An aspect of Southeast Asian research is that people do not necessarily articulate their feelings vocally, and in particular, to 'foreign' researchers. Having tried the direct method of questioning unsuccessfully in the past, I knew that even if I pressed the matter, and approached in a more direct probing way, I would not be successful in getting the kind of information that I wanted. I found other ways to derive information by discussing the impact the cloth has had on their lives and the livelihood of their family. Like the Sumbanese, Iban society 'has not been "psychologized" in a confessional tradition ... The narcissistic preoccupation with telling a retelling about their own lives is not well developed in Kodi, where direct questions seem either indiscreet or uninformed' (Hoskins, 1998: 2).

Evenings spent looking at the photo album, however, facilitated detailed questions. Around the photo album, Nancy was willing to talk about her life. Her stories about the photos helped me to understand her life and the role pua kumbu weaving played in it. Other days were spent looking at different pua kumbus - in various stages of completion. These showing were in the company of her mother who would point out different puas; 'Show her the one of the crocodile...can she see the pattern? Hold it up for her. What about the indigo pua? Get that from upstairs'. Nancy drew our attention to a bunch of threads hanging on the window sill. It is the early stages of a pua tied up

into a *baya* or crocodile pattern <sup>9</sup>. She hurried upstairs, dug around for a while and returned with a thick roll of material. She lay it on the floor and gently unfurled it, slowly so as to not entangle the thousands of loose threads, revealing a pua dyed completely in indigo blue <sup>10</sup>. Her father sits in the background, admiring her art.

Nancy may live in a remote environment but she is connected to global centres and networks. Nancy's photo albums can be seen as representing a genealogy of place or itinerary of travel, charting and documenting all the places she has visited. They also document her journey, as an individual woman crafting her life through her journeys to destinations scattered all over the globe. The photos, depicting her life as it unfolds, show the life and social identity she has been able to create as a result of her work with the pua kumbu.

Nancy and Bangie have achieved the traditional status of 'women of renown', only now their fame reaches a global audience. They move in international cultural, artistic and academic circles. They play the role of tribal representatives of the multicultural composition of Malaysia's population in Malaysian tourism board promotions in the United States and as representatives of Sarawak, Borneo, for the Sarawak tourism board (*Malaysia - Rhythms & Arts Promotion: Performers and Artisans Profile*, 2003). They have been invited to exhibit and lead Iban cultural workshops in galleries and cultural centres in Hawaii, Kuala Lumpur, Seattle and several cities in Europe, and they are collected in Sweden, Paris and in the United States.

Traditionally, fame and renown spread through the longhouse and several neighbouring longhouses in the region. Now Bangie and Nancy's renown is spread globally, enabled by today's technology. An indicator of their personal and social identity woven around the pua kumbu is their presence on the internet which has helped to create and raise their profile as tribal artists. Their international movement and appearance can be tracked over the years, and a virtual resume or itinerary of travel can be created. What was previously chanted in a genealogy of place is now digitally recorded and transferred to the internet, enabling us to reconstitute their travels on a global scale.

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<sup>9</sup> Bunches of threads tied up in a crocodile or *baya* design. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

<sup>10</sup> Indigo pua kumbu by Nancy. Indigo is grown around the longhouse. Two types are grown, *tarum* and *renggat*. Indigo requires its own complex set of procedures. In 2004, the Tun Jugah Foundation hosted an indigo dyeing workshop together with weavers from Bali. The Sarawak and Bali weavers then travelled upriver to Rumah Garie. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

The cloth has made them famous within textile collectors' circles and enabled the weavers to create a network of connections centred on the pua kumbu. They are featured in an extensive list of print publications. Their achievements and activities are reported in newspapers and academic circles, including the magazine journal of the Society Atelier, the art society in Kuching ("Atelier Event: Bejalai: A Malaysian-Australian Journey," 2004). Their workshop activities in the East-West Centre, Hawaii, as well as their exhibition at the Australian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur are reported and there are posters of Bangie in Ong's upmarket art/textile shop in Kuching as the face of a pua weaver. Every two years Bangie delivers several pieces to a local politician, who has hundreds of puas in her private collection. Bangie and Nancy's commissions for wealthy indigenous patrons and local politicians show they are connected to the highest levels of government and the business/cultural world through their art.

When I first arrived at the longhouse, I noticed that Nancy was wearing an inexpensive cotton *sarong* made of printed pua kumbu design <sup>11</sup>. I had seen these bales of cheap pua printed cloth in Main Bazaar in Kuching. I thought at the time that these bales of cloth represented a copyright infringement. As I looked around the longhouse, I noticed that not only Nancy, but Mula appeared in one, and so did a few other women in the longhouse. I asked Nancy about that; 'I saw this sarong in Kuching. What do you think of people using pua kumbu designs to make sarongs?' Contrary to expectations, Nancy beamed with pride and said, 'This is *my* design'. Far from considering herself a victim of infringement, this reproduction of her design on a massive scale was a form of 'publication' and was a point of pride for her. It was acknowledgement of the exquisiteness of her design, to her and the longhouse residents. The bales of printed cotton cloth, sold for less than two Australian dollars a meter in the city, contribute to the enhancement of Nancy's renown throughout the longhouse.

Bangie's son is Garie, and although he lives in Kapit town, he holds the position as longhouse headman. His absence is a source of contention and for all practical purposes, Bangie is the acting headwoman. The role of headwoman alone elevates Bangie's status above other residents in the longhouse. There is another factor however, that enhances Bangie's status, and places both her and Nancy above the average longhouse resident; namely their status as master weavers and dyers. Traditionally, the fact that they have proven themselves worthy to be categorized as master weavers was

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy in a pua kumbu sarong of her own design. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeunlimited.blogspot.com/>

enough as a marker of status. The status of these two weavers is elevated and affirmed by the prizes they have won and titles they have attained, in multiple categories in local and international weaving competitions. Bangie is listed as one of thirty-seven creative craftworkers with Unesco (*Creative Craftworkers: Unesco Crafts Prize 1996-2001 - 37 Prize-Winners for Creativity*, 2001). Bangie won the UNESCO crafts prize for Asia/Pacific in 1998, for vegetable dyeing. Bangie, together with her mother, the late Karama Dampa, won the first prize in an natural indigo dyeing exhibition/workshop in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, Thailand (*Creative Craftworkers: Unesco Crafts Prize 1996-2001 - 37 Prize-Winners for Creativity*, 2001: 58 - 61). Other prizes Bangie and Nancy won are the national pua kumbu weaving competition prize, Sarawak 1999, and the Unesco-AHPADA craft seal of excellence, 2000. In 2003, at the third WEFT (World Eco-Fibre and Textile) forum in Kuching, Bangie won the master weavers trophy for silk and Nancy won the trophy for cotton pua kumbus woven by weavers over thirty-five years old (*Rumah Garie is the Best*, 2003). Bangie was also awarded the title of 'Adiguru kraf Negara', national craft artist, Malaysia, 2001 (*Malaysia - Rhythms & Arts Promotion: Performers and Artisans Profile*, 2003). The status of prize-winning master weaver makes them highly respected practitioners of the art of pua kumbu weaving and places them above other women in the longhouse.

The women's fame among textile collectors and academics is capable of drawing people from diverse places on the planet to make the arduous and dangerous journey up to the longhouse. These visitors who travel specially to visit Bangie and Nancy enhance the weavers' status. Not only does the cloth enable Bangie and Nancy to travel overseas, the movements of international visitors travelling upriver to visit them elevate, affirm and maintain their status in the longhouse. Over a span of a few years, the rhythm of the longhouse is punctuated, albeit infrequently, with visits from outsiders. The longhouse guest book was a tattered scrapbook dating back over twenty years. It was only about one third full but some of the visitors had come from a long way. A professional Japanese ikat weaver stayed with Bangie in the longhouse for six months. She came specifically for master classes to learn Iban *ikat* weaving. She demonstrated her dedication by learning the Iban language and Bangie was impressed with the fact that she was able to communicate fluently with them. She made two pua kumbus in the time she was there and both Nancy and Bangie said the cloths were very good. In 2004, the Tun Jugah Foundation organized a visit by weavers from Bali who had attended an indigo dyeing workshop at the foundation headquarters in Kuching. The visit was to strengthen bonds between the two weaving communities and to share knowledge on indigo dyeing ("Tun Jugah Foundation Holds Indigo Dyeing Workshop,"



2004). Edric Ong organized for an American tribal art gallery owner, David McLanahan, from Seattle, to visit in 2006 in order to make a film about Rumah Garie as part of the promotion of the art in the United States (McLanahan, 2007). An Australian aboriginal textile artist, Eva Wanganeen visited in 2003 as part of the Australian Asialink Arts residency program (*Eva Wanganeen*, 2003). An advantage of Rumah Garie now having a permanent location is that the longhouse can receive international visitors, including myself, who have travelled across the globe to learn about this artform, admire and meet the artists, in the forest environment that inspires and provides the elements for making the pua.

Nancy's satisfaction and quiet pride in her art, her life experiences through her travels, has had an energizing effect on her demeanour. As she talks me through the album, reminiscing about her journeys, it is evident to me that the travelling has added an extra layer that enriches not only the quality of her life, but also her art, in the guise of dreams that form the inspiration for her art.

In Rumah Garie longhouse status and social identities are still being constructed and enhanced around the pua kumbu object. Nancy's pua kumbu loom physically dominates her living room, but what it represents is so much more than individual cotton or silk threads dyed to depict motifs woven together to form a pua kumbu. The emerging cloth on the loom speaks eloquently about the life she has created. It affects her lifestyle, her ability to provide for her family and acquire the objects in her home. Where previously women's status enhancing activities, like weaving and rice farming, were interconnected with men's status enhancing activities of headhunting, there is now a disconnect between the genders. Previously, the pua kumbu incited the men to go on journeys, now it is the women who travel. Silk threads tie Nancy and Bangie to a local Chinese Malaysian, enabling them to weave social identities, not available to their ancestors. They are able to weave this affiliation into a tapestry that spans the globe, covering New York, Seattle, Paris and Bangkok.

The weavers' circumstances exemplify Tilley's argument that 'questions of social identity and personal identity are inextricably bound' (Tilley, 2006: 8). Their travels and careers tie their personal identities in with the presentation of Iban ethnic expression and distinctiveness. They play the role of culture, as well as object, bearers. They contribute to the ways the cultural group is perceived overseas. Along with this object, they carry a version or 'brand' of Iban tribal cultural expression constructed in collaboration with various organizations; Edric Ong, the national tourism board, or with textile groups and galleries.

When the women travel, they represent not only Ibans but the most traditional constructed historical version of Iban practices and performances. They tell and recreate the stories that used to be associated with the cloth; the acts of bravery of the men and the stories of Lang, the god of war, practices of fertility, and the dances to welcome the spirits residing in the heads the men brought home from their journeys. They bear elements of cultural heritage embedded in and layered on to the object. They carry a nostalgic version of their lifestyle for circulation in non-Iban locales, in mixed race locales in peninsular Malaysia, and further afield. They portray a traditional version of Iban cultural expression and life in a geographically remote area, while living a lifestyle incorporating international travel and renown. They weave together old connotations, allegory, symbols, metaphors, 'sedimented meanings', and place these various levels of meanings and connotations into a framework that resonates today. Once the pua kumbu Nancy was weaving is delivered to her high status Iban politician client, the multi-layered meanings that the cloth represented for Nancy will be transferred, replaced and enhanced by the new owner, who will no doubt imbue her own meanings, significance and symbolisms onto the cloth. Just as the cloth enhanced Nancy's status in the process of production and circulation, it will be used to articulate the politician's status and position, and convey her ethnic affiliation and identity. In a departure from the original contexts for making the cloth, the women are able to weave an altogether unusual life for themselves around this old art form. Nancy's pua now represents new dynamics in an old art and a contemporary weaving of the individual threads that form the fabric of Nancy's life.

Historically, to symbolise travel from earth to the after life, a shaman, while sitting in a makeshift boat, would have a pua kumbu draped over him as he set off on an epic journey (Sather, 2001: 186-188). Once he had safely crossed to the other world, the shaman would commence searching for lost souls. Once he had found the souls, he would capture them, and then return them to the humans who had lost them. That image of the shaman draped in a pua kumbu is now replaced with that of Bangie and Nancy travelling overseas. The pua continues to enable travel but today it enables women to travel on the earthy rather than the imaginary realm. Instead of catching lost souls, the weavers reveal not only the character of their soul (Linggi, 2001: 36), but also the character of their tribal group and the nation. The pua kumbu, previously seen as shaman's wings have effectively become wings for Bangie and Nancy, enabling them to fly to international destinations.

## Social Science Research Method

Rumah Garie longhouse is situated by a little trickle of a river in the middle of the Borneo rainforest. In this remote longhouse live several women who have learned the art of weaving their life stories into cloth made from the forest. Travelling through this landscape however, to reach this longhouse by the river Kain, or Cloth River, involved overcoming the physical challenges of moving in an inhospitable climate and through rough terrain. The difficulties presented by the logistic challenges of traveling upriver provided a way for me to see the journey as weaving people and organizations together to form the social web of the object. The journey also provided a way for me to view rivers as a theme flowing through a series of relationships constituted at various locations along the river. These relationships were constructed into a narrative of a journey upriver with each relationship playing its part in the series, flowing on and leading to the next. The pua kumbu, although physically absent during our journey through the landscape, was always present in our imaginations, for it lay in the heart of a social network that transported us upriver.

This view, admittedly, came with distance and perspective after returning to Sydney, where aspects of the trip could be reflected upon, constructed, interpreted and viewed in their entirety. My position in this social web was constantly reassigned and renegotiated throughout the duration of the journey. These changes made it difficult to find a point of stability in the constant flow of relationships, made and broken off, during the journey. Disjointed and unrelated aspects of the trip became knitted together and constructed into a narrative with a beginning, middle and end as the story unfolded. My recount of the journey became my own weaving of experiences; fears and elation of reaching goals, real and perceived rapport and meaningful personal connection with people, were all experienced in a situation of heightened emotions. The account of the journey took on a purpose beyond physical transportation. The relationships created in this journey placed me within the social network constituted around the pua kumbu object.

This approach is in line with Bender, who argues that landscapes, as summarized by Tilley, ‘...are always in process, rather than static, being and becoming. Landscapes are on the move peopled by diasporas, migrants of identity, people making homes in new places, landscapes are structures of feeling, palimpsest of past and present...’ (Tilley, 2006: 7). Bender calls it ‘*phenomenological landscapes* where the time duration is measured in terms of human embodied experience of place and movement, of memory and expectation’ (Bender, 2002b: S103 ).

I set off on my journey with energy, enthusiasm and optimism. Before starting however, there were several problems to overcome. Ascertaining the location of the longhouse was my first problem. When preparing for the trip from Sydney, I could not obtain any maps that showed the location of the longhouse. The map I had purchased from Kuching previously did not have a dot marked with 'R. Garie' on it. Detailed maps of the remote interior of Sarawak are problematic to obtain. Although publicly available maps of the interior of Borneo are published they are not updated frequently. To add to the problem, longhouses are named after the current headman, but headmen are replaced more frequently than maps of the interior of Sarawak are updated. At the Iban Tun Jugah Foundation in Kuching, the most specific instructions I could obtain were variations of 'go to Kapit and ask around. You have to charter a longboat and get the locals to take you there'. With this scant information I proceeded on my journey to Kapit, a remote town, with some degree of trepidation and an attitude of just going with the flow.

As the details of our travel arrangements spread in Kapit, in contrast to Geertz' account of being 'invisible' in the first few days of arrival in Bali (Geertz, 1972), we were made acutely aware that far from appearing invisible, we were being allocated to different sides in Kapit's long history of multi-tribal tensions. Any attempts to be an 'objective' observer was quickly dispelled. We were implicated in the tensions simply by whomever we sat and talked with in the cafe. I was aware of how I appeared to the locals; I was an outsider/insider, traveling with an Anglo-Celtic companion. My 'side' was demonstrated to everyone, simply and eloquently, by my goal to travel further upriver to study an Iban art object and I was connected to an Iban foundation in Kuching. We were not blithely stumbling into tensions that I was not aware of. I knew about the conflicts around deforestation and native customary rights land, but I did not know that the legacy of hatred caused by headhunting and historical enmity was still so raw, that even today locals seek ways to get revenge, albeit in ways that matter in today's economy. Today's method of getting ahead (a head) involves land titles and logging concessions, rather than symbolic or spiritual heads. Local contestation over land involved incredibly high stakes. We had to agree with the locals; Kapit was indeed a cowboy town.

To add to the unsettling feelings, the night before we were due to leave for the longhouse, a Kayan man insisted on spending the whole evening with us, beginning with dinner at the Hua Hua cafe, which we frequented, and then on to several drinking places in various locations around the town. He turns to me; 'You're Chinese? From Semenanjung [the Peninsula]? No offence', he reassures me, and he turns his back to

me and faces Jackson; ‘The Chinese, they come here, they chop down the trees and take everything. They *orang kaya* [rich man]. But they’re not from here... from Semenanjung’. He turns to me to involve me in the conversation, ‘No offense, ah’ and he continues telling us stories about the rapacious nature of Chinese companies from West Malaysia exploiting Sarawak. This soon became generalised to all Chinese people, especially if they are from West Malaysia. I was born in West Malaysia, of Chinese-Indian heritage, but in Kapit I was told repeatedly that I look Iban. Before this encounter, I would tell stories to try to relate to my fellow Malaysians, soon after this encounter, I started telling people I was Australian and played my Western foreigner dualistic insider/outsider card.

The Kayan man then proceeded to quiz us over our travel arrangements, the details of which he already evidently knew. He showed particular interest in my study of the pua kumbu and found ways to allude to his pivotal role in helping foreign textile collectors in the 1980s acquire these objects. He promoted himself as an expert guide in taking foreign visitors to longhouses where pua kumbus were made and insinuated that we should have gone with him, a Kayan instead of an Iban. We were going directly to the weavers, but even as our travel arrangements were being finalised, he was still insisting that we needed him, a Kayan as a middle man, an agent, to mediate between us and the Ibans.

He evidently made a lot of money in the past from being a tour guide to Europeans and Americans in search of the “real” Borneo experience. ‘I’m not an *orang kaya* [rich man], but you should come here when we have the regatta. I have a very big fast boat and I enter the competition every year.’ ‘People call me an *orang kaya*, but I’m not...by the way, I’ve got a very big piece of land in town, very big.’ Soon he began a barely veiled diatribe against the Ibans as a whole, which resorted to the usual attacks of critiquing their educational attainment and their propensity to avoid work. These qualities were naturally presented as a contrast to the qualities of Kayans. This diatribe then swiftly degenerated to references of the not so distant history of headhunting, punctuated with pointing gestures towards the undeveloped side of the Balleh River, on the opposite bank of Kapit town. The gestures implied that scores had been settled and people had gone missing. To his mind, the area was still under contestation.

To place this Kayan’s grievances in historical context, less than one hundred and fifty years ago, in 1863, there was a great war between the Ibans and Kayans in the Rejang/Balleh area. This war has since come to be known as the great Kayan expedition;

... uncontrolled headhunting parties killed, plundered and drove off most of the Kayans and related tribes from the upper Rejang, the survivors found a haven in the Baram, some in Indonesian rivers and a very few in the more inaccessible parts of their own lands. This gave the Iban effective occupation of the Lower Rejang and the opportunity by the turn-of-the-century, to force their way into the Balleh against the *Rajah's* original wishes (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 12).

Rumah Garie longhouse, our destination, is located by a tributary of the Balleh River at a point that is several hours by boat past Fort Sylvia in Kapit. This places it within the disputed area where the Dutch, the British, the Kayans, Kenyahs and Ibans came together for the Great Peace Making ceremony of 1924 in Kapit ("Fort Sylvia Museum Exhibit - 1924 Peacemaking at Kapit," 2005). The significance of this location is that the ancestors who set up this longhouse were pioneers who would have fought wars against the Kayans and other tribes.

Over the course of a few drinks, our newly acquired Kayan acquaintance elaborated on how the victimised tribes are able to return contested land back to the original owners. 'In the past, we used to fight with the sword. Today, we don't need the sword. Just a pen.' He explains, 'We study, we get an education, so now our people work in the land office' he smiled. 'With the slash of a pen, we can cancel out their land' he gestured the slashing motion, 'and make it Kayan again ... The pen is indeed mightier than the sword,' he laughs. This exchange again took place in public and attempts by us to steer the conversation to safer, non-controversial topics were unsuccessful.

Although not naïve about the recent history between the tribes, it was still unsettling for us as strangers and outsiders. We were about to embark on a journey into what was for us, the great unknown, in a situation where we were completely dependent on the hospitality, integrity and expertise of our Iban hosts. The whole encounter was unsettling. Kapit was beginning to feel a little too small, too remote and too stifling. Enmity between tribes is swept under the (pua kumbu) blanket, but not forgotten. It does not take long for locals to offer unprompted and unwelcomed, information about the history of contestation between the tribes in the area, and often within earshot of other customers. In fact, it would appear that moments are picked to enunciate gripes specifically for the benefit of representatives of enemy tribes who are in fact sitting at the next table in the cafe.

Our Kayan friend had unsettled us. We were deep in historically contested territory, and it would appear, the conflict is not forgotten. The facts are; The Kayans were here first, the Ibans invaded, and there were the great Kayan wars where many people were slaughtered. In 2005, there were still residuals of enmity with people openly referring to the slashing of swords, of revenge and getting even. Tomorrow, after having spent a very public evening with not only a Kayan, but one with a local reputation as a troublemaker, we were going deep into Iban territory.

After the Kayan man left, Jacob, the Chinese proprietor of the cafe, came to check if we had made arrangements with this other person. 'How much did you pay him?' Jacob had witnessed our movement around all the different tables in his cafe throughout the days, deep in conversation with various players in town. Earlier, he had checked the rates we had agreed on with Garie, the longhouse headman, for boat travel and accommodation. Jacob consulted with his brother, the owner of the cafe, on the costs and details of our arrangements. They conferred for a while and both agreed that we were getting a good rate. By nightfall, everyone in town, it seems, knew the details of our travel plans, which is how our Kayan acquaintance knew of our intentions. 'Oh, we didn't pay him anything, we're not going with him.' Jacob, relieved, said 'He's...' he hesitates and looks at his brother at the other end of the café, 'he's ... a troublemaker'. He continues, 'he's very expensive.' Jacob pointedly warned us off the Kayan and clearly implied that we should not travel with him. 'Keep your distance from him.'

Bender talks about the 'subjective positioning of the commentator' in constituting landscape (Bender, 2002b: S103, 106). My subjective recording of Kapit was of a place barely recovering from its past of headhunting and violent clashes. There was a complete absence of romance or nostalgia in the memories I was recording of the place. To me Kapit was a town where big players stamp their mark while smaller or non-players scatter and skirt around powerful people, trying to find their place in it. It was a town rapidly changing in the midst of influx of huge sums of money for development of physical infrastructure.

I saw my place and positioning in the landscape in terms of relationships that were constituted and negotiated, strengthened and placed at risk of being severed if tests were not passed. An example was if I had represented myself inaccurately or could not substantiate connections that I had raised in conversation. Fortunately for us, we somehow managed to get the right connections to help us achieve our intentions. Relationships were created and broken off, intermingled and tinged with emotions of assurance or disturbing and disconcerting encounters.

When I looked out on to the street at the Kapit marketplace, I saw many faces but did not know who was going to end up being important in helping me achieve my intentions of travel and movement in the landscape. I was aware of being closely scrutinized and observed, knowing the look of watching and observing, while studiously appearing to ignore, fascinated yet demonstrating a complete lack of inquisitiveness. My experience of the landscape was a place where we felt completely out of our element. It felt like we had travelled a long way, not only geographically, but also socially, into the interior, or to the 'heart of Borneo' as the local government calls it (*Kapit Town*, 2007). After a few days in town, it started to get a little too familiar and we felt we had to tread carefully over not so deeply buried, and certainly not forgotten, underlying tensions between the tribes, still raw and sore. Kapit began to feel very small and very remote. If we stayed too long we would begin to make enemies.

We finally get back to the hotel that night, and find the young Iban receptionist waiting for us. 'I brought you a pua kumbu', he says as he pulls out a small piece of ikat cloth the size of a hand towel. He smiles, 'My mother-in-law made this. This is genuine pua kumbu. I can take you to Rumah Garie. No need to hire boat, lah. We can drive there - half an hour enough. ..It's very near.' 'It's ok, we've hitched a ride on a boat,' we replied. 'No need boat,' he insists, as we climb upstairs, 'we can go there by car.'

We went back to the hotel room and seriously assessed the situation. We weighed our options and debated canceling the trip. Our trepidation was based on the premise that if we were so completely out of our element in the town, how much more vulnerable were we going to be in a longboat up a river we could not even locate on a map, let alone the longhouse on the river, traveling with people we did not know, to meet weavers living in a longhouse that was out of communication range with the town. After an uneasy night, we resigned ourselves in the morning to take a chance and continue the journey upriver. We had come too far to turn back.



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## Approaches to textiles

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In this section on approaches to textiles, I trace developments in the study of objects, and present the historical scholarship, documentation and analysis on the pua kumbu. The approaches to objects can be designated to those that regard objects as passive in contrast to those that consider objects as being active, capable of doing work, or possessing a level of agency. Among anthropologists in the field of material culture one focus is set squarely on the objects, with human elements limited to ritual and ceremonial contexts, while another focus concentrates on social relations developed and articulated around the production and usage of objects. If we imagine the level of activity projected on to objects as a scale, then weighted to one side would be studies that focus on objects and associated cultural knowledge as being passively preserved and transmitted (Gill, 1971; Haddon & Start, 1936). On the other end of this scale would exist studies that reify objects to actively negotiate and construct social relations and create cultural identity. (Appadurai, 1986b; Gell, 1998; MacClancy, 1997b; Dennis Miller, 1998; Thomas, 1991; Tilley, 2002). The history of approaches to the pua kumbu spans both ends of this spectrum.

My approach adopts the model of objects doing active social work, in a context where they are assigned meanings and value, and have deep historical associations with the articulations of identity. These concepts form the background to the thesis. This

examination of the pua kumbu is situated within the field of material culture studies. This analysis of the pua kumbu takes as the wider context, studies of textiles starting from the early 1970s and continuing up to the 2000s.

Many of the earlier studies of textiles tended to investigate the object from within separate disciplines; art history, anthropology and textile studies feature prominently among them. Also many studies approached Southeast Asian textiles from a structuralist perspective. They analyzed the motifs, the symbols, the rich history of social meanings and cultural weight of these works of art. (Adams, 1969; Barnes, 1993, 1994; Forge, 1989; Fox, 1980; Gavin, 2004; Gill, 1971; M. Gittinger, 1979, 1989; M. S. Gittinger, 1980; Heringa, 1993; Kartiwa, 1980; Maxwell, 1990; Nabholz-Kartaschoff, 1989; Nabholz-Kartaschoff, Barnes, & Stuart-Fox, 1993; Nooy-Palm, 1980, 1989; Rodgers-Siregar, 1980; Uchino, 1999; Vogelsanger, 1980).

With the threat of demise or loss of these art forms, works have emerged that assess the impact of changes brought about by both contact with western influences and the inevitable changes that come with economic development. Although there was a decline in the production of cloth, new meanings and relevance were being created for cloth in society. There were studies asserting that textile art in Southeast Asia, and in the wider region, including the Pacific and Papua New Guinea, far from declining is alive, incorporating and creating new meaning and relevance. Some works discuss the current relevance and transformation of textiles in general, (Colchester, 1991; Rowley, 1999), and other authors examine changes in reference to textiles in the wider region; (Barnes, 1999; Clemans, 2006; Dhamija, 1999; Geirnaert, 1989; Howard & Sanggenafa, 1999; Maxwell, 1990; Mellor, 1999). Globally connected charitable organizations are gathering together people who have been identified as culture bearers. Together with the culture bearers, these organizations are attempting to salvage and conserve textile heritage. In so doing, they provide a means of employment for women in particular. These heritage and economic interventions assist the women in their efforts to rebuild lives shattered or disrupted by war and extreme poverty (*Cambodia House*, 2007; *East Timor Women Australia*, 2007; *Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles*, 2007). These activities around textiles are connecting academics, businesses, tribal campaigners, activists and art collectors.

The current trajectory that is beginning to emerge is one that is more interdisciplinary in nature, i.e. material culture. Material culture studies originated from the fields of archaeology and anthropology. At the heart of this approach is an 'abiding concern for the materiality of cultural life and its diverse and at times conflicting vitality' (Buchli, 2002a: 1). Miller argues that;

We cannot comprehend anything, including ourselves, except as a form, a body, a category, even a dream. As such forms develop in their sophistication we are able to see more complex possibilities for ourselves in them. As we create law, we understand ourselves as people with rights and limitations. As we create art we may see ourselves as a genius, or as unsophisticated. We cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as material culture and continues to evolve through us (Daniel Miller, 2005: 8).

The holistic approach is a fundamental feature of material culture study. This interdisciplinary approach is particularly relevant to this study of the pua kumbu because the object, used as a tool to examine social dynamics, yields data that is essentially interdisciplinary in nature. The data on the varied and socially active roles the object plays cannot be easily or neatly couched within specialized academic disciplines, such as art or anthropology. The field of material culture, according to Marcus and Myers, in *The Traffic in Culture*, actively renegotiates the relationship between art and anthropology (Marcus & Myers, 1995: 1).

### *Motifs on the pua kumbu*

The motifs on the pua kumbu have intrigued anthropologists for a century. Faced with a textile full of intricate abstract and figurative motifs, researchers have grappled with the meanings they depict <sup>12</sup>. What meanings do individual motifs on the pua communicate? What do the distribution of motifs on the cloth, and the usage of the pua in social situations mean? These were questions raised in research on the pua kumbu.

Enticing the researchers were motifs which are graphic and which depict clearly discernible animals, humans shapes, heads, monsters or demons. Added to the mystique was the fact that the cloths were sacred and used in rituals associated with headhunting and shamanism. They were also connected to the status of women. In

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<sup>12</sup> Pua Kumbu, details, depicting the figure of a man with enlarged shoulder tattoos, nabau (or serpent), and an unspecified object. The photo of the lion is from a pua kumbu by Nancy Ngali. She loves animals and they feature prominently in her dreams and percolate into reality on her cloth. She told us of her dream of wild animals entering her kitchen the night we arrived. Later, she invited us in to her kitchen for an Iban style evangelical church service. (Photographs by Audrey Low).

addition, some of these cloths had praise names which were bestowed on them in special showing and naming ceremonies. Even individual motifs had names. All these factors prompted researchers to think that these cloths and the motifs on them communicated meanings. What they communicated and how the researcher was to understand them was clouded. The meanings remained elusive. A significant part of the problem lay in how anthropologists were pursuing these meanings.

Three researchers on motifs and symbolisms on the pua kumbu, Haddon, Gill and Gavin, illustrate the changing focus and influence of three theoretical perspectives. Haddon, a famous anthropologist of his time in the 1890s, and Gill, arriving at the study later on in the 1970s, began with the premise that these motifs were a kind of code or language. This approach to motifs was an unfruitful quest which led no closer to the meanings (Gill, 1971; Haddon & Start, 1936). Haddon's research, published in the 1930s, exemplifies the application of the evolution theory on art. Gill's PhD thesis in the 1970s, provides an example of a structuralist-linguistic approach to art. Gavin's publications in the 1990s and 2000s, round out the history of approaches to pua kumbu motifs, by applying approaches from art history and textile studies, tinged with loss discourse, to the study of the pua kumbu. Gavin counters Haddon's approach, and returns agency back to the weaver (Gavin, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2004). Gavin's approach to symbols is developed by Heppell, and the art of pua kumbu is further clarified by Linggi, Jabu and Ong (Heppell, 2005; Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1998, 1999, 2001; Ong, 1986, 1999a).

### **Objects as passive: pua kumbu, symbolism and personal meanings**

*'Oh devilish tantalizations of the gods!'*

*And this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last (Melville, 1851: 396).*

The quote above, from Melville in *Moby Dick* about the mysterious tattoos on Queequeg's body, encapsulates several themes crossing over different approaches to the study of the pua kumbu through the years. The quote serves as an introduction to an attitude or to a preconceived conclusion or assumption that objects are passive. This passive approach to objects was often accompanied by the concomitant approach that viewed culture as structured, whole, pure, contained, authentic and with clearly defined and discernible boundaries. In relation to the pua kumbu, this combination of approaches is exemplified by the following researchers, Haddon and Start, and Gill (Gill, 1971; Haddon & Start, 1936). According to both Haddon and Gill, the object is seen as passive. It represents or reflects the world symbolically - it encrypts and encodes the world and cultural knowledge visually. Motifs are seen as a form of hieroglyphics that enshrine cultural knowledge. These hieroglyphics need to be interpreted, translated and read. The object and its related intangible cultural heritage are transmitted down the generations to passive recipients. These recipients then reproduce and transmit a diminished form of the cultural object to the next generation.

Melville's quote also helps to emphasize the point that key elements in various approaches to the pua kumbu blend into one another and are not easily separated. This underscores the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis and reflects recent works on material culture and objects.

The underlying approach evident from this quote is the evolutionary approach to culture. It viewed culture as degenerating from a glorious high point in the past, where mysteries were revealed and understood, up to the 'present' where Queequeg (and by implication, his tribal group), although bearing symbols on his body, was depicted as being ignorant of their meanings. The tattoos were the work of the ancients who were seen as having a heightened level of communication with the gods, an ability present generations have lost. Truths were revealed to people in the past. These inspired visions helped them work out mysteries of the universe. Elements from this body of knowledge were then reproduced on the material culture of the people, including the tattoos on Queequeg's body.

Language was given prominence in this approach. Great meanings were ascribed to motifs which were understood as symbols. These meanings could be read. They were seen as riddles that could be deciphered. As Queequeg was ignorant of their meanings, these designs were destined therefore to 'moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last' (Melville, 1851: 396). This perspective is reflected in Haddon's approach to the study of the pua kumbu.

### *Haddon and the evolutionary approach*

Alfred Haddon, a renowned anthropologist of his day, visited Sarawak in 1898 as part of his Torres Straits expedition in 1899. He was a guest of the Sarawak Museum (Haddon & Start, 1936: vii). While he was in Sarawak he conducted a systematic and in-depth study of the pua kumbu. The result of Haddon and Laura Start's study was the *Iban or Sea Dayak Fabrics and their Patterns: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Iban Fabrics*, originally published in 1936 (Haddon & Start, 1936). Haddon and Start's catalogue was the first publication that focussed exclusively on Iban weaving. Other colonial period works existed, but these dealt with the pua kumbu in a cursory manner in their survey of Ibans and other tribes in Sarawak (Hose, 1926; Howell, 1912; Roth, 1896). Haddon's publication can be seen as providing a historical perspective to the study of pua kumbu motifs.

Haddon's approach was to examine individual motifs. To this end, Haddon and Laura Start assembled many pieces of pua kumbu and set about drawing and documenting many of the motifs. The motifs were then divided into separate categories based on representations of humans, plants, animals, or what he termed anthropomorphs, phyllomorphs and zoomorphs, as well as objects in everyday life, (hooks, ladder, fences) and natural phenomena (clouds, moon) (Haddon & Start, 1936: 123). These categories he devised were based on names of motifs given by informants; 'More than two hundred sketches of patterns and designs were made of which the names were obtained' (Haddon & Start, 1936: vii). These names became the basis for the categorization of the abstract or figurative designs.

Haddon's study of the pua kumbu motifs was based on an approach that presumed those designs functioned as language or text. He regarded the patterns as symbols that revealed knowledge. The task of the researcher, according to Haddon's approach, was to decipher and discern the original inspiration for individual images. Once the motifs were identified, it was then seen as a relatively straightforward process to decipher the images in a similar manner adopted if one were to decode hieroglyphics, pictographs or other image based text.

Underlying Haddon's approach to motifs was the evolutionary view of culture. Haddon worked on the pua kumbu text in the late 1890s/early 1900s. This period of time is characterised by Buchli as being influenced by the evolutionary theory of art which originated in the fields of anthropology and ethnography (Buchli, 2002a). This approach can be discerned in Haddon's premise that individual pua motifs, although unrecognisable when he studied them, were originally accurate, realistic and

recognizable depictions or representations of actual phenomenon or concrete objects, like human figures or animals for example. They carried profound meanings that could be easily read and understood.

Haddon had an explanation as to why certain motifs for the pua, although named after forest creatures and plants, did not bear any resemblances to the objects and creatures the names referred to:

Although some of the designs are sufficiently realistic to make identification possible, most of them are highly conventionalized. Indeed, in many cases it is almost impossible to see any resemblance between the design and the object it is intended to represent. No doubt some students will question whether there is any such connection, but we must remember that these are traditional representations which have been transmitted through very many generations and it could not be expected that a realistic treatment often persist (Haddon & Start, 1936: xv).

These original forms, he argued, were handed down from previous generations and transmitted through the ages. However, the process of transmission was seen as flawed, and this resulted in the motifs losing crucial elements over the centuries and degenerating from a high point of realism to a form that was unrecognisable.

In this evolutionary approach, the idea of transmission was applied not only to motifs but also to culture itself. As culture was seen as being a static whole with clearly delineated and unchanging borders, it was therefore capable of being transmitted from one generation to the next. As with motifs, the same constraints resulting from the faulty process of transmission over a lengthy period of time, applied to culture. Culture was seen to lose key elements along the way. These key elements, which comprise ancient knowledge, wisdom or even languages, are therefore lost forever to future generations.

This evolutionary approach, according to Buchli, represented colonial attitudes to non-European cultures (Buchli, 2002a). Western European art and cultures were seen to have evolved to the pinnacle of civilization. According to this Euro-centric approach, non-European cultures were arrayed at varying points of development below this pinnacle. Objects, art works or material culture were used to determine the placing of cultural groups in this hierarchy. This arrangement of cultures along the scale of

civilization was particularly evident in The Great Exhibition of 1851 in the Crystal Palace, London (Buchli, 2002b: 3).

This evolutionary approach to art is paradoxical. Evolution is about change, development and adaptation to new circumstances. However, within this approach, non-European cultures were regarded as static and whole. The evolutionary approach to art promoted the idea that people were capable of creating new forms or expressions of culture. Yet, implicit in the practice of this approach however, was the idea that this ability to evolve and change was restricted to the European cultures. Non-western art and cultures were seen as only the passive end result of a process of transmission.

The paradox implicit in the evolutionary view of art and culture is that while all humans and their art and culture were seen as evolving and ascending the ladder of civilization, the art of non-western civilizations on the other hand, were seen as degenerating from a high point of realism to a conventionalised, abstract and indecipherable form. Implicit in this view is that subsequent generations did not have a hand in creating new works of art. They merely (mindlessly and uncomprehendingly) reproduced them.

Change in non-European cultures was seen as a form of degeneration. In this approach, non-western cultures and their art must remain static and frozen at the stage of development when they were 'discovered' by Europeans, or until shortly after the point of contact. This static form was then seen as transmitted to future generations. The recipients may or may not understand the symbolisms they inherited from their primordial ancestors.

Haddon included the Iban weavers and informants he worked with in the 1890s into this category of non-comprehending recipients. The weavers were seen as reproducing the motifs and designs, unaware of the meanings they were weaving. The descendents' ignorance of the origins and symbolisms of the motifs was understood as the reason why many tribal motifs were shrouded in secrecy. The meanings of motifs were lost and designs which were seen as once bearing meanings became cryptic riddles, destined to remain forever hidden from current descendents. The explanation Haddon offered was that; 'Every Iban cannot be expected to know the names of all the designs and patterns, so it is not surprising that identifications should occasionally vary' (Haddon & Start, 1936: xv).

Other assumptions in Haddon's approach led to problems with the interpretation of motifs. Haddon proceeded with the premise that the cloth and the motifs carried the same meanings for all Ibans. Everyone educated in the culture could



therefore read the motifs like hieroglyphics, text or a language. Haddon's search for meanings based on names was problematic because titles of pua kumbu and the names of motifs are often euphemisms. Headhunting was naturally a common theme; Being the central status conferring activity of historical Iban society, many of the motifs on the pua kumbu referred to the practice, either directly or indirectly (Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1998, 1999, 2001). Direct references to headhunting took the form of motifs depicting heads and warriors. Indirect references alluded to common metaphors and euphemisms for headhunting. These euphemisms included objects like palms, seeds and rice grains. These metaphors included concepts like hunger and abstract ideas like pining for something missing. Motifs and praise names for the cloth alluded to objects yearning to be satisfied (with heads). Apart from headhunting, other rituals and ceremonies, and motifs based on characters from the Iban canon of mythology, sacred stories and stories of heroes also featured prominently on the cloth (Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1998, 1999, 2001).

There are many ways of understanding the patterns; depictions of actual objects are combined with references to abstract ideas. These patterns and praise names refer to widely understood euphemisms and metaphors, and are combined with the weaver's personal meanings. The many layers of meanings and possible interpretations for the motifs meant that Haddon's attempt at documenting patterns and finding a direct and straightforward correlation for each image was therefore unsuccessful.

A group of motifs that Haddon labeled under the category of 'fence' demonstrates some of the complexities with the task of classifying motifs based on given names. This common item refers to the *pagar api* which is commonly translated as a fence of fire. *Pagar api* is a common theme, title or motif for a pua kumbu. The *pagar api* fence is not an actual physical fence constructed on the outside of the longhouse. It is a shamanic shrine, consisting of a collection of sacred plants and objects, assembled during shamanic rituals, inside the longhouse (Sather, 2001: 144 - 153). Some of the objects necessary to construct this shrine are: a pua kumbu cloth, a medicine box, a plate in rattan casing, a plate with husked rice, a bush knife, a basket containing the *dekuh* (offering) and a spear standing upright (Graham, 1987: 69-73; Sather, 2001: 147). The title *pagar api* when used in reference to the pua kumbu refers to a class of motifs depicting the actual shamanic shrine.

When depicted on the pua kumbu, the *pagar api*, in addition to a shamanic shrine, also refers to the metaphorical aspects of fire. According to Sather, fire in the context of the *pagar api* 'represents a place at which transactions may be concluded

between the *manang* [shaman] and the spirits, such that shamans may recover human souls, taking them back from the *antu* [spirits] ‘ (Sather, 2001: 109).

The *pagar api* represent, at once, a spiritual barrier, a ‘fence of fire’, that intimidates spirits and so prevents them from invading the human world, and a means of access, a bridge or dangerous crossing, by means of which the shaman may enter unseen regions of the cosmos and there contend against malevolent forces and return again to the visible world, oftentimes accompanied by formerly lost or captured souls. The shrine is at once the starting and ending point of the *manang’s* [shaman’s] journeys (Sather, 2001: 152).

Based on Clifford Sather’s interpretation and explanation of both the title and the term *pagar api*, the fence of fire refers to an actual shrine as well as a concept. It refers to a fence, but only in an invisible, abstract, metaphorical and spiritual sense. Alfred Haddon on the other hand, believed that the patterns, like one labelled fence for example, were depictions of actual objects found in everyday Iban existence around the longhouse. His search for a direct and straightforward correlation to actual objects therefore, proved to be an unrewarding and unfruitful method of understanding pua kumbu motifs.

After Haddon, another study of the pua kumbu was conducted in the 1970s. This study by Sarah Gill (1971), was couched in the approach dominant in its time which was an analysis of the pua kumbu from a structuralist perspective. Gill’s study elevates the role of language and can be characterised by Stafford’s phrase; ‘the totemization of language as a godlike agency in western culture’ (Stafford, 1996: 5).

#### *Gill and ‘The totemization of language’*

Sarah Gill’s approach to the pua kumbu underscores the importance of language. Both Haddon and Gill saw the pua kumbu as an enticing object that depicted an intriguing collection of symbols. The cloth was seen as displaying meanings that were hidden and secret. Gill subscribed to Haddon’s idea that the motifs have been transmitted through the ages and both Haddon and Gill were intrigued by the possibilities of decoding the long lost language. The key difference between Haddon and Gill was in their approach to the task of decoding. While Haddon’s approach relied on the names of individual motifs given by informants, Gill’s approach depended on an analysis of the shapes and forms that are depicted on the cloth.

Gill's approach was closely associated with semiotics and linguistics. She analysed the cloth from a structural-linguistic perspective and her method of formal analysis was based on the premise that the pua kumbu cloth functioned as text or a parchment. Her premise was that the object was a visual code to be linguistically deciphered by the (western) researcher; the 'special vocabulary of formal analysis permits the Western art historian to translate into words what the eye, by long practice and comparison, is able to discern' (Gill, 1971: vi). Gill worked from the basis that all the information a researcher needed was already in front of them on the cloth. The pua kumbu contained riddles in the form of motifs that could be broken down and isolated into component parts. The cloth revealed and communicated its meanings visually. These motifs could then be combined to form a grammar, syntax and system of symbols. These symbols were seen as the building blocks that form part of a universal language.

The researcher's task was to systematically categorize, transcribe and read the text. The foundation of Gill's analysis was that the motifs can be divided into categories based on their shapes, forms, lines, and colours. With this method of categorization, Gill compiled five categories; figures, lozenges, dentates, zigzags and stripes (Gill, 1971: 169). Other pieces of data to be fed into this analysis were clues laid out in the composition, pattern of distribution and frequency of motifs. Gill also emphasized the idea that objects are created solely for cultural rituals and ceremonial functions. Her premise was that the roles objects play in ritualistic and ceremonial life are inscribed on to the objects. Analysing the context in which the object was used, in combination with the language encrypted in the visual code displayed on the object, would give the researcher a complete understanding of the worldview expressed. Using this method of analysis, Gill concluded that the pua kumbu, contrary to information provided by the producers of these objects, performed the function of erotic objects that promote fertility.

In contrast to the focus on language, subsequent researchers after Haddon and Gill discounted the importance of symbols when studying the pua kumbu. Developments in approaches to the pua kumbu is discussed in the following section.

### *Against symbols*

Motifs do not communicate as symbols. This is the key premise of subsequent authors working on the pua kumbu. Gavin, Heppell, Jabu, Linggi and Ong argue that Iban weavers play with motifs. They master manipulating layers and layers of meanings that incorporate ideas from a rich variety of sources. Primary sources of inspiration are the

visceral experiences of living in the tropical rainforest environment and the mythologies and cultural stories that emanate from a lifestyle in an area of great biodiversity. The pua kumbu also celebrates personal experiences and dreams which are woven into word or image play and are represented in the motifs. (Gavin, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2004; Heppell, 2005; Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2004; Ong, 1986, 1999a).

Traude Gavin, in *Iban Ritual Textiles* (Gavin, 2004) and *Against Symbols* (Gavin, 1999), explained that, if the definition of symbols is a shape or sign that retains a stable accepted meaning, then individual pua kumbu motifs have no symbolic values. Gavin accepts that there are certain classes or types of cloths that are used for specific rituals and ceremonies, and that these cloths are ranked according to status and purpose. She explains that these ritualistic cloths display established sets of motifs and distribution of patterns, and that sacred patterns have certain visual attributes. Gavin insists, however, that, apart from a general type of design that reveals the level of potency or sacredness, there is no other inherent communication or individual motifs that communicate symbolically.

In terms of approach, Gavin rejects the role of linguistics and semiotics in the analysis of motifs. She does not regard the motifs as discrete words that communicate visually, or as hieroglyphics to be read, decoded or decrypted. The motifs to Gavin are creations of art. They are not text or language. She argues that there is no key to the symbols. The motifs cannot be unlocked. More important than individual motifs, she insists, is the function the cloth was made for - its ceremonial and ritual purposes. Empiang Jabu, a leading Iban politician, Iban textile scholar and collector of pua kumbu, supports this position:

An attempt to individualize and itemize every single design or represented symbol in a given piece often distorts the true meaning, and there is often a danger of misunderstanding. The interpretation of the true spiritual significance of the design on a piece of pua lies in the combination of the symbols and the general layout of design. A detailed description of the appearance of these symbols alone has little meaning and falls short of why a piece of pua is designed in a particular way (Jabu, 1991: 81).

According to Gavin and Jabu, textiles carry meanings, but not unknown secrets of the universe or profound truths. Rather they carry stories and personal tales (see for example Hoskins, 1998). There are names given by the weavers to types or classes of

patterns, but contrary to Haddon and Gill's understanding, these motifs do not have universal names or meanings. According to Gavin, names for motifs are unstable. By this she means that motifs that look very similar may be given different names by different weavers. The difficulty is compounded by another factor which is that praise names for pua kumbu cloths often bear no resemblance to the motifs. Gavin explains that they are more akin to names of people rather than names that bear information on the classifications. For example, one is unlikely to guess a person's name just by looking at them. Just as people need to be told what a person's name is, names of individual motifs and cloths need to be specified. The fact that these names are often euphemisms or based on mythology compounds the problems Haddon and Gill faced in their approaches. Jabu adds:

It is important to consider factors such as the purpose for which the pua has been woven, its date and historical context, the life story of the weaver herself, as well as to be aware of a rich repertoire of references to Iban legend, religion and oral history. The pua kumbu is essentially a sacred cloth, which may tell a mythological story, or a personal tale, or represent a historical archive (Jabu, 1991: 81).

The pua kumbu is, 'a statement about the soul of the weaver and her relationship with the spirits' (Jabu, 1991: 76). Gavin summarises that motifs, in short, mean different things to different weavers, and therefore they are whatever the weaver or artist says they are. The only way to determine the name, social, religious and ritual significance of a pua kumbu is to ask the individual weaver herself.

The idea of culture being transmitted to passive recipients has had surprising longevity. In compiling a list of world masterpieces of intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO has had to address the tensions between what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett labels as 'freezing' practices or 'addressing the processual nature of culture' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 16). (These tensions are explored in more detail in chapter seven in this dissertation). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her article on UNESCO's world heritage protocols, explores the tensions between the 'diversity of those who produce cultural assets' and 'the humanity to which those assets come to belong as world heritage' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 1).

What the heritage protocols do not generally account for is a conscious, reflexive subject. They speak of collective creation.

Performers are carriers, transmitters, and bearers of tradition, terms which connote a passive medium, conduit or vessel, without volition, intention, or subjectivity' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 16).

'Living archive' and 'library' are common metaphors. Such terms do not assert a person's right to what they do, but rather their role in keeping the culture going (for others). According to this model, people come and go, but culture persists, as one generation passes it along to the next (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 16).

Expertise in weaving stories and personal biographies into a coherent and cleverly arranged work of art was the high point aspired to in the art of pua kumbu weaving (Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1999, 2001). Innovation is not only celebrated, it is in fact a prerequisite that is a hallmark of this art. Of high value were cloths that depicted new interplays of dreams, stories from the canon, personal experiences and hopes. Originality and creativity were the criteria by which to judge the cloth. Intelligence was demonstrated by a grasp of mythology and the ability to spin yarns.

This viewpoint returns agency back to the weaver or artist. Merely reproducing 'primordial' designs, as Haddon and Gill posited, was never the original intention. Gavin and Jabu regard the weavers as knowing creators of artwork rather than descendents and passive uncomprehending recipients of ancient knowledge. The weavers are not mindlessly reproducing works they no longer understand nor are they ignorant of truths they carry on their body or the design they tie onto their cloths. Heppell sees the pua kumbu as a platform to demonstrate ingenuity. It was a form of an intelligence test or a forum to demonstrate cleverness. Far from being the product of mindless reproduction, the cloth was evidence of an ingenious and lively mind (Heppell, 2005).

Heppell develops the discussion on the agency of the weavers further. He argues that the pua kumbu is a way for the weaver to manage the spiritual realms. The pua kumbu, he explains, is a forum for the weaver to conduct spiritual or psychological warfare. If the weaver has mastery of the message, her cloth will incite or motivate action on earth. A weaver controls the message by using euphemisms, metaphors and signifiers from her personal life. She combines her life experiences with the rich heritage of Iban mythology and stories of celestial heroes. In terms of the discussion on motifs as symbols, Heppell explains that each weaver has a database of motifs in her

head that she commonly uses or invents. Each symbol, even if they appear similar to another woman's database of motifs, would be imbued with different personal meanings. This difference applies to stories, meaning that even the same stories used as source would have different meanings attached to them when employed in the service of a personal message. For example, the pertinent points of a story may be used by two weavers, but each might refer to different aspects or teachings of the story in relation to a personal experience or to her dreams. The pua kumbu is seen as consisting of individual motifs which all support the central message. The message is whatever the weaver makes of it. Like Gavin and Jabu insist, the only way to know what a pua means is to ask the 'conscious' and 'reflexive' weaver herself.

### **Objects building networks**

Recent approaches in material culture view objects as actively building social relations and networks in the process of their production and circulation. People are seen as active creators who constitute new forms of art around old meanings or who imbue new meanings onto old forms. The idea of objects actively building networks is developed from two linked approaches discussed below.

#### *'Do duty as person'*

The first approach employs the concept of agency explained by Alfred Gell in 'Art and Agency'. Agency is used as an approach to examine the social relationships built, negotiated or articulated around the production, usage and circulation of objects (Gell, 1998; Layton, 2003). Gell rejects the notion that objects passively reflect or explain the world. He rejects the notion that objects perform this function of reflecting the world symbolically or linguistically. Gell, instead, sees social relationships built by the object, as the only approach to analyse objects, and not the cultural, ritual and ceremonial context of the object (Gell, 1998 in Layton, 2003). The thrust of Gell's approach is that objects change the world, they have agency. They do not merely describe it. Gell reacted against the supremacy of language in object analysis. He rejected the idea that semiotic analysis was the only valid way to 'read' objects. Language in Gell's approach is seen as only one of many elements of analysis. Instead of encrypting meaning or merely playing a reflexive role, objects 'do duty as persons'. The duty of negotiating social relationship is constructed through 'agency'. Agency can be observed in the maker, user and object. Agency affects people in a psychological, aesthetic, physical and semiotic or linguistic way.

*'Metaphoric work'*

The second theoretical strand for the active social network of objects is derived from Tilley's idea that objects are capable of performing metaphorical work (Tilley, 2002). The premise of Tilley's argument is that metaphors are typical in human speech, and therefore, must be present in objects humans create (Tilley, 2002: 24). Objects reveal and enforce social relations. Tilley incorporates several themes together in this argument. The first is the theme of the active agency of objects. This is combined with the symbolic, reflective work of objects. Both themes are woven together with the metaphoric aspects of language (Tilley, 2002: 24).

The main distinction between Tilley's approach to material culture and the approaches employed by Haddon, Gill and Gell, is his attitude towards the role of language. Tilley's approach does not reject outright the role of language, as Gell's did. Instead, Tilley argues that language, although problematic, is necessary for the study of objects. Tilley's approach can be contrasted with the evolutionary view or a semiotic interpretation of objects through formal analysis, as proposed by Alfred Haddon and Sarah Gill. Tilley does not see language as a means to decode meaning or decipher the abstract motifs encrypted in art. Tilley's approach views objects functioning together with language in a metaphoric sense. Objects in Tilley's approach are seen as capable of both reflecting and changing the world. As in Alfred Gell's approach, the agency objects have in this approach is connected to the construction of social relationships. Objects are seen to build and negotiate social relationships in the process of their production and circulation. These relationships however, in contrast to Gell, are seen as being expressed in visual metaphors. Tilley argues that the advantage of visual metaphors over language is that objects can express aspects of a culture that may have to remain unspoken or unarticulated; 'Artefacts perform active metaphorical work in the world in a manner that words cannot' (Tilley, 2002: 25).

*The pua kumbu's work*

*What have thunder and lightning to do with weaving and headhunting, one might ask? ... Electric activity in the heavens tells the Iban that Keling [mythical hero] is up to some good. Represented on the cloth by a woman, it informs a man it is about time he did the same (Heppell et al., 2006: 69).*

The quote above from Heppell introduces the idea that the pua kumbu cloth works in a metaphorical way. The cloth in the quote is seen to provoke action on the earthly plane by manipulating mythological deities and heroes from the spiritual realm. This view of



the object's agency is presented by Heppell, Melak and Usen in *Iban Art: Headhunting and Sexual Selection* (Heppell et al., 2006). In collaboration with Limbang Anak Melak and Enian Anak Usen, Heppell argues that the object incites physical action, namely headhunting. Heppell's extensive study of the pua kumbu falls under the category of Gell's active agency and Tilley's metaphorical work of objects. Like Haddon and Gill's studies on the pua kumbu discussed in previous sections, Heppell sees the pua kumbu as having the ability to communicate distinct information. In contrast to the previous studies however, rather than isolating and reading individual motifs as symbols functioning as language, Heppell analyzed the pua in its entirety, reading the whole composition in terms of choice of motifs and design, as well as the execution of technical skills.

Heppell approaches the pua kumbu as an ethnographic object. He seeks to penetrate the deeper cultural meanings that have been imbued onto the object by the Iban people over the centuries. His premise is that the pua kumbu is laden with elements of intangible cultural heritage. The cloth is seen to contain elements which inspire the circulation of the cloth through society. It is infused with rituals, ceremonies and mythological elements. These elements, Heppell, Melak and Usen assert, are inscribed on the object. Based on that premise, Heppell conducted an extensive analysis of the mythology, poems, chants, rituals and cultural practices that motivate and inspire the designs and composition of the cloths. The patina of given meanings were analyzed, distilled, interpreted and explained.

Based on his analysis, Heppell argues that the cloth is active on two planes; the spiritual realm and the earthly plane. The spiritual work of the cloth includes managing benevolent spirits and demons. The following explanation of the metaphoric and social work of the object is gleaned from Heppell's explanation of the mythological and historical cultural background to the pua kumbu (Heppell et al., 2006). The complex web of interconnections between many cultural, physical and spiritual elements does not convert easily into a linear series of consequences but in essence, Heppell's argument of the work of the pua kumbu is as follows.

Heppell argues that pua kumbu themes link mythology to the work of humans on earth. The cloth prompts action such as farming, headhunting, and rites that ensure fertility – in the land and humans. His study argues that the cloth is a forum to manipulate metaphors derived from cultural mythology and stories of the acts, adventures and journeys of celestial deities, heroes and goddesses. These literary and spiritual metaphors are translated to visual metaphors in the form of themes,

composition and motifs. The metaphors are also employed in giving the cloth praise names.

Iban language is full of metaphors ... For example the elephant looking after its young is a metaphor for a headhunter jealously guarding the heads he has taken. The heavens often conjure up Panggau [celestial land]. Consequently, cloths with thunder and lightning in their praise names conjure up images of Keling [mythical hero] on his adventures. Similarly, constellations like the Seven Sisters in a cloth turn an Iban's mind to farming. Metaphors, consequently, are very important in the naming of cloths (Heppell et al., 2006: 66).

A large part of the pua kumbu's efficacy is in its ability to manipulate action on earth. Heppell provides an expansive explanation which is summarized below. On the physical and earthly plane, the pua is useful for demonstrating qualities desirable in a prospective wife. The gist of Heppell's argument was that the pua kumbu is a means of sexual selection. Heppell's findings are akin to Gill's findings that the cloth performed erotic and fertility functions. According to Heppell the pua kumbu's role in helping a man choose a wife was seen as the most important work of the pua kumbu. For a society that believed in extensive fertility rites involving headhunting, this function of the pua kumbu was very important; '... cloth is powerful and acts as a reminder that heads need to be collected if the fertility rites of that group are to be effective' (Heppell et al., 2006: 73).

Heppell argues that the making of certain types of cloth can be called 'managing' the spiritual world. Designs demonstrate desirable qualities, namely spiritual prowess. The cloth is evidence of psychological strength and power. The cloth reveals the women's ability to manage the spiritual realms through the composition, design and motifs on a pua kumbu. Gavin, Linggi, Jabu and Heppell all assert that the successful execution of potent designs and themes, are proof of psychological and spiritual strength (Gavin, 1996, 2004; Jabu, 1989; Linggi, 1999, 2001). In the historical cultural belief systems of the Ibans, it was believed that there were serious psychological risks inherent in making potent themes, patterns or types of cloth. If the weaver did not have the spiritual or psychological strength, skills or blessings and permission of spirits in the form of visitations or inspiration in her dreams it was believed that serious (although largely unspecified in the literature) psychological consequences could ensue. The presence of potent motifs on the cloth therefore worked

as evidence of spiritual favour or blessings bestowed on the weaver by the gods or celestial beings. The pua kumbu also reveals cleverness which is evident in the ingenuity of the design of the motifs and the technical execution of the work. Heppell argues that the pua kumbu revealed and was evidence of two qualities; cleverness and spiritual favour. Both qualities were historically desirable in the choice of a suitable wife.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that people working to safeguard cultural heritage have to manage the tension between freezing cultural practices and addressing the innovative and creative nature of cultural art forms (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006). This tension applies to the pua kumbu. On the one hand, recent scholars of the pua kumbu recognize innovation as a cornerstone of the art. Without innovation the art form becomes fossilized, which is contrary to every recorded reason for the making the object. On the other hand, the speed of social change is seen to present ominous threats. Threats to the pua kumbu were identified as far back as the late 1890s, during the Brooke reign, when Alfred Haddon conducted his research in Sarawak. Buchli noted that in Haddon's day the passage of time or the speed of change were seen as threats that had to be minimized (Buchli, 2002a); 'Early pioneers of anthropological research such as Haddon, Boaz and others ... were desperately aware of the precipitous rate of change in non-European societies whose ways of life were rapidly changing and whose traditional cultures were rapidly disappearing with the onslaught of imperial expansion in trade and administration' (Buchli, 2002b: 8). Buchli called this the 'melancholic receding view' (Buchli, 2002b: 9).

This melancholic receding view approached cultures as fixed, whole, and as having clearly delineated borders. Contact with Europeans was seen as contamination to the purity and authenticity of the culture and its material forms. New elements or influences were seen to lead to death or a diminished form of culture. These threats resulted in cultures losing critical and profound elements. Their meanings and significance were seen to fade and their brilliance become progressively dimmer with each subsequent generation. Cultural artforms gradually diminished from a glorious period of enlightenment. Previous approaches to objects did not allow for new developments to be incorporated into what is considered 'traditional' art. Change in the form of new techniques for doing art as responses to current circumstances, challenges, new stimulus or conditions were seen as evidence of degeneration of the art form. The overwhelming sense infusing this approach was one of loss. Loss of what was considered authentic was seen to possibly ultimately lead to the death of the culture itself. The emphasis therefore was on documenting, salvaging and preserving.

In regards to research on the pua kumbu Gavin mourns the loss of 'culture', symbolized by the loss in skills and technical knowledge. In the evolutionary approach, the degeneration or morphing of motifs and loss of meaning is attributed to the passage of time and the flawed process of transmission. Gavin however recognises other threats or dangers to this process of transmission (Gavin, 1996, 1999, 2004). They include, but are not restricted to modernization, globalisation, westernisation, or development. Hiatus, discontinuity or death of culture and cultural practices can also be seen as threats to 'authentic' culture. (For more on the discussion on the 'death of authentic primitive art,' please refer to Errington, 1998). Even the rebirth of culture is seen as a threat, if it is controlled by urbanized people who are not direct recipients of culture transmitted in a long line of tradition (Gavin, 1996: 12). Gavin's approach can be characterised by the 'salvage paradigm' (Clifford, 1987: 122). Gavin observes that many opportunities to discover and record the uses of these cloths have been missed. All these lost opportunities amount to threats to the culture which result in the degeneration of cultural knowledge and art forms. What is considered traditional cultural heritage is seen as irrevocably lost. From this perspective, the future for the integrity of the clearly delineated boundaries of Iban culture seem destined to be eroded.

Gavin's loss discourse is softened by other authors and heritage campaigners who see new emergences for the pua kumbu object. While recognizing the need to salvage what is left, Edric Ong actively promotes the use of new materials and location of production (Ong, 1999b). He creates new ways of commodifying, marketing and expanding the circulation of the pua kumbu cloth. Margaret Linggi (recently deceased) pursued new venues of consumption while trying to preserve traditional material and methods of production (Linggi, 1999). Jabu, Heppell and Maessen (working in Kalimantan), call for recognition of the cultural significance of this object. They allude to the pua kumbu's metaphoric value and active and changing role in Iban culture (Heppell, 1994; Jabu, 1991; Maessen, 1999).

This introductory chapter presented a history of developments in the study of the pua kumbu object from the 1890s, with the evolutionary approach to the present-day field of material culture, where this thesis is located. In summary, the approaches applied to the study of the pua kumbu span the spectrum of the level of activity attributed to objects. On one end, the cloth is seen as being completely passive and static and is transmitted through the ages. On the other end, objects are given agency. This view of objects being attributed with agency is the premise of this thesis.

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## **1 'Keep Many Tangled Roots in View': Articulations of Identity**

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*(Clifford, 2004: 17)*

This chapter provides a brief historical background to the movement of the Iban people through the forested landscape of Borneo. This geographical circulation is examined in relation to the Ibans' constant social and political realignment. The theory of the articulation of cultural identity informs this study. The migration and settlement of the Iban people in Sarawak provides a context to examine the changing articulations and affiliations of Iban identity throughout their four hundred year history in Malaysia.

The theory of articulation normally applied to the study of identity is in this thesis also applied to the study of the pua kumbu. The object is examined as an area of friction, a critical site, or contact zone or a site of negotiation and contestation. The object is seen as being active and functioning as a centre for building social networks in the process of production and circulation. This discussion focuses on pua kumbu textiles as symbols of cultural and indigenous identity. I examine issues of inclusion and exclusion within the context of Malaysia's political and social history, and in particular how the Dayak Ibans currently negotiate their positions within the majority *Bumiputera* pedigree of privileged citizenship.

This chapter begins with the early waves of Iban migration to Sarawak and further expansion through the land beginning in the 1600s. In the course of their journeys the Ibans shaped the forest landscape while shaping and crafting their own identity. The chapter touches on the violent nature of their migration and the

relationships they established with the people and tribes already present in the jungle. This violent history has repercussions to the present day. The chapter continues with the various Iban political alignments through the period of white *Rajah* colonial rule to the present situation, where Ibans are classed as *bumiputeras* in the Federation of Malaysia, which was established in 1963.

Over the course of time, different dynamics can be discerned in the various articulations of Iban cultural identity in Sarawak. In the period of early migration, during the process of expansion through the land, there were tactical alignments and entanglements with various ethnic and political groups. When the Ibans came head to head in their encounter with the private British colonial Brookes Administration (1841-1941), conflict with some indigenous tribes subsided into the background, while others flared up. During World War II, the Ibans were enlisted to fight with the allied forces behind enemy lines during the Japanese occupation (Heimann, 2007; Shirley, 2003). Today the Ibans are negotiating their social and political positioning within the majority *bumiputera* category of privileged citizenship in the present incarnation of Sarawak as part of Malaysia.

Indigenous identity politics in Sarawak is internally and externally contested, and exists within changing power structures. Every period and shift in political context adds new layers to racial definitions and boundaries. These changes in circumstances reinforce the political nature of the processes of negotiating and configuring cultural identity. Shifts in political power, over a long history of association from the 1600s to the late 2000s, continue to affect the articulation of Iban cultural expression and set the scene for future contestation over identity, land and resources. Ibans function within the minority *bumiputera* classification. The majority of *bumiputera* are Malay and predominantly Muslim. The Ibans' current challenge is to find their own voice(s) within the greater *bumiputera* category, without having to convert to Islam.

These different levels of majority and minority, Malay, Muslim, Indigenous *bumiputera* identities function within the project of the construction of the greater national identity. These local processes subvert any attempts at a unitary construction of identity that does not give voice to what Amartya Sen terms 'plural monoculture' (Sen, 2007), or multicultural, multiethnic and multivocal versions of articulations of Malaysian identities. In Clifford's words, the Ibans can be seen as attempting to 'convince and coerce insiders and outsiders, often in power charged, unequal situations, to accept the autonomy of a 'we' (Clifford, 2001: 479). This chapter examines some of these dynamics, emphasizing the shifting and changing nature of whatever the current articulation of 'we' is.

*They [the Ibans] are a very imitative people, readily adopting the fashions, customs, and beliefs of those with whom their roving natures bring them into relations of any kind. The result is that their beliefs and customs are much mixed, and present unusually great inconsistencies and extravagances. Since, then, we regard the customs of the Ibans as of less anthropological value than those of the tribes with which we have dealt above (Hose & McDougall, 1901: 196).*

*I think it was in a search for some kind of identity that I began to gravitate toward the Haida part of my ancestry. I'd never visited my people and the village until I was an adult. And so the only source I had was books and museums and the odd acquaintance with some people from the village. From this rather flimsy structure, I built a foundation from which I could start re-creating. It certainly was a business of recreation to start with, or it could even be called straight copying, that's what it was*

*(Bill Reid (First Nations Canadian artist) in Duffek, 2004: 76).*

Theoretical approaches to identity have morphed towards a view that identity is 'multivocal, nonessentialist' and 'fundamentally interactive' (Clifford, 2004: 17). Culture is seen as being 'always in process, enmeshed in history and social inequalities, rather than as existing in a state of equilibrium' (Rosaldo, 2003: 1). As these changes in approach have taken root, there is less attachment among anthropologists to the notion of clearly defined cultural borders and the corresponding wish to classify people into static groups. The two quotes above exemplify this evolution of attitudes.

Hose, an amateur anthropologist, MacDougall, and Haddon's studies (from 1898, referred to earlier in the introduction to the thesis), are illustrative of the approaches prevalent in anthropological and ethnographic circles in the early part of the twentieth century towards tribal, and what was considered primitive, cultural identities. This view, as summarized by James Clifford, is the idea of culture as an organic and unified whole that is capable of being transmitted from generation to subsequent generation (Clifford, 1988). Within that perspective, culture is seen as having clearly delineated borders. A feature of this view was a preoccupation with the question of authenticity. Culture was seen as consisting of core elements like customs,

ceremonies, language, oral literature, clothing and art. And there was an urgent sense of needing to guard this organic whole from contamination. This is because core cultural elements were viewed as susceptible to threats, namely from contact with Western elements. The core elements were at risk of dying off and their removal signalled the death or demise of the culture itself. This had dire consequences for the survival of the cultural group because once dead, the culture was considered lost forever. The Haddon study can be classed as an example of this bounded organic model of culture. This sentiment was shared by the Dutch colonizers on the other side of the border in Kalimantan, Indonesia. Tsing notes that they regarded the Meratus Dayaks 'only as scattered and untroublesome survivors of many years of Banjar influence. No longer authentic, their customs were hardly worth codifying' (Tsing, 1993: 42).

The second quote above is by the renowned Haida artist, Bill Reid, from British Columbia, Canada. Reid's story of his personal development as a native artist crystallizes Clifford's approach to cultural identity. Clifford views culture as dynamic and constructed rather than organic and whole, as seen by Haddon, Hose and MacDougall (Clifford, 1988, 1997b, 2000, 2001, 2004). Clifford veers towards more inclusive, less definitive versions of cultural identity. Identity is seen as being articulated, meaning that it is reconstituted from fragments, joined with elements that are not normally found together or reinvented in surprising and contradictory combinations (Clifford, 2001: 479). This approach to identity is a development of Stuart Hall's concept of articulation, which is defined below;

In England, the term has a nice double meaning because 'articulate' means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an 'articulated' lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time (Hall, 1996: 141).

Culture is subject to dismantling and cultural forms are being 'made, unmade, remade' (Clifford, 2001: 479). Clifford argues that cultures have never been 'pure', they have always had a history of contact, movement and travel. Cultures are not static, they



are constantly being exposed to new influences and elements which people, in time, adopt and adapt to form new articulations of their cultural identity (Clifford, 1997b). This approach views people as always having moved across boundaries. Outside influences are not seen as external to the process, nor are they new or evidence of contamination, because groups within cultures have always had to decide on new pathways in response to circumstances (Clifford, 1997b, 2000, 2001).

The quote below by Roy Madsen, an indigenous Alaskan Alutiiq anthropologist, encapsulates this attitude:

Close your eyes and visualize standing on a shore where a stream meets the sea. The tide has just begun to fall, and as it releases its hold on the river water, you gaze into the clear waters of the stream at the multicolored stones in its bed, and at the bits of seaweed and twigs that are being carried off to unknown destinations. Those bits and pieces are our Alutiiq culture as it has been pushed, shoved, jostled and propelled from the time of our earliest ancestors to the present day (Madsen, 2001: 75).

What the organic and transmission models consider as threats, Clifford's model regards as factors people take into consideration when negotiating new expressions of culture. Culture is 'pushed, shoved, jostled and propelled'. Contrary to the organic model, cultures can die and be reborn (Clifford, 1988, 2000, 2001, 2004). Culture is seen as having no essential features, but rather every aspect is to be negotiated and recreated. They are made up, remembered or copied. This process of constant recreation applies to aspects of culture that have outward signs, like a recognizable way of dressing and distinctive rituals, but the process also applies to aspects that are intangible, like religious beliefs, language and a group's canon of oral literature. A group can have lost all outward signs that distinguish them from other groups but they can still choose to identify themselves as members of a distinct tribal group.

According to Stuart Hall 'a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects' (Hall, 1996: 141-2). Hall's theory is paraphrased by Tania Li; 'The conjectures at which (some) people come to identify themselves as indigenous people, realigning the ways they connect to the nation, the government and their own, unique tribal place, are the contingent products of agency and the cultural and political work of *articulation*' (Li, 2000: 3). Clifford's approach to

culture falls into this notion of articulation. Cultural identity consists of 'collective identities, common positions, or shared interests' that are 'provisional', not fixed and 'subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power' (Li, 2000: 2). Identity is 'not an essence but a positioning'. 'Any articulation is complex, contestable and subject to rearticulation' (Hall in Li, 2000: 4). This view segues into Tilley's approach to identity; 'identity is transient, a reflection on where you are now, a fleeting moment in a biography of the self or the group, only partially connected to where you might have come from, and where you might be going' (Tilley, 2006: 9).

Bender provides some context or perspective to this articulated approach to cultural identity;

The reader might point out a logical flaw in the deconstruction: on one hand, I say everything is subjective and relative, and on the other, struggling to contextualize the discourse, I retain elements of 'grand narrative.' I find this a necessary contradiction. On one hand, our understandings are both 'placed' and changing; on the other, we marshal them to work for us, to answer to our current preoccupations. While we accept that we are not in the business of producing 'the truth,' we have the right to position ourselves within the postmodern flux in order to produce something that feels true to us and effective at a given moment in time (Bender, 2002c: S105).

One aspect of social change active around the pua kumbu is a constant reconfiguring, redefinition and rearticulation of identity. One dynamic in particular is the use of art or a remembered object as one of the means of anchoring the assertion of distinction in multiethnic and multicultural Malaysia. In other words, some people are 'creating their sense of culture through the use of particular objects' (MacClancy, 1997a: 4).

This tangent fits in with MacClancy and Myers' approach to culture and how it relates to art. Myers, writing about Australian Aboriginal art states that acrylic paintings have come to be 'a medium through which Aboriginal people have come to be known to others and through which they and their meanings participate in and influence the complex field of relations that settler states comprise' (Myers, 2002: 7). MacClancy states that culture is 'a continuing construction, which both organizes and emerges from people's behaviour' (MacClancy, 1997a: 4);

The boundaries which divide off the people of one culture from those of another are not necessarily those rules, habits or dispositions which differentiate them structurally but those which its members choose to distinguish themselves from others. The culture of a people thus becomes open to a variety of definitions as different members interpret it in their own way for their ends, and the boundaries they choose need not coincide ... In this contemporary context, the potentially central role of art can be suddenly and starkly realized, with peoples reifying or creating their sense of culture through the use of particular objects. Here, art objectifies power (MacClancy, 1997a: 4).

Objects, however, are more than merely devices to illuminate the processes of constructing identity. They do not only function to connect, reconstitute and knit disparate elements to form one positioning or version of culture, that exists at this particular point in time and socio-economic and political circumstances. The pua kumbu is also inherently of value as an art object. It exudes layers of physical and aesthetic appeal to connoisseurs of the textile. Some examples of the pua kumbu are considered works of beauty. It is easy for collectors and weavers to lose themselves in the intricacies and beauty of the designs, seeking out the elements of artistic and cultural heritage displayed while trying to discern the personality and aesthetics of the individual weaver.

While I concede that the pua kumbu object is not always made in order to assert identity, I argue that at some point in the recent history of Malaysia, the process of making and valuing the pua kumbu was for some people, a socio-aesthetic task. It involved the processes of making, defining and expressing a distinct Iban or Dayak cultural identity.

## **Tangled roots**

*Kichapi was, of course, still known only as the stranger to the people of Gumiloh's village. Silanting Kuning was the name given to him by his parents, and Kichapi that given to him by the Seven-headed Giant, but the people knew neither of these names. To them he had been known first as an orang-utan and then simply as a mysterious man from whence nobody knew*

*(Geddes, 1957: 127).*

*Now in the title of this talk on Sea Dayaks I refer also to Ibans. There is controversy over this among themselves, particularly in the Second Division. Iban (or Ivan) was once said to be a Kayan word for wanderer, but it is only to be found meaning father, or mother-in-law, which does not seem to help. The Dayaks themselves say that Iban simply means a person and it is commonly used for 'anyone' - 'is anyone there?' So that 'We Iban' means no more than our people or race. They were probably called Sea Dayaks because they use boats and were found in the 1840s in company with seagoing pirates out of the Batang [river] Lupar Saribas*

*(A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 10).*

Cultural identity in Sarawak is constantly rearticulated, within changing power structures with few clear cultural boundaries that remain stable over time. Disparate voices contribute to the discussion on the composition of ethnic groups in Sarawak and the criteria for inclusion into the *bumiputera* label. Some of these voices express certainty while others explain sources of confusion. The nature of the articulations of Iban identity politics is characterised by conflicting dynamics. On the one hand there are multivocal articulations of identity, on the other, among local politicians, there is a movement towards the construction of labels that exclude. Harrison, in 1958, noted that ethnic groups in Borneo '... do not and cannot think of themselves as named, tabbed, static, classified groups' (Harrison in King, 2001: 209). This attitude remains in place from the perspective of the groups.

Both quotes above by the late anthropologist Professor William Geddes and Anthony Richards introduce the complexities surrounding questions of identity in Borneo. The first quote by Geddes is taken from folklore. The story is about a mysterious stranger of unknown origins with many different names; Kichapi, Silanting Kuning and even as an orang-utan. This story reflects Richards' point about the controversy surrounding the meanings and definitions of tribal and ethnic names.

According to Wadley, the name 'hivan' from which Iban is derived from, referred to 'aggressive and migratory peoples who were moving into the Rejang Basin from the regions of the south and west during the 19th-century' (Wadley in King, 2001: 4). The name 'dayak' itself, according to Alfred Jabu (Jabu, 1989), was given by Dutch and German writers, to cover all non-Muslim natives. English writers subsequently added the distinction of 'land' and 'sea' – Dayak to refer to the Bidayuh and Ibans, respectively; 'these misnomer or wrong use of words to describe the Bidayuh and Iban ... have historical origin where it was said that when the Brookes wanted to differentiate the Bidayuh from the Iban they based it on their personal encounter and experience with these people' (Jabu, 1989). 'When Saribas and Skrang Iban clashed with the Brookes while on their Sea voyage, the Brookes mistook that all Iban were sea marauders or sea oriented people' (Jabu, 1989: xix). These labels continue to be highly politicised and are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated by multiple voices.

### **Longhouse and river loyalties; migration and pre-Federation alignments**

The Ibans migrating into Sarawak, beginning in the mid-1600s, presented themselves as aggressive headhunters. Having a reputation as ferocious headhunters would have helped clear settled lands of their inhabitants. This migration was characterized by Iban dominance and invasion into areas already occupied by Kayans, Kenyahs, Punans and other ethnic groups (Kedit, 1993; Pringle, 1970; A. Richards, 1949; Sandin, 1956). Initial migration into Sarawak originated from the south-eastern part of the island of Borneo, which later became Dutch-controlled Kalimantan and proceeded relentlessly along the Kapuas, Batang Ai and Batang Lupar Rivers (Pringle, 1970: 42). The migration path along the same rivers continued well into the 19th century (Kedit, 1993). The initial waves of migration from Kalimantan were followed by internal migration along the river systems up the Rejang and Balleh rivers of Sarawak. The effect was that by the 1800s, the Ibans had violently displaced the other ethnic groups (Pringle, 1970).

Migration was intrinsic to expressions of Iban cultural identity (Kedit, 1993). There were multiple reasons requiring the Ibans to be essentially a migratory people. Climatic factors could well have been one of the push factors for initial movement into Sarawak. According to Reid, during the period of 1598-1679 south Borneo received the least substantial rainfall in the 415 years recorded, and 1665 was the driest and suffered 'probably the most disastrous epidemic of the century, affecting most of the Archipelago' (Reid, 1993: 291-2). The little ice age which brought about the great

drought in Southern Borneo in 1660-61 (Reid, 1993: 292) could have been the climatic trigger that forced subsequent migration north into Sarawak. A more significant factor would have been the Ibans' dependence on hill rice farming; 'it was the Iban thirst for untouched jungle, ideal for ... semi-nomadic farming, which sparked the great migrations' (Pringle, 1970: 25).

Iban society in the past can be characterised as one that celebrated warfare and the elements interconnected to it. It was the practice of shifting cultivation as a method of farming rice that caused, what Pringle referred to as, the Iban 'thirst for untouched jungle'; The Ibans 'often cling with great tenacity to the fundamental aspects of their traditional culture, such as hill rice farming' (Pringle, 1970: 24). Shifting cultivation made the constant supply of land, and the protection of fallow land, necessary for survival in the rainforest environment. It necessitated the constant migration of individuals and the movement of the longhouse communities from site to site in the rainforest. New land was procured using various methods including headhunting; 'In some cases the Dayaks obtained land for a price - a brass gong or cannon, or a couple of slaves. In other cases the occupiers retreated or were absorbed. In at least one case they were treacherously slaughtered' (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 12).

The Ibans grew many crops but the main crop was rice. *Padi* (the name given to rice that is growing in the fields or hills) was not only a source of food and sustenance, it was intrinsic to the complicated network of interconnected cultural performances and practices linking rituals, religion, spirituality, respect for ancestors, natural elements, birds, dew and headhunting. Rice was attributed with qualities beyond mere sustenance; 'a trophy head is triumphantly split into two in a rite called *ngelampang*. As the head is split, primal sacred rice seed for the next Iban crop is spilled. For Freeman, the seed that pours forth will grow into a human crop ... The head is a phallic symbol and, therefore, a primary source of 'the generative power of nature' (Heppell et al., 2006: 34). The women took on not only the task of cultivating rice, but the stewardship of the rice seeds (as well as the seeds of the next generation), the method of storage, the knowledge required to propagate various genetic strains of rice, and in particular, they protected what was considered sacred rice, and passed this knowledge on to the next generation (V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001). At least thirty varieties of rice were commonly grown (Setyawati, 2003; Tsing, 2005b: 165). This diversity was an insurance against untoward events, but according to Tsing, it was also for the sheer pleasure of diversity itself. Rice farming governed the daily, seasonal and yearly schedule of activity: 'The production of rice is the centrepiece of the Meratus swidden field: it frames the schedule for labour and forms the standard for sufficiency' (Tsing,

2005b: 165). This yearly schedule that governed all aspects of life in the interior explains the importance of land to the Ibans, the processes associated with its acquisition, and the clearing, felling and burning of trees on the land. This interconnection of rice with cultural aspects fits in well with other Southeast Asian cultures as examined in *The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia* (Ammayao & Hamilton, 2003).

According to Padoch, an expert on agricultural practices in tropical rainforests, shifting cultivation was an efficient method of maximizing yield in tropical rainforests and this practice is necessary for maintaining the fertility of the land (Padoch, 1988: 22). The ten to twenty five year agricultural/migration cycle, dictated by shifting cultivation resulted in the Ibans being in a state of semi-permanent migration. This agricultural practice was a factor that elevated the notions of journeying and migration in Iban society.

When the shifting cultivation method of rice farming was the primary activity, movement was an essential feature of historical Iban life (Freeman, 1955; Padoch, 1988). Longhouses consist of independent and self-sustaining families joined to other families in a cooperative relationship. These separate family apartments are arranged in a row to form one longhouse. They may appear permanent but, previously, the whole longhouse community would have moved from site to site through the tropical rainforest landscape. A tolerance for movement was an intrinsic part of the social structure of the community. Movement characterised how the community functioned, perpetuated itself and remembered its existence and history in the forested landscape (A. Richards, 1949; Sandin, 1956). Longhouse communities accommodated flux and change at various levels, at the individual and whole longhouse community level (Kedit, 1993). The longhouse is a dwelling place for the inhabitants but it is also an inseparable part of the landscape surrounding it. The structure only 'makes sense' in relation to the many individually owned and cultivated fields, interlaced with communal gardens and tracts of primary and secondary forests surrounding the longhouse that are accessible to all the residents.

All these plots of land used for different purposes are governed within the complex ownership laws of *adat* or customary rights. There are levels of individual and communal ownership or land; 'It is within...[the] territory, called the *pemakai menoa*, that each longhouse community has access to land for farming, called the *temuda*, to rivers for fishing and to jungles, called the *galau* or *pulau galau*, for the gathering of forest produce' (Judge: *Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling*, 2001). Without these cultivated tracts of land there would be no

means of survival or reason for the longhouse to be positioned in a particular location. (For an introduction to the laws governing native customary rights land, please refer to the Borneo Resources Institute (Brimas) guide to the legal rights of native land owners (*Borneo Resources Institute, 2005*)).

The longhouse community's movement through the landscape was not completely arbitrary. The positioning of the longhouse was determined by the condition and fertility of the soil. The farming practice followed a pattern. Once a site was selected and acquired, the land was cleared of trees, which were felled and burned to form the nutrients for the crops. The farm was established, and rice and other crops cultivated. Once the land started to lose its fertility, the site was abandoned and left fallow for a period varying from fifteen to twenty-five years so as to allow the forest to regenerate and for fruit trees to mature. In the meantime, other sites were acquired, settled and cultivated. The community travelled in this manner in a cyclical pattern, retracing paths, revisiting and returning to historical family or community farming and old longhouse sites, and revitalising sites abandoned years earlier (Padoch, 1988; Padoch & Peluso, 1996).

Each one of these previous homesites, although seemingly abandoned and overgrown, is important. They are remembered and chanted as part of a genealogy of place. Sather explains that all these previous homesites or *tembawais*, as they are called, take on significance and are remembered and recited in long chants. These chants provide the history of the habitation and migration of a people. The chants also give an account of historical deeds associated with each place the longhouse community has settled in. Sather and Fox refer to these remembered lists or genealogies of place, as 'topogenies' which they define as 'an ordered sequence of named places' (Fox in Sather, 2001: 173).

Topogenies take a great variety of forms, but most are narrated as journeys or migrations. Aside from ritual narratives ... the most significant Iban topogenies are remembered lists that record the names of successive former longhouse sites or *tembawai*. These named sites, each designating the location at which an earlier longhouse stood, map spatially and in terms of their temporal order, the collective circulation of the local community within its territorial domain, and, indeed, often beyond as well. Large segments of the *Leka Pelian*, like other Iban ritual texts, are structured around topogenies, their



successive named places forming, as it were, an itinerary of travel (Sather, 2001: 173).

Movement of the whole longhouse was complemented by the movement of the individual men. The residents of the longhouse travel so much it is reminiscent of Ghosh's recount of travelling to a 'quiet corner of the Nile Delta' only to find 'the men in the village had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge ... Everyone's on the move, and has been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel' (Ghosh in Clifford, 1997b: 1-2). This 'dwelling-in-travel' had a history of being highly regarded in the community. The success of activities achieved while travelling on *bejalai* journeys contributed towards a man's status. Although primarily for the purposes of headhunting, to acquire trophy heads as evidence of bravery, these activities led to other rewards which enhanced a man's status and his capabilities to acquire a spouse. From his wife's success in the rice fields, his own abilities to host gawais are augmented. The gawais in turn enhance and maintain his and his family's prestige (Heppell et al., 2006; Masing, 1981).

Apart from travelling for adventure and for acquiring trophy heads, Iban men travelled in order to gather forest products for the lucrative trade with China. Trading was another highly valued and status enhancing activity. Men travelled downriver to various points along the river, to coastal towns ruled by Malays, and even on journeys following sea routes, trading with a series of middlemen and conducting transactions all the way to China;

Borneo became the crossroads for the interface of societies, matching unlikely groups in the middle of the forest. Taosug and Bugis, Dutchman and Dayak all found themselves face to face, usually at the headwaters of turbid rivers. The ecological market demands of the China trade prompted these meetings, as an increasingly large spectrum of actors competed for products which were becoming more and more difficult to find (Tagliacozzo, 2005: 49).

Tagliacozzo explains that trade with China was so significant it changed the ecology of Borneo. Prized among the forest products was camphor, and edible birds nests and horns; 'camphor descended from the mountains by way of traders plying the great rivers' (Tagliacozzo, 2005: 40). 'Upland peoples bought their knives, salt, beads and textiles from ... small itinerant Chinese merchants, in exchange for the traditional

China trade goods which found their way (through a series of intermediaries) out into the wider world' (Tagliacozzo, 2005: 43-44).

Giant Chinese ceramics storage jars, lined against the wall in a position of prominence in Nancy Ngali's newly renovated kitchen were evidence of this history and pattern of trade between Borneo and China. Once of great importance and symbolism, jars now remain valuable heirloom objects (Chin, 1988; Harrison, 1959). Historically, they were prized possessions, used to demonstrate wealth and enhance and maintain status of the owners. As status symbols, these objects would have been amassed over a long period of time. Her ancestors would have incurred considerable sacrifices to acquire them.

The insatiable demand for land caused by shifting cultivation was connected metaphorically with the constant pining by motifs on the pua kumbu for heads; Linggi (2001) describes cloth motifs bearing hidden meanings like asking for more trophy or enemy heads. This pining or yearning could be phrased in the praise names of cloth as 'asking for the impossible' (Linggi, 2001: 89, 110). These elements of headhunting and migration, vanquishing other tribes so as to acquire new land for agriculture, were inseparable from historical expressions of Iban cultural practices.

Headhunting raids on neighbouring communities were an integral element of Iban culture. Not only was it an essential rite of passage for young men, it was a precondition for ending the official period of mourning in Iban funeral rites. This necessity for headhunting, predictably, resulted in a very uneasy coexistence with the non-Iban local population. However, Heppell notes that some of these communities in the local area would have also been Iban. Heppell explains that because the Ibans were so successful at headhunting warfare they lived in ever increasing levels of internal and external conflicts, causing any semblance of group loyalty to splinter;

By the end of the nineteenth century, a Saribas or Skrang Iban would have had to travel vast distances to the east or to the south before encountering a non-Iban group of traditional enemies ... [But] not every Iban was able to organize an expedition over such long distances ... The only people living close by, however, were other Iban, who, naturally did not take lightly to becoming the trophy heads of their cousins (Heppell et al., 2006).

The legacy of headhunting, practiced within their own community, added to the unease and increased complications in the construction of any form of a unified

collective identity. Heppell states that the sordid history of Iban killing Iban created a situation where 'inhabitants of different river systems became so estranged that even today, the Iban cannot work together and, despite being the largest indigenous group, cannot dominate politics' (Heppell et al., 2006). This may be a sweeping generalization of the Ibans' inability to cooperate, but nonetheless, the quote alludes to the recent history of Ibans that is not easily forgotten.

In short, initial Iban migration into Sarawak is a fairly recent phenomenon. They displaced other native inhabitants but they did not think of themselves as a unified group; their loyalties were restricted instead, to longhouse or river communities. This was demonstrated by some Ibans practising headhunting on other Ibans in the vicinity. The uneasy coexistence with other tribes and with members of their own tribe, created by this entangled and violent history, persisted within the tribal power structure until the mid 1800s, when a new political force, in the form of the English adventurer James Brooke, entered the fray.

The Brooke reign, discussed in the next section, ushered in changes to the status of forests occupants. Subsequent governments and administrations introduced more changes and affected the legal rights of the forest inhabitants, and their claims of ownership of land. These changes included variable interpretations and enforcement of Native Customary Rights land and the 1958 Land Ordinance, established prior to Sarawak becoming part of Malaysia (Barney, 2004; Brookfield, Potter, & Byron, 1995; Li, 2000; Padoch & Peluso, 1996; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001; Potter, 2005). The result of these changes in the political state of the forest was that the Ibans were no longer able to headhunt or migrate at will without jeopardizing their claim to the land they were last settled in. As a result of these changes in the law, the Ibans became more permanently situated than they used to be.

These changes in community life resulted in new ways of acquiring, enhancing and maintaining status in the longhouse. All these multicoloured strands, I argue contribute towards the construction of social status and identity.

### *The Brookes*

In the school text books studied by all primary and secondary school children in Malaysian schools, on bronze plaques cemented into the pavements on the Kuching waterfront, and in the tourist brochures, we learn the often told story of the establishment and the founding myth of the Brooke kingdom, the White *Rajahs* of Sarawak. The facts were that Sarawak was founded and ruled by the Brookes for a

century, from 1841 – 1941, beginning with James Brooke. He was succeeded by his nephew, Charles and subsequently by Charles's son, Vyner.

The coast of Sarawak was officially under the rule of the Sultan of Brunei, but control over the margins of the Sultan's empire was tenuous. Some Ibans and Malays cooperated to take advantage of this weakness to conduct frequent raids on the Sultan's trading vessels (Pringle, 1970). These raids became such a provocative issue that the Sultan resorted to foreign intervention. This manifested in the form of James Brooke, an Englishman who was sailing the South China Sea in his private yacht. He was thirty-five years old at the time but was already a retired soldier of the British army. An agreement was struck between the Sultan and Brooke, to provide land in exchange for military assistance.

In the ensuing fight, the Ibans were overwhelmingly defeated, and the sultan rewarded Brooke with land in Sarawak. This was James' first foothold in Sarawak. He ruled the land as his own private kingdom, becoming its first *White Rajah*. Subsequent military suppression of the Sultan's enemies resulted in the granting of even more territory which led to the expansion of the Brooke Kingdom (For more details on Brooke, please refer to Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, 1989; Brooke, 1853; Jacob, 1876; John, 1994).

From a study of Pringle and Wagner (Pringle, 1970; Wagner, 1972), the relationship between the various Brookes rulers, James, Charles and Vyner, and the Ibans, went through numerous permutations over the period of the one hundred year rule. The Brookes ruled Sarawak by dividing the population into designated friendly and hostile tribes; Sea-Dayaks and Land-Dayaks, upriver-downriver, and various other ethnic, racial and geographical distinctions, some of which were arbitrary. Tribal groups, depending on geographical locality and history of loyalties, aligned themselves to different parties. Some groups aligned themselves alongside the Brookes administration and made their war parties available to be wielded by the Brookes for military suppression of other Iban / Dayak groups. Other communities placed themselves in opposition to the Brooke administration and incurred its wrath in the form of attacks from pro-Brooke Dayaks. Over time, these complex alignments were adjusted. The Balaus and Sebuyaus, who were allies of James, the first *Rajah*, 'who had long been at war with the stronger, 'piratical' Iban and Malay communities of the Second Division' found that they had become the 'upriver' Ibans (Pringle, 1970: 321). Previous enemies of James Brooke became allies of Charles, the second *Rajah* Brooke. Former 'pirates' raiding the Sultan of Brunei's vessels, came to be known as 'downriver Ibans' and became allies, who would fight against 'upriver' Ibans (Pringle, 1970: 321).

These often arbitrary changes in names and designations into friendly or hostile tribes by the Brooke governments were accompanied by constant political realignment by the Ibans, adapting to the shifting power structures.

Brooke's rule, ironically, created a sense of unity and ethnicity that had not previously existed. According to Pringle, the Brooke divide-and-rule policy had the opposite effect on the Ibans, as it caused the Ibans to begin considering themselves as one people;

... the official assumption of 'Ibanness' exerted its effect gradually but continuously through the period of Brooke rule. At first it encouraged the beginning of ethnic awareness in addition to, rather than in place of, the older river and longhouse loyalties. This process, perhaps the first step in a complex transition to an awareness of nationality, has continued down to the present day, and it is only recently that the majority of Ibans have begun to regard themselves more as Ibans than as members of some localized subgroup (Pringle, 1970: 330).

Wadley (Wadley, 2000) argues that the Iban 'did not begin to perceive themselves as a relatively homogenous and explicitly defined ethnic category until well into the 19th-century when colonial rule brought them into wider administrative and educational systems, established connections and communications between far-flung river-based groupings, imposed law and order between previously warring factions and undertook ethnographic investigations, classifications, and censuses of the native populations' (Wadley in King, 2001: 3). This new found unity between far-flung communities would have political and social implications for the ongoing articulation of Iban cultural identity in the national context.

'Brooke rule accomplished a fundamental reordering of the whole of Sarawak's multi-racial society' (Pringle, 1970: 322). 'Each of the three major groups in the population played a specific and necessary role within what was in many ways a remarkably ordered social and political world (Pringle, 1970: 323). 'The functions performed by Malays, Chinese and Ibans were ... political, economic and military respectively' (Pringle, 1970: 325).

There was another more sinister consequence of the method of Brooke rule. One of the policies of the administration was to eradicate tribal headhunting practices but the practice of wielding 'friendly' groups of Ibans against 'hostile' groups effectively legitimized government-sanctioned homicide:

It is widely believed that the White *Rajahs* stamped out headhunting in Sarawak, and there is no doubt that they consciously tried to do so. But as Spencer St John realized as early as 1854, Brooke reliance on Iban fighting power in fact perpetuated headhunting. The constant insecurity which prevailed in the Iban country until the period of World War I also encouraged migration, which was inspired by the same complex of values and traditions that sustained the Iban love of war (Pringle, 1970: 322).

This method of ruling created a wedge between various groups of Dayaks who found themselves designated into groups 'exposed to outside influence' or groups 'committed to tradition'. Ironically however, Pringle argues that it was ultimately, the 'outside influence' of the Brookes that perpetuated headhunting.

The wielding of power at central headquarters in Kuching had unpredictable consequences at the margins or the effective political limits of the administration. According to Pringle, much depended on the relationship between three factors; the local Resident or government representative, the native *penghulus* or village/longhouse headman and the proximity of forts (like Fort Sylvia, for example, discussed later in chapter six). 'The relationship between the *Rajah* and the Ibans varied according to the distance of any community from the nearest Government fort. The more remote upriver people remained committed to a tradition which emphasized migration and headhunting. The downriver people [like the Saribas Ibans] were far sooner exposed to new outside influences' (Pringle, 1970: 322).

In World War II, the Ibans and other indigenous races found themselves aligned with the Allied Forces against the Japanese. British and Australian Z Unit Force or 'Z-forces' were parachuted into the jungles. They lived with and fought alongside the Ibans in guerrilla type attacks on the Japanese. This was the period when British Army Major Tom Harrisson, who was later to become the director of the Sarawak Museum, was parachuted into the jungles to command seven Special Operations agents in their fight behind enemy lines (Heimann, 1999). Allied forces were exposed to the Iban method of war, and by 1949, the practice of headhunting, consciously, though

unsuccessfully, suppressed by the Brookes, reared its head: 'events at the end of World War II had stimulated the old Iban interest in bloodshed' (Pringle, 1970: 25). After the war, in 1945, the British government became the colonial administrators until Sarawak, alongside Sabah, joined what was then termed Malaya, and the island of Singapore, to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Where once the Ibans were dominant in Sarawak, they are now a people at the periphery of the nation of Malaysia. They form part of the minority *bumiputera* (indigenous) group. With changes in the social status of the Ibans, their relationship to the various governments and the evolution of the state of Sarawak, comes a change in the prestige activities of the Ibans.

## **Federation**

The Federation of Malaysia was another key founding story that all Malaysian school children studied. Sarawak transformed from being an independent kingdom ruled by white *Rajahs* to being just one of thirteen states and territories that formed the nation of Malaysia in 1963. The effects of this changed status were significant. The Ibans went from being numerically and politically dominant in a kingdom to being relegated to one of many indigenous peoples on the peripheries of the nation. This is a position from which the Ibans have yet to recover or emerge from. In addition they went from being Dayaks with a proud identity centred on the code of warriors, to the perception of them, held for many years in west Malaysia, as 'primitive headhunters' and jungle dwellers.

The early stages of federation however, mirroring the local dynamics among the Ibans, were unstable. The composition of the federation itself experienced changes in its early years. Intense negotiations with potential member countries, Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei, were followed by compromises. The confusion surrounding the boundaries between the tribes was compounded by the political instability of the time regarding what constituted Malaysia.

According to Andaya and Andaya, Sabah and Sarawak were invited into the fold as part of a strategic play by Malaya to balance the numerical proportion of Malays in Malaya to the Chinese from Singapore (Andaya & Andaya, 1982: 275-276). At the time that Sarawak entered the Federation, the total population, based on the 1960 census, was roughly 750,000 people (Lee, 1965: 344). The racial composition of Sarawak was 68 percent indigenous and 30 percent Chinese (Lee, 1965: 344). (Lee's use of the term 'indigenous' includes the many non-Muslim/Christian/animist tribes as well as the

coastal Muslim Malays and indigenous Melanau people, many of whom converted to Islam (although exact figures are not available). (For geographic distribution of the tribes, please refer to Sellato's map from the introduction, of ethnic groups of Borneo). Tribal people who convert to Islam are generally called Malays. The term 'Malay' is discussed in detail in the latter part of this chapter.)

The delicate relations between Chinese and Malays could not withstand the racial contestation and political friction that emerged from this union. This grouping of states eventually ended with the secession of Singapore, one of the original members, two years after federation. Andaya and Andaya (1982) discuss the circumstances of Singapore's secession from the Malaysian Federation, explaining that the PAP, the People's Action Party in Singapore under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew 'fought for a "Malaysian Malaya' as opposed to a 'Malay Malaysia'" (Andaya & Andaya, 1982: 276). Reid (2004) summarized the circumstances as follows:

Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore was expelled from the new country after less than two years because his vigorous campaign for a civic or territorial nationalism – 'Malaysian Malaysia' and the assertion that 'We are here as of right' - was considered by Alliance leaders [from Malaya] as certain to lead to violent conflict with Malay ethno-nationalism (Reid, 2004: 18).

The new nation was breaking apart and fragmenting. With the secession of Singapore the role of Sarawak people, in levelling and balancing the proportion of Singapore's Chinese population, was moot. This had long lasting implications for the political status of tribal peoples of Sarawak, and Sabah.

### *'The price of admission'*

The formation of the nation in 1963 ushered in new political context and dynamic. There were new factors for Ibans to take into account when articulating an expression of cultural identity. These new conditions were primarily geographical and cultural remoteness from the centre of government. Kuala Lumpur was a city few interior Ibans had easy access to. Few had heard of it let alone visited. In the new political context, distance from British forts was replaced by distance from the capital city as one of the factors that influenced the dynamics and nature of the relationship between the government and the interior people of Sarawak.

In addition to this geographical remoteness, Ibans, along with other Malaysians, had to absorb massive cultural changes brought about by the project of nation building.



The 1960s was the decade of transition. A new language policy was introduced. In the process of transition from colonial rule to independence, English language was gradually phased out as the language of instruction in schools and replaced with *Bahasa* Malaysia, or Malay language. This process of transition slowly spread to universities, government and legal institutions through the decade and into the 1970s. Sarawak, where the medium of instruction in schools had been English in the government schools, Malay in the Malay schools and Chinese in the Chinese schools, was allowed longer than the Peninsula for the transition to take place. All students were required to pass Malay language in their final year of High School.

Another fundamental change was brought about by intensive development. Nation building activities consisted of the construction of physical infrastructure and the provision of basic education and health care. All these activities formed the basis of Malaysia's economic and social development. The 1960s was the start of the Malaysia Plans. The nation-building project requires all the commitment and contribution of every citizen. The collective goals of the nation were encapsulated by Malaysia Plans, each of which spans five years.

The Ninth Malaysia Plan, spanning the years 2005 to 2010, has a medium term goal to achieve a high state of development by the year 2020. This was a goal first voiced, initiated and defined by Mahathir Mohammad, (Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003) in 1991 in the sixth Malaysia plan (Mahathir, 2005). What has now come to be known as 'Vision 2020' has been adopted by Abdullah Badawi, the Prime Minister since 2003.

Nation building also consisted of the construction, conceptualisation and creation of a national identity - however identity is theoretically defined and approached. Development was the unifying force, crafting, forging and fostering this new national identity. Brosius further emphasizes the impact of development on people's lives by suggesting that it is Malaysia's civil religion (Brosius, 2003: 100). This unifying goal of development was the forge from which a national identity was articulated and negotiated.

Cultural citizenship in the national context became the next phase of articulation of Iban identity as a result of the changes brought about by this intense period of construction. However, if we regard the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), then according to Loh, Sarawak and Sabah were frequently left out of the imagination (Loh, 1997: 1). The indigenous or forgotten population of Sarawak entered into what Rosaldo calls 'asymmetrical negotiations' where 'full citizenship is

conferred to minority groups that can be drawn in to 'nation building projects that are driven by ideas of development, modernity, assimilation, and nationalism' (Rosaldo, 2003: 1). The notion of development functions as a rallying call in Malaysia. Development is a goal to unite the races in forging a new nation. It is an ongoing goal where the population can be urged to make sacrifices for the good of the national economy. This goal, conceptualised as linear and time-specific, is amplified by the voices of local politicians, the elites, calling for 'natives' to not stand in the way of development, to catch up and not fall behind ("Bumiputera Minorities Urged to Catch Up," 2005). Errington explains;

The elites of these nation-states create narratives of nationhood, lately coupled with narratives of economic "modernization" and "development." These narratives, like Europe's analogous narratives of colonization and technological development of the 19th-century, cast "primitive" peoples as "backward," "Stone Age," and generally unmodern, likely to be left behind on the great superhighway of history (Errington, 1998: 8).

Tsing examines the 'asymmetrical negotiations' in terms of the concepts of marginality, centre and periphery when studying the Meratus Dayaks in Kalimantan, Indonesia (Tsing, 1993). She examines the processes and conditions in which marginality is constructed, of how groups get relegated to the margins:

As powerful demands for resources, land, and military control have guided state expansion to the most remote corners of the earth, the autonomy and mobility of the marginal cultural groups of once inaccessible places - rainforests, rugged mountains, deserts, tundra - have increasingly been threatened. The dominant frameworks for understanding recent encroachments, however, ignore long histories of marginality to posit conditions of "before" versus "after" - of pristine isolation, on the one hand, and rapid cultural destruction or modernization, on the other. In such frameworks, marginal people become archaic survivors who, for better or worse, are forced to "catch up with the twentieth-century" (Tsing, 1993: 7).

This period of nationhood in Sarawak's history where it negotiates its place in the federation, can be divided into the early and current phases. The early phase is

characterized by assurances of state autonomy by the federal government. Autonomy was a condition agreed upon with Tun Jugah, the paramount leader of the Ibans in 1962 ("51 Chiefs Support Plan: 13 Points to Be Put Before Commission," 1962). (The Tun Jugah Foundation, which is discussed in later chapters of this dissertation, is founded and managed by the children of this same paramount chief. For more information on Tun Jugah, please refer to *Tun Jugah of Sarawak: Colonialism and Iban Response* by Sutlive (V. H. Sutlive, 1992)). The current phase is characterized by calls for Ibans to assimilate under the *bumiputera* label within a unified Federal Malaysian nation. Urban elites among the Ibans are in a relatively powerful position. Those on the edges of the political administration, the rural indigenous people, may find themselves relegated to the 'imaginary waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8), or to a position where they have to negotiate a new identity based on conditions imposed from above and 'stop being who they are as the price of admission to the national community' (Rosaldo, 2003: 1).

Rosaldo was referring to the activities of minority groups that needed to be abandoned as the price of admission; activities such as shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering and the occupation of valuable land without legal land titles for example. However, 'the price of admission', applied to the Sarawak context, can also refer to identity. In Sarawak, some indigenous communities have the unusual option of choosing ethnic affiliation, and in so doing, influencing their life-chances. In this case, they have the option of choosing to be 'Malay'. In peninsular Malaysia, the racial distinction emphasized is one between *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera*. In Sarawak, there is an added layer of complexity, and that is the differences between Malay *bumiputera* and non-Malay *bumiputera*, or tribal, indigenous or minority *bumiputera*. These racial distinctions, actively fostered in the peninsula, have more ambiguous perimeters which are open to interpretation in Sarawak. (The complications surrounding the criteria and definition of the term *bumiputera*, as well as the benefits the status brings is discussed in the next section of this chapter).

The unusual option to choose racial or ethnic affiliation is available because the definition of a *bumiputera*, less problematic in peninsular Malaysia, is more difficult to define in Sarawak. The criteria for inclusion or exclusion into this position were originally designed for the racial context and composition of peninsular Malaysia in the 1960s. The criteria were effective in distinguishing between migrant races (Chinese, Indian and 'others') and the local Malay population. When used in the Sarawak context however, the criteria become problematic because among the many tribal people in Sarawak, some speak a language related to Malay, others practice a form of customary

law called 'adat', and others are Muslims. These three elements together form the definition for *bumiputeras*, which in peninsular Malaysia, generally means a Malay. Among the *bumiputeras* there are no clear or enduring boundaries between the majority and minority *bumiputera*. For a category of citizenship that carries with it special privileges, the definition of a *bumiputera* is far from clear and uncluttered. When definitions of *bumiputera*, designed for Peninsula Malaysia and adopted in the Federal constitution of Malaysia, are applied unmodified to the cultural composition of Sarawak and Sabah the term can become a source of confusion.

Growing up in West Malaysia, it was easy for me to distinguish the Malays from the other races. I am not a *Bumiputera*, and that distinction between me and the *Bumiputera* and their special status was made clear to me at every opportunity; from the first day of school, my very first experience of government, filling a form for my identity card at 12 years old, and in every subsequent official form in school through to my adulthood. Even before that however, my racial status was cemented in my birth certificate with an entry for my race and my parents' race.

Although excluded from *Bumiputera* status, my experiences of growing up in Kuala Lumpur, the political and social center of the nation, was not one of being relegated to the periphery. I did not feel marginalized. In fact, I like to think of my family as being the quintessential Malaysian family, with every mainstream race and religion in Malaysia represented in members of my extended family; Chinese, Indian, Malay, Nyonya, Arab, European. Mohammad, my cousin chanted Koranic verses from the airport balcony when his brother, Ismail set off on his journey overseas to study to be a pilot. Mohammad and his brother are *Bumiputeras*, and Ismail, and later Mohammad himself, received government scholarships to study at universities in the UK and the US. On my mother's side however, my aunty, Veronica got married in a Catholic church, and the guests were all blessed by the father on the cathedral steps. When I was a child, she would sometimes take me and my sister to Sunday mass. We even attempted to confess our sins. 'Bless me father for I have sinned'. Catholicism seemed terribly Western, exotic and filled with mysterious ritual. More familiar to me were experiences of eye-watering smoke-filled Buddhist temple ceremonies in Petaling Jaya where Buddhist rituals were performed in the presence of gold plated sculptures, surrounded by colorful paintings of deities. We burned offerings in the cauldron, and lit joss-sticks. On Wesak Day, we knelt at the feet of the monk who sprinkled water on us and distributed red strings to tie around our wrists. The next day at school, we would find other kids with red string around their wrists. When Grandpa died, he was cremated in a Hindu ceremony. When Kung Kung, my maternal grandfather died, we

went to the family house for the days-long ceremonies. I remember as a three-year-old trying to get to sleep, amidst all the outpouring of grief, to the discordant sounds of Chinese funerary music played on instruments originally brought from China; cymbals, clarinets, drums. The chanting and music, meant to scare bad spirits away, continued all night. The next day, after a morning of bewildering activities, we put on our sack cloths and walked in a funeral procession to the burial place, chosen based on fung shui principles, on the slope of a hill. Racial differences were clear in West Malaysia. What, however, is a bureaucrat to make of a non-Muslim, non-Malay and indigenous *Bumiputera*?

The races may be urged to unite under the national banner in pursuit of the national goal of economic development, but confusion surrounding the Ibans' status within the *bumiputera* label illustrates the complications inherent when racial categories devised for one cultural situation are applied unmodified to another society of different cultural composition. Confusion about the definitions of *bumiputera* emerge when the criteria 'non-Islamic' and 'non-Malay' are taken to mean 'non-*bumiputera*', as the word is widely (mis)understood in west Malaysia. In light of this frequent misunderstanding, the Ibans, along with the Kadazan-Dusun from Sabah push to assert a distinct identity within the *bumiputera* label as minority-*bumiputera*. Distinctive cultural/religious/tribal identity is the reason given by elites of the minority-*bumiputera* group as to why their group deserves a separate allocation of three percent of the national GDP, as that figure equates to the percentage of national population that minority *bumiputeras* from Sabah and Sarawak represent (A. H. Bujang, 2003).

The pua kumbu acts as a visual symbol for the vicissitudes of these negotiations surrounding articulations of identity. The present social and political situation that the pua kumbu exists in has elevated the role of the cloth. It is now an object around which Ibans articulate a cultural and racial/tribal identity that is distinct and separate from the Malay/majority/Islamic *bumiputera*. Dynamics around the cloth illustrates the constant renegotiation and rearticulation of cultural identity necessary for the Iban to enter into the changing power structures. The cloth becomes at once a symbol of inclusion, exclusion and even exclusivity. The pua kumbu is a symbol of cultural distinction, as well as exclusivity, as it tends to be the Iban elites who possess the highly valued antique pua kumbus within their family. However, the cloth also symbolizes inclusion in the Iban tribe and within the *bumiputera* label. At the same time however, it represents the exclusion of others who are not Ibans, with particular reference to the

Malays. The pua kumbu, an animist object signifies an identity that is non-Islamic, and therefore non-Malay.

The question of identity politics in Sarawak is expanded from a focus on the Iban cultural group to include the most politically significant cultural grouping that impacts on the Ibans - the Malays.

*The Malays: 'One of the most challenging and confusing terms in the world of Southeast Asia' (Barnard, 2004: xiii)*

When thinking of the definition of the Ibans in contrast to the Malays, it is important to bear in mind the confusion surrounding the term 'Malay'. The highly contested term 'Malay' is explored in Barnard and Maier's 'Contesting Malayness' (Barnard, 2004). Adding to this confusion is the fact that in Sarawak, as in other parts of Malaysia, there is a process for minority *bumiputeras* and other races to 'become Malays', '*masuk Melayu*' through conversion to Islam or by (converting and then) marrying a Muslim, like my aunty, Mohammad's mother had done.

In Sarawak, among the many voices emanating from the ranks of politicians and stakeholders involved in identity politics, there is a willingness to express conviction and certainty about clearly defined racial and ethnic borders. An example is a quote from Taib Mahmud, Chief Minister of Sarawak (1981 to present), the holder of the most powerful position within the state;

I think the concept of Malay itself has the process of unification of people who were isolated in small communities but found their own strength through unity and built up a small empire eventually called Sri Vijaya Empire (Taib-Mahmud, 1989: xv).

Any community that were visited by foreign mercantile boats often identified themselves as Malay (Taib-Mahmud, 1989: xvi).

The coastal communities that were visited by mercantile boats that Taib Mahmud mentions were the Melanau people. Being of Melanau heritage himself, his statements act to consolidate and lend legitimacy to his credentials as a Malay. They can be seen as a self-serving statements. However, in his official capacity as the chief executive officer of the state, that elevates the significance of the utterances. By his definition, non-coastal people – the people who live in the interior of Sarawak - would necessarily be excluded by this limited definition of a Malay. Taib Mahmud's definitions above, appear to promote the view that being Malay is an inherently political state. This

approach fits in with Clifford's view; 'In articulation theory, the whole question of authenticity is secondary, and the process of social and cultural persistence is political all the way back ... Communities can and must reconfigure themselves, drawing selectively on remembered pasts' (Clifford, 2001: 479). Instead of being a racial identity, it is a situation where people on the coast, tactically decided to align themselves with other coastal groups, that were visited by 'foreign mercantile boats', to form a strong political unit. Taib Mahmud's definition, however, using Barnard and Maier's words, throws 'uneasy shadows and echoes' (Barnard, 2004: ix) :

'Melayu', 'Malay' and 'Maleis' ... Somehow the three words remain elusive, open to multiple interpretations, no matter how hard scholars might try to confine them within distinct boundaries, or around unequivocal cores, to produce concrete and conclusive meanings. The process makes it clear that the way certain groups have co-opted 'Malayness' as an identity or nationality in order to justify their actions is something that should be subverted and questioned. The nature or essence of 'Malayness' remains problematic - one of the most challenging and confusing terms in the world of Southeast Asia (Barnard & Maier, 2004: xiii).

According to King and Wadley, 'Malay' was not an important regional identity in Borneo until the distinction between 'Dayak' and 'Malay' was created and consolidated by colonial administrations (King, 2001: 15) in their effort to 'demarcate, locate, control, administer, and tax ethnic units' (Wadley in King, 2001: 7). Barnard and Maier concur:

Official discussions about the meaning of the word have led to definitions that are embedded in various forms of nationalism and regionalism, and have been elaborated into awkward and shaky constructions, throwing uneasy shadows and echoes over Southeast Asia, where 'Malay' can refer to a number of deferring groups, ranging from speakers of Austronesian languages to small groups scattered over islands in and around the Melaka Straits (Barnard & Maier, 2004: ix - x).

In spite of the unresolved ambiguities with Taib Mahmud's limited definition, this definition is still commonly used, according to Vickers;

... the presence of 'Malay' kingdoms in Borneo and Sumatra is usually explained by their being coastal kingdoms created through trade with other Malay kingdoms and therefore taking on Malay languages as the language of commerce, and from the language came cultural influence. These Malay coastal kingdoms exist in contrast to interior spaces defined as 'primitive' or 'tribal' in colonial discourse, and also in such endogenous terms as 'Batak' and 'Dayak' (Vickers, 2004).

This situation is complicated by the definition expressed in the constitution of Malaysia, effective in Sarawak upon the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. In the 1988 Symposium on Sarawak Cultural Heritage, held on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Federation, the definition in the constitution was evoked in response to a question on the confusion surrounding cultural definition of Malays. Johari (1989), after having discussed complexities in naming cultural groups in Sabah, especially regarding Malays, questioned representatives from Sarawak, as to whether they had similar clouds of confusions enveloping the issue. Sanib Said (present director of the Sarawak Museum, discussed later in chapter six) and Adi Badi Ozman's reply to the question was that 'there was no confusion among the participants of the workshop [on Malay cultural identity in Sarawak] on what 'Malay' meant and who they were ... Malay can be defined as those who; 1. Profess Islam as religion, 2. Practice the tradition and customs of Malays, 3. Speak Bahasa Malaysia' (*Symposium on Sarawak Cultural Heritage - Summary of the Presentation by the Malay Community, 1988*).

This response to the question highlights the political nature of discussions of identity in Sarawak. It also indicates that there is a certainty from within the Malay community as to who is to be included in this cultural group, and that certainty is based on a political definition of cultural identity. Islam plays a major role in the definition, as does the language, *Bahasa* Malaysia. Both are criteria that are relatively, yet not totally, unproblematic. But the criterion: 'a person who practices the tradition and customs of Malays', written in 1963, is difficult to justify, defend and enforce in the late 2000s. Under current theoretical approaches to identity, this definition depends overwhelmingly on outdated assumptions that, not only are the cultural boundaries obvious and clear, but also they are robust and that they do not change over time.

The implication of the various definitions of Malays is that inclusion into the Malay group confers political, economic and social benefits. In terms of cultural identity, the Ibans are not Malay but nonetheless they are *bumiputera*. However to be



'more equal than others', there is a perception one has to be Muslim. Being a Malay *bumiputera*, in contrast to a non-Malay, non-Muslim, tribal or minority *bumiputera*, is a status, widely perceived to be one of privilege and one that confers benefits, with implications for access to educational opportunities and government jobs. Johari explains; 'in reality the reason why a particular group would like to change its name, renegotiate, or reinterpret its boundary is often coloured by other issues, including political considerations' (Johari, 1989: 217). Labels, names and tabs have practical social, educational and financial implications that affect life chances and standards of living; 'It was important to identify the ethnic group roots to enable them to apply for scholarships, banking loans as well as government projects' (Acho Bian in "Bumi Minorities in Sabah, S'wak to Increase their Economic Stake," 2005). These privileges include government loans at favourable interest rates, government job quotas, quota for business ownership and government scholarships for study both within the country and abroad. These special privileges can be lucrative and life changing.

Another dynamic at play in Iban articulations is a movement towards tactical alignments with other racial, ethnic or tribal groups from a neighbouring state that share the same status of indigeneity, and likewise share in economically disadvantaged circumstances. In 2005, the Dayak Chamber of Commerce and Industry, DCCI, together with the KadazanDusun Chamber of Commerce and Industry, KDCCI, from Sabah, convened the first *Bumiputera* Minorities Economic Congress, BMEC. The congress met in Kuala Lumpur with the Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi. The purpose was to represent the various (largely disempowered and forgotten) tribal groups as one unified minority *bumiputera* bloc lobbying for socio-economic advantage. The aim was to 'find ways how we can synergise among ourselves and at the same time, to recommend tailor-made programmes to the Government to create greater opportunities for them to participate in commerce and industry' (The secretary general of the DCCI, Acho Bian in *Abdullah to Officiate First Bumiputera Minorities Economic Congress*, 2005).

In this meeting with the federal government the congress of minority *bumiputeras* presented a package of resolutions in which they requested financial assistance in meeting development goals. Included in this package was a request for the government to clearly define the term 'minority *bumiputera*' as 'there were still a large number of small ethnic groups which have not been clearly stated under the minorities group' (*Abdullah to Officiate First Bumiputera Minorities Economic Congress*, 2005). The term 'Dayak' refers to the biggest ethnic group, the Ibans, but it also covers the Bidayuh, Orang Ulu, Kenyah, Kayan, Kelabit, Penan, Punan and Lun Bawang (Loh,

1997). According to the BMEC, a total of thirty three ethnic groups are represented by that term (BMEC in "Bumi Minorities in Sabah, S'wak to Increase their Economic Stake," 2005). 'While the term 'Dayaks' covered all the thirty-three ethnic groups of Sarawak, Sabah did not have such an umbrella term. Thus, apart from the KadazanDusun and Murut, the other ethnic groups too had to be recognized' (BMEC spokesperson in Aznam, 2005).

The term 'minority *bumiputera*' itself needs to be examined. The source of the term 'minority *bumiputera*' is from the federal government:

While the census category of '*Bumiputera*' (indigenous ethnic groups) in Malaysia includes the Malays, the indigenous peoples of West Malaysia and those of Sarawak (collectively known as the Dayak) and Sabah (the Kadazandusun and Murut), the *Third Outline Perspective Plan for 2000-2010* issued by the federal government used the term '*Bumiputera* minorities' to refer to the indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Sabah in relation to the need for affirmative action programmes to address poverty in the two east Malaysian states (Morrison, Murray, & Ngidang, 2006: 191-2).

It is important to note that this creation of a distinct category of citizenship was designed to highlight the contrast between the mainstream and comparatively more privileged majority Malay *bumiputeras*. It is used by the government to highlight the disadvantaged position of the minority indigenous, non-Malay and generally non-Muslim group. This term has also been adopted and owned by the people it defines.

This construction of a more clearly defined category of minority *bumiputera*, creates a boundary that separates and excludes, and adds levels of distinction, but it also aligns with other ethnic or non-Malay groups. In concert with the constant creation and reconstitution of Iban identity, these processes underscore the complex dynamics at play in the articulation of Iban identities.

### *Conclusion*

*Collective identities are always bound up with notions of collective traditions and shared material forms. That is they are imagined in a historically and materially specific way. But that which they imagine, or present to consciousness is not always the same. For example the meaning of being a Muslim or a Hindu, or being Cornish or*

*Breton may change fundamentally through time although use of the same term produces a semblance of continuity (Tilley, 2006: 12).*

Creation of ethnic boundaries where none existed, or exclusion of segments of connected groups that did not fall neatly into specific categories, is a complicated legacy which needs to be constantly renegotiated. Iban cultural identity, or Malay, for that matter, is not a consistent, unified, or continuous whole. Iban affiliations went from riverine, longhouse loyalties to the idea of a unified 'people', firstly as Dayaks and Ibans, to *bumiputeras*, and finally evolving to minority *bumiputeras*. There is a history of encounters with various tribes in different degrees of contact or conflict. There are also shifting political contexts in the form of various governments wielding power from distant forts or cities. At times, the effect of the power is to unite, and at other times, it creates barriers and excludes people. These are the multiple expressions of Iban identity within the context of a history of migration and movement through the land.

Clifford discusses name changes as a 'tactic used by indigenous groups reflecting new articulations of resistance, separation, community affiliation, and tribal governance' (Clifford, 2004: 17). Tactical political realignment and the commensurate name changes are prominent features in the Sarawak political landscape. There is a redefinition and readaptation of the term *bumiputera* by the people described by the term minority *bumiputera*. King notes the rise of 'Dayakism' where the term is used by 'indigenous elites in their efforts to create and develop 'Dayak' political consciousness and political parties' (King, 2001: 2-3). Alongside changes brought about by intermarriage and migration, name changes or redefinitions can be preconditions for political ascendancy or cultural survival. The many expressions of identity in Sarawak reflect Clifford's articulation theory where cultural identity consists of 'selective rearticulation of diverse connections ... constantly rearticulated in changing circumstances and power charged relations' (Clifford, 2004: 19).

Negotiations are constantly underway for advantageous positioning in multicultural Malaysia. A dynamic discernible in Iban identity politics is an attempt to articulate a collective identity that is distinct from the construction of the majority *bumiputera* identity. The present articulation expands to include a grouping with the indigenous, non-Malay populations of Sabah to form one negotiating bloc for better socio, political and economic conditions. Constructing distinct boundaries between the majority and minority *bumiputera* is seen by the Dayak chamber of commerce and industry (DCCI) as the first step towards achieving their political and economic goals of

a separate allocation of resources and privileges that are specifically targeted towards the minority *bumiputeras*.

The legacy of the colonially prescribed racial roles have not been entirely discarded: The Malays still predominate in government, with the Chief Minister being a Malay/Melanau, although there have been inroads made by the other races. The Chinese are still largely involved in business enterprises but strong inroads have been made by the Malays through government legislation. It is however, the indigenous populations that have experienced the greatest change. They have had to negotiate a new identity away from their previous warrior, headhunting or military role in society. I argue that part of the negotiations for evolving from their military role to the creation and construction of a new identity involves the assertion of distinctness. The *pua kumbu*, with its history of multiple connotations, can be seen as a flag signalling this process.

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## 2 Circulation Through Mythic Landscapes

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Stories and chants from the extensive oral literary traditions of the Ibans serve as a way to introduce the rich mythological and spiritual dimensions infusing historical Iban life and the pua kumbu. The field of material culture, while including cultural objects, also includes physical environments that are shaped by human culture (Bender, 2002a, 2002c). These physical environments include the mythic landscapes. Iban literary traditions celebrates many aspects of Iban cultural expressions such as; the primacy of the god of war, the prevalence of supernatural beings, heroes, ancestors and birds of augury for predicting the future. Iban oral traditions celebrate the animist religion, the role of the shaman in managing and mitigating the spiritual world that is filled with the flight of heroes, headhunting and forms of journeying. These notions are interrelated and are closely associated with the pua kumbu and they therefore form the core themes in this chapter. These themes enable us to examine the pua kumbu circulating in mythic circles. I have organized this material around peoples' and objects' relationships with mythic landscapes. The historical context and the mythology that the pua kumbu is steeped in is discussed in relation to how textiles carry people's stories and myths and act as metaphors.

The pua kumbu in its circulation permeates and envelops the issue of the performance and articulation of cultural identity for the Ibans, which is a key arena of social change analysed in this thesis. A combination of the concepts of articulation, which is discussed in chapter one, and that of circulation, discussed in this chapter, provides a framework to examine the pua kumbu. The notion of circulation is used to analyse the mythic agency of the pua kumbu. This framework allows an expansion of the focus, from the traditional venues of creation in the longhouse and the historical cultural significance and meanings of the pua kumbu, to incorporate the wider geographic and social landscapes in which the object circulates. Before moving on to explain the pua kumbu's role in the mythic landscape, I explain the concept of circulation as it is applied in this thesis.

Graburn and Glass (Graburn & Glass, 2004) analyse the circulation of objects as they make a passage through 'a series of socially active 'regimes', each of which gave its own category, value, origin myth, and function to the objects' (Graburn & Glass, 2004: 109). 'Rather than considering the 'travel' of material objects between different systems to be the exception, it was taken as the main focus of analysis' (Graburn & Glass, 2004: 109-110). Marcus and Myers in *Traffic in Culture* argue that 'you carry with you into

your own realm of meaning and art production more than just the object. You also carry its whole context of local culture and of circulation' (Marcus & Myers, 1995: 34). Graburn and Glass state that 'art objects and the venue of their creation and circulation became recognizable as critical sites at which financial, political and social values are negotiated and contested, both within communities and across the globe' (Graburn & Glass, 2004: 109-110).

The concept of circulation, when applied to the pua kumbu, enables me to see the cloth as travelling through 'shifting discursive, evaluative and agentive fields - as they circulate between players with divergent interests' (Graburn & Glass, 2004: 111). The term circulation can also be seen as a description of the route of the pua kumbu. This route, journey or transition of the pua kumbu and its 'players with divergent interests', can be traced around, and is interconnected with, the social processes and relationships active in the vicinity of the object.

The notion of circulation allows a combination of two facets of the study of material culture, object and the landscape. These facets have both social and physical nodes of contact. The focus in this analysis is on the 'transition' or "travel' of material objects between different systems' (Graburn & Glass, 2004: 109). In the Iban context, these systems include mythic and gendered landscapes, which is explored in this chapter, and contemporary landscapes, which is examined in chapters six and seven on the object flowing downriver.

The 'players' analysed in this chapter are mythic players, active around the object of the pua kumbu. In subsequent chapters, I examine the work of the human players active around the object. The social and physical landscapes woven together by the cloth are explored in later chapters where I discuss the textile's broader circulation with reference to international art markets and Bangie's and Nancy's international activities. Themes of connection to land are developed in the chapters on the circulation of the pua kumbu through the river environments (chapter three) and forest (chapter five).

There are obvious limitations of this approach, as only social dynamics active in the vicinity of the cloth are examined. However, because it is the cloth that provides the logic for the path through society, the object is able to connect disparate items and geographic locations into a coherent flow. By following the object, I therefore commit to an interdisciplinary approach.

In this chapter, and in the early part of the thesis, I follow the object circulating within communities. That is, I examine the object circulating locally, in the 'venue of

creation' rather than outside the value system that created the object. Although the object does circulate overseas, especially in western art and cultural institutions, my initial focus is predominantly, although not exclusively, in Iban and multiethnic locales in Malaysia.

Limiting observations to the local arena, diminishes (although it does not extinguish) the importance of the discussions on issues such as dominance, exploitation and colonialism which are inevitably raised when tribal and indigenous art objects of the east are consumed by the west. Instead, focusing on local circulation helps us concentrate on local dynamics, local articulations and local contestation. These include the local art world, museums and foundations, local critics, art dealers and museum curators. Furthermore, the examination of local social processes sheds light on the construction of indigenous Iban identity around the pua kumbu. They illuminate the relationship between the state and indigenous groups and between the races, highlighting the struggles of tribal groups, not in the pursuit of autonomy or independence, but for recognition and the assertion of rights.

At this point, I need to define my use of the word local. Local here is defined as the physical and geographic locations of the area of study. This is interpreted as being within the state of Sarawak, and in Malaysia. Locals are defined as those who articulate their identity as being Iban, who may travel in varying degrees of local/nonlocal circles. This definition avoids entering into the entangled complexities regarding racial identification. It eschews issues of clear or stable boundaries between races and tribes.

However, although I have set a large section of this thesis in the local arena, abiding by the notion of circulation means that the object dictates the path. Using the concept of circulation, the study of the object expands to diverse locations, which is, wherever the pua kumbu appears and especially when it agitates in unexpected places.

Studies of ethnographic or culturally significant indigenous objects or motifs tend to focus on their circulation in the non-local contexts. The three studies discussed below focus on the consumption, circulation or exploitation of tribal art objects. They examine the application of western social, or institutional, processes including changing or reconstructing articulations around the objects in ways that add value or make them more palatable to non-locals. Myers (2002), and Geismar and Horst (2004), examine the circulation of art objects in global art markets, outside of the value systems that produced them (Geismar & Horst, 2004; Myers, 2002). Geismar argues that to add perceived value to tribal objects in auction houses, objects undergo a process she termed the 'ironic construction of authenticity'. Myers examines Australian

aboriginal art circulating outside of indigenous communities through western art circles. His study focuses on the processes by which the acrylic dot paintings by Western Desert artists become high art. Townsend-Gault (2004), examines the circulation of Canadian aboriginal motifs outside of their original or traditional value system (Townsend-Gault, 2004). She argues that although the motifs appear to be ubiquitous and are used as packaging to signify aboriginality and place, they are consumed on a superficial level. Therefore, although the motifs are interlocked and interspersed into the market economy, their meanings are withheld, hidden and remain secret.

Allowing the object to dictate the path widens the possibilities of connections and the parameters for an examination of social dynamics around the object. Marcus and Myers propose 'putting objects and their identities in motion and showing their broadest paths of circulation through a diversity of contexts' (Marcus & Myers, 1995: 34). They argue that following the object through their 'complex paths of circulation - of objects, money, ideas, and people' allows us to examine dynamics in varied locations (Marcus & Myers, 1995: 34).

The object crafts the paths of circulation and the parameters of observation. Occasionally, the object and its weavers leave the state and national boundaries and appears in global destinations. It also crosses imaginary boundaries between what is considered local or non-local, or what is 'traditional', 'authentic' and 'cultural', or 'contaminated', 'contemporary', 'modern' or 'non-traditional'.

The thesis is organized around the diverse locations the pua kumbu circulates in. The themes are developed from the physical and social landscapes of Sarawak. Chapter three on rivers examines the building of social relationships around the object in various locations in my journey upriver. Chapter four on the social status of weavers in a remote longhouse is situated in an Iban longhouse. It examines the enhancement of social status around the object. Chapter five on the contested tropical rainforests of Borneo explores the physical landscape of the forest circulating through the cloth. Chapters six and seven, on going downriver, examine issues of representation and authority to speak on behalf of others in a cultural group. Chapter six is located in museums and seven, in the capital city, Kuching. Chapter seven examines the object in its circulation in contemporary Sarawak. It explores the tension between what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) identified as 'freezing' cultural practices and 'addressing the processual nature' of cultural practices (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006).



Organizing the chapters around the physical landscape taps into a theme common among indigenous peoples of the world. It is not uncommon to have indigenous groups defining themselves in a way that highlights their deep spiritual attachment and bond to land. In some cases the construction of cultural identity is grounded in the land. In 'Wisdom Sits in Places' Basso (1996) explores how actual landscape features are imbued with meanings, cultural and moral teachings and wisdom (Basso, 1996). He argues that the retelling of the old stories that are situated at local geographic landmarks, known landscapes or local places of significance, not only continues the application of the teachings and the wisdom in an efficient and socially adept way, but these teachings also strengthen the connection between the generations (Basso, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1996). According to Pullar (2001) in 'Look Both Ways', this bond with land defines the people. Identity is constructed around a 'special, even spiritual attachment to land ... people belong to the land' (Pullar, 2001: 82). 'A strong connection to the land continues to help define Alutiiq [indigenous Alaskan] identity just as it does for other Native peoples of the world' (Pullar, 2001: 82). Land is also seen in terms of Bender's (2002) approach to landscape:

People sometimes talk about the landscape as 'palimpsest', meaning by this that past activities leave their signatures upon the land. But this suggests that elements of the past are simply left 'in place'. In reality, things are more complicated: people invest these elements with new meaning, they re-use them literally or figuratively. Or they neglect or forget them. What is left out of the story is often as interesting as what is left in (Bender, 2002a: 136).

The theme of connection to land expands beyond necessity and of physical survival to pleasure and the imagination. There is the physical connection, a deep knowledge of the information necessary for livelihood and survival in the forest and river environments. Necessity however, is not the only reason for this deep knowledge. Tsing (2005) talks of people's evident pleasure in their ability to list species, and the pleasure of acquiring and carrying knowledge of the environment for aesthetic reasons (Tsing, 2005b). Heppell (2006) explores landscapes being reconstructed in the imagination through the telling of stories of the adventures of cultural and mythological heroes (Heppell et al., 2006). Sather (2001) and Sandin (1983), in recording, documenting and translating the shamanic chants used in rituals, expose the reader to

the detailed landscape in the Iban mythological world that corresponds to the earth (Sandin, 1983; Sather, 2001).

Landscapes are 'in process, rather than static' (Bender quoted in Tilley, 2006). With Iban shifting cultivation the land is in process through the many cycles it undergoes through the years. Apart from the normal rice cultivation cycle, which begins with clearing land, planting, weeding, nurturing and harvesting, shifting cultivation requires an additional cycle where the land is left fallow for a period generally no less than ten to fifteen years (Padoch, 1988). During this period, the farming community migrates to another site, giving the land time to grow into secondary forest. This land cultivation cycle is connected to the circulation of the longhouse community through the forest landscape. The longhouse community can clear virgin forestland for cultivation or, years after leaving, they can return to previous longhouse sites which are called *tembawai* (Sather, 2001). The land can only be cultivated once the forest and vegetation that has regrown is burned to the ground, as it is the ashes that enrich the soil for the next cycle of rice crop (Padoch, 1988).

This circulation of the Iban people through the forest serves as a metaphor for the circulation of the pua kumbu. The Iban mythic landscape corresponds to the physical world. Imaginary geographical locations correspond to the structure of the longhouse passageway, the physical landscapes, rocks by the rivers and giant trees of the forest (Heppell et al., 2006; Sather, 2001: 118). The pua kumbu's circulation in physical landscapes can therefore be interpreted as having a correlation to mythic circles. The pua kumbu also reflects the importance of journeying and migration for the Iban people on an individual level in the institution of *bejalai* or journeying.

### **Flight, journey, *bejalai***

*Where is your dancing cloth called Mayang Piduka, Flowing with lightning flash, Making a roar like thunder, Booming through jungle and hills and loftiest peaks?*

*As he ended his song, he snatched a cloth from the shoulders of one of the two girls from Minyawai's village. As he swept it through the air it became a dazzling sheet of lightning; he waved it and thunder surged in a mighty roar*

*(Geddes, 1957: 129).*

In Iban stories, the pua kumbu and other forms of weaving, namely, *kelambi burong* [bird jacket]<sup>13</sup>, and *bidang* [skirt], function as a metaphor of transition. A primary role of the pua, *kelambi* and *bidang* in myths is to function as wings, or a means of transition for cultural heroes, ancestors and divine beings. Their journey is between the land of humans, that they have temporarily left behind, and the land of supernatural beings. In the oral literature the cloth enables normal humans to fly and visit heavenly mythic lands. This supernatural gift or miracle is valuable in itself but flight is also important because in Iban mythology, it is only through these legendary flights that cultural institutions can be introduced into human society. In the two Iban stories presented below the mythic introduction of two cultural institutions, Iban customary law, *adat*, and shamanism, are presented in order to shed light on the social agency and circulation of the pua kumbu, *bidang* and *kelambi* through the mythic landscapes of Iban stories.

[Note: The generic name for this type of textile is pua kumbu, but in stories and within Iban society, these cloths can be called by their title or praise names. There are several types of puas of different ranks, social and spiritual status, but generally, praise names are conferred after a naming ceremony for a newly woven pua cloth. The naming takes into account, but is not restricted to, the type of cloth that it is and the dream that inspired the design. Two stories and very limited social and spiritual functions of the pua are discussed below for the purposes of illustrating its circulation in Iban cultural landscapes. For in-depth exposition on the subject of the pua kumbu in mythology, please refer to Gavin, Jabu and Linggi (Gavin, 1996, 1999, 2004; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1999, 2001).]

### *The introduction of Adat*

*One day, while hunting in the jungle, Mengin shoots a bird. As he retrieves it, it turns into a woman's skirt, which he takes home with him. A few days later, the skirt's owner appears to claim a property. She turns out to be Dara Tinchin Temaga, eldest daughter of Singalang Burong and wife of Ketupong. After a time, she becomes Mengin's wife and bears him his son, whom they call Surong Gunting. Eventually, she returns to her celestial home. Her husband and son soon follow by donning jackets with bird designs woven by Dara Tinchin Temaga for this purpose. At first, Surong Gunting's claim of being the grandson of Singalang Burong is questioned. However,*

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<sup>13</sup> A shaman's bird jacket, from the collection of the Tun Jugah Foundation gallery, Kuching. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation).

*after passing a number of ordeals laid on him, he proves his ancestry and in turn is taught by Singalang Burong the rules of customary law (adat), bird augury relating to farming and warfare, the ritual treatment of trophy heads, the rights for the dead, and much else (Gavin, 2004: 11-12).*

### *The introduction of Shamanism*

*While Landu slept inside the covered dais, he dreamed that he met a spotted grey-colored hawk, who invited him to fly into the sky. Landu told the hawk that he could not fly as he lacked wings. The hawk told him to use a woven blanket for his wings. As soon as Landu had his wings ready, a strong wind blew from the south towards the north side of the country. As the wind blew, the hawk and Landu flew skyward towards the halo of the moon. From there, they flew downward towards the mountain tops. As they came near the earth, the hawk perched on the top of a...tree, while Landu fell and finally came to life on the top of a huge... boulder (Sandin, 1983: 238).*

While Landu was there, Inee Rabong Hari or Grandma Inee approached him. She was Singalang Burong's sister – 'the inheritor of healing charms and the greatest of the 'transformed' shaman' (Sandin, 1983: 236). 'With her strong shamanistic power, she alone consecrated others to become *manangs* [shamans] in the early days of *manangism* [shamanism]' (Sandin, 1983: 237).

After they had talked for some time, the old woman told Landu that the place where they had met was known as Rabong Manang Mountain. It was here she said that she had consecrated Raja Menjaya as Manang Bali years earlier. 'You are the first son of man to have come to this place', she told Landu. 'Anyone who comes here must become a *manang* [shaman] (Sandin, 1983: 238).

She then proceeded to initiate him, which included the following procedure:

She thrust porcupine quills into his hands and fish hooks into his body, causing him to faint. When he regained consciousness, Ini' Inda informed him that the fish hooks in his shoulders were to attach pua wings and those in his body were to prevent him from slipping as he pursued errant souls (Sather, 2001: 110).

In the Iban spiritual landscape, Lang Singalang Burong's manifestation in nature is the Brahmini Kite, but his representation in the festival or gawai celebrated to honour him, Gawai Burong, is always as a hornbill (Sandin, 1983; V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 216). Lang, the God of war and headhunting is the most powerful sibling of six other recognized 'gods' in Iban culture. The primacy of birds is a theme both stories reemphasize. Dara Tinchin Temaga, the wife of the bird Ketupong, (*Sasia abnormis Temminck*) is the eldest of Lang Singalang Burong's daughters (Hose & McDougall, 1901: 197). The daughters are married to birds and these birds form the seven birds of augury, or omen birds in Iban culture. Historically, these birds were consulted prior to headhunting raids and the performance of specific agricultural activities (Hose & McDougall, 1901: 197; V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 216; Wagner, 1972: 102). The events in the two stories are precipitated by, or involve, birds. The human interlopers have a compelling reason to fly to heavenly destinations in the sky, but are unable to do so without the aid of pua cloth functioning as wings. In Iban oral literature, birds/wings and cloth are interchangeable and this interchangeability is reflected in the stories: the bird Mengin, the hunter, shot becomes a cloth and the cloth Dara Tinchin Temaga weaves, becomes wings. These wings are essential if humans are to traverse the space between human and heavenly realm, and it is only by bridging this gap that divinely ordained practices for humans can be introduced into human society. The 'physical' bridging work performed by puas functioning as wings is also reflected in the role of the pua in Iban gendered landscape, where according to Linggi, the weaver of the pua acts as or reveals the psychological bridge between the spiritual world and human world; the fabric become 'products of technologies and symbologies through which women bridge seen and unseen worlds' (Linggi, 2001: 29).

The accounts of the introduction to the cultural institutions of *adat* and *shamanism* indicate the presence and pivotal role of the pua in Iban mythology. They contribute to our understanding of the richness in meaning and textuality of this object for present day Ibans, particularly when searching for a symbol to represent pride in Iban cultural heritage, or to hark back to a period of dominance in Sarawak. The following section introduces the notion of journeying in historical Iban culture, which in this thesis is linked with circulation.

The role of the pua in enabling flight sits comfortably with the primary Iban metaphor of journeys. Journeys or migration were paramount in Iban existence because much of their survival, since the mid 1500s, depended on their success in finding new land for settlement. This form of migration or *pindah*, although not the only kind of travel or mobility recognized, is the form most commonly focused on by

researchers when studying Iban mobility (Freeman, 1955; Padoch, 1988; Pringle, 1970; A. Richards, 1949; Sandin, 1956; V. H. Sutlive, 1978). According to Kedit (Kedit, 1993) there are other distinct and important types of journeys: *belelang* – which means ‘to go on an extended and distant journey, sometimes without returning’, *bekuli* – ‘to do wage labouring, to take on labour migration’, *kerja* – ‘to work as a nonmanual wage earner, for example to work with the government’, *kampar* – to go hunting or on trading expeditions, *ngayau* – to travel in a large war party or *kayau anak* - small war party. The traditional context of *ngayau* travel was headhunting and tribal warfare. Modern versions include enlisting in the security forces, joining the Sarawak Rangers, the police force, and Malaysian rangers, (Kedit, 1993: 3-4) or going abroad for education.

The most important form of Iban mobility, according to Kedit, did not involve migrating permanently as a family group or long house community, but was restricted to groups of young men in an institution called *bejalai*. Historically *bejalai*, ‘to go on journeys with the view of acquiring wealth, material goods and social prestige’ (Kedit, 1993: 3) was an important rite of passage for young men in Iban communities; ‘Iban values of valour, equality and individualism support *bejalai* and have made it a viable institution throughout Iban history’ (Kedit, 1993: 3). Women’s work tied them to the longhouse and farm - they ran and managed the farm and household, their work was essential to the day-to-day survival of the household (*bilik*) unit. Men’s work on the other hand, in the historical social organization of Iban society, formed an addition to the essential work that the women did to keep the family unit alive. This freedom from the farming activities allowed them to go on expeditions. According to Wagner, *bejalai* ‘forms an important part of the whole economic system ...it adds considerably to the economic assets of the *bilek*-family [family unit] ... by being away they lessen the household consumption of the *padi* [rice] stores’ (Wagner, 1972: 99). Pringle, writing in 1970 notes:

These journeys, or *Bejalai*, frequently last for several years on end, and often extend to the remotest corner of Borneo, and even to Malaya and the islands of Indonesia. They have two main aims: the acquisition of valuable property and of social prestige. For most young men these journeys are an overruling passion...’ (Pringle, 1970: 24). ‘... even today, when a young man returns to his longhouse after working in the timber camps of Sabah, bringing a new sewing-machine or an outboard motor, he is carrying home much more than a mere utilitarian object (Pringle, 1970: 24).

'The reward of a successful *bejalai* are not only material gains, but also the right to perform esoteric rituals which give them social status' (Kedit, 1993: 11). The historical methods for men to acquire and enhance status were the successful performance of the acts of *bejalai* and headhunting. Success in these activities meant that a man was finally qualified to host *gawais* or feasts. These rituals require the use of sacred pua kumbus. These feasts in turn, enhanced the individual's status as well as his family's prestige.

Kedit argues that this was such an important cultural institution that boys were socialized early in life to be predisposed to going away for a few years on *bejalai*. As discussed in the introduction, women's presence and work on the farms on a permanent daily basis was essential for the survival of the family unit. Men's work on the farm formed a supplementary contribution to the work of the women. Historically, men's work would include war and headhunting. In the present day, their work on the farm is needed around the time of harvest and preparing new land for planting, which usually consist of logging, clear felling and burning. Men on *bejalai*, which can last a few years, often time their return to the longhouse to coincide with the harvest season, *Gawai Dayak* (Wagner, 1972: 98). That is when their labour is most needed, and it is also a time of celebration.

The socialization of boys to accept the institution of *bejalai* includes stories from the vast canon of Iban oral literature. Kedit recounts how 'cultural heroes in Iban mythology performed triumphant *bejalai*, undertaking feats which provide both inspiration for and a model of conduct for *bejalai* aspirants' (Kedit, 1993: 11). James Jemut Masing relates a *timang* [invocatory chant] which 'depicts the gods on their journey to the world of men, and their subsequent participation in a ritual feast and other activities, at the end of which charms and blessings are bequeathed on the man who has performed this ritual' (Masing, 1981: i). Masing rationalizes the cultural importance placed on travelling recounted in this chant, by observing that 'this particular version of the *timang* came into prominence when the Iban, in migrating into new territories, were faced by the need to become effective warriors' (Masing, 1981: i). An 'effective warrior', is a euphemism for headhunter. 'In the past, these journeys must also have served as reconnaissance tours of potential areas for migration coupled with intimidation by killing and head-taking' (Wagner, 1972: 98-99). And in this cultural institution, the paramount god of war and headhunting is Lang Singalang Burong.

### **Circulation and divergent players**

A prominent metaphor that sits alongside that of the journey metaphor is the primacy of the bird-god, Lang Singalang Burong (the God of War, headhunting and bird augury). As mentioned, his sons-in-law were all birds and these birds form the complete set of seven omen birds of augury. In Iban bird augury, the call, frequency and direction of flight of these seven birds were closely observed by the bird expert, *tuai burong*, before decisions were made (Wagner, 1972: 102). In recent times this guidance is mostly connected with agriculture, but the more common usage for bird augury in the past was for guidance prior to headhunting raids (V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 216; Wagner, 1972: 102 - 3).

In these activities, the men's world was interconnected with women's world. These rituals were divinely ordained by Lang Singalang Burong and brought back to the land of humans by Surong Gunting, the son of a divine mother and human father, and Singalang's grandson. The tight knit between the genders is reflected in the genetic and spiritual connection between humans and supernatural beings. The institution of *bejalai* or the notion of journeying, headhunting, the place of Lang Singalang Burong in Iban culture, the types of migration and women's spiritual journey tied up with weaving are all interconnected.

*The gongs were sounding some people were dancing, and the priests and priestesses were making the first offerings to the ancestors and the demons. Gumiloh followed Kichapi, carrying the heads of Minyawai and his six brothers, and the heads of her father and mother. The seven new heads were still not dry... Everyone sat down on the veranda. The women began to dance with the heads, to greet them. Gumiloh danced to greet the head of Minyawai. She did not, of course, dance with the heads of her mother and father, because this must not be done... Gumiloh rose to dance. She danced holding a head in each hand. When she had danced with them for a while, she stopped to exchange them for another two. Then she danced again. She danced until she had danced with all the heads of Minyawai and his six brothers... But she danced without cloth. She should have had a cloth draped over her shoulders, with an end held in each hand. Kichapi called out to her to get a cloth. But Gumiloh had none, she had never danced with heads before, so she had not felt the need of one (Geddes, 1957: 128-9).*

In the Raja Entala creation myth, the pua kumbu existed before Iban humans were created out of the trees of the forests and the earth (Gavin, 2004: 11; Jensen, 1966:



6-11). The story illustrates how much reverence is given to the pua. This reverence reverberated in the archipelago. Cloth traders in the 1600s were regarded, according to Reid (Reid, 1993:7), with supernatural reverence. Cloth was regarded as a supernatural object with divine powers. They were able to function as wings and create thunder and lightning. As birds precipitate the teaching and introduction of cultural institutions like *adat*, shamanism, bird augury, the ritual treatment of trophy heads and the rights for the dead, similarly, pua kumbu cloth is necessary prior to all life crisis events.

Mythic landscapes overlap gendered landscapes, and both impact on the contemporary use of the pua kumbu, most significantly in its role in the performance and articulation of Iban identity. The Ibans' relatively short history of five hundred years in Sarawak adds to the complexities of articulating cultural identity. When the Iban history in Sarawak is one of forced displacement and decapitation of other native inhabitants, names and labels of 'indigenous' or 'native' themselves become ambiguous. So, as the pua kumbu's metaphorical use in shamanism is its involvement in rescuing and catching souls that have gone astray and giving shamans the ability to follow soul guides, so too, the pua, in contemporary social landscapes, plays an important metaphorical role in managing 21<sup>st</sup> century articulations and constructions of Iban cultural identity.

*Now a borrow a piece of the most skilfully designed ampang bekebat cloth for us Gendai, younger brother of Rechap, to use for wings so that we may surround the soul that has grown wild and strayed away to the far edge of the world (Sather, 2001: 207).*

*We dream of flying. That is why we must use a ritual cloth, to serve as our wings when we fly. Our spirit guide always flies in front of us and we follow. It is ahead of us all the time, guiding us (Sather, 2001: 29).*

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## **3 Rivers and Flows: Pua Kumbu, Journey and a Web of Connections**

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This chapter, on my river journey up to *Rumah Garie* [Garie longhouse], examines the circulation of the pua kumbu through the river environments. It develops the theme of people's physical and spiritual connection to land begun in chapter two. In the imagination, rivers are conceived as tying together the spiritual and physical landscape. These insights provide an understanding of how these elements overlap with the sensory, emotional and psychological realms, all converging in the form of rivers. Travelling through the riverine landscape I record my memories of the environment. I come into contact with other people's experiences of the same landscape and experience it through the senses. I see the journey as a way to immerse myself in the layers of meanings that rivers in Borneo carry in their flow.

Bangie Embol and Nancy Ngali, two weavers with reputations that span the globe, live in this remote environment at the river's edge. The experiences of my fieldwork research journey to meet them is discussed in relation to the social agency of the cloth. The physical and social challenges of organizing my fieldwork, and the diverse connections I made, are interpreted as the cloth's agency in constructing social networks and relationships. My challenges during fieldwork resonate with other social science scholarship on research methods, particularly where it related to the experiences and dilemmas of participant observation.

Rivers in Sarawak control everyday life in the physical sense. Rivers are lifelines for individuals from many remote settlements, and they are often the only viable form of transportation for the logging, forest and plantation industries. Rivers, rather than roads, remain the predominant, cheapest, fastest, safest and most relevant form of transportation for the majority of the population. As only towns by main rivers have ferry services, many rural communities today remain isolated, with the residents being

entirely dependent on their own longboats. Air transport, although subsidized by the government, is beyond the financial reach of most people. In 2005, the news was filled with several helicopter crashes, including one carrying politicians. It was found days later, after a massive search of the terrain, in the dense jungle, with the help of indigenous trackers. Unfortunately, there were no survivors. This is the reality of the limitations in terms of physical infrastructure and communications.

Limitations in the transport infrastructure had a significant impact on my ability to conduct my fieldwork. The function of rivers as a means of transportation coloured my first encounter with rivers in Borneo. Rumah Garie longhouse is a remote place that is four boat journeys away from the capital city, Kuching. To further emphasize its remoteness, in 2005, the nearest telephone lay at the end of a five-hour journey by boat. Two of these boat journeys had to be taken by privately arranged boats for there were no commercial river links to the Rumah Garie longhouse.

It was these limitations that brought into sharp focus, the necessity of social relationships, all constituted in order to help me move around in the landscape. My ability to travel to the longhouse was completely predicated on the relationships I was able to make. Without the creation of a series of connections at various locations all the way up the river, the journey could not be contemplated. Family and institutional connections provided protection, but personal interactions and relationships constituted around the pua kumbu object, in combination with chance serendipitous meetings with the right people enabled the flow of goodwill.

These flows I see as surging through and breaking barriers, flowing around or wearing down obstacles, inaugurating social change. The travel took me through areas of friction (Tsing, 2005a) and zones of contact or contestation (Clifford, 1988, 1997b). Rivers became the area of confluence where my intention to travel up river to meet the makers of an object the Ibans hold in high esteem converged with the work, energy and emotions of the people around me. Rivers connected me to these people, places and objects.

How far and wide do I cast the net to cover the entangled object (Thomas, 1991) and social network crafted around the pua kumbu? These connections extend beyond the forest landscape, and lead all the way back to Kuching, the capital city, and also overseas to Sydney, Australia. The connections invoke issues of intercultural, interracial relations, not only on a personal level but also at an institutional level.

I was born in west Malaysia of Chinese - Indian heritage. I am currently affiliated with a university in Australia, where I now live, and I was travelling with an

Anglo-Celtic Australian. At an institutional level, the web of connection that I brought to this journey included my supervisor in Australia, Dr Barbara Leigh, and her contacts from her years in Sarawak, and her network of family and friends. Dr Leigh's network incorporates connections to local and expatriate professionals and academics, the local university, museums and cultural institutions. It was through Dr Leigh's connections to the Tun Jugah Foundation, an influential, powerful and wealthy Iban cultural organization, that I was able to establish a relationship with the organization. This connection eased potential political and social difficulties during fieldwork. (Research on indigenous communities in Malaysia has been known to be problematic (see Appell, 2004 for example)).

Given the difficulties encountered in terms of logistic challenges to travel through the area, this network of connections highlights, acknowledges and factors in my dependence on the social, physical and political work of the locals, and their connections. I was aware of the ease in which 'wrong' relationships can be established, which would in turn alienate all the contacts I did manage to make; with the after-effects felt all the way downriver to the Tun Jugah Foundation.

The historical agency of the cloth was to incite men's journeys or expeditions. In this chapter, the agency of the cloth is interpreted as drawing or attracting people like me to travel to the object located at the centre of a web of social relationships. For the past twenty years, Bangie Embol and Nancy Ngali have travelled internationally as pua kumbu weaving artists, representatives of the artform, and as cultural ambassadors. These women continue the tradition of *bejalai*, of journeying for status and prestige, previously the domain of men, following in a long line of travelers, migrants, warriors and settlers, all of whom form a history of movement and circulation in these areas. My journey upriver to meet these two women is framed in relation to the historically elevated role of journeying as a status activity in Iban society. My journey involved travelling from Sydney to Kuala Lumpur, then on to Kuching, Sibul, Kapit and Nanga Kain to finally arrive at Rumah Garie. I travelled by jet plane, small plane, and seagoing express boat, over the rough South China Sea, out of sight of land, onto a smaller express boat to Kapit. After meetings with key contacts in town, with a lot of luck, I got on to another small, tattered old express boat that plies the Balleh River, and finally onto a small longboat, handled superbly by two people, a man and woman, who took me all the way up to the longhouse.

### **Rivers in the physical, sensory, social and imaginary realms**

*Those are all of the upriver fish, who go in throngs to attend the festival.  
Those are all of the downriver fish, who are invited to attend the celebration.  
Even the jaan fish arrive, pleased to join the manang's festival,  
and bless the stalk of the areca bud;  
They come from the Samarahan river,  
and swim behind the Meluan trading vessel,  
skirting along the right-hand shore of the Sarawak river,  
there to await their cousin the porpoise,  
because the porpoise can dive to the bottom of the still limban pool,  
these are the varieties of sea fish invited to attend the festival  
(Sandin in Graham, 1987: 42).*

In Sarawak, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of rivers. Historically, rivers enabled wider Iban migration through the dense forested interior. Rivers facilitated the travel of war parties and headhunting raids and these raids enabled the Ibans to protect the land they held or to acquire more land from enemy tribes. Among the more settled tribal longhouse communities, rivers played a major part in enabling Ibans to establish and maintain social relations. Ibans articulated their identity around rivers, reaffirming connections between the various longhouse groups living along particular rivers. For instance, people call themselves Balleh River Ibans or Saribas River Ibans.

For the Iban people who have lived along rivers for generations, the language is filled with specialised vocabulary. Specific words exist to describe the many changing conditions of the rivers, all of which need to be identified and known. The river is evoked in all its seasons and moods, and river metaphors flavour the language, oral literature and religion. The poem above indicates that the fish of the river are known as are the trading vessels that plied the coast from far away places like China and India. Different types of whirlpools are named in Iban stories; these names are widely known and evident in the praise names and the motifs on the pua (Linggi, 1998, 2001).

Out of necessity people learn to handle boats, skilfully navigating the rivers in times of flood and drought, using knowledge borne from generations of experience of

living at the water's edge. For journeys to town, people have to factor in the cost and supply of fuel, supplemented by the physical fitness, stamina and ability of the passengers to assist with the difficult and often dangerous journey. Local knowledge of locations of submerged hazards is crucial, as are the skills and strength to navigate vessels in swirling waters<sup>14</sup>. Distances were calculated in terms of the number of bends in the river, and local knowledge is needed to avoid whirlpools, rapids and other such hazards. River dwellers have to be adept at judging the depths of the water, or the draft of the boat once fully loaded with supplies and passengers. These elements form crucial knowledge when manoeuvring a craft through rapids and rocks in a Borneo river.

For the Ibans, and all communities living in the interior of Sarawak, the river is a symbol of connection and a means of communication. Rivers carry information, influences, people and the provisions to sustain life. They also carry weavers and their pua kumbu cloth downriver, and they bring outsiders searching for the cloth up to the few longhouses where the women still weave. The river is not only a means of connecting life, it enables life in the interior. Rivers in Borneo are a source of water to drink, a place to bathe bodies, wash clothes and a way of removing waste. Rivers in drought, however, can isolate or cut off communities, and when swollen with monsoonal downpour they can flood an area.

Rivers permeate many facets of life in a longhouse in the remote interior of Sarawak, much more than they enter the imagination in West Malaysia. Most towns and cities in both east and west Malaysia are situated at river estuaries; *kuala*, a common word in town names means estuary. Kuala Lumpur, for example, was founded at the confluence of two rivers. The point at which these rivers meet is now part of an urban landscaped area, with the river as a visual feature rather than the primary means of transport and communications. A point made by many locals is that Sarawak lags behind west Malaysia in terms of the construction of infrastructure. This is clear to even the most fleeting visitor. Roads link most places in West Malaysia, but the same cannot be said for Sarawak. This fact is not lost on the Ibans themselves. It has become a point of contention as there is an expectation of federal government spending on infrastructure. This expectation is based on the fact that one of the concessions made in order to encourage Sarawak, and allay its fears about joining other states to form the

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<sup>14</sup> Dangerous journeys on the Balleh River. Cargo ship shipwrecked in the swirling waters. This ship, along with other capsized boats, and more natural submerged hazards in the dangerous stretch of the river, become water hazards for other crafts. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

Federation more than four decades ago, was that 'financial arrangements would be made to guarantee Federal funds for economic development' (Andaya & Andaya, 1982: 272).

In the 1960s, there were no roads connecting the capital city, Kuching to Sibiu, a major town. In the mid 2000s, although a road had been constructed, travel by boat was still the fastest and most convenient way between the two towns. The boat trip over the South China Sea on commercial ferry took half the time, or four to five hours, rather than the seven or more hours it would have taken by road. In 2006 roads and bridges had not reached Kapit. The Trans-Borneo Highway is a project that is conceived to link major cities and towns of Sarawak and Sabah, with plans to extend the project to Brunei, and later into Kalimantan (*Trans-Borneo Highway Mooted*, 2006). This ambitious project, highlighted in both the local Kapit government and Sarawak State government websites, was begun in 1963, after Federation (*Resident's Office, Kapit Division: Divisional Profile*, 2006; *Transportation and Communications: Road Transport*, 2007). This highway will have many implications for the island population when finally completed, but in the mid-2000s, rivers were still the main mode of transportation for rural communities. In 1995, most of the population was scattered in rural areas as only under twenty five percent of Sarawak was considered urban (Brookfield et al., 1995). As of the mid-2000s many rural citizens did not live within easy access to these road systems.

### *Rivers and the spiritual realms*

In this section, I introduce the reader to two examples of the pua kumbu used in rituals. These rituals are connected with rivers, and this connection in turn ties in neatly with the theme of this chapter, which is to layer my river journey over the deep undercurrents of meanings that rivers in Sarawak hold.

Many aspects of Iban physical life correspond to the spiritual realm, and this extends rivers. Rivers are seen as reflections of spiritual landscapes. Sather explains that the imagery evoked in shamanic chants 'not only maps features of the invisible cosmos, but links these to attributes of the tangible social world and to the internal makeup of the human body, soul, and other aspects of the person' (Sather, 2001: 118). This is supported by Heppell who explains that in the retelling of stories, events that take place in different parts of the spiritual landscape can be evoked by creating an imagery of physical aspects of the longhouse, like the passageway and entrance ladder

<sup>15</sup> as a chasm or waterfall, for example (Heppell et al., 2006). Rivers are conceived as flowing in the afterlife and existing in the spiritual landscape, in what Sather calls the 'microcosmic use of imagery' (Sather, 2001: 118). 'Portions of the larger cosmos are compressed and given microcosmic representation in, for example, specific architectural features of the longhouse' (Sather, 2001: 118). An example given is one of the Limban Chasm which in chants is 'the deep divide through which the Limban River flows, separating this world from the otherworld of the dead' (Sather, 2001: 118). The waters of the Limban, 'may refer simultaneously to the Limban river at the border of the unseen otherworld, to the longhouse *tempuan* [passageway], and to the lymphatic fluid ... that flows from a decomposing corpse' (Sather, 2001: 118). The Limban waterfall refers to the longhouse entry ladder (Sather, 2001: 118).

In their flow through the landscape, rivers bring together the spiritual aspects of life, the imaginary, psychological, emotional, sensory and physical realms, all overlapping in wave upon wave of convergences. Sather, in documenting the shamanic rites of the Ibans for significant events and mishaps in a person's journey through life, constantly returns to the theme of rivers. Rivers feature in images and stories or dreams, such as one featuring a woman falling into the water for not being brave enough to follow a loved one into the unknown. The more esoteric aspects of rivers are intimated in an exploration of rivers in dreams and the imagination. In rituals, sections of the river become venues for the performances of shamanic rites and ceremonies. They become the repository of flowers that symbolise loved ones who are now dead and are grieved for. Rivers can be thought of as the abode of souls that have been lost and submerged. In order to rescue these souls, a shaman had to 'fish' in the river for them and attempt to catch the souls. This ritual involved the shaman casting a powerful and symbolic 'fishing net' which is the pua kumbu.

This interconnection between the different realms of perceived existence and experience is demonstrated by two rituals described by Sather (Sather, 2001: 128, 186-7). Shamans, in performing rituals to maintain the health of living member of a longhouse often search in rivers of the imagination for lost or errant souls that have wandered off. Sather describes two rituals that carry out these symbolic searches in the rivers (Sather, 2001: 128, 186-7). They are the *pelian merau* 'canoeing rite for the

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<sup>15</sup> The longhouse entry ladder corresponds to locations in mythical landscapes, such as waterfalls. Detail from a storyteller's memory board, reproduced in silk, depicting an event in a story featuring a ladder or longhouse steps. (Photograph by Audrey Low).



father and his two sons' (Sather, 2001: 188) and *pelian nyala*, throwing a 'cast net' (*jala*) into the water to catch the souls' (Sather, 2001: 128).

In the *pelian merau* the pua kumbu is draped over the head and torso of the shaman, while he sits in a symbolic canoe or longboat fashioned out of a mat tied at both ends (Sather, 2001: 187). Sather recounts the shaman's symbolic journey to the 'Mandai River of the Dead' (Sather, 2001: 188) to look for the souls of two children, after their father told of a dream of the 'capsizing of his boat and the loss of his sons' (Sather, 2001: 188). When the shaman finds the souls, he captures them in his hand in a grasping motion (Sather, 2001: 182).

Sather also recounts a dream told in a ceremony of the loss of a child after she was chased into the river, and another of a daughter meeting her dead father at the roots of a kara ficus tree. In her dream her father instructed her to climb up the tree after him and told her to jump into the river. The woman recounts that she was too afraid to jump, and instead slipped and fell into the water, waking up in a breathless and agitated state (Sather, 2001: 128). 'The shaman said that the meaning of this dream was ... bad and that her soul, was still lost in the water' (Sather, 2001: 128). These dreams necessitated the performance of the *pelian nyala*, casting of the nets, and in the rituals the net is symbolized by the pua kumbu.

In both ceremonies, once the souls, often symbolised in the form of seeds or nut, are caught they have to be bathed in the longhouse bathing place <sup>16</sup> before being re-embodied (Sather, 2001: 186). According to Sather, this bathing reflects shaman Jarai's (one of the original shamans) bathing of his dead wife's soul in the river 'before he carried it back to the longhouse and reinserted it into her body' (Sather, 2001: 186) bringing her back to life. This bathing 'soothes and quenches the thirst of the soul' (Sather, 2001: 186).

The following ceremony weaves in the psychological and emotional weight of rivers. The *pelian beserara bunga* (Sather, 2001: 324-9) is a ceremony performed when grieving for the death of a beloved has persisted for longer than is considered healthy. According to Sather, the Ibans think that excessively prolonged grieving and emotional attachment to the departed can result in a dangerous psychological state. This state would then require the intervention of a shaman and the performance of the severing of the flower ceremony. This healing ceremony culminates in the shaman

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<sup>16</sup> The longhouse bathing place is more than a place to wash and cool the body. These areas feature in the culmination of performances of shamanic rituals. They also play host to a significant part of the pua kumbu weaving process. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

severing the flower representing the deceased family member. The relatives, along with the shaman, then 'carry the branch, [with other items used in the ceremony] fire, water, and the trays of food offerings down to the river bathing place. Here, they throw these objects into the water in a downriver direction (toward *Sebayan*) [the afterworld]' (Sather, 2001: 328). This symbolic and psychological severing of the strong bond between the living and the dead 'is an emotional moment, and normally all of the family comes out of the *bilik* [apartment] and gathers around the *manang* [shaman] at this point, listening as he concludes this section of the *leka pelian*, [chant] many of them openly weeping' (Sather, 2001: 328).

These ceremonies imbue the longhouse bathing place with spiritual significance and emotional weight. In the microcosmic imagery of the Ibans, these bathing places not only wash and cool the physical body they are also conceived as places to cool the soul, bathing it in preparation for reintroduction into a person's body. (For the Iban concepts of spiritual coolness (*chelap*) and heat (*angat*), please refer to Sather and Graham (Graham, 1987: 68-69; Sather, 2001: 74-81).)

### **Destinations on my journey upriver**

After a few days acclimatizing in Kuching, my travelling companion and I set off early one morning as the sun was rising, to the Kuching docks. The taxi dropped us off at a row of makeshift stalls lining the road. The smell of deep-fried bananas and coffee filled the air, and the passengers stocked up on snacks for the boat trip. The *Bahagia*,<sup>17</sup> happiness, a seagoing vessel was being loaded with cargo for its five-hour journey to Sibu. Men, heavily laden with sacks, walked up and down the gangplanks. We embarked and found our seats upstairs in the air-condition lounge dominated by a huge television screen. The crossing over the rolling South China Sea was choppy with waves coming in short sets. It caused quite a few cases of seasickness, which made it impossible to remain inside the enclosed air-conditioned area, the screening of the latest *kungfu* movie of the week, notwithstanding.

After a few hours on the open seas, we entered a huge estuary and proceeded upriver until we could see a Buddhist pagoda dominating the vista. This structure

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<sup>17</sup> The *Bahagia* (Happiness), a seagoing ferry connecting Kuching and Sibu on the often rough and choppy five-hour journey. Many who can afford it, opt to fly instead, to avoid the seasickness that inflicts many. Road transport, although in existence, takes almost twice as long as the river journey. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeunlimited.blogspot.com/>

marked our arrival to the town of Sibü. The impression of Sibü from the docks is that of an untidy logging town. A great concrete wharf was under construction. All the passengers disembarked and hurried to the nearest restaurants for lunch. After lunch, those continuing further on upriver had to board a smaller more streamlined passenger ferry for the next leg of the journey.

We travelled further and further inland, stopping at numerous points on the wide muddy Rejang River. This was no languid journey in a measured pace up a tropical river. The ferry was a fast, motorized powerful vehicle, churning up wake in its trail <sup>18</sup>. Smaller boats in the vicinity had to dodge and bail. Five hours later, after all of *Kungfu Hustle* starring Stephen Chow, and most of *Om bak* starring Tony Jah, as the sun was setting, we arrived at an embankment with a deep red scar from a recent landslide. On the opposite bank of the river, there was a collection of petrol barges and another massive construction site <sup>19</sup>. After nearly a whole day of travelling on two boats we had finally arrived in Kapit, the third in a series of destinations on our journey to Rumah Garie; Kuching, Sibü, Kapit, Nanga Kain or Nanga Sempat and Rumah Garie.

### *Kapit*

After disembarking, we made our way through the town full of shophouses, provision stores and a remarkable number of hotels and guesthouses for its remote location. That night the skies opened up and a tropical downpour cooled the evening while we had dinner in the Malay quarter consisting of twenty sticks of satay with peanut sauce, *roti chanai* and curry dip, and sweetened tea. The makeshift tarpaulin shelters strung out over the food stalls started to fill with water, and a young girl had to prod the loaded tarpaulin with a long stick to empty it throughout the storm. Stranded under the tarpaulin, we waited it out with the other diners. There was no hurry, there was no place to go to. Kapit was the end of the line for many people.

A white wooden fort built in 1880 dominates the approach to Kapit <sup>20</sup>. This fort built by the white *Rajahs* is a constant reminder of the historical enmity in the area. It

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<sup>18</sup> Baleh River ferry leaving a wake, muddy from the intense deforestation and resulting landslides. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Petrol barges at Kapit town. Kapit is the supply centre for a large area in the interior of Sarawak. The most prominent industries are logging, timber processing and palm oil and acacia paper pulp plantations. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

<sup>20</sup> Fort Kapit was built by Rajah Charles Brooke, the second white *rajah* (king) in the 1880s. The fort was built to prevent the Ibans from further migration up the Baleh River. Rumah Garie is several hours beyond this point in the river. The fort was the site of the great Peacemaking

represents a history of colonialism, Iban invasion, ferocious attacks and a culture celebrating decapitation of the enemy, as well as resistance from Kayan, Kenyah and other local tribal forces. The route of migration of the Ibans in the mid-1600s was 'by way of the low-lying water-shed between the Kapuas and the Batang Lupar or Batang Ai, following the faulted depression known to the geologists as the Danau series, which runs from Indonesian Borneo, North-west down the Batang Ai' (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 10). By the mid-1800s, there was massive Iban migration in the Balleh region, which displaced the Kayans, Kenyahs and other tribes. 'Many names of rivers tributary to the Rejang call to mind expeditions against parties and individuals who broke the law in complying with their own customs' (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 12).

It was these great skirmishes and ferocious wars over land that brought the colonial British Brooke influence up the Rejang River with its armies, canons and artillery. The *Rajah's* aim was to prevent or control any further Iban migration up the Balleh River. These 'special problems for the Brookes', necessitated the construction of forts at several locations along the rivers, including one at Kapit, called Fort Sylvia (named after the second *Rajah* Brooke's consort). The Ibans however found a way to circumvent this fort, and the invasion of Kayan and Kenyah land further upriver continued for decades.

Hostilities finally subsided in 1924, with a peacemaking ceremony involving the British Brooke forces, members of all the local tribes, as well as the Dutch representatives from across the border in Kalimantan ("Fort Sylvia Museum Exhibit - 1924 Peacemaking at Kapit," 2005). The peacemaking ceremony did not however, end headhunting. Richards, writing in 1959 stated that 'clan feuds and headhunting raids continued until fairly recently, together with government expeditions against the resulting 'outlaws'.

The location of the fort is significant because the degrees of accessibility of the colonial ruling power depended, on whether there was a fort, an outpost of the Brooke government. Historically, the nature of contact with the British Brooke colonial government was influenced to a great degree by the positioning of a longhouse. The presence of the fort in Kapit meant that the area was effectively within the control of the colonial government. One of the implications of Brooke government control is that James Brooke, the first *Rajah*, could conscript 'friendly' native warriors to fight as allies for the *Rajah* and be wielded against 'hostile' native groups. These native levies helped

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Ceremony in 1924. There is a plaque commemorating this event. The markers on the wall show the high water marks from previous floods. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

him achieve the aim of effective control of the country. James Brooke, speaking of native levies, stated; 'Without their assistance we could do nothing. Without them, the English could not have got into the country' (James Brooke, first *Rajah*, in Pringle, 1970: 321).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is again the location of Kapit at the confluence of two of the major rivers in Sarawak that augments its position. Kapit is a rapidly developing frontier town and its positioning makes it a node for a dual flow of objects and influences; resources flow downriver from the forests and state government influences flow upriver from Kuching <sup>21</sup>. Kapit's positioning makes it the centre for dissemination of power. It is the administration centre for the local government, as well as the banking, health and education centre for the region.

Kapit is a timber-processing town in the middle of the (fast disappearing) jungle. It is the point at which all the resources extracted from the forests and palm oil cultivated in plantations upriver are processed before being shipped downriver to Sibuan and from there, on to global destinations. There is much evidence of income generating activity to give credence to the anecdotal claim of many Kapit residents, that the Kapit area produces a significant amount of Sarawak's GDP. Local government statistics show that forestry and logging activities contributed in excess of 600 million ringgit to the GDP from 2001 to 2003 (*Resident's Office, Kapit Division: Divisional Profile*, 2006). There was some coal mining up river in Merit Pila and the Hose Mountains but, according to the resident's office, even back in 2001, and continuing to 2008, there has been no reported income generated by the mines.

The main activity in the Kapit area, visible from every inch of the river and its banks, is logging. The Rejang and Balleh rivers are both brown from deforestation; logs are piled up along the riverbanks in preparation for transportation to sawmills <sup>22</sup>. Many longhouses along the Balleh are constructed next to sawmills, and have heavy machinery parked out the front. According to information provided in the local government website, timber processing is the only manufacturing activity in the Kapit region. By 2008, logging, palm oil and paper pulp industries have penetrated Sarawak's rivers. These industries are dependent on the Balleh and Rejang rivers for the transportation of their machinery and products.

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<sup>21</sup> Kapit is the centre of commerce and government administration for the region. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

<sup>22</sup> Timber processing is the mainstay of the town. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

In the Kapit region, two economies come into contact: the traditional rural subsistence longhouse economy and the cash economy. Kapit's industries bring changes in influences, wealth, lifestyles and standards of living, and carry in new waves of personnel and employees of the companies. The cash flow generated from these commercial activities, attract people in to the region, but also enable those from rural longhouses to leave the area and enter mixed race locales in multicultural Malaysia, in the towns and cities of Sarawak. The town functions as a supply centre for the rural population for miles around. It serves the remote longhouse inhabitants of the interior of Sarawak upstream from Kapit. The hotel room we stayed in was full of signs and instructions in Malay saying; 'no more than five people are allowed to sleep in the room', 'no more than two people are allowed to share each bed'. For longhouse inhabitants with little access to cash income, trips to town are expensive ventures. The cost of petrol and hotels are prohibitive. Sharing a room was one way to cut costs. Kapit may function as the hub and centre for the region, but from the perspective of Kuching, and for those locked out of the cash and capital economy, it is a frontier, logging town, a marginal place, a place some locals call a cowboy town.

In 2005, Kapit was not connected by road to any of the towns in Sarawak. There is however, evidence of massive government infrastructure spending by the State government <sup>23</sup>. There is a real sense of development pushing through, making its way up the river. There were at least three road bridges in the middle of construction in the Sibü to Kapit stretch of the Rejang River. A new wharf is being constructed in Kapit, along similar lines to the Sibü wharf. The riverbank is being upgraded with the construction of gazebos, paved walkways and landscaped gardens overlooking the Rejang River. Construction is proceeding at a furious pace. One morning, we were awoken by the sound of a series of urgent shouts followed by a huge crash of heavy machinery. The noise drove everyone within hearing distance outside to see what had happened. The sight that greeted us was a great orange crane, used in the construction of the new concrete jetty and wharf, toppled on its side. The crash of the crane was going to be a very costly accident as work had to stop until parts and engineers were shipped upstream from Sibü or Kuching.

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<sup>23</sup> Kapit is undergoing a furious rate of construction. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

*Fort Sylvia: From the furthest reaches of the Brooke kingdom to the first point of contact for journeys upriver*

In the 1880s, Fort Sylvia would have been the most, if not the only, imposing structure in town. It was after all the reason for the existence of the town in the first place. In this century it is dwarfed by modern buildings immediately in its vicinity <sup>24</sup>, which make the white wooden fort look like an anachronism or a quaint historical relic. The fort is now a museum managed by the Iban Tun Jugah Foundation. Although based in Kuching, the foundation maintains strong family and political links to the local community. The fort therefore, seemed like a good starting point for enquiries about logistics arrangements for my journey to Rumah Garie.

Inside the fort, I introduced myself to the two men at reception casually 'guarding the fort'. As it happens, Ricky and Dennis turned out to be relatives of Tun Jugah himself. This was a stroke of luck especially since Dennis pointed out that it was not his job to be guarding the fort, he was only visiting Ricky, his cousin. Their family connections extend to Siah, a master weaver and the consultant for taboos at the Tun Jugah Foundation, who I had met in a previous visit to Kuching. Ricky and Dennis were therefore also related to Leonard Linggi, the president of the Foundation and the Dayak Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), and also the late Margaret Linggi, the wife of Leonard, and director of the pua kumbu textile department at the foundation. They were also close friends of Garie, the *tuai rumah* or headman of Rumah Garie, who happened to be in town that day.

When I explained that I was studying the pua kumbu and wanted to travel to Rumah Garie, they appeared disinterested and they were non-committal about my claim of having the support of the foundation in my research. They made it clear to me that before any action was taken, my connections had to be verified, so we left to go to the local cafe before taking any steps to contact the foundation. In the time it took us to walk to the Hua Hua cafe, which was about five minutes, Ricky had called Janet Rata Noel, the head curator of textiles at the foundation in Kuching to verify my account. Janet informed Ricky that Datin Margaret Linggi had given me written permission and every assistance was therefore to be extended to me. With this confirmation from the

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<sup>24</sup> The fort, once the reason for the existence of the town, is now dwarfed by other buildings in the vicinity. The fort that was built to suppress Iban attacks, is now managed by a powerful Iban family who have converted the fort into a shrine that celebrates the achievements of the Ibans, and in particular, the life of one man, Tun Jugah, the last paramount chief of the Ibans. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

foundation, Ricky rushed to the Hua Hua cafe, found us and informed us that our contacts had been verified. He announced to us that in accordance with instructions from the foundation, the private residential areas of the fort, normally off limits to the public, were to be opened to us and to be photographed, if we so wished <sup>25</sup>.

Ricky made the point repeatedly, by way of apology, that the reason he had to confirm my connections first, was because a national television station had previously fabricated stories about obtaining permission from the foundation to film. It was also a way of alerting us to the fact that this was indeed a rare privilege. The confirmation from the foundation elevated our status, from strangers to people with some credibility, and most importantly, connections. As a consequence, we were then treated as guests in the private residential chambers of the fort. The private rooms were the formal living areas and bedroom of the *Rajah* or the British Resident when they visited. The original furnishing and tone of the rooms had been maintained. Recent additions were of room size carpets made with pua kumbu designs and a gigantic wall hanging made of silk depicting an Iban storyteller's storyboard or *papan turai*. After the verification from Kuching, the business of the logistics of my travel arrangements from Kapit to Rumah Garie took on legitimacy and added urgency. Again, by the time we got back to the cafe from the fort, Dennis was already sitting down casually to a coffee with Garie, the headman, having begun the negotiations for the logistics and travel arrangements of our journey.

*'Sure you can go to my longhouse, but there's a problem...': logistics and social networks*

*Therefore, let us go as guests, Friends, 'The-One-Who-Awaits-With-*

*Hesitation', From the circling, twisting whirlpools.*

*Let us go as guests, Friends, 'The-One-Who-Awaits-In-Vain'.*

*Then we dress, putting away our soiled travelling clothes*

*(Invocatory chant 'To bring the spirit fish', Sather, 2001: 503).*

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<sup>25</sup> The Brooke Resident's (government agent) private residential quarters in the fort. The quarters, now managed by descendants of Tun Jugah, is decorated with specially made carpets inspired by pua kumbu motifs. (Photograph by Audrey Low).



At the Hua Hua cafe, Dennis introduced us to Garie, the headman of the longhouse we had traveled all this way to visit. Garie was to be the point of contact for all the travel arrangements further along the Balleh River. Garie, in his late thirties, told us we were welcomed to visit his longhouse, and that we could stay with his mother. After a hesitant conversation, it became clear that his mother is in fact Bangie Embol, one of the women I had come to visit. His grandmother, Bangie's adopted mother, was Karama, another matriarch and master weaver. The connections were starting to become clearer. Rumah Garie also houses Gading Mayau and Nancy Ngali. Gading is permanently exhibited in the Fort Sylvia Kapit Museum and is affiliated with the Tun Jugah Foundation. Bangie and Nancy are affiliated with Edric Ong, a local Kuching entrepreneur connected to the global network of textile collectors, scholars, dealers, and artist. That remote longhouse was starting to appear very connected.

Problems with logistics meant that my journey could not be undertaken independently beyond Kapit. I became effectively dependent on 'players with divergent interests' (Graburn & Glass, 2004: 111) and on the various motivations of the locals for helping me. Influencing them could be my perceived connections with powerful urban centres or the possibility of monetary gains, but there was also the kindness of strangers to visitors, and various other motivations that were not evident to me. After Janet Rata Noel vouched for us all the way from Kuching and confirmed my association with the foundation, however tenuous, the locals did everything they could to make our trip a success. I experienced an almost palpable sense of 'protection'. Every aspect of the trip to the longhouse, the transport, accommodation at the longhouse, and all related costs, were smoothly negotiated and prearranged by Garie together with Dennis.

In spite of Garie's graciousness however, it was becoming apparent that the problems of logistics were nearly insurmountable within the timeframe we had. Rumah Garie is located at the end of a long river journey into an area so remote that not even all Kapit locals were familiar with it. The journey required local knowledge in navigating the river system. For people without their own private longboat and familiarity with the particularities of Kain River, the longhouse is all but inaccessible. Manoeuvring the vessel upriver through the rapids, whirlpools or shallow and rocky parts of the river required constant skilled pushing, pulling and dragging of the boat. These constraints were such that even the headman of the house himself experiences difficulties in arranging transportation for visitors. Garie told us that there was no way we could proceed on our journey up to the longhouse immediately, as there was nobody from the longhouse in town to take us there.

Garie could not contact them because there was no telephone system or mail service. Although landline, mobile and satellite telephone systems had penetrated many areas of the interior of Sarawak, modern communication had not as of 2005, reached Rumah Garie. The longhouse was still several hours away by boat to the nearest landline phone. As we could not phone the longhouse, Garie told us we simply had to wait for someone to come downriver to town. In the meantime, he would try to get word to the longhouse through other means. Sending a messenger up would take a few days. These were part of the constraints Garie had to work with. His solution was for us to travel up the Rejang River to a holiday resort at the Pelagus Resort to wait until he could get word. Dennis had contacts with staff at the resort, and he knew that they would be in Kapit that day for supplies. It was starting to emerge, that Dennis was just the right person to know as he seemed to have contacts with all the locals and major players in town.

Just as Garie finished explaining the impossibility of the situation, he suddenly sat upright, then turned to look at us, and said; 'You are very lucky'. He had spotted, out of the corner of his eye, a couple walking up the road towards us. We turned around, and watched as a middle-aged Iban couple made their way slowly up the five-foot way, fresh off their boat journey from Rumah Garie. Garie signalled for Melambir to come over to our table and had a few words with him. Garie then turned to us and said that we could go upriver with the couple on Saturday morning. Garie instructed us to be at the coffee shop the next day at eight o'clock in the morning. He told us that Melambir would buy the express boat tickets for us that leaves at eleven o'clock and then Melambir would take us upriver in his longboat. At the other end, when we were ready, Melambir would take us back down again in time to catch the express ferry back to Kapit.

It was a lucky day for all the parties involved; Melambir and Ensunot, his wife, could unexpectedly earn some cash and everything had fallen into place for us. Garie himself was amazed at our luck. Being so remote, a lot depended on luck. I knew that finding transport to the longhouse was only one element for the success of the trip. Having overcome the physical challenges, there was a high possibility that the weavers might be away either harvesting rice in their fields or on one of their world travels, considering how frequently they travelled.

Melambir did not speak much throughout the arrangements. He seemed very shy and Ensunot refused to even sit down and stood in the background all the way through the conversation. Melambir smoked a cigarette, quietly, in deference to Garie. He listened to his instructions, assented, sat for only as long as it was polite, and then

left. Garie related to Melambir as if he were a child. He spoke down to him and spoke of him in a disparaging way. He singled out Melambir's neck tattoo for derision, saying he was of the past. Melambir, in contrast was expected to behave in a deferential manner through all this indignity. Ensunot was entirely ignored, she was not even introduced. After the arrangements were made, we shook hands with Melambir, and Ensunot glowered in the background. The whole conversation was awkward. I felt vaguely uncomfortable as to why Ensunot was left standing in the background and ignored in this 'men's business', which was after all primarily about getting us upriver, for my research into Ensunot's area of expertise, pua kumbu weaving.

The arrangements made, we sat back and watched the throngs of people passing by on their way to and from the busy marketplace. Then it was Dennis' turn to sit upright and point at an elderly lady walking past the cafe. In an almost taunting way, Dennis said; 'You told me you know Siah, that's her over there.' I realised from his tone and the way it was stated, that I was required to prove it. This was delicate situation. I did know Siah, but I had only met her briefly the year before; I sat quietly by her side while she weaved, but that was in the plush surroundings of the formal weaving/exhibition gallery at the Tun Jugah Foundation in Kuching. I had also seen photos of her in Margaret Linggi's book on Iban weaving (Linggi, 2001). The busy wet marketplace of a remote far upriver town in the middle of the jungle was very far removed from the formal venues in the city. I doubted that she would recognize me a year later, in a vastly different context where she was not expecting to see me.

I walked onto the road and greeted her. To my relief she recognised me immediately. She was genuinely surprised to see me in her remote hometown and greeted me with a warm embrace. 'How was your trip from Sydney? When did you get here? Where are you staying? Are you well?' My presence at that street corner in the middle of the jungle spoke volumes to her about my commitment to her craft. The encounter although brief, was characterised by an outpouring of warmth and acceptance.

Although to Dennis this may have been a test, for me, on an emotional level, it was very comforting to experience a kind welcome from a friendly face. The journey up to that point had been a long series of travelling into the unknown and of constant encounters with new places and people. Siah, it turned out, was the first familiar face I encountered in this unknown place. No doubt, upon glancing up at Dennis at the cafe and noticing his demeanour, Siah would have realised instantly that this was a test for me. This test was more profound than I had realised at the time because Siah, I discovered later, is Tun Jugah's daughter, Leonard Linggi's sister and a relative of

Dennis. Being welcomed and embraced by the daughter of the last paramount chief of the Ibans on the street of Kapit was yet another confirmation that eased the flow of my journey in terms of the intentions of people.

The local Chinese coffee shop, the Hua Hua cafe, became the headquarters and meeting point for all the contacts we needed for our journey. It was the centre where the logistics were sorted out, the trip planned, and after the journey, it functioned as the debrief centre, where we gave informal reports to the locals on how our trip went. It was the site where connections over long conversations were established and verified. An understanding of the relationships helped me position people I had met in Kuching and Kapit within the family network, and helped the locals position me within this network. The cafe also functioned as a hub of different languages. For example, ordering a complete meal required conversations in many of the commonly spoken local languages and dialects; I spoke Mandarin with the waitress, Cantonese with the chef, English with Jacob for drinks, and Malay and rudimentary Iban for other necessities. The locals made a point of keeping us up to date on the movement and background stories of all the foreign visitors in Kapit at the time we were there, and we had no doubt that other visitors were being updated on our movements. Everything happening in town was discussed in this cafe, no matter how insignificant to the individuals concerned.

At the cafe, the conversation turned to Garie and Dennis' involvement in local politics. Dennis himself had recently returned from Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, as part of a delegation representing the Dayak Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), at the *Bumiputera* Minority Economic Conference (BMEC) with the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi. Garie's involvement with a faction of a local political party was very much more low-keyed as he was just starting out in politics. Although remote, Kapit was surprisingly abuzz with political fervour as a political convention was being hosted in town during the time we were there. The formal meetings were all conducted in the official venues, but the informal meetings often took place at the Hua Hua cafe. According to Dennis, the locals nicknamed the cafe the 'United Nations' as it is the meeting place for all the major players in town. For me the nickname implies that the multiple tribal and racial groups continue to maintain a strong sense of difference. There is noticeable 'friction' among the various political factions active in Kapit, even as all the parties agree to talk (Tsing, 2005a: xi).

The casual setting of the cafe belied the nature of the conversations. At the next table, several 'big shots' or *orang kaya* were discussing politically contentious issues loudly in public, within earshot of all the adjacent tables. There were rumblings of

unfair distribution of wealth and logging concessions, of displacement of people, and of the Kapit area being neglected by the federal government in peninsular Malaysia. There were rumours of personnel being raised to positions of power, and others being moved to the peripheries. After that morning's crash of the construction crane, the cafe became the centre for the contractors and the workers; safety concerns and workers disputes were all to be settled there. That day, it was especially bustling, the conversations particularly lively and Dennis, being one of the local politicians was busier than ever. It became Dennis' role to attempt to smooth the situation for the crane driver at risk of losing his job while appeasing the construction company juggling its tight schedule. Problems were solved, deals were done and grievances aired. And even after only a few visits to the cafe, there did appear to be a lot of grievances aired. We were starting to get a sense of Kapit, and the local, political and social tensions and dynamics, of political games conducted over cups of *kopi susu*, the rich thick local coffee, sweetened with condensed milk.

This cafe, although remote, boasts global connections, as its nickname implied. The town is inhabited by people who are connected to global centres with some of its inhabitants being frequent travellers and sojourners overseas. Jacob who works at the cafe, for example, although a local, born and bred in Kapit, was travelling to the United States where he now lives with his wife and mother. Although he was at the time, on the cusp of migrating permanently to San Francisco, he claimed to have 'left his heart in Kapit'. He remains connected to Kapit through his family run coffee shop where he helps out when he is in town, taking the drinks order. His brother runs the cafe full-time, and is a local entrepreneur engaged in various business interests in the town. In the middle of the conversation, Jacob stared out on to the street wistfully and then became nostalgic for the Kapit of his boyhood. He stated telling us stories about his boyhood spent playing on the main street leading to the wet market and the park at the jetty: 'As boys, me and my friends used to play marbles from one end of this street to the other, and only once every half an hour, a motorbike will come, then we had to scatter. Look at it now'. We looked at the busy intersection where cars trawl for scarce parking spaces.

This traffic congestion at the intersection is incongruous. Kapit is not connected by road to any major town in Sarawak, or any minor town for that matter. In the late 2000s, there is still less than forty kilometers of paved roads (*Infrastructure and Communication: Roads*, 2007). The roads emanate from the town centre for a few kilometres and then dwindle into the jungle. There are some logging roads, but they are not suitable for cars. All the cars and vehicles we could see had to be shipped up the

river by boat. Jacob's subjective recording and process of creating the landscape of Kapit consisted of superimposing the remembered landscape of his boyhood on to the present. On the street, in place of Jacob's memories of a childhood filled with simple pleasures, I saw the intersection where my relationship with Siah was tested, watched closely, but nonchalantly, by Dennis and Garie. The intersection was seen within a series of connections, some of which were 'right', some 'wrong'. Jacob was nostalgic for the rural, remote and undeveloped Kapit of his boyhood that now lived only in his memory. He was rueful of changes to his hometown, but even he was leaving it permanently for San Francisco, one of the most connected cities on the planet.

### **Immersion, rapport and connection**

In the morning we went to the agreed meeting point at the cafe and waited for Melambir who hurried over to us, took our money, and went off to purchase our ferry tickets. Garie came later to the ferry wharf to see us off. The jetty was a busy scene repeated all the way up the river, of cargo being loaded and unloaded up on to the roof a string of express ferries, all moored alongside each other <sup>26</sup>. Brown cardboard boxes and gas bottles all labelled with a tag were tied up on to the roof. Each boat had a giant clock face marking the time of departure. We spotted our old 'express' boat. People boarded the ferry by nimbly walking on the ledge of all the other ferries docked in between the wharf and their boat. It was strangely quiet for all the activity from a large number of people.

The ferry was like a bus with tattered seat covers, full of moms and their kids and the occasional rooster, possibly the same rooster that kept up indignant crowing all the way upriver from Sibuh to Kapit. Our ticket numbers said 23, 24 but they were taken. We were told to 'go behind' by the people occupying our seats to seats well away from the only exit in this capsule shaped boat <sup>27</sup>. Ensunot sorted out the situation for us even

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<sup>26</sup> Embarking on the next stage of the journey to Rumah Garie. Express ferries moored at Kapit wharf for journeys further up the Baleh River. Other boats depart for points further up the Rejang River, to a series of destinations heading towards the controversial Belaga dam (which is inaccessible to unauthorized personnel). Residents upriver have to purchase all their necessities from town, including furniture and gas bottles (seen on the roofs of the boats). (Photograph by Audrey Low).

<sup>27</sup> The ferries are enclosed air-conditioned capsules, jetting through the landscape. The ferries are often the first places residents from monocultural tribal communities come into contact with other races and tribes, on their journey downriver to Kapit, Sibuh and beyond. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

though she was still unsure of us. We finally got our seats with the help of the Chinese ticket master. As we settled in, Melambir turned up. He called to my partner, spoke Iban to him, and asked him to go up the front with him. He signalled two fingers to the lips, as in smoking a cigarette. He seemed earnest. The women, Ensunot and Mula, her companion, told him to pipe down, and were very dismissive of him. I asked them what it was about, and they signed, 'Forget it! It's not important! Don't listen to him. We go on our journey'.

On the ferry we shared our ubiquitous deep-fried banana fritters, bought in the wet market beforehand. The ferry speeded through the landscape, leaving a brown wake along the riverbanks. The water was reddish brown from deforestation and landslides. The banks all the way along the Balleh were dotted with many longhouses<sup>28</sup>, timber processing plants and sawmills.

Accurate information about the journey was hard to obtain. At the Hua Hua Cafe we asked, 'How long is the trip upriver?' 'Oh, about one or two hours... if the river is low, you have to get out and push'. That sounded manageable, we put on our flip-flops in preparation for getting out of the boat, regretting not buying the plastic river shoes suitable for immersion in the water. Two hours later, we were still on the express boat. After many stops at nondescript mud banks along the Balleh River, we finally got to a river bend, at a tiny tributary marked by a rusting, wrecked hull of an abandoned 1970s Chinese cargo ship that once plied the Balleh. The letters 'Golden Link' were barely visible on the hull<sup>29</sup>. That plus a couple of long boats on the muddy bank mark the landing and the entrance to Sungai Kain. This tributary is variously called Nanga Kain, Nanga Sempat, or Nanga Balleh. From here, it is a five-hour longboat journey upriver, longer if the river levels are low.

A few passengers disembark with us and we unloaded boxes and boxes of 'stuff' and several gas canisters and set them on the mud. Everything has to be purchased from Kapit and transported upriver. Prominent were gas bottles, but also cartons of eggs, sugar, milk, coffee, tea, tobacco, weaving supplies, yarn, threads and mail

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<sup>28</sup> Longhouse along the Balleh River. More wealthy longhouse communities that are closer to Kapit are similar in design to the modern concrete terrace houses seen in many urban areas in west Malaysia. Longboats moored by the longhouses show that rivers are still the preferred, and often, the only form of transport available, especially further upriver. In the late 2000s, there were still only about 40 kilometres of paved roads in the area. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

<sup>29</sup> The Golden Link, once a cargo ship plying the upper reaches of the Balleh, now marks the landing for Sungai Kain, where Rumah Garie is located, another five hour journey upriver from this point. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

collected from the communal longhouse mailbox at the Kapit post office. Someone unloaded the wrong gas canister from the roof of the boat, there was some consternation and a lot of sign language. The owners read the label and then decided that it does not matter, they are all the same anyway.

The express trundled away leaving us to the sounds of the river and forest. Ensunot waited with us at the bank but she still did not say much to us. Melambir disappeared and after a while we saw him coming down the steep wooden stairs from a longhouse up the top of the hill, balancing a boat motor on his shoulder and a petrol can in his hand.

The first longboat left with five people including Mula, who was on the ferry with us <sup>30</sup>. Then our longboat arrived with Melambir steering. We loaded our packs, their boxes and the gas bottle. They covered the cargo and then they loaded us. The cargo took up most of the room and we perched on either ends of it. The longboat had a shallow draft and it took us a while to find our balance on it.

We pushed off from the embankment and as soon as we turned into Kain River, the forest canopy closed in and it felt like we were moving through a tunnel. Almost immediately, we encountered the first rapids. Somehow Ensunot and Melambir, labouring with all their strength, got the heavily laden boat through six inches of water. We tried to help. We looked to Ensunot for instructions, trying to communicate with sign language, trying to decipher what we should do. Do we get out and walk, sit still or push? She was standing at the prow of the boat, polling with all her strength to get us upstream. Then she stepped into the water to pull the boat along; she fell over while dragging the boat and it floated over half her body. She got back on, stood at the prow and suddenly slipped and fell again. Melambir was pushing the boat from behind, he is all buffed and toned muscles, but even he could hardly push the boat at certain points. They kept easing the boat through rapids. Melambir used the motor strategically, aiming the boat to the exact angle, and got us through parts of the river, often only as wide as the boat. On the boat, Melambir was given no respect at all. There was none of the earlier mannerisms of deference, none of that standing back while the men do their business. Ensunot dismissed him and yelled at him when he made a mistake steering the boat from behind. It was a sharp contrast to his apparent status in the cafe and her diffidence at that time.

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<sup>30</sup> The first boat departs for the longhouse, and the occupants give Bangie advanced notice of our arrival. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeelimited.blogspot.com/>



We were consciously trying to avoid being the type of passengers that just sat in the boat while being pushed upriver by this middle aged couple. The first boat that left carried an old man, possibly in his eighties, and at the rapids even he got out of the boat and was able to be useful. We felt pretty competent in the water, living by the sea in Sydney, and so we felt we could be of use too. At play also was the notion of pitching in when there were things to be done, especially in our common goal of getting the boat upriver. We had all these notions playing at the back of our minds when we stepped out of the boat. And immediately slipped straight to the bottom, cutting and injuring ourselves on the way down. We had misjudged the depth of the river at that point and had stepped on some submerged rocks, sharp and steeply angled. Then while trying to hang on to it to steady ourselves and gain our balance we nearly capsized the boat. That would have been a disaster for Melambir and Ensunot.

To our embarrassment, what Melambir worried about was our footwear floating away. He swam off to retrieve a lost slipper. We clambered back onboard without capsizing the boat. Our slapstick uncoordinated actions made us crack up with laughter. We saw this as our initiation, we were fully immersed and bloodied. But when Melambir saw the blood oozing out of our feet he got really anxious, agitated and concerned. Laughter aside, we realised we had simply become another problem for them. They practically begged us to stay on board then. We realized that they saw us as their responsibility, and for the rest of the journey, except where it was really imperative we got out, we were told to stay on board. We also realised we were helpless in this river situation, being completely unfamiliar with longboat travel. We continued on our journey, sometimes sitting in the boat, sometimes wading in the shallow areas over river rocks and pebbles, making our way slowly up Kain River.

We took a well-earned rest on a shady riverbank on our journey upriver; Ensunot picked up a tiny white flower from under a gigantic tree growing by the river. She told me the flower was from a tree called *engkarabai* and explained that it was used to make the colour red, which is so important for the pua kumbu. Our immersion in the river broke the ice between us; the fall helped create a form of rapport. We were starting to develop a connection on a personal level.

We got back on board for the final push. Finally, after more shoving and exhilarating travel on the river, we arrived at a place where several longboats were

moored <sup>31</sup>. The river was just a narrow stream at this point. The forest canopy overhead was thicker and almost touching, the water was crystal-clear, a contrast from the brown, muddy water all along the Balleh. The river continued up river from this point. We could not see a longhouse from the river, but there were some concrete steps, and a faded sign saying Rumah Garie <sup>32</sup>. Four hours after we got off the ferry, we had finally arrived at the longhouse.

At the river's edge, Melambir instructed us to leave our gear, and follow him up some concrete steps that lead up to the longhouse <sup>33</sup>. He led us to a door right in the middle of the longhouse, into Bangie's apartment. He took us through the communal gallery that spans the width of the structure into Bangie's living room, and on through the interior passageway, the open-air courtyard in the back, and finally into a darkened kitchen where Bangie and Mula emerged and invited us in for drinks and a formal welcoming. Mula who had arrived on the first boat had given Bangie some notice that two visitors were coming to stay. So Bangie had a few minutes preparation time before we arrived. Later, Nancy arrived from next door. As a crowd started to gather, the longhouse structure began to feel surreal as suddenly, in the jungle environment this far up river, we were in the middle of a street scene, which is what the *tempuan*, the longhouse passageway felt like. With such close proximity, we felt like we could have been in a row of terraces in the middle of Sydney or Kuching.

Over drinks of red cordial, we recounted the story of us falling in the river while trying to 'help'. That incident of our immersion in the river, and the retelling of the event was a significant icebreaker for us all. It was a shared moment fraught with responsibility and emotion for Melambir and Ensunot. They had no way of knowing that we could swim, and it was impossible to tell immediately, how serious the cuts were. Predominant in his mind was whether we blamed him for us falling out the boat. And consequently, whether we would want him to take us back down river, giving him another opportunity to earn badly needed additional cash income. Opportunities for earning cash income were scarce, and any opportunities were not a light matter where Rumah Garie is positioned. As for me, I had to consider whether the injuries were

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<sup>31</sup> A cluster of longboats marks the location of Rumah Garie. The forest canopy is thick in this area. As of 2008, Logging, although present in the surrounding area, has not reached Rumah Garie. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

<sup>32</sup> The welcome sign and concrete path leading up the longhouse. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

<sup>33</sup> Rumah Garie, exterior. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

serious enough to shorten the length of stay of the fieldwork and what it meant for the journey.

Because of the language barrier, there was a fair bit of acting and miming. We told our version, and Melambir and Ensunot embellished the story, and told it from their point of view. At first, it was a careful factual reporting of the sequence of events. Melambir was still concerned about our injuries and unsure how we would react. When he saw us laughing about our accident, he seemed reassured and relieved, and the telling of the incident then got progressively funnier, our movements represented as more clumsy, with added emotional intensity to our facial expressions. This retelling of a shared moment infused with the possibility of physical harm and heightened emotions is reminiscent of Geertz's account of the shared experience of escaping a police raid on a cockfighting event, and the rapport that developed after the raid in the sharing and retelling of the incident (Geertz, 1972). We developed a rapport based on sensory immersion and storytelling. The incident, and the telling of it, connected us to each other and to our audiences. At the same time, although a degree of rapport was created, I carry with me Duneier's caution: 'Though participant observers often remark on the rapport they achieve and how they are seen by the people they write about, in the end it is best to be humble about such things, because one never really knows' (Duneier, 1999: 14).

On the evening of our arrival, there was a rapport and familiarity with the longhouse residents. After the evening meal, some of the residents came over to Bangie's house from adjacent apartments. The women sat visiting with us, getting to know us, spending time with us and just 'hanging out'<sup>34</sup>. They kept pointing out that I could be Iban; my hair is Iban, my skin is Iban, and my face is Iban. I felt there was a sense of identification with me. Reading our behaviour and familiarity with longhouse protocols and etiquette, they expressed surprise that it was our first time ever in a longhouse and kept asking us if it really was our first visit. Although, I was sure that all the way up and down the longhouse, they knew it was our very first time in a longboat going upriver. The digital camera and photos of everybody there that night caused a lot of laughter and everyone got to try out various expressions and see themselves on screen. We spent the evening in convivial laughter and conversations.

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<sup>34</sup> Hanging out with the women in Bangie's apartment. Note pua kumbu seat covers on Bangie's sofa (right). (Photograph by Audrey Low).

It was only after a long chat in the evening that Bangie finally asked me if I wanted to see her pua kumbu. Everybody was aware of my intentions and knew that when the time was right Bangie would bring it out. When Bangie brought a pile of cloths down from the loft, everyone viewed them with interest, even those who had obviously seen them on many previous occasions. Bangie sat with quiet pride of her artistic achievements, answering questions, not only from me, but also from the other women present.

These were the pua kumbus I had traveled all that distance to see. In the historical Iban worldview, rivers were variously conceived of as a spiritual place, a repository for offerings, a link with the afterworld, and also a place that submerges souls. In the present day, rivers still act as a marker of domains that affect the performances of personal relationships. Over the many layers of how rivers are conceived of in Iban culture, I now add my personal journey. After the ebbs and flows of the creation and breaking off of a series of social relationships stitched around my goal of meeting the pua kumbu weavers of Rumah Garie, I finally lay eyes on the objects positioned at the center of the social network.

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## 4 Weaving Identities

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At dawn, the longhouse was a cacophony of sounds coming from the apartments. First light was a busy time, filled with sounds of the residents awakening preparing for the day. Washing and chores were hurriedly done. In the relative calm of mid-morning, after the bustle of the morning rush, I found a spot on the communal gallery, to sit, write and observe the slower pace of life <sup>35</sup>. Even at that time in the morning, it was already starting to get stiflingly hot, and the gallery, constructed out of solid and thick wooden beams, was the coolest place to sit.

The gallery, a vast communal space where residents carry out their activities, was a good place to observe the rhythm and movements within the longhouse. There were many young families out of the thirty-one families who lived there. Husbands were working on wood, carving implements and tools. Wives were sitting on the floor, weaving and tying their puas with their kids playing around them, occasionally demanding that mum stop weaving to play with them. Dads walked babies to sleep along the length of the gallery and sleepy kids, hung off dad's arms, watching the newcomers. In the rural longhouse weaving is interrupted by daily life; farming, caring for children, washing, preparing food, travelling downriver to get provisions, taking care of the animals. Weaving is done in between all the other chores.

This chapter, situated in a remote Iban longhouse, presents a discussion of gender, cloth and identity. It examines the pua kumbu object as the core around which the status of weavers are enhanced and maintained. It examines how women weave identities, and enhance and maintain their social status around the object. I discuss how control over local knowledge, the technology of weaving and dyeing, in this case, enhances women's positions. Using ethnographic data, I document the meaning and the current layering of religious beliefs with regard to pua kumbu production and use. Previously steeped in Iban ritual, ceremony, and religion, the pua kumbu now reflects Nancy and Bangie's multilayered and nuanced expression of spirituality. This documentation, like other scholarship examining shifts in religious phenomena, demonstrates that people combine aspects of new and older practices - maintaining

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<sup>35</sup> The exterior longhouse gallery. Venue for communal events and festivities. Bangie's neighbour is working on a wooden beater, a tool for the loom, for his wife. He spent an entire Sunday crafting the object. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

some customs and letting others go - as they reconfigure their personalized religious/sacred positions and decide what objects to retain as their religious adjuncts. Stuart Hall's work on identity construction is used as a key theoretical framework throughout the chapter.

Social identities performed, maintained and enhanced around the pua kumbu involved a complex interconnection of elements including headhunting, shamanism and the acquisition of male and female status. Every act was seen as having significance and a correlation between the genders and, to some extent, correlations to the spiritual dimension within a network of interconnected practices. The cloth delineated gender roles, but also reinforced the reciprocal and cooperative nature of these physical and spiritual roles and sets of skills. Men's work was complemented by women's work. What was previously an intersection between men and women's status enhancing activities is now however, disentangled and disconnected from each other.

The multilayered process of making a pua kumbu is an apt comparison for the processes of making and unmaking social identities around the cloth, from growing and harvesting cotton, carding and processing yarn, preparing the other raw material, then bringing the whole idea from germination to fruition. Dipping the yarns into different coloured dyes produces colours that may be unexpected, or delight the women warriors with the startling deep reds that are so desired by the master weavers. The processes may also reflect change. Some of the strands may be coloured with the patina of history, of traditionally concocted vegetable dyes, while others are coloured with imported synthetic dyes. Even the yarns may be replaced, with machine made silk yarns imported from China replacing homegrown and hand-processed cotton yarn. Every strand bears a history of connections to elements that in the past may have significance for a different way of constructing identities, or embodying change.

### **Gender, Cloth and Identity**

The weaving of personal identities into cloth is an established practice within the Iban community. It has been examined by Heppell, Linggi, Jabu, Gavin and Ong. These writers describe either specific examples of women weaving personal identities into the cloth or give more generalised accounts of the practice (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1989, 1991; Linggi, 1999, 2001; Ong, , 1986). Much of this body of research into the pua kumbu has tended to focus on historical methods of acquiring, enhancing and maintaining social status for women. The construction of status has been built in to

the various processes involved in the making of the object. In the aforementioned writers' accounts, the sheer beauty of the object is admired, but of importance too is the exquisiteness and ingenuity of the crafting of the message. The pua kumbu demonstrates 'not only her [the weaver's] relative success in terms of the knowledge and expertise, but also the state of her soul' (Jabu, 1989:94). The 'state of her soul' is revealed through the clever interplay of stories that inspire a design and the unique combination of the various levels of meanings of motifs <sup>36</sup>.

The cloth demonstrates a weaver's grasp of Iban cultural stories and, harnessed in the form of motifs, these cultural yarns contribute to the telling of a personalized message. Cloth in this context carries peoples' stories and myths and acts as metaphors. It creates and communicates local meanings through narratives. This role of objects is not unlike what Janet Hoskins discovered when doing fieldwork among the Kodi people in Sumba, Indonesia. She explains that the Sumbanese use objects 'autobiographically, as the cornerstone of a story about themselves, a vehicle to define personal identity and sexual identity. In a way, the object becomes a prop, a storytelling device, and also a mnemonic for certain experiences' (Hoskins, 1998: 3). There are different ways of demonstrating originality. It can be achieved through ingenious crafting of legends through original combinations of motifs. Expertise is demonstrated in the weaving of various strands of established mythology and cultural chronicles, or elements of personal experiences and biography into an original narrative. There is also the personal rendering, or idiosyncratic interpretations of meanings and significance, of these accounts. Stories that are manipulated demonstrate a weaver's control in the execution and delivery of a message. This is achieved through a play of motifs. There are established designs, a weaver's personal repertoire of patterns that she has invented or an innovative combination of established and invented motifs. Motifs carry many levels of meanings for the weaver and also for the family-member observers. There are the individualised interpretations of motifs, as well as a history of meanings specific to particular families, longhouses or regions (Jabu, 1991; Linggi, 1999, 2001).

An area that is less explored is the pua kumbu as an object on which to anchor the articulations of identity. The basis of my exploration into the construction of identities around the pua kumbu is informed by the intersection of two ideas. The first is Stuart Hall's idea of 'positioning' as one element, tactic, tool or manifestation of the articulation of cultural identity. Hall's approach to identity is summarised by Li; "My

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<sup>36</sup> The pua kumbu 'reveals the state of her soul' Jabu. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

argument is that self-identification as tribal or indigenous people is not natural or inevitable, but neither is it simply invented, adopted or imposed. It is, rather, a positioning, which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle' (Li, 2000: 2-3). The second idea is Tilley's argument that 'questions of social identity and personal identity are inextricably bound' (Tilley, 2006: 8). These two ideas form the basis for the exploration of social identities, woven around the pua kumbu. As well as the concept of identity as a positioning, and of social and personal identities being intertwined, identity is also regarded as constructed, constituted, performed, enhanced, maintained, established and reinforced around the pua kumbu.

The following section presents historical processes of constructing identity tied in with pua kumbu weaving.

### **Historical Processes, local knowledge**

Previously, control of the processes and mastery of techniques of pua kumbu weaving represented a part of the expression, demonstration and enhancement of a woman's status and of her personal identity (Gavin, 2004; Jabu, 1989; Linggi, 1999, 2001, 2004). Linggi explains that the cloth was evidence of mastery of the complex processes and technicalities of the art. The cloth revealed the level of skill in design and dyeing. The skills included expertise in the degree of accuracy of the dyeing, the skills with which the designs have been executed and the quality of the design (Linggi, 2001: 36-7). Both dyeing and designing were considered distinct skills and were assessed separately; 'a woman who could perform the *ngar* [mordanting] ceremony ... might be awarded the highest status of her community. It did not mean, however, that she could weave the finest blankets' (Linggi, 2001: 7). The mordanting process was considered so laden and fraught with spiritual and psychological threat that the leader capable of performing this ceremony was called a woman warrior (Linggi, 2001: 7). The high status bestowed on a woman as a result of mordanting skills made her uniquely qualified to lead the other women in the dyeing process; 'The procedure ... can only be performed by a special person, a woman considered to be 'gifted' in the truest sense of the word, i.e., one assisted by a spiritual power' (Linggi, 2001: 6);

The leader of the ceremony stands at the head of the trough ... the women in unison yell war cries (*manjung*). This symbolizes the cries of warriors who have defeated their enemies. The leader



goes first and is followed by all the other women in treading on the submerged yarn (Linggi, 2001: 8).

The act of leading the weavers in turn enhanced, maintained and reaffirmed her high status. In this way, processes around the making of the cloth provided a forum for the enhancement of a woman's status.

Yarn is subjected to a lengthy and complicated process, from growing the cotton to the final showing and naming of the cloth. The following summary of the process, gleaned from Gavin and Linggi (Gavin, 2004: 41-77; Linggi, 2001: 39-48), is to be read as being part of the many strands that contribute towards the weaving of a woman's social status and personal identity.

Raw cotton is naturally coated with wax and oils and has to be pretreated before the dye can adhere (Gavin, 2004: 49, 57, 58). There are 'three basic stages: cleaning (or scouring), dyeing and mordanting. First, the cotton is cleaned with a solution of oil and alkali (or 'soap') in order to remove the coating of wax; then it is dyed with morinda while the dye is being fixed to the fibre with an alum mordant' (Gavin, 2004: 59). Only after being subjected to the processes of pretreatment, premordanting and mordanting, which includes the threads being immersed in a ginger mixture (Gavin, 2004: 52), the use of charms (Gavin, 2004: 54-55) and exposure to the sun and dew (Gavin, 2004: 55) can the actual tying and dyeing begin. According to Linggi, 'exposure to the dew helps to leach away the residue of salt that remains after submersion in the mordant bath and, during the day, the sun helps remove the excess oil' (Linggi, 2001: 7).

Once the cotton yarns are wrapped around the loom, they are tied with strings to form intricate patterns. The concealed segments resist the vegetable dyes and the exposed segments absorb the colour the yarns are dipped into. The yarns are taken off the tying frame to be dipped in a trough filled with liquid vegetable dye. These yarns are then lifted from the trough, strung up onto the tying frame again, and then untied, retied and dipped again in another concoction of vegetable dyes. This process is repeated as often as necessary to produce the requisite number of colours in the appropriate sections. Dipping white yarn into indigo turns it blue, but dipping yarn that has already been dyed red, turns it black. These coloured patterns discernible on the yarns are then woven together to form one continuous long narrow strip of cloth. This length of cloth is then removed from the loom, cut in half and placed side by side, with both sides forming a mirror image of the other. These two pieces are then stitched together with needle and thread down the middle to form one wider piece of pua kumbu cloth.

The process does not end there, however. After the physical production, the last procedure, is one where the cloth is shown to the community in a special ceremony. This is when the cloth is given a praise name which may make explicit or obscure its historical references, personal biography, mythology, stories, significance or meanings (Gavin, 2004: 79-196).

Each of the physical stages of this process corresponds to, and resonates with, the spiritual dimension. Heppell describes the correlation of the weaving processes to the spiritual dimension in the quote below. The quote crystallizes previous connections between the various elements of dreams, rice, ancestors, dew, harvest, heads, seed and cotton;

New designs are created in Panggau [celestial land] and transmitted to women in dreams. These designs then germinate in the heads of women before being brought to life on their looms. Tying the thread is analogous to the growing rice. During dyeing, yarns absorb the colour in the same way growing rice absorbs the essence of the ancestors through the dew. The materialising pattern symbolises the development of the rice panicles, cutting the cloth from the loom symbolizes the harvest, and finally, the new cloth is carried up and down the longhouse just as the men carry the harvested rice back to the longhouse. The finished cloth becomes a womb for the new seed - a newly severed head - on its entry into the longhouse and group. A symbolic birth also occurs in the ceremony in which a new cloth is taken from its wrapping and revealed to the world. Even the cotton has to endure death and rebirth before being spun into yarn and then dyed into patterns that produce the great cloths (Heppell et al., 2006: 36).

*'Just as no man was really a man until he had taken the head of an enemy, so no woman could scale the heights of feminine respectability until she had woven a first-class blanket' (Pringle, 1970: 24).*

The cloth and women were credited with the ability to manipulate action in the spiritual realm and on earth. The act of making the cloth by the women was said to perform the psychological function of inciting the men (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006). 'One noteworthy quality of coil patterns is that, as a class, they are credited with

the capacity to incite headhunting, or *peransing*' (Gavin, 2004: 98). The precise dynamics of this relationship between the making of the pua kumbu and its role in inciting and spiritually or psychologically motivating the men to go on headhunting expeditions is unclear, but according to Heppell and Gavin, this relationship was characterized as women starting a chain of events.

The parallelism between headhunting and pua weaving in the thinking of the Iban is best shown by a quarrel between husband and wife, which Freeman (D.F. no date) once overheard in a longhouse. After insulting her husband in public, the angry wife finally shouted, 'You call yourself a man! Well, prove it by bringing back a head!' The husband, flushing with shame, replied, 'And you make a pua!' (Freeman in Vogelsanger, 1980: 121).

By performing this psychological goading, the cloth, in the hands of the weaver, is able to acquire land, and consequently, through carefully observed rites, ensure fertility and a good rice harvest.

To ensure fertility, women need a plentiful supply of heads, which they cannot reap themselves. They need men to perform this grisly task, and incite them to do so through their weaving. Thus, in the poems, after the rice seed is safely stored, cotton must also be produced. Without a woven object, men cannot go to war (Heppell et al., 2006: 35).

The fertility of the land and the fertility and survival of its people were inextricably linked. Human fertility was necessary if the group was going to sustain itself through the provision of enough rice land for the new generation. Soil fertility of land already held was vital to sustain bountiful rice harvest to feed the growing population. Once land was acquired, its fertility needed to be ensured. Fertilizing tropical rainforest land is a constant challenge. In the past, attempts to coax bountiful yields from this infertile land resulted in elaborate rituals evolved over hundreds of years and passed down and refined through the generations. Men performed the physical work of headhunting warfare and returned with trophy heads that were necessary for the symbolic spiritual rituals associated with fertility and blessings on the family.

Iban women played an important part in encouraging male prestige behaviour patterns, including headhunting. In 1949, after events at the end of World War II had stimulated the old Iban interest in bloodshed, a contributor to the Sarawak Gazette observed: organized headhunting has of course died out but wandering parties of Dayaks are never above suspicion, since it is so easy to take a stray head or so when the corpses may not be found for a month or two afterwards. Successful efforts immediately encouraging others and if the party is not caught quickly - by no means an easy thing to do - dozens of people may be out trying their hands, for nobody who has seen the girls change in to little furies of excitement when a fresh head is brought in can doubt that the grim spectre of headhunting will raise its dismembered trunk on the slightest relaxation of vigilance (Pringle, 1970: 25).

The quote above, apart from emphasizing the interconnection between men and women's status enhancing activities, also gives an indication that it is difficult to place an exact date on when headhunting was no longer a revered cultural practice. This status quo existed until a period around World War Two.

The following section discusses the ways in which Nancy currently uses contemporary textile production to reposition herself socially and economically in a global context. It also explores her expressions of spirituality.

### **Sunday at Rumah Garie longhouse**

One Sunday morning spent with Nancy in her longhouse kitchen evangelical congregation followed by a showing of her prize-winning artwork highlights several interwoven threads. In this section, the multicoloured threads of the ceremonial poles pua kumbu cloth Nancy was weaving, are used as visual and physical metaphors to anchor observations about personal identities woven around the object. Nancy's pua kumbu on the loom interlocks and accentuates the status of the weaver, the client and the cloth itself; The high status of the ceremonial poles design is intertwined together with Nancy's status as a weaver capable of weaving this design, and the high status of the politician who ordered the cloth. These interlocking threads are interpreted as constituting the social fabric of Nancy's life. The background to these multiple threads

have been laid in the preceding chapters, and include historical strands, meanings, ideas and values, that are connected with Iban spiritualism, introduced religion, trade, colonialism, warfare, and, given that Nancy's cloth was being made for a politician, a political component, as well as an economic one.

Sitting with the residents while they did their daily chores helped me gain an understanding of the structure of the longhouse and the demarcation of shared and private space. The gallery was a series of privately owned spaces for public use (See Kelbing, 1983). Each section of the gallery fronting a separate apartment door was furnished minimally and individually to taste, and maintained by the individual owners. The structure of the gallery highlighted the independence of the family unit within a community.

The physical positioning of the apartments contributed towards the maintenance of a longhouse resident's status. I was staying as a guest of Bangie Embol in the headman's apartment which was positioned in the middle of the gallery. Living in the headman's house placed Bangie at a relatively higher status than the other residents. From her apartment, I had a view of the whole longhouse, spread out in equal length on either sides (the photograph of the longhouse gallery shows one half of the gallery viewed from Bangie's house in the middle). It was customary for visitors to stay in the middle house as guests of the headman. And because Garie the headman had arranged the logistics of our trip, it was even more imperative we stayed with his mother. Bangie status was doubly amplified by her position as mother of the headman and her capacity as master weaver. She would therefore have hosted many visitors, some international, which in turn would have inflated her status even more.

One morning, Nancy Ngali, Bangie's neighbour, came looking for me and my partner. When she found us in the gallery, she started telling us about a dream she had the previous night. 'Last night, I had a very good dream ... a wild animal ran into my kitchen. From the jungle! I tried to catch it, and it let me! This wild animal came into my arms and let me hug it! Can you believe it? That is very good, very good'. Nancy had just finished extensive renovations to her kitchen. When we arrived she was in the midst of rearranging her prized ceramic jars, portable stove, and other cooking implements. It was clear that she felt it was important that we know about this dream, as it was only after telling us the dream that she invited us to follow her. 'I was so happy, I love animals. Are you busy? Come with me.' she gestured for us to follow her into the kitchen. We entered her sizeable living room which was dominated by a big loom. Strung up on the loom was a magnificent pua kumbu, tied and dyed, but not woven. I stopped to admire it. 'Come,' she urges 'Later, I'll show you'.

Nancy continued leading us from the public space of the gallery, through her living room and out through the open-air interior communal passageway, to the back of her house, and into her kitchen. The kitchen walls were lined with about fifteen old giant Chinese ceramics storage jars. In the middle of the vast kitchen, there was a group of about twenty or so, women, men and children, all seated in a circle on the floor. All of them were apparently waiting for us. In the middle of this circle of people were an assortment of little dishes piled with Iban delicacies, like deep fried sweet rice cakes, and other finger food, jugs of drinks, cordial and *tuak*, Iban rice wine. The dishes were arranged on the floor in a way that is reminiscent of old photographs in the Sarawak Museum and the Iban encyclopaedia of the food or *piring* offerings, laid out on pua kumbus and presented to Iban gods or spirits during spiritual ceremonies. Everything was untouched. Nancy led us to the inner circle, and invited us to sit down next to her.

When we sat down close to the middle of the circle, Nancy whispered; ‘Can you pray?’ It took me a moment to realize that this was a church ceremony. ‘Do you know SIB? We are all SIB’ she pointed around the circle. ‘SIB, no....’ ‘Sijil Injil Borneo,’ she replied, and then I understood - this was a Borneo evangelical church service. Nancy then started praying aloud, and people started speaking in tongues. We sang a few songs. Some of the tunes were familiar songs of praise and Christian hymns, but the words were all in Iban. The church gathering culminated with an Iban style Holy Communion, where we consumed the Iban rice cakes and drank rice wine.

The rice cakes consumed at Nancy’s kitchen congregation represented one aspect of the multilayered or sedimented meanings associated with the pua kumbu.

With the Iban, after death, a person’s soul enters the Land of Departed Souls for an indeterminate time until the soul itself expires and becomes dew. The dew falls to the ground and is absorbed by the growing rice and yarn hanging out to dry [as part of the mordanting process yarns undergo before being made into pua kumbu]. The rice, of course, is eaten and the ancestor returns to contribute to the health and strength of the Iban who eat the cooked rice ... The Iban say: ‘We should take care of rice plants, for they are our ancestors’. Thus, rice itself is strongly associated with renewal and everlasting life (Heppell et al., 2006: 32).

In the past, the rice dishes were arranged as food offerings to the gods. Now, in Nancy’s longhouse congregation, these same rice dishes had ‘become’ god, but one from

an introduced religion. The sweet fried rice cakes and Iban rice wine that previously carried connotations as the spirits of the ancestors themselves, had transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ and were consumed in holy communion.

Christianity was introduced in Sarawak by missionaries under the rule of the Brookes colonial government. The Brookes, while favouring the Anglican, initiated a policy of 'denominational zoning' where geographical regions were granted to various churches or denominations (Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, 1989; Kana, 2004: 31-34; Runciman, 1960). Areas were designated Anglican, Catholic or Evangelical, to name just three of the denominations active at the time, and the churches were restricted to proselytizing within these arbitrarily set boundaries. For example, when the Australian Borneo Evangelical Mission, or *Sidang Injil* Borneo (SIB) missionaries, were finally allowed in the country in 1928, they were restricted to the Limbang area, North Sarawak (Kana, 2004: 33). They were specifically instructed not to go to the Baram area, which was Catholic at the time (Kana, 2004: 33).

Although Nancy's longhouse congregation, attended by Bangie, was of the SIB evangelical denomination, in the whole longhouse community, other church denominations were active. In fact, while our service in Nancy's kitchen was progressing, we could hear several choirs emanating from other kitchens all along the longhouse. In this 30 family longhouse, there is not one church, but several competing services all at once, in the middle of the jungle, in this far tributary of the Balleh. The various congregations starting up at different times in Rumah Garie were a testament to the fact that although boundaries may have been set by the *Rajah*, over time, these areas got blended, with the churches crossing and migrating over borders. (For more details on longhouse churches, please refer to Joseph (Joseph, 1964).

After the church service Nancy invited me in to her living room to take a closer look at the pua on her loom, and to see the rest of the pua in her private collection. Seated in her living room, Nancy was surrounded by her art at various stages of completion. There were bunches of threads hanging from the window depicting a crocodile design. She unrolled another pua in the middle of production, one depicting an intricate design in indigo blue and white.

After viewing several other cloths, we returned to the cloth on the loom. The design on the threads was one of a category of designs called ceremonial poles. This one was a *tiang ranyai*. This theme is also known as the Iban altar or shrine pattern. A prominent state politician had commissioned the piece and it was to be delivered by the end of the month, which was ten days away at that point. The intricate cloth was in the

final stages of completion. The *ikat* or tying and dyeing stages were done. Each individual thread was dyed and the design could clearly be seen. All that remained to be done was the final weaving, which Nancy estimated would take her two to three weeks to finish.

One feature of the ceremonial poles pua highlighted in this analysis is the design or theme of ceremonial poles that were visible on the cloth. Physical ceremonial poles reference historical ways of enhancing status. Together with the collection of everyday objects found in Nancy's longhouse apartment, the ceremonial poles pua kumbu draws on 'sedimented practices and repertoires of meanings' (Li, 2000: 2-3). These objects, and what they currently signify or represent, coupled together with their histories of connotations, contribute to an understanding of the weaving of a life or an identity.

### **Nancy's Ceremonial Poles**

The Iban altar or ceremonial poles design (*tiang ranyai*), depicted on the cloth Nancy was weaving, represents physical ceremonial poles, but the poles design also denotes a sacred centre. Physically, the poles are not a permanent, single object. Rather, the altar is an impermanent structure consisting of a collection of objects (V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 636). The ceremonial poles are a tall frame constructed of bamboo. This bamboo framework is wrapped around with several pieces of pua kumbu cloth, and objects, practical tools or implements are tied to this cloth covered framework (V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 34). The *tiang ranyai* is also known as a tree of life; 'A tree of life (*ranyai*) is erected at all major festivals ... it has all the characteristics of a tree of life, and it is planted. Trophy heads hanging from it are called the 'seed' or 'fruit' of the tree. Representations of it on Saribas cloths usually have a Trophy head at the base of the tree' (Heppell et al., 2006: 26).

The objects amassed vary according to particular rituals, but may consist of weapons, tools or farming implements; such as a shotgun, spear, knife, harvest basket and whetstone. 'Along with the Trophy heads hang the Iban's main weapons of war, the sword and the spear ... Also placed there are the household's sacred rice, its ritual whetstone and farming implements' (Heppell et al., 2006: 26). 'The shrine includes every artefact linking heads with fertility: the sword to sever the head, the trophy head itself, the sacred rice seed symbolizing renewal and life and the instruments required to cultivate it' (Heppell et al., 2006: 26). They also include parts of plants and trees, musical instruments and household items, and even parts of the longhouse structure,



like the notched step ladder, and other items like a mat, rattan, banana pith, palm, firewood and a gong. Other items of note include unhusked coconut, areca nuts, betelnut, *piring* or plate/food offering and a basket of charms (Graham, 1987: 69-73; Jabu, 1991: 82; V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 636).

The ceremonial poles are not however, merely a collection of objects. Taken individually, none of the objects listed above are considered inherently sacred. When amassed together, however, in a particular context and arranged in a specific way, around the framework of the bamboo poles, the objects collectively delineate a sacred space and represent a ceremonial or ritual centre. This shrine or altar becomes 'a place where gifts are received from both human and spiritual benefactors' (V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001: 34, 636). The physical ceremonial poles therefore symbolically connect Iban spirituality, animist religion and shamanism to weaving, headhunting war and the acquisition of land, fertility rites, shifting cultivation and rice farming.

Previously when headhunting was a relevant cultural practice, the *tiang ranyai* or ceremonial poles *pua kumbu* represented the intersection of gendered status enhancing activities. It connected men's headhunting with women's work of weaving *pua kumbu* and farming rice. According to Jabu, the ceremonial poles *pua kumbu* was historically made specifically for the eighth stage of the *Gawai Burong* festival which celebrated war and headhunting, and the *tiang sandong* was made for the second stage (Jabu, 1991: 82). The interconnection between rice, headhunting and the *pua* was illustrated by the fact that the most spiritually potent part of the process of making the *pua* was called women's headhunting. This status-enhancing activity for the women, the *ngar*, or dyeing ritual, was governed by the schedule or timing of activities centred around rice farming; 'The usual time for performing *ngar* is either June or July, usually the time of the inter-monsoon period. It was during this time that Ibans traditionally began their farms, a period referred to as 'the season of felling trees' in the slash-and-burn cycle. The next time possible for performing *ngar* is in December or January, a time known as the 'rice flowering season' (Linggi, 2001: 7). 'Beyond the longhouse in the farm, cotton (*taya*), the most important crop next to *padi* [rice], was planted' (Jabu, 1991: 76). Even the act of harvesting rice referenced headhunting; 'A harvest of trophy heads and a harvest of rice are reaped, each symbolising the other. Men carefully reap the heads from the bodies supporting them. Women, equally carefully, reap the ears of rice from the plants supporting them. The two genders are joined' (Heppell et al., 2006: 35). Old connotations associated with rice include the concept of their ancestors turning into dew at death and then returning to earth to settle on rice grains. The concept of the souls of the ancestors absorbed by the grains of rice adds to

the sacredness of the rice cakes consumed by the descendants during Nancy's church service communion.

The idea of the physical poles representing a spiritual centre in Iban animist religion is transferred to a category of pua kumbu called the *tiang ranyai*. The *tiang ranyai* is one of the sacred patterns that make the pua kumbu an appropriate forum for a woman to express her personal spirituality and private sacred centre. This cloth enables a weaver to demonstrate the gifts and blessings she has received from spiritual benefactors in the form of dreams that either become the sources of inspiration for motifs that eventually appear on the cloth or evidence that the gods have given the weavers permission to design and weave certain motifs.

Today many Rumah Garie weavers place their faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit, rather than (and possibly, as well as) the spirits that reside in trophy heads that this cloth historically referenced. The *tiang ranyai* pua now acts to tie local and introduced religions together as elements of animist Iban spirituality continue to appear on the cloths, even when woven by Christians. The cloth represents a layering of religious beliefs and personal sacred centres. It illustrates the possibilities of merging Christian and Iban symbolism, meanings, stories or mythology. The weavers insert Christian symbols into the designs as well as layer Christian meanings over Iban symbols. Motifs can now represent both Christian and Iban meanings.

In line with the personal spiritual role of the ceremonial poles pua kumbu, Nancy along with Bangie her neighbour, and Karama, Bangie's mother, have all found a way to accommodate their Christian beliefs and values on the cloth. The animist connotations that are explicit on the ceremonial poles pua kumbu do not appear to clash with the weavers' practice of evangelical Christianity. According to Edric Ong, one of their principal patrons, and himself an ardent Anglican, ...

Karama, Bangie and her group of weavers became evangelical Christians some twelve years ago when I first met them. Today they have discarded the traditional taboos of old, and have found in their faith a new liberty and a new spirit! Instead of making the traditional sacrifices to the weaving goddess like Kumang during the 'NGAR' mordant-bath ceremony, special Christian prayers and blessings are made (Ong, 1999a: 133).

In an article explaining the significance of the pua kumbu to Iban cultural pride, Jabu describes how a weaver reconciled two religions on a ceremonial poles pua

kumbu. The weaver used spiritual symbols and sacred themes in Iban religion, and layered Christian symbols over the cloth. Lenta anak Semana from the Betong region of Sarawak has

... taken a conventional theme, that of the *tiang sandong*, the ceremonial pole used for the second stage of the *Gawai Burong*. However she has adapted the vertical pole motif to her own religious beliefs, as at the base of the pole is depicted Jesus nailed not to the cross, but to the *tiang sandong* accompanied by Mary and another figure, possibly St John. The Christian theme is continued with the small cross motifs at the centre of the cloth (Jabu, 1991: 82).

In this pua kumbu, the weaver used the ceremonial poles pua kumbu to tell the story of changes to her personal identity. She used a cloth depicting a shrine or a construction and collection of objects sacred in Iban religion to illustrate and elucidate her conversion to Christianity.

On Nancy's pua kumbu the weavers' personal identities are tied in with remembered and historical practices surrounding the processes and cultural, shamanic and religious elements involved in producing the object. Nancy, although a devout evangelical Christian, layers her practice of Christianity over this quintessentially potent and spiritual Iban cloth. Visible on the pua kumbu Nancy was weaving in her living room were the distinctive parallel lines that are characteristic of the *tiang ranyai* category of design. These poles span the length of the central panel and represent the physical bamboo poles of the altar/shrine framework. The borders at the base of the central panel were lined with figures of lions. The lions on the pua also illustrate an aspect of Nancy's personality which is her love of animals. Nancy explained that the dream she related to me previously before the church service, of the wild animals running into her newly refurbished kitchen was a very positive omen. Many of the puas she showed me illustrate her love of wild animals. Animals feature in her dreams and these dream images percolate through reality and appear prominently in all her designs. Nancy is well known for her 'black dog' design, for example, a pua kumbu woven based on another dream. On another pua, the depiction of warriors and the implication of trophy heads on the pua kumbu emphasize the interconnection of male and female headhunting.

Nancy's *tiang ranyai* demonstrates the pua kumbu traversing boundaries set in the past. The cloth acts as an area of contact or friction for various expressions of

spirituality. It represents the intersection of old, new and gendered ways of constructing status. The fact that this shrine or ceremonial poles pua kumbu from Iban religion is still made by devout Christians demonstrates that the values from Iban spirituality can be layered together with the practice of Christianity. Nancy's *tiang ranyai* shows not only the layering of religions, but also the layering of the intimately personal over more commonly shared sentiments of the tribal community. The cloth represents new affiliations and new status enhancing activities of the women, adding to the sedimented meanings for the motifs.

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## **5 Pua Kumbu and the Tropical Rainforests of Borneo**

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In this chapter on the subject of forests, I examine the biodiversity of the jungle circulating through the pua kumbu. I argue that the cloth symbolizes the Ibans' knowledge of the biodiversity of the tropical rainforest environment, and that Iban manipulation of the jungle is reflected in the pua kumbu. The art originated from deep knowledge, appreciation, understanding and cultivation of biodiversity in the physical environment. Highlighting the people's familiarity and knowledge of this biodiversity underscores the threat, not only to the environment, but also to the pua kumbu art itself, as with the disappearance of the forests goes a major fundamental source of the inspiration and the materials for making the pua kumbu.

Studying the forest as material culture, in line with Bender's approach (2002a; 2002b; 2002c), allows an examination of the areas of contact between two culturally significant indigenous 'objects'. To summarize the explanation presented in the introduction to this thesis, Bender argues that landscapes were shaped by humans, and they should therefore be examined as material culture. The area of contact between the circulation of two forms of the 'materiality of [Iban] cultural life' (Buchli, 2002a: 1) is examined in this chapter, in order to gain insights into the pua kumbu that studying the cloth separately from the forests might not yield.

## Jungle

The tropical rainforests of Borneo were a rich source of inspiration for themes and motifs that circulated through the pua kumbu. Jungle vegetation, in the form of the creepers, vines, roots, leaves and the bark of giant trees, coloured the yarns. Metaphorically and thematically, jungle creatures, real and imaginary, dreamed or mythical, inhabited and animated the cloth. The cloth therefore represented a deep and intimate knowledge of the jungle. It was a physical and visual testament of the Iban people's long history of habitation in the jungle.

In the Iban imagination, the history of their existence in the rainforest extends far back in time to the very creation of Ibans themselves. In the creation myth featuring the character Raja Entala, humans were variously moulded and carved out of the trees or from a mound of earth. In this story, recounted to Jensen by unnamed Iban sources, and paraphrased in Gavin (Gavin, 2004: 11; Jensen, 1966: 6-11);

Raja Entala and his wife created man by covering a statue, fashioned in alternative versions from the kumpang tree, the bangkit banana, and from earth, with a pua kumbu cloth; they then shouted at it three times in order to bring it to life (Gavin, 2004: 11).

The pua kumbu, as demonstrated in versions of this story, was held in such high esteem, that previous attempts by Raja Entala and his wife to create man were unsuccessful until they thought to drape a pua kumbu around the lifeless human-shaped mould. What is interesting about this myth is that in Iban mythology, the pua kumbu had always simply been in existence. It existed even before the creation of humans; 'Genealogically speaking, weaving and dyeing were established almost at the beginning of time before language has been sufficiently developed to name the animals and before the Iban were taught to cultivate rice, both of which were accomplished by Simpi Impang some generations later' (Heppell et al., 2006: 25).

The Raja Entala creation myth ties two elements of Iban material culture together; the forest landscape and the pua kumbu. The forest, like the pua, is manipulated by human hands. The jungle displays evidence of deliberate and intricate human intervention; According to Brookfield, Potter and Byron (Brookfield et al., 1995), the forest is not pristine and cannot be separated from human activity. The forests in its present state, even what is termed 'virgin' forest, is a result of centuries of stewardship, of human migration and expansion of areas of intervention and

cultivation (Brookfield et al., 1995; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001). The tropical rainforest environment has experienced human habitation for millennia and there is evidence that manipulation in the past was greater, at least in terms of acreage of land, if not in intensity (Brookfield et al., 1995). People changed the balance and distribution of types of vegetation. Forests were the source of essential forest products for trade, building materials and raw material (Potter, 2005; Tagliacozzo, 2005; Wadley & Colfer, 2004). Human habitation has caused landslides, muddied rivers, cleared areas, and left land fallow. The forest is social, and every minute thing people do in a landscape make the landscape known to them (Bender, 2002a; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001; Tsing, 2005b).

These diverse avenues of human activity in manipulating the jungle environment enable us to view the forest as a 'landscape', in accordance with Bender's definition of the word, which is, an environment transformed by human occupation, as opposed to one that is naturally occurring (Bender, 2002a). Human activity enables the jungle to be effectively described as a product of human culture and legitimately examined as material culture.

The relationship between the forest and the pua kumbu was one spoke in the greater wheel of interconnections between the pua, headhunting, land acquisition, fertility practices, rice farming, spirituality and the vast canon of Iban oral history. Historically, when the pua kumbu circulated through the forest, it joined the cloth to the trees and the earth. It pulled together diverse themes, connotations and remembered notions that were articulated around the cloth. Both forests and the pua kumbu existed in a reciprocal and interconnected dynamic; The pua kumbu incited the movement of the Ibans through the forest (Heppell et al., 2006) and the forest entered the cloth through the motifs, themes and raw material (Linggi, 2001). According to Heppell, headhunting and the acquisition of forestland were the motivations for making the pua kumbu. This interconnected dynamic between the forest, the cloth and the people intensifies the Iban's sense of ownership of, and belonging to, the forest.

Previously, the pua kumbu was a quintessential symbol of life in the forest; it originated from the forest, was created out of the forest, was made because of the forest and was animated by themes and stories inspired from the forest. When there was widespread Iban tribal occupation of the jungle, the pua kumbu represented knowledge of living with a great diversity of species of animals and vegetation. The cloth represented a richness of cultural life stemming from an informed interaction with the environment. It signified past associations with the imaginary, supernatural or spiritual life of communities that lived in the forest. One manifestation of this intimate

knowledge was the rich seams of intangible cultural heritage that coursed through the veins of the designs.

When great tracks of the tropical rainforest were clear-felled and reduced to monocultural plantations, the nature of this relationship was affected in ways that are, although difficult to quantify, significant. This devastating and irrevocable change in the environment has impacted greatly on the social, cultural and economic life of the people. One way to understand the impact of this development is to examine the changing articulations around the pua kumbu.

What the pua kumbu represents against the backdrop of a plantation is starkly contrasted to the role it used to play in the past. The nature of existence in the forest changed. The complex and stimulating biodiversity was reduced to mind-numbing uniformity. The varied interactions of humans with the challenging and often dangerous jungle environment was reduced to the activity of tending neat and predictable rows of a single crop spread over thousands of hectares. All life forms were chopped down, poisoned, killed and removed, except for a single introduced species of either oil palm or acacia trees for paper pulp. These plantations that are devoid of all other life are not capable of sustaining the traditional self-sufficient lifestyles that were heavily dependent on the diversity of the forest.

Previous connotations of the pua kumbu now represent different meanings. When notions of the forest circulate through modern, urban Iban society, they evoke memories of cultural and spiritual traditions. The cloth along with all it symbolises, encapsulates issues of contemporary political, economic and environmental contestations. Although the pua kumbu is not used in an obvious or deliberately political way, I argue that the cloth and the forest both play a part within a salvo of tactics used by the Iban business and political elites, which comprises members of the Dayak Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), and the Tun Jugah Foundation.

The following section examines the circulation of the pua kumbu through the abundant biodiversity present in the forest landscape as well as the stories inspired from living in the physically and psychologically challenging terrain of the jungle. It examines two forms of material culture of the Ibans together, the forest and the pua, in order to shed light on articulations around the pua kumbu.



## Diversity

The pua kumbu was evidence of women's deep knowledge of the natural biodiversity of the jungle. The first motifs apprentice weavers depict are often of vegetation found in the forest; ferns, bamboo, palms, tendrils, sugarcane shoots (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Linggi, 2001). Later on, as they become more expert weavers, they are allowed to attempt depicting animals and figures from an extensive list of known and imaginary species. The pua kumbu displayed expertise in identifying, gathering and mixing various parts of different vegetation to concoct mordant baths which were used to prepare the cotton and make dyes to colour the yarns. The presence of literary and mythological characters that are associated with animals and plants demonstrate a deep knowledge of the biodiversity of the environment. Through these stories, knowledge and moral teachings based on the landscapes in the rainforest, makes its way onto the cloth. From conversations with the residents of Rumah Garie, it is evident that the Ibans placed great value on knowing a huge diversity of forest vegetation, wild and cultivated.

Diversity is a theme that constantly recurs when thinking of the tropical rainforest in Borneo. There is great natural biodiversity of the species of plants and animals that inhabit and constitute the forest. Borneo consists of 'approximately 220,000km<sup>2</sup> of equatorial rainforests and numerous wildlife species' (*Why is the Heart of Borneo So Important?*, 2007). This biodiversity is cited by environmental groups and politicians, as a reason for the establishment of the 'Heart of Borneo' conservation area; a 'groundbreaking conservation pledge' involving an undertaking by the governments of three countries, Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. 'The Heart of Borneo harbours up to six per cent of the world's total biodiversity' (Dr Dino Sharma Executive Director of WWF-Malaysia in *Leaders Endorse Heart of Borneo Declaration*, 2007). 'Borneo is home to 13 primate species, more than 350 bird species, 150 reptiles and amphibians and around 15,000 species of plants, and continues to be the source of many new discoveries — three species have been found every month over the past ten years alone' (*Leaders Endorse Heart of Borneo Declaration*, 2007). The World Wildlife Fund's report in 2006 states that 'at least 52 new species of animals and plants have been identified this past year on the island of Borneo' (*Scientists Find Dozens of New Species in Borneo Rainforests*, 2006). In 2003, DNA tests on the Borneo pygmy elephants revealed that they are a likely new subspecies, distinct from other Asian elephants (*Borneo Pygmy Elephant*, 2007). In 2007, the clouded leopards were recognized as new a species (*Borneo Forests: Borneo's Clouded Leopard Identified as*

*New Cat Species*, 2007). 'These discoveries reaffirm Borneo's position as one of the most important centres of biodiversity in the world' (*Scientists Find Dozens of New Species in Borneo Rainforests*, 2006).

The abundance of the natural diversity is reflected in the cultivated areas. In the farmlands of the Dayaks diverse types of human activities have created different types of landscapes. People cultivated crops and created rice growing areas, vegetable patches, and areas of nurtured trees. Patterns of habitation can be seen in areas that have been burned, slashed, irrigated, sculpted and logged. Communities created secondary forests and converted others to grassland (Brookfield et al., 1995; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001).

The importance of diversity is recognised even in the law courts. Judge Ian Chin's decision, although subsequently overturned by Appellate court judge Hashim Yusoff on 8 July 2005 (*Court Overturns Decision on NCR Land Made in 2001*, 2005), demonstrates that some judges recognize the necessity of diversity for survival in the forest landscape;

'...territory is chosen because of the presence of arable land, of rivers and forests from which life sustaining resources like water, fish, animals and forest products (including timber, wild vegetables, edible ferns, palm shoots, rattans, herbs or medicinal plants, fruit trees and bamboo) can be obtained' (Justice Ian Chin in *Judge: Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling*, 2001).

These patterns of usage of land continue in some areas classed as native customary rights (NCR) land. These areas with different patterns of usage have specific names and are recognized by the section of the law governing NCR land. In a judgement for a court case involving a dispute over NCR land, Judge Ian Chin in his ruling, (supported with quotes from researchers, AJN Richards and Dimbab Ngidang), explained the various usage of the land;

*Temuda* is 'farm land, including land left deliberately fallow for varying periods of time to allow for the soil to regain its fertility and for the regeneration of forest produce. Some lands are left fallow for upward of 25 years to allow for trees to grow. Thus during the course of time, secondary jungle would appear

*(Judge: Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling, 2001).*

The jungle area around the longhouse, *the pulau*, was considered a source of forest products;

*Pulau* is 'a term for primary forest preserved to ensure a steady supply of natural resources like rattan and timber and for water catchment, to enable hunting for animals to be carried out and to honour distinguished persons' *(Judge: Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling, 2001).*

This preference for diversity was reflected in the number and types of cultivated trees. For forest dwellers, wealth is calculated in terms of trees (Tsing, 2005b). Species were selected, genetic variation was nurtured and hybrids created. Forest dwellers planted and nurtured preferred trees and removed and cleared land of other trees. Some valuable trees in the wild were owned, and stewardship of treasured trees was passed down to future generations. For example, prized trees like durians, were tended, protected and claimed – for generations *(Judge: Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling, 2001).*

Familiarity with diversity includes knowing how to nurture and use many different types of vegetation;

The most amazing thing about a Meratus [Dayak] swidden field is the extraordinary number of plants growing together in the same small spot. There may be trees saved from the forest that was cut to make the field: fruit trees, honey trees, sugar palms. Fallen trunks and stumps, sometimes resprouting, litter the ground. Between them grow an exuberance of plants: not only grains, such as rice, corn, millet, and job's tears, but root crops, such as taro, cassava, and sweet potatoes, as well as beans crawling up the stumps, eggplant bushes five feet high, dense clumps of sugarcane, spreading squashes, gangling banana and papaya trees, gingers and basil and medicinal plants, and on and on. The field is a scene of enormous variety (Tsing, 2005a: 165).

Knowledge of the environment enables survival. Diversity is an important feature for the people living in the jungle and people take pride in knowing and naming their surroundings (Tsing, 2005b: 165). Tsing explains that cultivating diversity is a way of securing food supply and as an insurance against drought. This knowledge manifests in the ability to identify, categorize and list species of plants and animals in this area. Tsing records one woman, Uma Adang's extraordinary ability to name and list up to a thousand known local species (Tsing, 2005b).

The knowledge of the biodiversity of the jungle environment was transferred into the cloth. Knowledge of the plants and methods of using them were demonstrated in the many pua kumbus woven and created through the centuries. Success as a master dyer depended on the expert ability to manipulate and process many species of plants sourced from the jungle. The cloth was made in the forest. It emerged from, and was constituted out of, the material derived from it. The jungles circulated through the cloth. It inhabited and entered the cloth.

This specialized knowledge of the vegetation seeped into the social structure of historical Iban communities especially in regards to women's social status. The prestige system of women was based around the pua kumbu, and this prestige was intertwined with the forest. It formed a significant part of the body of knowledge and the intangible cultural heritage of the Iban people. The jungle was the source of all the physical raw material necessary to create objects that the social organization demanded. Forest products were necessary for making utilitarian objects; for the construction of houses and longboats, and to fashion weapons, tools, and equipment for weaving (Brookfield et al., 1995; Tsing, 2005b). They were also necessary for objects of cultural significance and objects for aesthetic or artistic purposes. The creation of art works like the pua kumbu is one such example. Without the natural and cultivated biodiversity found in the forest the pua kumbu object could not have existed or evolved the way it did.

Many plant based ingredients were used in varying combinations 'in order to create the shades of colour desired by the individual dyer' (Jabu, 1991: 77). The yarns were prepared and coloured with mordants and dyes made out of a vast number of ingredients from plant material. Shrubs, creepers, bushes and trees, and various parts of plants, the root, bark, leaves, nuts, and flowers were used. Some of these plant sources for ingredients were domesticated and cultivated in the garden patches or farmland around the longhouses. Others grew in the wild and were nurtured, managed, harvested and gathered (2005; 2005).

Red is a particularly important colour on the pua kumbu and the Ibans have several words for the colour red. According to Linggi, Jabu, Heppell and Gavin, reds are categorized and named according to the plant sources. For example, engkudu roots (*morinda citrifolia*) produce shades from a vibrant red to deep maroon and reddish brown (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1991; Linggi, 2001). The results are called pua engkudu or pua embun. A simpler process using engkarabai produces a dull brown - pua mata; and sebangki bark produces brick red to brown;

Ingredients for red dye used in ikat weaving consist of the roots of the engkudu tree, bark of janggau tree, and leaves of engkalait tree. Puas made with engkudu are known as pua engkudu. The shade of red acquired from engkudu is most highly prized and is colour fast. Other plants used are the leaves of the engkarabai plant, which grows wild, but is commonly found around longhouses, and the one-inch bark of the wild sebangki tree (Linggi, 2001: 10-11).

When using raw cotton, correct preparation of the mordant baths was a crucial part of the process. The mordant bath is concocted from various ingredients. The plant materials are variously boiled, rubbed with quicklime, and soaked in rice gruel. Particular varieties of wild ginger are mixed with oil derived from the nut of the kepayang tree. Kepayang oil is used as a preservative; 'pounded ginger is put into a trough and water is added ... the watery ginger is strained and the extract boiled for about two hours. The hot ginger water is poured into a wooden trough. The palm salt and kepayang oil are added in' (Linggi, 2001: 8). Every part of the procedure must occur for a specific amount of time.

Many other trees and shrubs are known, cultivated and processed in addition to the vegetation listed above by Linggi. Two species of the *tarum* or *renggat* plants, a vine and a bushy shrub, are cultivated as sources for indigo. These plants are used to produce the colour blue or black, if dyed over red (Linggi, 2001: 11). Raw cotton or *taya* is grown in the farm after the rice is harvested. It is then hand processed to make yarn; 'Beyond the longhouse on the farm, cotton (*taya*), the most important crop next to *padi*, was planted. The *taya* was planted on a farm fallow soon after the hill *padi* was harvested. The *taya* plot is called *empalai kasaí* (Jabu, 1991: 76). The yarns are prepared for dyeing and processed with mordants made of vegetation from the forest. Another plant source necessary for the cloth is the lembe leaves for the 200,000 ties or ikat needed to make one pua (Jabu, 1991: 76; Linggi, 2001: 5-12). And finally there are

the different sources of wood for the loom and other weaving tools and equipment, like the warp beam, heddle stick, laze rods, and spool shuttle (Linggi, 2001: 49-52), as well as the wooden trough for the mordant bath.

The expert use and manipulation of ingredients includes knowing how to extract, concoct, develop, exploit, and coax the qualities and colours out of the vegetation, or to make a cloth colourfast (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Linggi, 2001). Primarily the ways of achieving the desired effects required a practical understanding of the chemical compositions of the various parts of the plant materials. Linggi, Heppell and Gavin explain that the processing of the ingredients was highly circumscribed and ritualistic (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Linggi, 2001). Part of the difficulty in achieving success was the unpredictable variability in the quality of the ingredients based on variations in the chemical composition of the soil (Jabu, 1991: 77);

Each dyer had her own special recipes, the details of which were a closely guarded secret. However, with natural dyes no two shades are exactly the same, and the results are sometimes not always to the dyer's satisfaction. For my ancestors, who were I am told among the great weavers of the past, the dyeing process was laden with pitfalls, but little did they know that the chemical content may vary depending on the chemicals in the soil and the conditions of the dye producing plants. This unpredictability has created a whole folklore of beliefs and taboos which have evolved around the art of dyeing (Jabu, 1991: 77).

Manipulating forest products in the processes of preparing the yarns and acquiring the proper shade of red was so complex and specialized it was regarded a spiritual and esoteric art. Gavin, Heppell, Jabu and Linggi explain that observations and experimentations performed with combinations of different ingredients were passed down through generations of women. These processes have entered the way the status of the women in the longhouse community was structured. Only a very limited number of women had expert ability and the women who consistently achieved success in this area and mastered the technology were revered and held in remarkably high esteem. The women who could master the processes were bestowed the highest status or ranking in Iban longhouse communities (Gavin, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Jabu, 1991; Linggi, 2001). The most prestigious rank or title that a woman could aspire to and attain in historical Iban society was that of *indu takar*, *indu ngar* (Jabu, 1989; Linggi,

1999, 2001), which is literally translated as a woman who 'knows her salts' (Linggi, 2001: 37):

A woman who is capable of designing and producing a good blanket through her own ingenuity of mixing the mordant bath (indu takar, indu gar) and properly treating the thread ... She is able to measure the correct quantities of wild ginger and other ingredients for the mordant bath and the dyes (Linggi, 2001: 37).

In 2008, the cloth is no longer made entirely of the forest. Few women can afford the time to make pua kumbus, let alone make it while adhering to traditional methods. All the physical materials that were previously sourced from the jungle can be replaced with alternatively sourced machine-made, store-bought synthetic materials. Cotton, for example, is no longer commonly grown and it is now replaced with imported silk or machine made cotton threads. Adaptation includes the use of chemical dyes instead of the more time consuming and complex procedure of concocting large troughs of vegetable dyes. Apart from being more predictable, synthetic dyes make an almost infinite choice of colours available instead of restricting weavers to the limited palette of hues that could be derived exclusively from jungle vegetation. Silk pua kumbus woven from machine made yarns; represent adaptation of the people in adopting modern material and another step in the evolution of the art. The introduction of silk has considerably shortened the length of time required and simplified the degree of complexity in making vegetable dyed cloths. The use of chemical dyes and silk yarns make the mordanting procedure redundant; According to Ong, silk, unlike raw cotton, does not need to undergo the mordanting process for dye to adhere to the yarns (Ong, 2006b). The removal of the lengthy, complicated, and fraught process of mordanting has made vegetable dyed silk a viable alternative. With the redundancy of the mordanting procedure, a key historical way of establishing and reinforcing women's prestige disappeared. From conversations with locals in Kapit, it is evident that appreciation and respect for the specialist knowledge of this esoteric and status laden procedure is diminishing.

In 1994, Heppell noted that *engkudu*, which was once grown around the longhouse, was becoming scarce in the general rural/longhouse Iban communities (Heppell, 1994: 134). In 2005, when I visited Bangie and Nancy in Rumah Garie longhouse, *engkudu* was still being cultivated. However, the handmade production of vegetable dyes is an exception. Rumah Garie is one of the very few remaining places where any pua kumbu weaving is done at all, let alone weaving using vegetable dyes.

Vegetable dyes continue to be used because a few of the longhouse weavers there are connected to tribal art markets overseas where collectors are prepared to pay the higher prices. In Seattle for example, through the connections of a Sarawak-Chinese entrepreneur, Edric Ong, there is demand for pua kumbus made with vegetable dyes (*Edric Ong Textile Gallery 1, 2007; Rumah Garie Longhouse, 2007*). Although limited to the occasional piece, the small demand from the west makes the complicated process of vegetable dyeing financially viable for connected weavers. Another avenue that makes vegetable dyed pua kumbus viable is local weaving competitions that stipulate the use of vegetable dyes in certain categories (*Rumah Garie is the Best, 2003*). Other than these special situations however, weavers generally use the more easily available chemical dyes (Ngali, 2005). The confluence of the preference for modern synthetic material combined with the destruction of the jungle landscape means that the necessity for deep knowledge of the diversity of the forest is receding in importance.

Vegetable dyed pua kumbus now circulate globally. Different articulations are attached to these pua kumbus made using the most traditional material and methods. For overseas collectors a pua kumbu made of and coloured with diverse vegetation of the rainforest symbolizes headhunting, ancient tribal knowledge, lifestyles and art. The pua kumbu emanates from the jungles of Borneo. For Bangie and Nancy the higher prices that vegetable-dyed pua kumbus fetch overseas raises their living standards to a middle class lifestyle characterized by frequent international travel or women's *bejalai* and the latest consumer goods. Personal motifs inspired from the weavers' dreams circulate the planet and enable the women in the jungle to have their dreams of artistic success and renown come true.

## **Stories**

The natural biodiversity of the jungle enhances literary enjoyment and increases the visual appeal of the pua. The forest was an omnipresent source of inspiration for the stories that formed the canon of Iban oral literature. These stories reinforced knowledge of, and deep familiarity with, the animals and other life forms inhabiting the jungle. An analysis of the themes and praise names reveal that the inspiration for many of the cloths emerged from Iban folk stories set in the forest. This relationship continues today with the forest circulating through the pua, only now, the cloth alludes to stories of present day sources of conflict around the land. Although folk stories continue to animate the cloth and form its spiritual home, the issues they reference now centre on the tension between nurturing biodiversity or establishing plantations.



Knowledge of the biodiversity of the jungle was important, not only for survival, but according to Tsing, people living in this environment derive great sensory and intellectual pleasure from it (Tsing, 2005a). Lists of species served an aesthetic, even emotional purpose – indicating a sense of the familiar (Tsing, 2005b). There is the pleasure of the intellectual pursuit. People enjoyed categorizing and intimately knowing and listing the variety of species encountered (Tsing, 2005b). (While Tsing's research was conducted in Kalimantan and not in Sarawak, her observations on the neighbouring Meratus Dayak, and their way of interacting with the land are relevant to the Dayak Ibans).

Consider the pleasure of storytelling: It is impossible to tell or listen to stories in Kalimantan without saying the names of plants and animals. People encounter a large variety of plants and animals everyday. It is hard to talk about what people are doing or where they have been without talking about plants and animals. One of the pleasures of Uma Adang's lists was its incitement to remember and tell stories (Tsing, 2005a: 163).

Animals are an omnipresent reality in daily life in the forest environment. Crocodiles, snakes, centipedes and even rocks appear on the pua kumbu as motifs. Immersion in the landscape includes the possibilities of unpredictable encounters with many species of wild animals. According to Tsing, these encounters are noted by residents. These encounters may end up being a source of stimulus for the art. Motifs can emerge from the weavers' interpretation and depiction of these experiences.

While I was in Rumah Garie longhouse, I had my own encounter with a little, but particularly dreaded forest creature. One night, after everyone went to bed, my partner and I unfolded the mattress Bangie, our host, had supplied, and spread it on the living room floor. The generator had been switched off hours earlier and we were in complete darkness, without the fan or lights. It was stiflingly hot. We tried to get to sleep, which was easy enough, after the previous physically strenuous days. As we drifted off to sleep, I suddenly felt several prickly legs crawling swiftly over my arms and legs. It moved fast, and almost immediately, it had made it way across to my partner. As we fumbled with our torches, we could still feel those scratchy legs at several parts of our body all at once. Once we finally got some light, we could not find any creature at all, but instead what we found was several legs of some insect, dismembered, but still twitching in various parts of the floor and on our body. Several frantic moments of lifting the mattresses and floor covering ensued until finally we

revealed an agitated and angry centipede. In the torchlight, we groped for something to kill it with, and the only solid thing we had to hand was a tube of insect repellent we had purchased in Sydney. After some frenzied stabbing, we managed to chop the creature up into several pieces. Deep red juice oozed out of the body and the legs kept twitching. We could not wait to get rid of it. We wiped off the mashed insect and carefully wrapped it in tissue paper to dispose of the offending creature in the garbage bin. Then we gingerly lay the mattresses down again, this time checking carefully for more night creatures, and fell soundly asleep.

The next morning I casually told Bangie about the centipede episode, thinking she might get a laugh out of our panic. I was assuming that this was a really common occurrence to have centipedes crawling on beds at night. The longhouse was after all, in the middle of the jungle. I did not know the Iban word for centipede so Bangie did not really know what I was talking about, but she started getting really agitated and insisted on seeing it. So we dug it out from the garbage bin and unwrapped the tissue. When Bangie identified the crushed remains, she got really excited and told the others about it. The news then spread quickly up and down the longhouse. Then she turned to us and said pointedly, 'Bangie has no medicine for this. The only thing we can do when it bites you is ... cry for you.'

Upon researching the creature when we returned home, we learned that a sting from this centipede is as feared as a snakebite because it causes alarming swelling and excruciating pain. It is little wonder that when a weaver makes a particularly powerful pua kumbu that features a malevolent spirit, one of the ways she could hope to control the spirit and limit its efficacy to the cloth was to enclose the spirit within a border of centipedes. This border prevented the spirit from escaping from the cloth (See Gavin, 2004-71; Krutak, 2006; Linggi, 2001: 86, 93). Haddon noted in 1898 that the centipede group of designs 'is very common on narrow order stripes ... and its use is probably protective. The designs are very suggestive of the *embayar* [the phosphorescent centipede] itself, the so-called 'hundred legs' making a definite appeal' (Haddon & Start, 1936: 132, and plate XVI).

Many characters in Iban oral literature are associated with known species and subspecies of animals. Some species are associated with folk heroes, mythological figures, goddesses and demons, including mythical serpents or cats with magical powers. The pageant or pantheon of characters that inhabit the otherworld of Iban mythology filter on to the pua kumbu as motifs. Some of these characters are human, others, animals, others composite and mythical. Gavin, Heppell and Linggi relate many of these stories that have been woven into personal stories on the cloth. There are

cloths depicting giants that sit on platforms staring at the moon, and demons, flying serpents and beings that cry out insatiably for human heads. There are stories inspired by the actions of heroes, warriors and goddesses, human ancestors manifested in the form of birds, or creatures of the sea and land, and animals that live in the tree canopies (Gavin, 1996, 1999, 2004; Heppell et al., 2006; Linggi, 2001:102, 103, 107, 110, 141).

These stories, inspired from living in an interdependent relationship with the forest, feature prominently on the cloth. Stories from the canon of Iban oral storytelling tradition inspire the weavers and inform the praise names given to spiritually potent cloths. Stories are the inspiration for themes, motifs, designs and significance or potency of the cloth. The forest enters the cloth through the dreams and imagination of the weavers. The cloth was a forum for weavers, for their idiosyncratic telling and retelling of these stories, and of subverting or converting stories to fit personal messages or meanings. To this end, the Tun Jugah Foundation has set up an oral history department in Kuching in an effort to salvage, preserve, record and document the intangible cultural heritage of the Ibans. The foundation's approach to oral literature is based on the premise that 'embedded in those traditional chants, songs and stories are coded messages to the Iban beliefs, values and ways of life ... oral history / literature tends to express the core symbols and values of a culture and act as an important source of identity' (*Oral History: Introduction*, 1999).

There are stories based on creatures given anthropomorphic attributes. One example is the story about crocodiles and their history of association with humans. Crocodiles are widespread in the river systems of Sarawak. In Iban oral literary traditions, crocodiles used to be humans, and brothers of man (Jabu, 1991: 82). According to Jabu, the generally peaceful coexistence and cooperation is a result of peace treaties between crocodiles and men. However, it is not uncommon to read in the newspapers about crocodile attacks. Residents in Rumah Garie who were far upriver, were concerned enough about crocodile attacks to acquire guard dogs. The dogs, from what we could discern, functioned as sacrificial fodder for the crocodiles, as a dog is obviously no match for a crocodile. Empiang Jabu, a local Iban politician, collector and patron of the pua kumbu artform, relates a story depicted on a pua kumbu named 'Colliding crocodiles';

In the consciousness of Nangku anak Dingat, the weaver, ... was a family story about a dream of one of her ancestors, which described peace between the crocodiles and men, and a

harmonious coexistence between them, as brothers. Crocodiles were believed, at one time, to have been human. To that day, her family had never killed or shot a crocodile. However, in the 1930s one of her relatives, a teenage boy was attacked and killed by a crocodile. As a consequence, she wove... [a] pua kumbu depicting crocodiles confronting each other face-to-face to remind crocodiles of the former peace treaty between men and crocodile, urging them to fight each other instead of attacking humans (Jabu, 1991: 82).

In the 1900s, this status quo between man and crocodiles was commonly reinforced with a show of respect, through a custom of food offerings and sacrifices to ensure an abundant rice harvest. This offering included cloth;

On going to a new district Ibans always make a lifesize image of a crocodile in clay on the land chosen for the paddy-farm ... for seven days the house is ... under special restrictions ... at the end of the seven days they go to see the clay crocodile and give it cloth and food and rice-spirit and kill a fowl and a pig before it. ... when the rites are duly performed this clay crocodile destroys all the pests which eat the rice (Hose & McDougall, 1901: 198-9).

Snakes too have stories associated with them. People possess knowledge about snakes, not simply in terms of the number of types of snakes, but snakes differentiated according to habitat, behaviour, feeding habits and method of movement through space (Tsing, 2005b). In Tsing's biodiversity list-making exercise, Uma Adang named twenty types of snakes, four types each of pythons and cobras. The ability to identify the genus and biological differences of snakes is only one aspects of the knowledge of the fauna. In addition to Tsing and Uma Adang's list of twenty snakes, other reptiles are also portrayed as characters on the pua kumbu. These reptiles can be avatars or various representations of gods or deities from the Iban otherworld (Maxwell, 1990: 281). This use of snakes as a representation of the powerful is mirrored in Sumba, where Hoskins relates; 'a respected older man who had served as the Raja in colonial times identified his heritage of spiritual power with the snake depicted on the cloth he chose to be his funeral shroud. Instead of writing an autobiography, he wrote for me an account of his ancestor's encounter with the snake and a gift of cloth that he interpreted as the "basis" of his power to rule' (Hoskins, 1998: 3). Different subspecies of snakes, according to Heppell, are classed together with imaginary snakes. They are associated with the

immortals. Heppell suggests that *nabau* is the king cobra <sup>37</sup>. According to Linggi, praise names on pua kumbus allude to *nabau's* abilities, such as 'Forced sounds of a serpent while lifting a rock' and 'Serpent in labour, groaning loudly while lifting the ripples of waves' (Linggi, 2001: 81, 87).

The Immortals are associated with reptiles. Keling can appear as a cobra. His companions from Panggau can also appear as snakes, for example, Laja as a coral snake, Bungai Nuing as the king cobra, Punggai as a whip snake and, from Gelong, Kumang as the banded krait. Nabau, the water serpent, (probably a king cobra) is Keling's grandfather and Ribai's father. Reptiles are clearly Underworld creatures, strengthening the location of Panggau and Gelong in the Underworld (Heppell et al., 2006: 28).

Local knowledge and familiarity of the forest extends to include a long history of associations of animals with celestial deities of ancient stories. Stories associated with animals help people distinguish between species;

ular lidi: a small, mainly coastal snake said to be able to soar. Perhaps it is legendary. They say one once fought the great naga snake that holds up the earth; the naga swallowed the ular lidi, but the latter fought the naga from the inside, and won (Tsing, 2005b: 163-4).

Association with celestial beings has a correlation with physical realities. 'In Kalimantan as in other places, to talk of snakes often provokes stories. When we arrived at snakes in our list, [in a list-making exercise] the house began to jump with stories of snake encounters' (Tsing, 2005b: 163). Often these stories are inspired from dangers emanating from living in the forest landscape. Some of the creatures that inspire fear are crocodiles, wildcats, snakes, and centipedes, not to mention diseases and infection. There are also stories of imaginary dangers and threats; of ghosts, giants, monsters of the deep and malevolent spirits that live in the roots of trees. These characters fill the imagination and spill over onto the cloth.

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<sup>37</sup> Pua kumbu by Bangie, detail, *nabau*, serpent design. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

In the Iban imagination, mythological action is combined with real life human shaping of the forest environment. Stories are set at striking or important features in the landscape, like particular rock formations, waterfalls or significant sections of rivers. In Iban stories the physical landscapes correspond to venues in the otherworld where mythical events take place. As it is difficult to separate the stories from the environment, likewise, it is difficult to disentangle the cloth from the jungle. The jungle infuses and animates the cloth through the stories that the designs reference. These stories that feature prominently on the pua kumbu imbue the object with significance and meanings. The pua kumbu tells the story of the Iban people's familiarity with the jungle. It demonstrates deep knowledge of the forest creatures and vegetation. This relationship with the forest is not however, limited to a passive knowledge, but extends to human intervention of the physical environment. Knowledge of the diverse species of animals and vegetation of the forests extends to the landscapes that the people have created in the jungle.

Knowledge of the environment extends beyond animals and plants to cover inanimate objects, like rocks. Rocks are listed, categorised and have stories and mythical heroes associated with them. Iban knowledge of the landscape extends so deep that even the rocks along the riverbanks are known. This familiarity with the rocks in the landscape is supported by Tsing's recount of a friend telling her that rocks can be 'differentiated between 'living' rocks and 'dead' rocks: basalt and sandstone were his respective examples. He thought living rocks could reproduce themselves, although slowly and surreptitiously' (Tsing, 2005b: 169). Tsing recalls another account where another friend, Uma Adang, lists 'geographical names of the locally prominent karst formations, moving from one end to the other of the area she had demarcated as 'local' (Tsing, 2005b: 169).

Iban stories tell of a time when humans lived in an interdependent relationship with the animals, trees, rivers and even the rocks in the landscape. *Tangga Beji* is one such story. Key elements of the well-known myth are isolated, depicted and woven into the retelling of the story in the weaver's own personalised message or expression onto pua kumbus bearing that name.

*Tangga Beji* demonstrates that the forest is imagined as being shaped by the ancestors or cultural heroes who caused even the rocks to be made. The story, paraphrased from Jabu, proceeds as follows; Beji was a mythical hero / warrior from the Kapuas region in Borneo. His greatest ambition was to reach Petara, the supreme spirit, by touching heaven. So he and his followers searched for the tallest trees in the forest to make a ladder to climb up to heaven. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he

tried, he failed every single time, and when he fell, the ladder that he had built was scattered throughout the land, and pieces of it turned to rock. These rocks, known as *Tangga Beji*, (Beji's ladder) can still be found along rivers today (paraphrased from Jabu, 1991: 82).

The story, reminiscent of the tower of Babel, carries a similar teaching. According to Jabu 'The story of Beji's futile attempt to reach heaven is indicative of man's yearning for immortality' (Jabu, 1991: 82). This story of man's doomed quest to reach the Supreme Being, links man's efforts, his spiritual world, the code of warriors, his ambition and the consequences of pride and finally his downfall. This story however, carries another message, one that is now more political in nature. The pua kumbu, in representing key aspects of this story, acts as a testament to the fact that the Iban people have been in the forests for so long that they were present, not only when the rocks were in the process of hardening, but that it was their ancestors' actions, in trying to reach god, that created the substance that eventually formed these rocks. The story also demonstrates a device of using features in the landscapes in the service of teaching moral values. The *Tangga Beji* pua kumbu can be seen to demonstrate not only the multigenerational presence of Ibans in the land, but it also highlights their spirituality and moral fibre, all of which strengthens their moral claim to the land.

Stories set in the landscape help people remember the moral teachings of their culture. Keith Basso (1996) in his writings on the Apache people, explained how 'Western Apaches evoke and manipulate the significance of local places to comment on the moral shortcomings of wayward individuals' (Basso, 1996: 61). Stories set in the landscape, among other things, 'firmly chastised and generously pardoned' wayward people (Basso, 1996: 65). The stories are linked to 'something concrete, something fixed and permanent, something he had seen and could go see again - a place upon the land' (Basso, 1996: 64). Basso explains that these landscape features become constant reminders to the inhabitants who pass through the land of the important moral stories. Landscape features also remind people of their ancestors and their long presence in the land;

The stories are very old, he has heard them many times, and they always give him pleasure. Besides being humourous, he says, they make him think of the ancestors - the wise ones, he calls them - the people who first told the stories at a time when humans and animals communicated without difficulty (Basso, 1996: 63).

## Conflicts

The pua kumbu's historical association with the land is translated to the present day. It continues to reflect the life and circumstances of the people. The cloth now succinctly and effectively represents, articulates and centres attention on issues in Iban identity politics. It represents modern interpretations of the stories of ancient conflicts. One of the key issues centres around the ownership of jungle land. The cloth represents the tension between an appreciation for natural biodiversity versus the value given to monocultural plantations. It also represents the diversity of views concerning interpretations of appropriate and sustainable exploitation of the jungle.

The biodiversity of the forest is reflected in the diversity of views and attitudes towards forests. The stories that are told about the jungle today centre around conflicts over ownership and the flow of profits. The forest has become a zone of contestation between tribes, corporations, state and federal governments and environmental organizations (*Court Overturns Decision on NCR Land Made in 2001*, 2005; *Rh Nor Files Appeal to Federal Court*, 2005; Thien, 2005b, 2005c). This conflict can be characterized by the tension between monoculture and diversity. The establishment of plantations caused deep rifts between conflicting views on definitions of what constitutes sustainable usage of jungle land as well as differences in views on acceptable degree and speed of human intervention in nature.

One particularly contentious issue that has crystallized Iban identity politics in the 2000s, surrounds questions of indigenous ownership and usage of forests and the land the trees stand on. Some contestation over land reported in the newspaper articles listed above centred on the contentious idea that owners of Native Customary Rights land (variously abbreviated as NCR for Native Customary Rights or NCL for Native Customary Rights Land in the literature) may indeed own the land, but they do not own the trees on the land. This situation paved the way for timber concession owners to harvest the lucrative timber of the jungle, leaving the NCR owners with denuded land. Native Customary Rights land is important because ownership or occupation of NCR land is one characteristic of native cultural identity in Sarawak. It is a feature that distinguishes Ibans and other indigenous Sarawak citizens, or minority *bumiputeras*, from the majority *bumiputera* / Malay / Islamic people (M. Bujang, 2004).

The contestation involves openly hostile attitudes and agendas between the tribal people who inhabit and shape the landscape, the companies that log the forest and establish plantations, previous governments that recognized native customary rights land and present governments at state and federal levels that manage joint



venture companies, JVC, and grant land titles (Lal, 1999). Conflict also occurs even within tribes. Between tribe members there is contestation over definitions of what constitutes sustainable development. Some tribal communities seek to develop the land themselves by establishing their own commercial oil palm plantations without waiting for the involvement of non-native corporations to initiate projects. Others hope for ownership of shares and the cash incomes generated by private companies that take over, manage and develop the land. Yet others fight for a much smaller scale and degree of intervention in the forest, protecting a way of life dependent on the forest for multiple resources, including food (M. Bujang, 2004; "Bumi Minorities in Sabah, S'wak to Increase their Economic Stake," 2005; *Court Overturns Decision on NCR Land Made in 2001*, 2005; *Judge: Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling*, 2001; Lal, 1999; *Rh Nor Files Appeal to Federal Court*, 2005; Sanders, 2002; Thien, 2005b, 2005c). Finally, there are those whose positions settle at points in between full commercial development and conservation of large tracts of forest. The environmental lobby, represented by the WWF, nurtures, values and protects biodiversity. Contestation continues to entangle government and native usage of land today with JVCs, NCRs and the WWF converging in the contact zone of the forest.

The multiple fronts in which the conflict over forests is expressed have been the subject of several studies and many newspaper reports. These studies have ranged from a focus on agricultural activities to the wider context of conservation, environmental and socio-economic transformation (Brookfield et al., 1995; Padoch, 1988; Padoch & Peluso, 1996). The wider context includes landscape and resource politics, primarily when it relates to displacement of the local inhabitants, and encroachment on Native Customary Rights Land (Sanders, 2002). The following studies addressed some of the consequences and implications of the intense competition for land use between indigenous people, the government, and logging, palm oil or acacia plantations.

Conflict between government, commercial and native usage of forests in Southeast Asia is documented by Peluso and Vandergeest, who provide a historical perspective on the politicization of forests in Sarawak, and Bender and Li, who conducted studies on the politics of landscape, forest and resources (Bender, 2002a; Li, 2000; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001). Exploitation of the forest takes the form of logging and the establishment of palm oil or acacia plantations for paper pulp. Wadley and Eilenberg discuss this conflict surrounding forests and governments' involvement (partnership or collusion) with commercial enterprises, and autonomy and identity of fringe forest dwellers (Wadley & Eilenberg, 2005). Barney examines the conflict

between locals and commercial pulp plantation enterprises in Thailand and Sarawak, and Tsing charts the conditions that lead to despair, with the involvement of the government, in the neighbouring Kalimantan forests (Barney, 2004; Tsing, 2005a).

While some studies report on the victimization of rural indigenous people who stand in the way of development; 'highlight woes', 'misery'; others focus on the dynamics of resistance and activism around the issue of the forest; 'see red', 'take on', 'struggle', and how Ibans now use, include and engage with agencies of the government, like the judiciary (Native Tribunal Courts), in their arsenal of tactics of resistance (Aznam, 2005; *Judge: Iban NCR Have "Survived": An In-Depth Analysis of the Rumah Nor Ruling*, 2001; Lal, 1999; Thien, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e, 2007a, 2007b). While Malaysian politicians measure and position indigenous people in relation to linear notions of development; 'on track', 'catch up' or 'left behind' ("Bumi Minorities in Sabah, S'wak to Increase their Economic Stake," 2005; "Bumiputera Minorities Urged to Catch Up," 2005; "Sarawak Right on Track to be Developed State," 2003), other writers focus on marginalized groups in the hinterland or borderlands, negotiating cultural citizenship and belonging with governments in Southeast Asia (Brosius, 2003; Rosaldo, 2003).

This contestation can be abbreviated to a contest between acronyms; JVC versus NCRs. NCR land is a colonial legacy which originated in the Brooke era. The intent of the Brooke government forest policy was to limit unfettered Iban migration in order to contain the conflicts flaring up with other tribes already occupying the land (M. Bujang, 2004; Pringle, 1970; Sanders, 2002). This is what Peluso and Vandergeest calls, the 'racialization of the landscape' (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001: 801). The boundaries were last demarcated in the 1958 land code. The Joint Venture Companies, or JVC, program initiated by the present government aims to convert NCR land into commercial enterprises. Private enterprises enter into an agreement that distributes the profits three-ways, with 60 percent returning to the companies, 30 percent to the NCR owners and 10 percent to the government (Ngidang, 2002). This program effectively converts the many types of cultivated land, including farms of great diversity, to extensive areas of mono-cultural plantations.

This contestation over land and forests has spilled over into the law courts. In 2005, encroachment of NCR land was the subject of more than one hundred court cases pending between native customary rights land holders and Joint Venture Companies, or JVCs, that were granted leases by the State government (2005e). This land ownership problem is widespread. According to Ngidang, estimates of the total percentage of designated NCR land varies from as low as 13 percent to as high as 22

percent of the total area of Sarawak (Ngidang, 2002: 158). Even the lower estimate of 13 percent would cover 1.5 million hectares (Ngidang, 2002: 158). These estimates vary because although 'these provisions allow title to customary lands to be granted to the native owners' (Sanders, 2002: para 3), and although these rights date back to the first *Rajah*, 'in reality, however, Indigenous peoples have not been granted titles under Sarawak land legislation for much of their lands' (Sanders, 2002: para 4). In fact, a lot of the land has not even been mapped or 'demarcated officially' (M. Bujang, 2004: 2). Many of the residents do not have legal titles to the land they occupy. Ambiguities caused by a combination of the absence of legal land titles or official maps, and variations in the interpretation of a land code that originated from the colonial government have exacerbated the intense competition and pressure for the land.

The intensity of these conflicts over the use and ownership of the forest is sparked in part by how the proceeds from exploitation of the forest is channelled. The proceeds derived from the forest are seldom channelled into the hands of the indigenous NCR landowners on whose land a lot of the revenue generation occurs. The NCR owners therefore lose on both counts; they lose the use of their land for their own subsistence or oil palm plantations (Thien, 2007a), and they tend to lose challenges when there are conflicts with companies. When native tribes like the Penans or the Ibans resort to barricading their land from encroachment by companies, the army and police are called in, not to protect the landowners from companies that are trespassing, but to dismantle the barricades (Eaton, 2004: 95; 2007b).

The legal position of the barricades was uncertain as communities could claim they were building them on their own land and it was the companies that were guilty of trespass, an opinion that was upheld by a magistrate's court decision in July 1987. In an attempt to change this position the state government hastily brought in an amendment to the Forest Act that made it illegal to set up a barrier or obstruction on road constructed by a concession holder, or to prevent the removal of such a barrier. Anybody found guilty was liable to a penalty of two years imprisonment and a heavy fine (Eaton, 2004: 95).

The actions of the army, police and state government lawmakers lead many NCR landowners and land rights campaigners to conclude that the Joint Venture Companies (JVC) program the government has introduced legalises some of the more questionable tactics of some logging and plantation companies. The JVC program and

the subsequent actions of agencies of the government lead some to conclude that the government is complicit and in collusion with the private companies in not only destroying the forests, but destroying even oil palm plantations, when they are owned by the natives (Thien, 2007a).

The Malaysian government's plans for Borneo, stem from a perspective of seeing the forest in terms of potential land that no longer has high value exportable timber, and so can be cleared to create plantations. The Prime Minister, Badawi, in an announcement of plans for Sabah and Sarawak in 2005, expressed the goal to develop the agricultural sectors of the two states in Borneo, converting them to advanced, progressive and modern states based on the establishment of plantations ("Sabah dan Sarawak Akan Dijadikan Negeri Pertanian Maju," 2005). If this vision for Sarawak (and Sabah) is achieved, then even more of Sarawak's rainforest and natural biodiversity, except for isolated pockets of national parks, will be destroyed and monocultural plantations established in its place. In this view of Sarawak as landmass suitable for agricultural development, the natural biodiversity is afforded little value at all.

There is an irreconcilable diversity of views of how forests and the land they stand on can or should be managed. Conflicting views of the forest can be symbolized by the contrast between taking pleasure in diversity, and an appreciation for ordered mono-cultural plantations. One side of the conflict values the forest only in terms of the establishment of plantations of a single crop of trees. The other counts riches in the fact that the trees cannot be tabulated or measured. The pleasure of making lists of multiple species, of knowing and being familiar with diversity is contrasted with taking pleasure in the jungle being tamed, reduced to ordered rows of trees. In this ordered plantation the wildlife cannot survive. Very little survives except that which is cultivated. Huge areas of biodiversity are irrevocably lost when the land is converted to large areas of mega plantations. These rows of trees however, are quantifiable and in turn translate to neat rows of figures on a spreadsheet that correlate to a dollar value. Where the value of biodiversity is difficult to calculate, the figures on a spreadsheet measure the trees and land in terms of tonnage and square meter of sawn timber. Once the trees have been logged, the land can be calculated in terms of yield of palm oil or acacia paper pulp per hectare.

### *Conclusion*

Previously, the pua kumbu was the quintessential representation of women's deep and expert knowledge of a vast range of jungle vegetation. It represented weavers' expertise in manipulating stories set in the forest that affirmed the long presence of the Iban

people in the jungle. These cultural stories were woven together with personal stories to form a moral and spiritual claim to the land. In short, the pua kumbu symbolized the Iban's proud and varied history of life in the jungle.

Human intervention in the jungle environment is proceeding at a much faster and more drastic rate than when shifting cultivation was the dominant activity. When jungles metamorphose into plantations, along with the biodiversity goes the raw material for the pua kumbu and the inspiration for the stories and the motifs. The cloth now can be seen to represent the loss of a traditional way of life in the rainforest when people lived in close interaction and knowledge of the ecosystem. With the forest environment fast metamorphosing into plantations, the pua kumbu represents a much more repetitive and limited range of human interactions with nature. This is demonstrated by the use of ready-made synthetic material rather than the arduous and complex processes involved in the use of forest products to make the cloth.

The loss of forest is not only a loss of biodiversity, it is also a gradual loss of the intangible cultural heritage of the Ibans in the form of the body of knowledge surrounding the use of various vegetation from this critical environment. The people no longer live in landscapes and environment that corresponds to venues in stories and myths where key events took place. The natural inspirations that filled the pua kumbu no longer exist, or exist in limited areas. The animals and creatures and other life forms on the cloth do not depict real live and unpredictable chance encounters with the wildlife of the forest.

The pua kumbu can be imagined as a flag draped over this desolate landscape. The pua represents the characteristic richness of biodiversity in this fast-disappearing ecosystem. It symbolizes an ecological system that initially inspired the cloth but no longer dominates. Where previously, the forest formed the object's reason for being, as well as its very fibre, now, in a landscape overtaken by rows upon rows of the same tree, the themes, stories and images the pua kumbu used to depict represent only a vaguely imagined reality of a half-remembered previous existence in the jungle. The cloth becomes a poignant reminder of the loss of a historical lifestyle and ways of interacting with the jungle. It also becomes a stark reminder of the destruction of large tracts of the ecosystem. New meanings articulated around the pua now reflect the new physical realities of the landscape. Changing circumstances now weave new meanings into the cloth.

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## 6 Going Downriver: Museums

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'Going Downriver' holds the particular connotation of contact with the outside world, of movement to the cities – Kuching, Sibü and Miri – of connection with the ocean that leads to lands further afield. 'Going downriver' means contact. It means flow, meeting and action. It holds excitement and it embodies change. Retracing my fieldwork journey downriver serves as an introduction to the theme for this chapter. It mirrors the movement of objects, people and their cultures, in their precarious voyage downriver to an unknown reception at the other end. Museums are one of the meeting points for such flows.

The pua kumbu now crosses cultural boundaries and circulates in downriver locations outside of its original venue of creation in the longhouse. The object is transplanted from the monocultural setting of the Iban longhouse and the cultural and value systems that created it, and repositioned in destinations of mixed race, multi-ethnic, cross-cultural or 'plural monocultural' (Sen, 2007) locales.

This chapter places objects and museums in the centre of contact zones. Contact, is used here in two senses. Clifford's definition of a contact zone is one where multiple players 'challenge and rework a relationship', one where objects become 'sites of a historical negotiation, occasions for an ongoing contact' (Clifford, 1997a: 194). Anna Tsing's model takes the concept of negotiation, challenge and the reworking of a relationship further. She develops the idea of contact to the point where it is characterized by 'systematic misunderstandings', and 'awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak' (Tsing, 2005a: xi). These areas of misunderstandings or friction, are the means in which divergent players work together (Tsing, 2005a: x). Their contact is based on friction. Tsing's perspective on friction is that it is a positive force; friction can be productive (Tsing, 2005a: 1). Tsing and Clifford's ideas of contact zones and friction are applied to Karp's (2006) ideas about the role of museums;

At once facing inward to local constituencies and outward to wider audiences through relations to other museums and sites, these institutions provide ways to mobilize an internationalist - perhaps global - sense of local identities, histories, and concerns. They have become essential forms through which to make statements about history, identity, value, and place to claim recognition. Reproduced, adapted, and transformed globally, museums are not just a place or institution but have become a portable social technology, a set of museological processes through which such statements and claims are represented, embodied, and debated. Whether they define their scope as national, regional, or community-based, museums spaces can become global theatres of real consequence (Karp et al., 2006: 4).

I view objects and museums as lightning rods that ground and centre emotional or political content. Multiple players gather to articulate their cultural and religious identity in attitudes of conflict or in fruitful and respectful negotiations around objects. Primarily of interest in this case are the Iban pua kumbu textile collections in Sarawak and I examine these cloths displayed in ways to engender public admiration in particular museum contexts. The issues surrounding these tribal textiles, are similar to the issues surrounding other more physically imposing objects like monumental burial poles, and are therefore examined as significant contact zones. Three artistic/cultural institutions in Sarawak are chosen specifically to examine the voices these museums/galleries project in multi-cultural/multi-religious Malaysia. These institutions are examined in regards to their expressions and articulations around the (presence or absence) of the pua kumbu object.

This chapter engages with the literature in Museum studies and contributes to the scholarship on material culture, museums and the politics of representation. I document the history and operation of the Sarawak Museum, the Tun Jugah Foundation and the Fort Sylvia Museum, and examine the challenges these institutions face with shifts in the role of museums and the vision of museum directors.

### *Leaving the longhouse*

At the end of our stay in Rumah Garie longhouse, as our new friends are gathering in the living room preparing for our departure, Bangie presents me with a piece of cloth she had woven, and Ensunot hands us necklaces of seeds collected from the forest and

strung together; she says they are talismans to safeguard us on our journey. Some of the weavers walk us down the concrete steps that lead from the longhouse compound to the river. They watch us as we get on board the longboat with two of Bangie's neighbours. We push off and the women stand waving at the water's edge until we disappear around the first bend.

One of Bangie's neighbours, an athletic man, spent an entire Sunday working on a piece of wood, perfecting the contours and lines of the object, checking the alignment, making sure the object was perfectly straight. He worked on the object as if it was a work of art, sculpting the wood to make a finely crafted object of beauty. We discovered later that he was making a wooden beater, which is one of the many tools needed for weaving. The object he was loving crafting was made specially for his wife, who would use the beater to make another work of art, the pua kumbu. In this one object, the traditional work and roles of men and women come into contact.

The husband's artistry with wood is reflected in his expert handling of another craft, his longboat. On our journey, he aims the longboat with incredible accuracy, judging distance, depth and speed, navigating through rocks jutting out of the river. Confident in his local knowledge of the area, he deftly avoids rocks that are barely submerged and treat us to an exquisite journey downriver. It is morning, there is a gentle rain on the water. The yellow butterflies flying by are so big they look like little birds. As they flap past, their wings are almost audible, and I feel the breeze they generate as they brush past, leaving a gentle sensation on the skin. What took four hours of hard labour, pulling the boat practically all the way up the river, takes one hour to get downstream to the main river, the Balleh. Compared to the boat we travelled upriver in, this boat taking us downstream is slightly bigger, has a more powerful motor and does not require constant bailing. Speeding through the rapids is exhilarating. The boat clears the rocks with millimeters to spare, and often, not even that. The narrow surf-ski-like vessel is extremely unsteady, but to succumb to the temptation to grip the sides of the boat for balance would almost certainly result in crushed or lost fingers. The journey marks the end of our stay in the longhouse.

Bangie and Nancy, globetrotting weavers, begin their travels to world centres the way that ours ended. They begin with a longboat journey downriver to the confluence of Kain River and the Balleh River, marked by a distinct line of a clear



stream entering cafe latte coloured water <sup>38</sup>. They reach the mud bank where we had first arrived to wait for the Kapit express ferry to take them further downriver. From that point on, the scene is one of logs piled along the riverbanks to be transported downriver to sawmills.

Longhouses on the main stretch of the rivers are being modernized. Some have been completely rebuilt to resemble rows of concrete terrace houses seen all over urban Malaysia. All the separate apartments of the longhouse are built and painted in uniform colours and design features. Often the old wooden structure is left to disintegrate not far from the new structure. The closer to Kapit we get, the more modern and permanent the structures look.

Longboats moored on the riverbanks are still the only forms of transportation, being perfectly constructed and suited for the river conditions. Even though we are closer to Kapit, there are still no roads connecting these river villages to the town. It was not until the 1970s that the first road linking Kuching with Brunei was constructed. Prior to that time, transport in Sarawak meant the ocean and the many rivers that flowed into the South China Sea.

Travellers from upriver who do not take their own boats, including us, enter Kapit town on an ancient ferry. The ferry is a capsule with tattered seats that plies the Balleh River bringing upriver folk to town for their supplies. It is a lifeline for the upper reaches of the Balleh. The ferry capsule is often the first location where the various tribal populations living in monocultural longhouses or settlements in the Balleh region come into contact with other tribes and races. The Balleh ferry for example, is run by a Chinese company, manned by a Chinese conductor / ticket seller, who unfortunately is none too likable or friendly to his tribal passengers. From Kapit, travellers have to catch another river ferry that takes them downriver. The river widens up and the landscape gets progressively more industrial, until one arrives at Sibul, an untidy, predominantly Foochow Chinese timber-processing town. It is a wealthy but rough frontier town. For people from Kapit it is the big city. The next part of the journey is on the open seas. Bangie and Nancy normally opt to fly from Sibul to Kuching; for the five-hour sea journey is usually very rough and choppy, and river-dwelling Bangie is prone to seasickness. After their trips to America and Paris, their journey concludes this way.

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<sup>38</sup> Sungai Kain entering the Balleh River. A clear stream entering the murky muddy waters of a river marked by deforestation further upriver. This confluence symbolizes the circulation of the pua kumbu leaving Iban locales and entering the plural monocultural locales downriver. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreelimited.blogspot.com/>

### *Kelirieng*

This part of the chapter explores an object that is not Iban, but a Kayan object of social and cultural significance. It was acquired by the government museum in Sarawak at great expense, but the object now provokes contestation and friction. This object studied as a contact zone serves as an introduction to cross cultural articulations around the pua kumbu.

A renowned warrior in Sarawak's Belaga district, grief stricken by the sudden death of his young daughter, commissioned elaborate burial poles and a hut to be constructed in her honour. The funerary objects were carved and erected in the forest as a proper resting place for her. Five years of skilled labour, from the time the selected tropical hardwood trees were felled, to the final sanding of the intricate carvings, resulted in the magnificently carved *kelirieng* and *salong* (burial poles and hut) <sup>39</sup>. In the 1970s, overseas interest in ethnographic objects led to the negotiation of sale of these particular burial poles. The condition of the sale required that the object be dismantled and removed from its original location in the forest in Long Segaham and shipped overseas.

The death of the young daughter and the associated grief that occasioned the creation of this object, the skill and inspiration of the artists in designing and crafting these poles and the erection of the *kelirieng* in a favoured place in the rainforest in Long Segaham, all made this an object of cultural and historical significance to the people of the Belaga district. When negotiations proceeded with overseas buyers for the sale and removal of the object from the country, multiple players from the wider community became involved, and the status of this object was raised from that of local and marginal cultural significance to one of significance and value to the state of Sarawak. It effectively became a part of the cultural heritage of Sarawak. (Note on the object: The *kelirieng* consists of two logs hollowed out and joined together to form the burial poles. The *salong* or hut is also made of wood and is placed above the two poles. For the purposes of this paper, the three elements (two poles and the burial hut) will be referred to as one consolidated ethnographic burial object.)

The imminent sale and removal of the poles, mobilized Sarawak museum officials. According to Lucas Chin, the director of the Sarawak Museum at the time, the museum could not match the prices offered by overseas collectors (Chin, 2004). 'The

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<sup>39</sup> *Kelirieng* and *salong*. Magnificent burial poles and burial hut, in the grounds of the Sarawak Museum, Tun Abdul Razak Building. (Photograph by Audrey Low). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeimited.blogspot.com/>

Antiquities Ordinance came into force in 1958, antiquities and cultural properties had been illegally taken out of the country because the museum did not make any great efforts in the past to seek adequate funds from the government for acquisition. ... It was only in recent years that more funds were provided for acquisitions' (Chin et al., 1983: 9). Fortunately, after long and delicate negotiations with the elders and customary owners of the burial poles, a favourable outcome for all parties was agreed upon. Museum staff entered into agreements with tribal groups for the granting of sacred religious objects. The tribal elders decided to relinquish the poles, and present the composite object as a gift to the museum and the people of Sarawak. The conditions of this gift were that customary law regarding the removal of sacred burial objects had to be carefully observed. This involved an elaborate process of ritual prohibitions, taboos, or *pemalis*, to propitiate spirits. Chin relates that non-tribal museum employees were involved in animist ceremonies for the granting of the burial poles to the museum. These animist and non-Islamic rituals associated with this object were later to become a point of friction for the Sarawak Museum under a subsequent and different leadership (interviews August, Chin, 2004; Said, 2004b). After complex culturally sensitive negotiations, came the logistic difficulties of transporting overland, what is effectively a hollowed out tropical hardwood tree with intricate carving along its whole length. The journey was over rough terrain and down rapids-strewn rivers. Lucas Chin, now retired, still remembers the adventures of its acquisition in 1972 as an exhilarating component of his job as director of the museum (interviews August, Chin, 2004).

When the gift was finalized, there was celebration. Acquiring the poles was a symbolic coup. This event, occurring about a decade after independence from the British, coincided with Euro-American museum professionals' contentions with 'both the physical ownership of objects [or "cultural property"] and the right of representing their meaning' (Stocking, 1985: 11). In this case, individuals from a newly independent nation had mobilized to prevent an object of significant cultural heritage from being shipped over to the west. Lucas Chin and the museum staff overcame obstacles, and in so doing, wrested a prized heritage from the international market in ethnographic objects. The museum staff had in effect managed to retain physical ownership of the object in Sarawak and maintain control over the representation of its meaning, in line with developments elsewhere in the museum world.

For Chin, it was a personal coup because he had earlier identified and codified the system for salvaging Sarawak's objects of cultural heritage, (which included the burial poles). Not only did he have to contend with stiff competition from the

international market for tribal objects, there was also the threats brought about by land development;

Survey has already been carried out on the burial poles (*kelirieng*) and burial huts (*salong*) in the Upper Rajang. It is hoped that as many of these structures as possible will be salvaged and re-sited before that part of the mighty Rajang River is flooded as the result of the implementation of the hydroelectric projects in the area (Chin et al., 1983: 9).

The combined sustained efforts in overcoming all the difficulties by people and agencies that would not normally have any contact increased the object's relevance and meaning. The burial poles effectively became a contact zone, bringing together multiple players in the wider community. Some of the players brought in to this contact zone were the customary owners, the carvers and artists, the aristocratic family that commissioned the poles, together with the Malaysian public and the local government. Islamic leaders, shamans, the museum staff involved in shamanism as part of the bequest ceremony, and even the museum grounds as the venue for a non-Islamic funerary object, also became part of this contact zone. This contact zone expanded to cover other non-Islamic objects in the museum's collection.

### **Entangled history: The Sarawak Museum in transition**

The Sarawak Museum founded by Charles Brooke in the late 1800s began as a natural history, ethnographic and anthropological museum (Chin et al., 1983) <sup>40</sup>. Alfred Wallace, the Victorian naturalist, was influential in the early stages of its establishment, having 'spent two years (1854 to 1856) in Sarawak where he wrote his seminal paper on natural selection' (Chin et al., 1983: 1). After the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the museum came under the auspices of the Sarawak state government. The Sarawak Museum, in its present configuration, consists of eight (existing and proposed) buildings. These include the original Georgian structure, called the 'Old Building', and the 'new wing' incorporated in 1983, and named after the second Prime Minister of Malaysia, called the Tun Abdul Razak building (Chin et al., 1983; *The Sarawak Museum Old Building*, 2005). The salvaged Kayan burial poles stand at the entrance of

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<sup>40</sup> The Sarawak Museum, Old (original) Building. Built by Charles Brooke, the second white *rajah* of Sarawak in the late 1880s. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

this new wing. During my visits to the museum in 2004 and 2005, the collection of pua kumbus were removed from public view, being held in storage in preparation for transfer to their new specialised venue. The pua kumbu textiles, along with the other textiles in the collection, are exhibited in a separate building away from the old museum. The 'Pavilion', an old building dating back to the turn of the century now houses the textile museum.

The original two-storey building, houses a natural history section on the ground floor, displaying insects, snakes, stuffed orang-utans and other mammals. The museum is eclectic in its focus. According to Chin, 'under the initiative of the late Tom Harrisson, ... its activities in their various research fields were intensified. Qualified scholars were invited to carry out anthropological studies on the major ethnic groups, archaeological research was initiated, and studies of the fauna, especially the orangutan and the marine turtles were carried out' (Chin et al., 1983: 1). The exhibits reflect this wide focus. The upper floor houses a collection of woodcarvings, fertility sculptures, mats, hats and metalwork. Musical instruments are displayed in cases – *sape*, (a stringed instrument), drums and wind instruments, as are basketwork, and weapons from various tribes. Also on display are framed black and white photographs of rituals, festivals and ceremonies from the various tribes all over Sarawak. The upper floor also houses a full-size replica of two family *biliks* or apartments in a longhouse. This exhibit, established in 1968 'has since become a very popular exhibit both to tourists and Malaysians alike' (Chin et al., 1983: 11). The visitor can enter and climb the Iban log/step ladder to the upper floors, and experience the precarious (though solid) construction of the structure. Once inside the longhouse, the visitor can see human skulls hanging from the rafters, Chinese heritage jars and other valuable Iban objects in the context of the longhouse. Innovative for its time, this replica longhouse was the contribution of Benedict Sandin, the first indigenous Iban curator.

A salvage paradigm, loss discourse or a melancholic receding view (Buchli, 2002a: 9; Clifford, 1987) characterized the period when the museum was founded. Even though the museum was built during the colonial period, it was not designed primarily to celebrate British achievements in terms of the subject of the exhibitions. Nevertheless, the museum paid tribute indirectly to the ideals of 'good Victorian British colonial rule'; of 'idealistic philosophy, rooted in the principles of nineteenth-century liberalism', 'ruling the country for the ultimate benefit of the inhabitants' guided by 'humane, idealistic ethic' and philanthropy (Pringle, 1970: 347, 344, 346). The Charles Brooke administration presented what was perceived to be a model of good governance of native populations, by the act of salvaging, preserving and ensuring the survival of

Dayak cultural expressions and cultural heritage. This is even as the various Brookes rulers acknowledged that, ironically, it was their presence that was the cause of the perceived threat to the existence and continuity of those cultures. The Brooke administration privileged and exoticized the indigenous groups over and above the Malays and the Chinese. According to Chin, Charles Brooke was not particularly concerned with preserving or displaying the cultural traditions of the other races (Chin, 2004). This is the justification used by the Chinese and Muslims for the establishment of the Chinese History Museum and the Islamic Museum in separate locations in Kuching (Chin, 2004). The three Brooke rulers also privileged the Iban 'uncontaminated' by western influences; They regarded the 'lithe, long-haired Iban from upriver as a more attractive specimen than the Iban who had achieved a mission education' (Pringle, 1970: 325). Pringle explains this attitude as one of 'non-interference with local custom' (Pringle, 1970: 348). There was a notion of education 'spoiling' the Ibans, (Pringle, 1970: 331); 'the longer he is kept from the influences of civilization the better off it will be for him, for the good cannot be introduced without the bad' (The Rajah's "quasi-official historians", Baring-Gould and Bampfylde, 1908, in Pringle, 1970: 325-6). Therefore, one of the effects of Charles Brooke's government was to 'preserve and perhaps even to accentuate traditional Iban culture' (Pringle, 1970: 322).

The choice of museum directors over a period of a century reflects the changing focus of research and exhibition agenda. The transition from a focus on natural science to ethnography is reflected in the area of expertise of the curators as listed in the Sarawak Museum website (*List of Former and Present Curators of the Sarawak Museum since 1886 to Present*, 2005). The first three curators in the 1890s were natural history scientists; Lewis, an entomologist, Haviland, a botanist, and Bartlett, a zoologist. Under Tom Harrisson, curator from 1947-1966, the museum shifted focus. 'Under the initiative of the late Tom Harrisson, ... qualified scholars were invited to carry out anthropological studies on the major ethnic groups, archaeological research was initiated, and studies of the fauna, especially the orangutan and the marine turtles were carried out' (Chin et al., 1983: 1). Although the museum started to focus on ethnology under Harrisson, it was not until the late 1960s that a curator with formal qualifications in ethnology was installed in the office. Under Benedict Sandin (1967 – 1974) the bulk of collection and exhibition turned to ethnology.

The choice of directors also reflects the changing power structure in Sarawak politics. It comes as little surprise that from 1888 to 1966, all the directors were British. What happens after the mid-1960s is more revealing. The first Malaysian director after

Tom Harrisson, was Benedict Sandin, an indigenous Iban (Chin et al., 1983: 3). He was followed by Lucas Chin, a Chinese (1974 – 1991), and Peter Kedit, also an Iban (1991-1996). Kedit was succeeded by Sanib Said, a Malay from West Malaysia (1997 – present). This change in racial background of the directors is a reflection of the power distribution in the political arena. Immediately after the formation of Malaysia in 1963, an Iban held the highest office in the state, that of Chief Minister. Political infighting and disunity led to the demise of that position, and since 1980, the position has been held by a Melanau Malay, Taib Mahmud. (For a discussion on the distribution of power in Sarawak in the early years, please refer to M. Leigh, 1983).

The salvage paradigm of privileging Sarawak's Dayak and tribal past, a legacy from the colonial period, was continued under the directorship of Chin. This attitude is almost completely reversed in the present directorship of Sanib Said. Chin in 1983 proclaimed that 'What we have accumulated in the museum really is the best and most comprehensive collection of Borneon materials ever deposited in one single place' (Chin et al., 1983: 3);

The objectives of the museum were then as now, to be an all round museum and not to overspecialize; to try and be interested in everything; and to collect everything - plants, snakes, butterflies, as well as, porcelains, arts and prehistoric artifacts (Chin et al., 1983: 2).

In 2004, more than forty years after Sarawak's Independence / the formation of Malaysia, and after seven years in the position of Museum Director, Sanib Said identified as his most pressing challenge, the legacy of colonialism. Eschewing the intervening post-colonial period of thirty years (1966-1996) under the stewardship of Sandin, Chin and Kedit, the present director likens the museum to a 'dinosaur, old and famous but very sick' (Said, 2004a). In his seminar entitled, *Modernizing the Colonial Museum*, (Said, 2004a) Said outlines the need for the institution to evolve from a colonial museum to one that presents contemporary expressions of Malaysian culture and identity: 'The philosophy and management of the old Sarawak Museum, which had not changed much since 1906, compounded the challenges I had to face. It was retrogressing and losing its reputation in the country... It was stuck in the old colonial-Victorian age while the country had gained independence many decades earlier' (Said, 2004a). This approach is compatible with corresponding developments in Western museums: 'increasingly, Western museologists are calling into question the romantic exoticism that has in fact motivated much of anthropological museology; increasingly,

they have insisted on the need to represent the problems of present day life in the Third World (Stocking, 1985: 12).

Modernity was one issue. Representing the museum as an institution that is compatible with Islamic values is another challenge. In 1983, Chin wrote, ‘it is the responsibility of the curator and his staff to search, acquire and to protect antiquities and historical monuments which form part and parcel of our national heritage’ (Chin et al., 1983: 2). Many objects of Sarawak’s heritage tend to be animist and non-Islamic in nature. The dominant national discourse had long been the ideas of development, and cultural and religious pluralism. In the mid-2000s however, there was a discernible change in the museum. Pluralism was seen to be sidelined in favour of privileging Islam above other religions and consequently, a greater emphasis was given to representing a monocultural Malay–Islamic voice as an expression of the Malaysian identity. Being a government institution functioning in a nation that characterizes itself as Islamic, the challenge then became for the museum to cater to both Islamic and tribal values. The two were and are seen as incompatible by Sanib Said. In this situation, ‘the study of material culture becomes an effective way to understand power, not as some abstraction, but as the mode by which certain forms or people become realized, often at the expense of others’ (Daniel Miller, 2005: 19).

Chin’s approach to museums fits in to what Cameron (1991) terms “temples,” that is places and displays that inspire wonder. Said in contrast can be seen to thrust the museum into a (highly contested) “forum” model, in terms of exhibition design, decisions, and more significantly, omissions (Cameron in Karp & Lavine, 1991: 3). In Said’s museum forum, tribal (non-Islamic) objects in a government museum become, in Clifford’s terms, zones of ongoing historical negotiation and contact (Clifford, 1997b). Another way of looking at tribal objects in the Sarawak museum is to think of them as causing what Anna Tsing calls, ‘friction’ or ‘grip’ (Tsing, 2005a). The tribal and animist objects become ‘sticky’ in their encounters or contact between museum and tribal representatives. The friction evident in encounters around the burial poles give an indication of some of the issues, challenges and transitions currently facing the museum.

Changes started becoming palpable in the Sarawak Museum’s stewardship of the burial poles in the early 2000s. The Sarawak Museum, so crucial to the ‘salvaging’ of the burial poles in 1972, now deals with the messy and entangled heritage issues the poles raise. The triumphant (and tolerant) attitude of the 1970s morphed to one where the burial object now causes consternation among some quarters in the population, offended by the fact that a funerary entity graces the entrance of the State Museum



(Chin, 2004). The object is seen as pagan, and as such, its commanding and prominent placement in the grounds of a government-funded institution is highly controversial and sensitive. One of the more challenging issues, apart from the morbid nature of the object, is that the poles are perceived to be incompatible with the tenets of Islam. The presence of the funerary object, attained after museum staff, as representatives of the government, performed and observed shamanic and animist rituals, is a clear declaration of a non-Islamic aspect of history. This history of paganism is not how some sectors of the population want to imagine their community or their country, and this contestation finds expression around the museum, particularly in its role in representing the country.

Contestation in Kuching surrounds objects included, excluded or removed from the museum, and therefore, symbolically removed from national or state discourse. Karp and Lavine argue that 'exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural "others" are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and "other" (Karp & Lavine, 1991: 15). In *The Traffic in Culture*, Marcus and Myers argue that 'Writings on art come out of a concern for the ways in which such objects have been used to represent or signify identity in a range of contexts - personal, local, and national. In this capacity, art can valorize or exclude minority identities' (Myers, 2001: 28). Tribal objects in Sarawak, once secure in an environment of cultural and religious pluralism, now exist within a discourse that favours and privileges Islamic values. Regarding the burial poles, conditions were agreed on and appropriate prohibitions observed to grant the Sarawak Museum stewardship of the object in perpetuity. Changed attitudes in museum staff towards the burial poles and other sacred religious tribal objects symbolise what can be perceived as broken promises. The tribal population in Sarawak extrapolate that the fate of their objects in the government museum reflects their relative loss of power in state politics (Linggi, 2004). Those broken promises regarding sacred objects have not gone unnoticed. What Muslim curators do to reconcile Islamic values with tribal or pagan artifacts, such as shamanic objects and objects which depict figures, including the burial poles and pua kumbus, are indications of how tribal people fit into the Islamic discourse of nationalism.

Broken promises regarding the stewardship of objects, symbolise promises broken since 1962, when fifty one tribal elders in the (then) Third Division in Sarawak gathered to decide on conditions for a 'yes' vote to join with Malaya, to form the nation Malaysia in 1963 ("51 Chiefs Support Plan: 13 Points to Be Put Before Commission,"

1962). The fifty-one Chiefs representing over 100,000 Sea Dayaks / Ibans, put forward thirteen points before the Cobbold commission. One of these points was that the Chief Minister or 'the head of state of Sarawak should be a Native of Sarawak' ("51 Chiefs Support Plan: 13 Points to Be Put Before Commission," 1962). The word 'native', it is now argued by various Dayak politicians in Kapit, has been deliberately misunderstood. To the Dayaks, it means an indigenous or tribal Sarawakian. The unspoken meaning implies a non-Muslim. To others in power it is taken to mean anyone born in Sarawak.

'Systematic misunderstandings' and 'awkward engagements' instead of being the source of breakdown in communication, can, in Tsing's model, be the means in which divergent players work together. Karp and Lavine propose that 'if the museum community continues to explore this multicultural and intercultural terrain consciously and deliberately, in spite of the snares that may await, it can play a role in reflecting and mediating the claims of various groups, and perhaps help construct a new idea of ourselves as a nation' (Karp & Lavine, 1991: 8). That is plausible in the future in Sarawak, but in the meantime, the Iban response to having their grasp on power usurped is to take their objects somewhere else other than the government museums and institutions of culture. Their actions are inline with Hall's concept of articulation: The Ibans represent themselves, in their own locations, with their own financial resources and agendas, articulating their tribal culture and identity. They are, in Hall's words, beginning 'to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position' (Hall, 1996: 142). They wrest control of 'the means of representing' (Karp & Lavine, 1991: 15). The next section deals with the Iban response to being marginalized in a government institution where once they were privileged. It deals with tribal groups speaking out, giving voice to a distinct cultural identity.

### **Voice and ethnographic authority: The Tun Jugah Foundation Gallery in Kuching**

One of the tallest buildings visible in the skyline of the central business district of Kuching is the Tun Jugah building. The top floors house the offices of the Tun Jugah Foundation and the commercial interests of the powerful and wealthy, extended Tun Jugah family. The foundation is managed by Tun Jugah's son, Leonard Linggi. Tun Jugah's legacy extends to his grandson, Alex Linggi, who is a member of parliament for Kapit. The family is positioned at the helm of Iban society in Kuching. They command a prominent and influential position in society. They are stalwarts on the local political

and economic scene. (For more on the history of this family, please refer to Vinson Sutlive's biography of Tun Jugah (V. H. Sutlive, 1992) and Michael Leigh's 'The Rising Moon' (M. Leigh, 1988)). The family is independently wealthy and there are adequate funds to support the various works of the organization. The Foundation funds art projects, cultural heritage work and the Dayak Cultural Foundation. It conducts research on Dayak performing arts, dances and other aspects of Dayak cultural heritage. It works in collaboration with renown ethnomusicologists, local and international (Brakel & Matusky, 2002; Chong, 2000). The foundation teaches city Dayak children the finer aspects of their rich cultural heritage. The children are given the opportunity to perform as dancers or musicians in the Dayak Cultural Foundation Ethnic Orchestra.

The first three floors of the building from ground level house exclusive upmarket department stores. The fourth and sixth floors house the cultural arm of the foundation. The fourth floor is the venue of the formal gallery/exhibition space, library, live weaving gallery and offices of researchers working on documenting and transcribing Iban oral literature and history. The sixth floor houses the Dayak Cultural Foundation which focuses on Dayak performing arts. It is a repository of formal dance costumes and regalia and the many, mostly percussion, instruments of a traditional Iban orchestra (which is not unlike the Indonesian gamelan instruments). Where the weaving gallery on the fourth floor is a place where women are focussed in quiet contemplation on their cloth, the sixth floor is the venue where boisterous urban Dayak teenagers congregate to learn traditional Iban dance and musical instruments. In the breaks between dance lessons of serene and gentle swaying movements, or the hypnotic trance-like music on the Iban orchestra, the children rehearse their hip hop dance routines, jumping acrobatically from one end of the room to the other. The vitality of Iban cultural expressions is evident at both levels.

The gallery and offices of the textile and research department is accessible only by appointment. Access to the secured formal exhibition gallery, behind locked glass doors, is through the open weaving gallery, where about twenty women work on their individual puas<sup>41</sup>. A visitor to the gallery has to take their shoes off at the entrance, and proceed through the weaving gallery in the company of a guide. This guide, usually one of the office staff taking time out of other duties, will unlock the glass doors, switch on

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<sup>41</sup> The weaving gallery at the Tun Jugah Foundation in Kuching, reminiscent of the longhouse gallery, recreated in the city. The entrance to the formal gallery is through the weaving gallery. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation).

the lights, remove the protective cloth covering from several flat glass frames of particularly rare pua kumbus, and stay to answer questions. The visitors are then generally left to study the objects. Although the gallery is 'open' to the general public, there is very little publicity attached to it. There are no advertisements either inside or outside the building, nor is it set up for streams of visitors. The lack of publicity and restricted access effectively limits the reach of the Iban voice in Kuching and places it off the main itinerary of residents' or visitors' experience of Kuching. The fact that it is accessible by appointment only contributes to the low impact the Iban gallery has on the psyche of Kuching. Access is rarefied, privileged and restricted.

The gallery showcases the private collection of the wealthy Tun Jugah / Linggi family network. Giant Chinese ceramic jars dominate the floor space. In one corner, there is a display of Tun Jugah's office and work paraphernalia. There is his desk, portraits and medals. One section has a mannequin displaying warrior clothing and accessories – a clouded leopard cat breastplate, a hornbill feather scabbard, and a shell belt <sup>42</sup>. The major collection however, is of pua kumbus <sup>43</sup>. Pua kumbus are displayed in glass cases with subdued lighting, and weaving tools are dotted around the gallery. There are walls with framed full-size pua kumbus, and other puas in sliding flat wood-and-glass cases/frames. Each frame is numbered with a corresponding reference placed at the side of the collection. The numerous puas are supplemented by display cases of valuable beads, some configured into jewellery. The puas and beads in particular, reference women's art and creativity. They celebrate the work of their hands, mind and spirit.

The collection can be characterized as an extensive private collection of an aristocratic Iban family's heirloom objects rather than an exhibition of objects arranged around a theme. In the "boutique lighting" of the gallery, the objects are presented as treasures and works of art, and laid out in "jewellery box" display <sup>44</sup>. They 'impart wonder from outside, to give the object a sense of mystery that is derived not from itself but from the apparatus of commercial display' (Greenblatt in Karp & Lavine, 1991: 18). Greenblatt argues that 'boutique lighting... provides an instance in which the spectacle

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<sup>42</sup> Frozen in time, a warrior breastplate made out of a clouded leopard, displayed in the Tun Jugah Foundation gallery. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation).

<sup>43</sup> A pua kumbu occupying pride of place at the gallery. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation). To view the photo, please go to <http://papayatreeelimited.blogspot.com/>

<sup>44</sup> The Tun Jugah Foundation Gallery – jewellery box display and boutique lighting. (Photograph by Audrey Low, with permission from the Tun Jugah Foundation).

of possession is presented as if it were the mystique of the object (Karp & Lavine, 1991: 18). This mystique of the objects and collection is evident in the gallery.

Whereas the formal gallery keeps the treasured objects locked, the weaving gallery plays host to the live treasures; the legacy the women carry with them and the new expressions of culture they create through the weaving and sharing of knowledge about the pua kumbu. At the gallery, approximately twenty women weave not only for demonstration purposes, but a great deal of genuine teaching, learning and mentoring processes occur within the confines of the weaving gallery. Siah, daughter of Tun Jugah travels between the Kapit area and Kuching mentoring both weaving centres, acting in her capacity as 'consultant on adat and rites relating to pua', (*Tun Jugah Foundation*, 2006). (It was during one of her trips to Kapit that I was fortunate enough to be able to meet her. Especially when the meeting occurred at a strategic moment in the midst of my negotiations with Dennis and Garie for travel arrangement to go upriver to Rumah Garie from Kapit). This practice of mentoring would have taken place in many traditional settings in longhouse galleries. At the Tun Jugah foundation, the weavers experiment with new designs of their own, and try out new techniques, but generally they make copies of old pieces and learn old techniques. When completed, the weavers have ownership of the puas they weave, but they can choose to display them in the temporary pua display area. Old pieces and new creations decorate the looms and walls of the working gallery/studio.

It is quite rare to find a scenario where there is extensive weaving in most of the apartments in longhouses today. There has not been a comprehensive survey of the state of this craft, but several feature news articles in the early 1990s discussed this situation; Munan states that 'The craft of *kebat* weaving is no longer common. Today's experts are mostly middle-aged; not many young women have the interest or the patience required to learn weaving.' ('Iban Weaving - A Dying Craft?', Munan, 1994). Tay goes further and proclaims "Pua Kumbu' Weaving a Dying Art in the Undup' (Tay, 1994). Empiang Jabu 'denied that the Iban art of 'pua kumbu' weaving was dying. 'Only shortsighted people will say that it is a dying art,' she said at the opening of 'The New Dimension', a Gawai weaving display by Fabriko at Kuching Hilton' ("Pua Kumbu' Weaving is Alive," 1993).

Whatever the actual state, it is notable that the master weavers that were involved in the 1993 exhibition were the same ones that dominate the artform in Sarawak in the late 2000s. These weavers were Bangie and Nancy - the very same weavers I had travelled to visit. Dominance of the art by such a few weavers places the art in a very precarious situation. In 1994, Munan reported a weaver, Madam Tawa of

Rumah Lachau, an expert weaver who learnt the art from her mother, saying; 'I'd teach any girl!', 'But they're all too busy with school work' (Munan, 1994).

In contrast to the 1990s, one of the weavers I interviewed in the weaving gallery in the 2000s, a younger weaver in her twenties, told me that she was placed on the waiting list for two-years before she was finally granted a place to learn the art full-time at the foundation. The reversal of the situation Munan encountered in the 1990s, is in a large part fuelled by the activities of the foundation. The foundation, for its part has revitalized and recreated the teaching and mentoring practices in an urban context, above a shopping mall.

In September 2004, The Tun Jugah Foundation hosted a three-day textile workshop on natural indigo dyeing with international participants. The aims of the workshop, as stated by the director of the foundation, Margaret Linggi, were to 'enable local weavers to learn and acquire knowledge and skills on new dyeing techniques using indigo as well as on new techniques and skills in processing the natural indigo dye' ("Tun Jugah Foundation Holds Indigo Dyeing Workshop," 2004). The article reported that she 'hoped that the workshop would act as a venue for cultural exchange in weaving and natural dyeing techniques between weavers from Sarawak, Malaysia and Bali, Indonesia'. This workshop was one of many that the foundation organizes for the 'preservation and promotion of traditional weaving activities, both at local and international levels', including a pua kumbu competition and exhibition on August 22, 2003. The stated objective of this textile workshop was to share knowledge about scientific and traditional techniques centred on cloth.

The foundation in its activities and its stated mission has become a site of articulation of Iban identity. In the socio-political climate and context, all these activities; the indigo dyeing workshop and the daily 'live weaving demonstrations', could also be interpreted as non-controversial performances and assertions of distinctness from the 'majority'/Malay *bumiputera* category of citizenship. The weaving gallery and the adjoining research area have effectively become zones where this distinction is performed and the vitality of the Iban culture asserted, quietly hidden away from constant public gaze. The various arms of the foundation have become a zone of contact, a hub where international guest artists, weavers, oral historians and researchers in the field of Iban studies gather. Local artists interact with international visitors, and share techniques, as well as, discuss strategies on articulations of cultural identity in their respective countries. Contact is regional, international and intercultural in nature, rather than inter-racial or inter-tribal, as neither the Sarawak

Museum nor the foundation museum function as a site for dialogue between the races and tribes in Sarawak.

When the pua kumbu object circulates through the foundation it becomes political. The cloth plays its part in political tactics. The weaver's art has become part of the jostling and jockeying for position in the political realm. The pua kumbu has become a platform to define a tribal, indigenous, minority *bumiputera* group. Expressed around the cloth are statements about being Malaysian and distinctly Iban and proudly indigenous. The object is presented as a tribal and 'primitive' object, yet it is sophisticated enough to have a long established place in the international art world, (albeit in what is labelled the *primitive* category). This object fits into the *bumiputera* label, but it is older than the nation. It is not Malay and it predates Islam. The Ibans identify as a people who have had a presence in the land that dates back well before the state of Sarawak was formed, and that statement of multigenerational, continued and historical presence in the land is asserted around the cloth.

The political aims of the foundation include activism in land rights and the achievement of economic parity with other *bumiputeras*. The aims include solving issues of poverty, under-development and of inequitable distribution of national wealth to populations on the margins. The tactics include asserting uniqueness and difference. They push for the government to recognize them not only as *bumiputeras* but also as minority *bumiputera* citizens of Malaysia.

Leonard Linggi was one of the key voices calling for a fairer distribution of the national GDP to reflect the proportion of native tribes of Sarawak, or minority *bumiputera*, to majority / Malay *bumiputera* population (A. H. Bujang, 2003). In 2003, the Dayak Chamber of Commerce and Industry, DCCI, under the leadership of Leonard Linggi, the president, asserted in Kuala Lumpur, in a meeting with the Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, that the Dayaks, together with the Kadazan-Dusun in Sabah, form three percent of the population, and therefore, deserve three percent of the GDP.

The object is seen by Ibans in the foundation as providing a relatively accurate indication of the status, positioning or situation of the Iban group in contemporary state (i.e. provincial) and national discourse. Disrespect shown the cloth is interpreted as disrespect towards Ibans. Malaysians on the mainland or Semenanjung Malaysia are, on the whole, unaware of its existence. The treatment of the object in non-Iban venues becomes representative and symbolic of attitudes towards the Ibans.

In 2004 and 2005, the Sarawak museum's entire collection of pua kumbu along with several other tribal animist objects displaying anatomically correct features, were covered or removed from the active public exhibition area. The explanation from the museum was that the cloths were removed from the old museum building so that the pua kumbu, together with all the other textiles in the museum's collection, like the Malay *songket*, could be gathered into a dedicated textile museum to be housed in the newly renovated Pavillion building. In 2004, Datin Linggi tried to gain access to several antique pua kumbu in the museum's collection for her research (Linggi, 2004: series of interviews in August, 2004). She was informed by a museum staff that the museum could not account for the whereabouts of every piece of pua kumbu in the entire collection. Eventually, in 2006 the collection was rehoused in a new building and what appeared to be sinister machinations turned out to be a pragmatic temporary removal of the pua for the purposes of relocating the collection to a different venue.

In the intervening two years however, in the absence of what some Ibans considered credible official explanations, the mystery of the missing pua kumbu generated many explanations. One that gained currency was that this removal of tribal, animist, non-Islamic artefacts reflected government attitudes towards tribal people in Sarawak. From this development in one government agency they, rightly or wrongly, extrapolated their own social and political positioning in the state. A shift in curatorial attitude reflected a shift in government attitudes to tribal people. They discerned that Ibans and other tribes, previously privileged in the institution when it was a 'colonial museum', were effectively being sidelined from the mainstream thrust of the museum. They interpreted the removal of tribal objects as evidence of the government downplaying tribal presence in favour of Islamic articulations in the state or national discourse. The removal was seen as a precursor of further changes to come, namely the Islamization of the museum.

### **Presenting a celebratory history: The Fort Sylvia Museum, Kapit**

Fort Sylvia was built in 1880 by the White *Rajahs* to control 'hostile' or 'warring' Dayaks in the Kapit region from further migration into the Rejang and Balleh rivers. Kapit is a regional town in the interior of Sarawak. In 2005, with the benefits of motorized vessels, it still took up to eight hours of solid travel from Kuching on a series of seagoing and riverboats. The Ibans, as discussed in chapter one, migrated from Kalimantan into what is now Sarawak, in the 1600s. Later in the 1800s, from the south and west of Sarawak they started spreading into the Rejang and Balleh River systems.



Their migration during The Great Kayan Expedition of 1863 was violent and displaced Kayans, Kenyahs and Kajangs already settled there;

... uncontrolled head hunting parties killed, plundered and drove off most of the Kayans and related tribes from the Upper Rejang, the survivors found a haven in the Baram, some in Indonesian rivers and a very few in the more inaccessible parts of their own lands. This gave the Iban effective occupation of the Lower Rejang and the opportunity, by the turn of the century, to force their way into the Balleh against the *Rajah's* original wishes. The spread continued in 1870 (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 12).

It took more than forty years of 'control' by the Brooke government before peace was established. Peace between the Ibans/Sea Dayaks of the Rejang and Ai Rivers and the Kayans, Kenyahs and Kajangs of the Apo Kayan and Baloi River was formalized in the Peacemaking Ceremony of 1924. According to information provided in the museum, Kapit played host to nine hundred men who arrived in ninety-seven boats from all the warring tribes. The third *Rajah*, Vyner Brooke and representatives from Netherlands East India, all gathered with the men for the peacemaking ceremony ("Fort Sylvia Museum Exhibit - 1924 Peacemaking at Kapit," 2005). The first part of the ceremony was conducted in Long Nawang in Kenyah country according to Kenyah custom, the second, in Kapit, according to Sea Dayak/Iban custom.

Fort Kapit, which was renamed Fort Sylvia, after Vyner Brooke's consort, is constructed of belian hardwood with shuttered gun placements pointing at the Rejang river. The old features and objects from the original function of the building as fort are maintained, including brass canons and artillery positions. Upstairs, there are several exhibits of pua kumbus in glass cases, brief descriptions of the textiles, and a feature wall on Gading anak Mayau, a weaver who lives in Rumah Garie longhouse, but who unlike Bangie and Nancy, works for the Tun Jugah Foundation. According to Janet Rata Noel, the Textile Curator at the Tun Jugah Foundation in Kuching, there are relatively few pieces of textile on display in the Kapit Museum because of significant challenges posed by the heritage building (2004). The 120-year-old building is not insulated and the air-conditioning and climate control system installed is inadequate for the conservation and preservation of antique textiles. Other glass cases display antique Chinese jars and prestige items in traditional Dayak culture. The 'Community Wall of Fame', consisting of framed photographs of Ibans, Orang Ulu, Malays and Chinese, highlight contributions and achievements of individuals from the multiracial

community, albeit displayed divided according to tribal affiliation. The largest exhibit is a wall mural depicting aspects of traditional Iban customs and traditions. Some of the images are from published anthropological / ethnographic photographs. The museum houses a small library / reading corner, stocked with books on Borneo, and the Rane suite (closed to the public) used for recordings of oral literature, one of the many goals and activities of the Tun Jugah Foundation. The ground floor houses an amber gallery, a weaving gallery – with space for demonstrating weaving processes, and a gift shop. It has rooms for conferences, seminars, meetings, all facilities for people to have their voices heard.

One of the stated aims of the museum is ‘to give an insight into the history of Kapit and the Fort’ (*Fort Sylvia - Mission Statement, 2005*). The exhibits in the Fort Sylvia Museum feature Kapit to an extent, but the main theme, as in the foundation museum in Kuching, is the work and contribution of Tun Jugah, the last paramount chief of the Ibans and the federal minister of Sarawak Affairs. The museum can be interpreted as a public shrine to one man <sup>45</sup>. It celebrates his achievements and is filled with his personal regalia, memorabilia, medals of honour, and various ceremonial outfits. There are photos of his many interactions and encounters with various heads of state and political leaders of the day, at social events in the course of performing his many state and tribal duties, as well as photos of him relaxed with his family and friends. Included in this shrine commemorating Tun Jugah’s achievements is a framed, reproduced newspaper article crystallizing the moment in 1962 that set the momentum for the eventual formation of Malaysia in 1963. (Sarawakians are at pains to correct west Malaysians in their characterization of that moment in Malaysia’s history. They stress that Sarawak did not ‘join’ Malaysia. They insist, correctly, that Sarawak, together with Sabah, Singapore and Malaya formed Malaysia collectively.)

Tun Jugah was a great orator and he used his famed oratorical skills to put forward the case for Malaysia. In an oral culture, voice is paramount (A. J. N. Richards, 1959: 22). Historically, in the longhouse context, oratorical skills were a necessary part of a leaders repertoire of skills. Oratorical excellence used to be the hallmark of a great Iban leader. Authority resided in the voice. Eloquent performances practiced in the longhouse gallery were the way to persuade an Iban audience. A leader ‘attains his standing through knowledge of adat, shrewdness of judgement and eloquent skills’

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<sup>45</sup> The museum at Fort Sylvia can be seen as a shrine to Tun Jugah. This is a formal portrait for his portfolio as the Minister for Sarawak Affairs in the Malaysian federal government. Note the pua kumbu backdrop. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

(Wagner, 1972: 100). 'Prestige was not derived solely from activities which involved warfare or travel. The ability to speak well, both formally and in ordinary conversation, was another highly valued attribute' (Pringle, 1970: 24). Likewise, a shaman's training consisted of, among other things, chants and recitals for healing or grieving ceremonies that lasted for days (Graham, 1987; Sather, 2001).

Tun Jugah was the voice of influence when meeting with tribal heads to decide on the 'Malaysia' question (V. H. Sutlive, 1992). 'The contemporary backdrop was devoid of a consensus on Malaysia amongst the State's disparate population. The other communities in Sarawak were divided over the question then and the Ibans, being the largest community in the State, were the decisive swing factor which Jugah clearly grasped' (Teo, 2003).

Outside of the longhouse gallery however, other forms of articulation are needed. When speaking on the national stage to non-Iban audiences, Iban political elites are starting to converse in the language of Malaysia's dominant discourse which is development. In order to be heard, Ibans at the Tun Jugah foundation are presenting their demands articulated within the discourse of development. The nature of contestation in Malaysia is understated. Barbara Leigh refers to this indirect mode of expressing discontent as Malaysia's *pianissimo* (B. Leigh, 2002). The sentiments may be subdued, but they mask strongly held feelings.

Contemporary multivocal articulations around the pua kumbu encompass many issues. Today, voices emanating from the Ibans speak of GDP, contestation over use and ownership of tropical rainforest land, timber concessions and NCR (native customary rights) land. They speak the language of commerce, human rights, dignity and justice. The voices, amplified in regional urban centres like Kapit, are that of mumblings of political parties forming, disintegrating and of alignment with previously incompatible elements. The voices are those of angry whispers about forced migration, of being displaced and removed, of people and villages being in the way of progress or of dams. The voices speak of tears of humiliation and despair from having to buy food items in which rural folk were once self-sufficient. The voices whisper innuendos of corruption, express cynicism regarding NCR, and murmur disbelief over natives who own the land but not the trees on this land. Audible voices of outrage and consternation emanate from logging companies when accused of illegal logging; because with the collusion of lawmakers, it is not technically 'illegal'. The gift of oratory has descended into grumbling; while chanted stories of mythic heroes has morphed into mutterings of injustice and theft.

### **Productive friction, entangled history**

The management of the Fort Sylvia museum is entangled; it falls under the auspices of the Sarawak Museum but is managed by the Tun Jugah Foundation. The two organizations work under different philosophies, goals and mandates. This model for collaboration fits into the themes explored in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures / Global Transformations* (Karp et al., 2006). The Sarawak Museum represents the government. The Ibans represent indigenous Iban rights within a Malaysian national context; that is they are fighting for protection of their distinct cultural identity rather than for an independent state. The aims of the Sarawak Museum, as stated in its corporate strategy, is to unify 'the various ethnic groups of Sarawak leading to their harmonious ... well-being', whereas one of the aims of the Fort Sylvia Museum is to 'inform the public of the contributions of local leaders and individuals' (*Corporate Strategy, 2005; Fort Sylvia - Mission Statement, 2005*). How the Sarawak Museum believes it is achieving its aim of *unifying* various ethnic groups is not discussed in public.

In the capital city, Kuching, the relationship between the Sarawak museum and the Tun Jugah foundation could be characterized as one of contestation or, at best, one of complementarity; with the foundation filling the gaps left by the museum regarding the representation of Iban / Dayak cultural identity and of the contributions of local individuals. In Kapit, both organisations have successfully negotiated a productive relationship that benefits both parties. The Sarawak Museum allows the foundation curatorial freedom to present a celebratory and 'objective' history of the Dayak presence in the region. The foundation funds the restoration, conservation and management of the building, relieving the government-funded Sarawak Museum of the financial burden. However, the fact that this freedom, accorded by a government agency, applies only in an outpost town, and not in the capital city, reinforces the marginalisation of Iban articulations.

This financial investment affords the Linggi family, who are powerful players in local economic and cultural sectors, the opportunity to make their voices heard on contestations surround Iban issues. Managing the museum gives them almost unfettered control of the presentation of local history. Although attempts are made for an even-handed presentation of local history, the voice of the Ibans is predominant. The 'Community Wall of Fame', celebrates the achievements of local heroes and community leaders, and attempts to present the voices of many tribal people in the

region. It is however the voice of a powerful group within the Dayak community that is privileged in the context of the other exhibits in the museum taken as a whole.

The Kapit Museum brings together three forces or players into what Tsing calls the 'sticky' and unexpectedly persistent effects of particular historical encounters (Tsing, 2005a); The Brookes' historic legacy, the local government in the form of the Sarawak Museum, and a powerful and wealthy indigenous group, the Tun Jugah Foundation. These sticky encounters happen within the discourse of development presented by the Malaysian national government and encapsulated in former Prime Minister, Mahatir Mohammad's 'Vision 2020'. Development is Malaysia's all-encompassing rallying call. The Sarawak Museum, in the present director's view, is in the process of transition from a Brookes' colonial institution to a museum that fits within the national Islamic discourse of development. For the Ibans, the continuation of cultural aspects appears to sit prominently alongside efforts to assert indigenous rights on the economic stage of the state and nation.

The Tun Jugah Foundation represents Iban interests and Iban cultural groups as a primary aim; fitting into the discourse of development, only as a secondary aim. The foundation presents an indigenous tribal discourse that promotes the rights of the Iban segment of the population. The political and commercial activities of the founders of the foundation point to a recourse to the rights of indigenous people to native customary rights land (A. H. Bujang, 2003). The agenda is to press the government for assistance with development and participation in a market economy in a technological age.

This present-day encounter between the two organizations is entangled with the historical context of the Brookes' and the British colonial legacy. The Kapit fort, built to suppress warring *natives*, now ironically privileges the Dayak voice, celebrating and asserting Dayak achievements, Dayak heroes and Dayak identity, as well as individuals of other ethnic backgrounds: tribal, Chinese and Malay. All three museums, players or participants, come together in the temporal and geographic space of the Kapit Museum, Fort Sylvia.

The three museums/galleries in Sarawak each illustrate a different aspect of the racial dynamics in local politics and society. The Sarawak Museum founded by colonial rulers, privileged Dayak cultural expression under the Brooke administration. The museum is undergoing a transition, under the current curatorship of Sanib Said, from what he considers, a Victorian tribal storehouse/cabinet of curiosity, to a museum finding a Malaysian Islamic voice. The Tun Jugah Foundation performs and articulates

Iban identity for an international audience, rather than the local stage. The Kapit Museum, jointly managed by both organisations presents a celebratory Dayak history in a rural, marginalized place, fast in the process of being modernized, with the construction of connecting roads and bridges along the span of the great Rejang River. The Malays assert political legitimacy and a hold on power that transcends many generations. The Ibans boast of individual achievements, contributions, and sacrifices, and of talents applied to develop and help the wider community in Sarawak and Malaysia. The three museums present a celebratory and 'objective' history of the race, tribe or nation they predominantly represent.

In Kuching, the Tun Jugah Gallery presents the Iban voice, as a response to being marginalized in the government institution of the Sarawak Museum. In Kapit, the isolated regional town, the Fort Sylvia museum privileges the Dayak/Iban voice. Privileging the Dayak voice comes at the expense of other indigenous voices prominent in the Kapit region. Eighty years after the 1924 Peacemaking Ceremony between the tribes, political loyalties still fall largely along tribal lines, and tribal affiliations are still a potential source of difference. To the descendents of the Kayans, Kenyahs and Kajangs who were present at the peacemaking ceremony, very little seems to have changed in terms of Dayak Iban dominance in the region.

In viewing the major museum contact zones for the pua kumbu – the Tun Jugah Gallery, the Kapit Museum, the Sarawak Museum, an overriding theme emerges. On behalf of the race they represent, each museum, and therefore each ethnic group, makes a claim to a long and entangled presence in the land. The museums reflect the changing place and nature of Iban cultural articulations in Sarawak society, an articulation in part that is centred around meanings read into the presence, or absence, of indigenous objects, the pua kumbu included. The museums engage with a tribe's long and contested history. Iban voices, at once eloquent and muted, united, coherent and dissipated, demand recognition and affirmation of the right of various cultural groups to live, function and be treated as full members or citizens of Malaysia. These muffled mingling of tribal voices articulate with the national Islamic discourse of development.

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## 7 Tension on the Back-Strap Loom

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The *pua kumbu* is woven on a back-strap loom. After the cotton is harvested, spun into yarns and wrapped around the loom, the yarns are alternately pulled and stretched taut or released on the loom. The tension is concentrated on the women's back <sup>46</sup>. The right tension necessary to weave the cloth is finely and expertly calibrated by the movement of the women's bodies. Too much tension pulls the yarns apart and destroys the cloth, too little results in the threads not being taut enough to weave. Tension in this chapter is therefore, used as a positive and productive force.

This tension on the loom can be seen to represent another tension around objects of cultural significance. In this chapter, I apply this tension as a metaphor to describe social dynamics and articulations surrounding the *pua kumbu* cloth as it circulates through socially active regimes in contemporary Sarawak. This metaphor is used to capture the current tension between so-called traditional or indigenous textile production and contemporary production for global markets. I discuss the contestation over who has the power and authority to represent culture, the roles of art in cultural institutions, and issues in the construction and representation of 'authenticity', 'tradition', and 'modernity' in 'ethnic art' markets. By highlighting the contestation around a historical textile form and examining the dynamics and interdependence of players in cultural intervention in one particular instance, this chapter sheds light on the conflicting issues involved in preserving, valorizing and producing material culture. It offers a way of analyzing competing and overlapping interventions in cultural production that has the potential to be applied elsewhere.

These topics are being addressed by other scholars on material culture who explore the tension between historical and contemporary indigenous production in textiles as well as in media other than textiles. Phillips and Steiner in *Unpacking Culture* argue that 'a particularly dense aura of inauthenticity surrounds objects produced for the souvenir and tourist trades because they are most obviously located at the intersection of the discourses of art, artifacts, and commodity' (1999: 4). 'Tourist arts', they argue, 'offer particularly concentrated examples of the clash and resolution of culturally different ideas about the nature of authenticity' (1999: 4). Myers examines 'the ways in which art objects particularly are used to construct or deny identity and

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<sup>46</sup> The back-strap loom used in weaving. Tension is concentrated on the backs of the women which makes them ache with tiredness. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

cultural difference' (2001: 4) and how they 'articulate in their circulation new relationships of power and self-revelation' (2002: 6). Writing about Pintupi acrylic paintings by the Western Desert Aboriginal people, Myers characterises the art works as 'hybrid constructions' and 'forms of activism within a multicultural context' (2002: 5). This idea of objects as forms of activism is captured by Schrift (2001) in her study on Chairman Mao badges in China. She argues that people articulate their own meanings and wrest some degree of power around objects - even when those objects are used by the government as a means to dominate the population and disseminate propaganda. While outwardly displaying patriotism and obedience, Schrift argues that people subvert the meanings of objects, bending and manipulating the message conveyed in official symbols into their own personal and political expression. Causey (2003), in researching Toba Batak crafts on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, examines several questions, such as, how art forms change, what it means to innovate, what is art and why some people consume, in order to understand issues surrounding authenticity and innovation. All these ideas, together with a theoretical framework constructed from a combination of Geismar (2001) and Rowlands (2002), are used to tease out the complexities and tensions in articulating culture through material means.

Tension is examined in this chapter in relation to two prominent organisations that focus their various activities on the *pua kumbu*, both of which are based in Kuching, the capital city. They are the Iban Tun Jugah foundation and Edric Ong's business/cultural enterprises. The two organisations can be seen as metaphors for two aspects of the tension or opposite ends of the yarns. The ambivalent relationship between the Iban staff at the foundation and Ong, a non-Iban, local Sarawak Chinese, represents the broader tension around issues of preserving and re-creating objects of cultural value. This tension is voiced around many different issues, but primarily, the contestation is about power, authority and permission. These issues are however, framed around the concepts of authenticity and respect.

The two organisations span a range of approaches to the Iban culture. The Iban foundation approaches culture as being whole and intact. Efforts are focussed on salvaging, protecting, conserving, recording, documenting and transmitting. Ong's approach is more closely aligned to one that considers culture as fragmented. He endeavours to isolate elements and reconstitute them, recreating culture on the way (see Clifford, 2001; Hall, 1996). Ong and the Tun Jugah foundation share similar intermediate goals of preserving material culture and intangible cultural heritage associated with this object (for more details on their efforts, please refer to *Fifth Annual Aid to Artisans Awards*, 2006; *Textile and Fabric: Weaving Project*, 2005). The



difference in approach is encapsulated by their differing ultimate goals. Ong's business enterprise is ultimately geared towards maximising financial profitability. The foundation's aims point to efforts at maintaining cultural purity. The *pua kumbu* in its circulation through the foundation can be discerned as doing the political work of asserting a distinct cultural identity.

In this chapter, I outline a range of products that are currently being produced, (such as placemats, high-end fashion garments and sculptures), and identify new players, (contemporary fashion designers and emerging young Dayak Ibans artists), who are engaging in the production and marketing of these goods.

### **'Keeping them primitive'**

*'Objects do not travel alone through the field of social relations, being wrapped in stories of their production and histories of the representations that they bear, and accompanied by songs, dances and theories making claims about their values'*

*(Townsend-Gault, 1997: 142).*

In a twist from the iconoclasm demanded by Christian missionaries in Indonesia in the 1920s (Corbey, 2003), Jacques Maessen, a Dutch missionary, recounts how in 1974 he became the focus of a protest by Dayak in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. In this protest heirloom *pua kumbus*, valued highly now by anthropologists, ethnographers and art dealers, were destroyed in a mass burning. Maessen (1999) recalled that 'young Dayak women raged against me for keeping them primitive, as they said, and burned their old *ikats* in front of my house'.

By the 1970s, the national focus of both Indonesia and Malaysia was on economic and social development. The Ibans in both countries were caught up in what Brosius (2003) calls the 'civil religion'. Development was conceived of and presented to the populations in terms of a linear scale. In this distribution, jungle dwellers and headhunters were characterised as being at the bottom end of the scale, and as being of the past. Modernisation and urbanisation were the national goals and the way forward. The *pua kumbu*, in its direct connotations with practices of the past, such as headhunting, had therefore become a symbol of backwardness and primitivism in the national discourse - at least in the eyes of the Dayak protesters. As an example, Maessen (1999) relates how a young Dayak man, fearing ridicule, the scorn of more urbane citizens, and possibly retribution from descendents of headhunted victims, tried to distance himself from his ancestors; 'he always told people he was Indonesian, ...

frightened to death that he had to reveal his real identity, afraid to be called a primitive headhunter’.

This image of the primitive was, in the Kalimantan Dayaks’ relation to the outer world (Indonesia), an encumbrance. The connection between headhunting and weaving had become a tedious and derogatory association for them (Maessen, 1999). In light of the problems the Dayak Ibans faced in 1974, versions of their cultural history associated with the cloth were damaging and no longer useful or accurate. These associations were at odds with how they wanted to be seen, how they wanted to express themselves and how they articulated their identity.

Maessen’s anecdote serves as an introduction to the inherent tension surrounding objects that are heavily laden with cultural significance. ‘Change is intrinsic to culture, and measures intended to preserve, conserve, safeguard and sustain particular cultural practices are caught between freezing the practice and addressing the inherently processual nature of culture’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 16). Maessen, keen to preserve traditional cultural heritage centred around the *pua kumbu* textiles, was caught between this tension. The weavers saw Maessen’s heritage interventions as a means of keeping them frozen in time and ‘slowing the rate of change’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 16). His efforts at safeguarding the cloth and maintaining the skills were interpreted by the women as an attempt to keep the people primitive. For the Indonesian Dayak, what was articulated around the *pua kumbu*, in the seventies in rural Kalimantan, was what Saunders called, an “unsuitable past” that did not fit in with their present social and economic circumstances and challenges (Saunders, 1997: 116). The *pua kumbu* cloth was a marker of an identity the Kalimantan Ibans were trying to hide. Maessen observes that there were negative connotations surrounding the object, borne of a stereotyped and essentialised image of the people who produced it. In contrast to the international art market version of the word, the meaning of *primitive* in the local context meant unsophisticated, uneducated and unclothed. Their action can be interpreted as people discarding one limiting or restricting identity and opening up to different articulations and creating other possibilities. The burning of the *puas* by the weavers can be compared to similar actions by their feminist sisters in the West who in the same period in the late 1960s consumed another item of clothing by burning. The actions of these Kalimantan Ibans can be seen as people making similar statements about self-determination and liberation, as the women in the famous bra-burning protest.

However, ‘all history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary’ (Orwell, 1949). Within the space of thirty years, the dynamics of

heritage interventions have been completely reversed. Across the border in Sarawak, Malaysia, heritage interventions are now being initiated by the Dayaks. Now, it is an Iban foundation that is at risk of fossilising practices by attempting to freeze or slow the rate of change. The Ibans have gone from hiding or destroying the cloth because of shameful connotations with a past involving headhunting and tribal warfare, to flaunting their warrior heritage. It is now the non-Ibans, local Sarawak Chinese traders/culture brokers, who are seen as accelerating the rate of change by introducing innovation, and reconstituting fragments of Iban culture into a choreographed performance and successful marketing campaigns.

### **Making the past suitable**

*'... the past requires assimilation and resurrection into an ever changing present. The problems ... have not been in establishing continuity with the past therefore, but with suitable pasts. What though is to count as suitable has depended less on the reliability of historical research than on who has control of representation'*  
(Saunders, 1997: 116).

The past articulations of headhunting and associations with primitivism that the Kalimantan Ibans were desperate to shed are now considered suitable. The iconic textile is embraced by the Tun Jugah foundation in Sarawak. The process by which these articulations became suitable was however, forged from outside the Iban community.

At about the same time that the Kalimantan Ibans were destroying their cloths and shedding an unsuitable past, Southeast Asian textiles were beginning to be valued in international collectors circles. There was a confluence of Ibans selling their heirloom *pua kumbus* and a surge of interest from Europe, America and Australia in 'primitive' art. In the 1970s the *pua kumbu* was 'discovered' by the international art market (Gavin, 1996: 13). Academic scholarship in the area of Southeast Asian textiles flourished, fuelled by research by anthropologists, material culturalists, ethnographers, textile experts and art historians. Christie's held its first auction of Tribal Arts in 1976 and Sotheby's followed in 1978 (Geismar, 2001:31-2). By the 1980s 'traditional textiles' were firmly established as a field in the art market (MacClancy, 1997b: 21).

This trade was mediated by local Chinese residents, and this role of mediation between indigenous maker, Chinese trader and international consumers continues to the present. The surge in international demand for the object resulted in such a flow of

export of heirloom *pua kumbus*, according to Lucas Chin (interview, 2004), a former museum curator, that even the Sarawak Museum in Malaysia, across the border from Indonesian Kalimantan, had to race to acquire some of the fine pieces of Sarawak's cultural heritage before they were shipped overseas. The museum however faced stiff competition from local Chinese shopkeepers.

Local Chinese traders have had a long history in the Sarawak textile market. Aware of the monetary value tribal objects had gained in overseas markets, the Chinese traders actively acquired the *pua kumbus* from local producers through various means; trade, barter, and, when harvests failed for example, they even acquired the cloths as collateral and pawned objects (Chin, 2004: 22; Gavin, 1996: 13; 2004: 22; Postill, 2003). According to Postill, the shopkeepers valued the *pua kumbus* as trade objects, not art objects. So records about biographical, cultural or religious information were not kept. There was no provenance attached to the object. This reduced its economic value in the long term, but according to Postill, those shopkeepers were only interested in short-term gain. To the shopkeepers, the cloths were all interchangeable with each other; the level of sacredness, the status of individual weavers, or regional differences were not documented. This source of supply however, fed the international art and academic market.

The interchangeability of the cloth among the Chinese vendors was somewhat mirrored in the international art market's attitude to 'tribal', 'ethnic', 'primitive' art or textile art of Southeast Asia. According to Geismar, 'Antiquities, Pre-Columbian, African, Indonesian and Oceanic (or Pacific) arts' are all grouped into one category, to be marketed as 'inherently traditional rather than 'contemporary'. Only Native American and Aboriginal Australian art are sold separately and 'are the only tribal arts that are marketed as 'contemporary' fine-art' (Geismar, 2001: 44).

The high monetary value placed on the *pua kumbu* by overseas consumers has changed the pattern of consumption and affected how local producers view their own objects. Interest from the international art market feeds off and informs the local consumers. Global interest has increased the *pua kumbu*'s value locally and renewed interest by Ibans in their own heritage. Postill relates how 'as longhouse residents have become aware of their increasing market value only destitute families are today prepared to part with their heirloom' (Postill, 2003: 13). A display of *pua kumbus* or objects inspired or copied from traditional *pua kumbus* attests to the owner's personalized link to the global economy through the art world. This connection enhances and adds prestige to the Ibans' present status, alluding to the owner's taste, refinement and wealth.

The past referred to, whether it is rejected or embraced, is essentially the same for rural and urban Ibans. The difference is the present social, economic and political circumstances which, to a large extent, determines whether a past is considered *suitable* or not. The lives of rural agricultural people are more directly linked with the practices and lifestyles of the past, and this lifestyle was interpreted by other Indonesians as primitive and uncivilised in the 1970s. While being labelled ‘primitive headhunters’ was a source of shame for the Kalimantan Ibans, across the border in rural Sarawak, the situation is slightly different. The *pua kumbu* is not a source of shame but it continues to be a symbol of the Iban people. Accentuating racial or tribal difference however, may not be the most advantageous tactic for rural people who are dependent on government financial assistance for survival.

Ibans from Sarawak are eligible to access financial assistance from the Malaysian government because they belong to a category of citizenship called the *Bumiputera*. This status, discussed in chapter one, is summarized below to refresh the reader’s familiarity with the term. This category includes the Malays and other indigenous peoples from East and West Malaysia, and was originally designed to exclude the migrant races, the Chinese and Indians. Complications arise however, because officially, one criteria for inclusion into the *Bumiputera* category is to be a practising Muslim. Many Ibans are Christians, or continue observe Iban animist practices, of which the *pua kumbu* is an essential object. So although the Ibans belong to the *Bumiputera* category, they can still be distinguished from the Malays by their religion. Being recognized as a *Bumiputera* bestows financial and social benefits and from conversations with Ibans in Kuching and Kapit, there is a perception that for Ibans to receive preferential treatment from the government, they need to *not* be as easily distinguishable from the Malay-Muslim *Bumiputera*. Using a *pua kumbu* would signify this difference and be counterproductive.

On the other end of the socio-economic scale, for the wealthy middle class Ibans, the link with primitivism is maintained through the global art market. Far from being a source of shame, for rich and powerful tribal leaders, the meanings of the label ‘primitive headhunters’ have evolved so far that, instead of hiding the connection, the political and financial elites, from the comfort of their corporation headquarters in city skyscrapers, emphasise this affiliation with the warrior heritage. Unfurling the *pua kumbu* cloth is a succinct signifier of difference from their Malay and Muslim *Bumiputera* siblings and they are proud to show this link with headhunters.

The Tun Jugah foundation works on many fronts to strengthen the link with its heritage and it achieves this aim most powerfully through its work with the *pua kumbu*

cloth. In the process however, it sometimes falls into the risk of fossilising cultural practices.

### **The Tun Jugah Foundation**

The tension between freezing practices and addressing the processual nature of culture is examined in relation to the activities, ethos and approach of the cultural arm of the Tun Jugah foundation. The Dayak/Iban foundation can be seen as attempting to slow the rate of change. Its approach to culture can be interpreted as an attempt to freeze practices. Its efforts fit in with the Rowland's explanations for the various motivations behind heritage interventions; as attempts 'to salvage an essential, authentic sense of 'self' from the debris of modern estrangement', or 'because of fear of erosive power of market economies', or even 'to cure postmodern identity crisis' (Rowlands, 2002: 106). The foundation's efforts fit into Kopytoff's model where exists 'a perennial and universal tug-of-war between the tendency of all economies to expand the jurisdiction of commoditization and of all cultures to restrict it' (Appadurai, 1986a: 17). Tilley argues that 'there is no such thing as a traditional identity, only forms of constructing identities that might be labelled traditional by some according to particular, and ultimately, arbitrary criteria. However, the significance of tradition manifested through material forms and the social practices linked to them is difficult to overemphasize' (Tilley, 2006: 12). This respect paid to tradition is reflected in the ethos of the foundation.

The foundation adheres to what it identifies as tradition. In its official website, the stated aims are to maintain the integrity of the various aspects of culture and to continue the purity of traditions (*Tun Jugah Foundation, 2006*). It has as an urgent and primary aim, the salvage and resurgence of Iban culture in contemporary Sarawak. The focus of this organization is on 'authenticity' and accuracy and it achieves these aims by documenting aspects of Iban cultural heritage. During interviews, both Margaret Linggi, the (previous) director of textiles, (recently deceased), and Janet Rata Noel, the textile curator, asserted the foundation's authority to determine, define and safeguard 'authenticity'.

Expert researchers at the foundation work on many different aspects of Iban culture. It is this depth and breadth of research that Linggi uses to validate the foundation's authority over all expressions of Iban culture. The work of the foundation can be seen as an example of an indigenous group reconfiguring the model for

collaboration between academics and tribal groups (Clifford, 2004). The foundation is in charge of its own ethnography. It functions as an authority and repository of the body of knowledge of Iban intangible cultural heritage. It takes on the role of guardian, steward and patron of Iban cultural identity and it funds research into Iban culture by commissioning local and foreign anthropologists, biographers and folklorists (Noel, 2004, 2005). The work it does on Iban oral literature is invaluable. In an interview, Margaret Linggi (2004), explained that the foundation proactively collects, records, translates, and transcribes the songs of bards, the poetry, dirges, epic poems and stories. This includes the preservation and revival of shamanic chants (see Sather, 2001). The foundation systematically identifies oral history culture bearers in the longhouses and in the cities, and records them on extensive field studies conducted by its in-house researchers. Control over the representation of Iban cultural identity is maintained with its own publishing arm which has produced the three volume Iban encyclopaedia and a biography of Tun Jugah himself (V. Sutlive & Sutlive, 2001; V. H. Sutlive, 1992). The Dayak cultural foundation, which is funded by the Tun Jugah foundation, teaches children Iban dances and the various musical instruments in the Iban orchestra (Brakel & Matusky, 2002).

From an analysis of the two galleries that the foundation manages, it is evident that premium is placed on objects that were prevalent in historical Iban society. The main gallery is located in Kuching in the capital city, and a smaller gallery is situated in Kapit, a remote regional town in the Rejang district. The Rejang area in the interior of Sarawak, was politically contested, and the frequent skirmishes and outbreak of war between the Ibans, Kayan and Kenyahs, necessitated the construction of a fort in 1880. Called Fort Sylvia (named after the second *Rajah* Brooke's consort), the wooden structure still stands and even today dominates the entrance to Kapit. This fort built by the white *Rajahs* is a constant reminder of the historical enmity in the area. It represents a history of colonialism, Iban invasion, ferocious attacks and a culture celebrating decapitation of the enemy, as well as resistance from Kayan, Kenyah and other local tribal forces.

In addition to antique and heirloom *pua kumbu* cloths, the two galleries boast magnificent collections of Iban cultural artefacts, jewellery, beads, costumes, war regalia and formal dress from all the different regions in Sarawak and Kalimantan where Ibans have settled. Margaret Linggi explained that this substantial collection was amassed and inherited over a period of hundreds of years by her extended family. In the Kuching gallery, the textile department is given a place of prominence. Its many permanent weavers are housed in a plush recreation of a traditional rural longhouse

gallery. They work in a modern air-conditioned gallery situated above an expensive department store in the commercial heart of Kuching. The objects showcased at the Kuching gallery include antique cloths as well as cloths woven by the resident weavers at the gallery. The prominence of the textile department demonstrates that the cloth is projected to the fore, along with the intangible cultural heritage linked to the object.

Art has become a marker for many indigenous groups, such as the Australian Aborigines, and these groups are therefore increasingly using art to define tribal identity (see Myers, 2002). Myers ascribes Aboriginal acrylic painting with the 'capacity to objectify political aspirations and identity, as well as indigenous aesthetic sensibilities ... Far from being the mere victims that liberal discourse supposed, Aboriginal people - Yarnangu, as the Pintupi speak their identity - have engaged the settler state with their own political tactics and practices' (Myers, 2002: 5). Ibans too have become closely associated with their artwork and the foundation uses Iban culture and objects as part of their tactics to assert a distinct identity on the local and national stage. To a large extent, the foundation has centred its cultural activities on the *pua kumbu* object. Funding for the continuity of the *pua kumbu* artistic traditions manifests in informal weaving classes that comprise the physical skills, spiritual aspects and taboos associated with the object.

At the foundation galleries, there are no depictions of the contemporary use of objects, nor are there modern manifestations of the *pua kumbu*. In contrast, areas outside of the Kuching gallery, frequented by tourists, are saturated with objects inspired from and made out of cloths printed with distinctive *pua kumbu* motifs. The gallery does not tell the story of the development or evolution of the culture. Rather, the exhibits present a snapshot of Iban culture frozen in a particular point in time. This approach is consistent with the foundation's focus on *preserving* (Tun Jugah Foundation, 2005).

The reverence for tradition is evident in its work with the *pua kumbu*. The foundation focuses on teaching and learning skills according to traditional methods and techniques and highlights cultural significance associated with the object (Linggi, 2004; Noel, 2004, 2005). Linggi stressed that in its efforts aimed at preserving the artwork, it documents and slavishly adheres to all taboos regulating the art of weaving. The weavers at the centre assiduously observe traditional taboos which include a range from simple observances, like bedding down the loom for the night in order to protect the unfinished cloth from malevolent forces, to the strict observance of protocol regarding the use of sacred or ritually powerful motifs.



This focus on tradition is highlighted by the fact that among the foundation weavers, there is a position created for a consultant who is ‘an encyclopaedia’ of taboos and customs connected with the art of *pua kumbu* weaving. This position is held by Siah Tun Jugah and she carries knowledge of the important mordanting process, the cultivation, selection and usage of plants for dyes, and all the other parts of the weaving process (*Tun Jugah Foundation*, 2005). Several times during my conversations with Margaret Linggi and Janet Noel, they kept referring to Siah and honoured her as the keeper of the knowledge (Linggi, 2004; Noel, 2004, 2005). The foundation supports the weavers who are the living culture bearers, and these women weavers in turn carry the riches of historical Iban cultural knowledge, and disseminate it to the next generation.

Attempts to freeze practices are however, complicated by the view that, according to Clifford (2000; 2001; 2004), cultural identity is constantly evolving, has no rigid borders, is constantly being reborn and reconstituted from fragments. In other words, it is articulated. Clifford (2001) argues that articulation is necessary for cultures to ‘survive’. To a certain extent, all performances, even for local Iban audiences in the longhouse gallery, are constructed; “all traditions have to start somewhere, and at some time, and therefore may be said to be invented” (Tilley, 2006: 12). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett stresses that “all heritage interventions – like the globalising pressures they are trying to counteract – change the relationship of people to what they do. They change how people understand their culture and themselves. They change the fundamental conditions for cultural production and reproduction” (2006: 16).

The view of culture as being articulated, constructed, invented and constantly changing is a contrast to the foundation’s approach. The foundation’s goals and activities indicate an alignment with an approach that views culture as an organic whole that can be salvaged, documented, preserved and transmitted intact to the next generation. Focussing on the *pua kumbu* however, forces the foundation to address the tension between freezing what it identifies as traditional or unchanging aspects of Iban culture, and addressing the intrinsically processual nature of culture. This is because the object, while forming historical links to previous generations, also encapsulates change. Change is woven into the inherently processual process of mordanting yarns in preparation for dyeing the *pua kumbu*.

The *pua kumbu* drew centuries of admiration and devotion on the part of the women weavers and other members of the Iban community. The women committed themselves to developing and perfecting the skills set and techniques the object demanded. A significant part of the process was the mordanting procedure. Essentially,

mordanting is the process where the naturally occurring layers of oils on wild cotton yarns are stripped away, allowing the dyes to adhere to the yarns. Ingredients for the mordant bath were historically sourced from the jungle. Wild ginger, nuts and seeds, tree bark and roots of shrubs, all contributed to the mix. The problem was that the variations in the chemical content of these ingredients meant that instead of prescribing set amounts for the concoction, the master dyer had to experiment and carefully observe nuances in the chemical reactions. Expertise in the art therefore required a scientific mindset rather than rote learning of a collection of formulas and a set series of steps in an unchanging process. This stage was notoriously difficult and consequently an aura of mystique developed around the few women who could master the art. The body of knowledge was not easily learned or transmitted and the skilful observations and subtle adjustments seemed to border on being beyond teaching or documenting. The women appeared to develop a sense of feeling or a deep knowing for the elements. Knowledge of the reactions and capabilities of the various compounds was so sophisticated it was considered magical, esoteric and fraught with danger to the uninitiated. Not surprisingly, the greatest number of taboos surrounded this process. The few women who could consistently produce the desired results were regarded with the highest esteem and called women warriors (for more details on the mordanting process, please refer to Gavin, 2004; Jabu, 1991).

What is recognised today as taboos were however, not about freezing practices. The inconsistencies in the chemical compositions of the ingredients essentially forced the master dyers to observe closely, constantly adjust, and make changes. The process of making the mordant bath therefore accommodated, and in fact demanded, a fluidity in approach. In its work on heritage conservation, the foundation is confronted with the challenges of calibrating the tension between trying to freeze and fossilise aspects of Iban cultural practices, and addressing the inherently processual nature of cultural development. This tension applies to its work with the *pua kumbu*, but it is not limited to the textile artform. In its works with Iban oral literature and other forms of intangible cultural heritage, it is again forced to address this tension (for further discussion on the tensions as they relate to oral history, please refer to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006).

### **Edric Ong**

Edric Ong is a local Sarawak Chinese identity from a well-known *Hokkien* family in Kuching. Trained as an architect, he is also a fashion designer, president of the local art

organisation, and a staunch Christian. He is acknowledged as being a consummate promoter of Iban art and cultural heritage. For twenty years he has focused his talents on the concerted marketing of indigenous tribal art as contemporary fine art. His successful business fosters international recognition for the quality of Sarawak tribal artwork and it is largely through his efforts that the *pua kumbu* now enjoys a high reputation in collectors circles overseas.

The *pua kumbu* textiles, which he specialises in, form the core objects in his shop/gallery but they are not the extent of his business. He is active in promoting tribal art from other regions of the world. By developing the *pua kumbu* as an object for academic research and regularly hosting the World Eco-Fibre and Textile forum, or WEFT, he has contributed to the tribal textile and heritage world and created an international reputation for himself as a culture broker. Demand for silk *pua kumbus* is fuelled by him, his personality, his renown and art world connections (see for example, his outlet in the United States: *Edric Ong Textile Gallery 1, 2007*).

Ong's activities with the cloth can be seen to address the processual nature of culture. He introduced innovation into the art with his initiative to replace cotton yarns with silk and was therefore pivotal in developing new materials for the cloth. A collector of *pua kumbus* himself, he is also notable for designing and manufacturing modern manifestations of the *pua kumbu* <sup>47</sup>. A diverse range of objects inspired by the *pua* are sold in his shop and targeted at the up-market tourist/collectors niche, with prices to match. (Ong's company, 'Fabriko' has since been sold to the Chop Chin Nam Company, but the *pua kumbu* inspired merchandise remains a major part of the business. The 'Edric Ong' shop, a few doors down the road on Main Bazaar, is still owned by Ong).

Historically, the *pua* would have been very rarely seen, visible only as part of shamanic healing rituals and at life crisis moments. Now, a tourist walking around the shops in Main Bazaar, the premier shopping precinct for tourists in Kuching, would see almost blanket coverage of red hues. Tourists are treated to a visual display starting at the arrival hall at Kuching airport, and moving on to other venues; hotel lobbies, Sarawak Craft Council, the Kuching waterfront, to restaurant menus and shopping malls. At the Tom Abang boutique for example, there are multi-coloured shawls decorated with *pua* motifs <sup>48</sup>. Few of these cloths would be the original and sacred

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<sup>47</sup> Pua kumbu inspired objects in Edric Ong's shop in Main Bazaar, Kuching. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

<sup>48</sup> Tom Abang (local fashion designer) shawl inspired from pua kumbu design. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

blanket-sized *pua kumbus*. Instead what a tourist is likely to see is *pua kumbu* motifs reproduced in various permutations.

When I was walking through the tourist precinct in Kuching, I could see inexpensive batik-style *sarongs* made of printed *pua* designs. These were sold among the *sarongs* made in various parts of Indonesia and Malaysia and were called Borneo designs. My initial reaction was disappointment at seeing such sacred cloths reduced to cheap printed *sarongs*. Originally, I saw this as exploitation and breaches of copyright of these designs. Copyright infringement in Malaysia is hard to enforce even with the best resources and/or will. Breaches in copyright of artistic, cultural or intellectual property appear to be foreign concepts. However, after travelling a long distance upriver by a series of boats to the remote *Rumah* Garie longhouse, one of the first things I noticed in a master weaver's apartment was a lounge chair decorated with fabric printed with *pua kumbu* designs. The reader will recall that in the introduction I mentioned that when I looked closely at the women's attire, I found that several of the weavers, Bangie, Nancy and Mula, and other women in the longhouse, were all wearing the printed *sarongs* I saw in Kuching, and that Nancy was proud of the fact that her designs were reproduced. As it did in the past, good designs still contribute to a woman's reputation and renown.

The manufacturers of these *pua* inspired objects copy once sacred designs, like Nancy's *puas*, and apply them onto a wide range of objects for the art and tourist market. Motifs are reproduced on objects that bear little resemblance to previous spiritual connotations or sacredness of the *pua kumbu*. Yet depending on the price of the object, these modern manifestations are made to bear a semblance of the same cultural load that the original form did. For example, walking around Kuching, a tourist would see cheap objects sold without any explanations or labels. On the internet however, in order to justify high prices, some objects wrongly labelled *pua kumbu*, would be accompanied by lengthy explanations of historical cultural uses. The intention, presumably, is to give buyers the indication that the object for sale is the same as an old, blanket-sized, sacred *pua kumbu*, used previously for headhunting and shamanism.

*Pua kumbu* motifs are isolated, lifted off the cloth, copied, derived and manipulated as graphic design. With the addition of synthetic dyes, the restricted palette of old *pua kumbus* is expanded to include all colours. Motifs are cut into wooden blocks and block printed or silkscreen printed onto bales of cotton, silk or polyester textiles. These cloths are then cut and made into scarves, cushion covers and curtains. Edric Ong's shop sells a variety of these printed silk fabrics, some of which are

made into shirts that retail for about US\$150. Motifs are enlarged, repeated into patterns, reconstituted in various permutations and reproduced onto multiple objects for the tourist market. These objects include bags, mobile phone cases, place mats, T shirts and carpets. Modern manifestation of the *pua kumbu* also include a category of objects bearing motifs of indeterminable tribal inspiration and influence, distilled from various design features of Southeast Asian tribes. These are sold as *pua kumbus*, along with other tribal/primitive objects, and marketed as local and indigenous. The weavers at *Rumah Garie* themselves contribute to this range of objects. When I visited, all the weavers in the longhouse were involved in a big order for a hotel in Kuala Lumpur for bedspreads woven with *pua* motifs. Apart from this order, their repertoire of objects include the ubiquitous smaller hand-woven cloth placemats, wall hangings and table runners.

When tourists purchase and wear items of clothing, such as one of Edric Ong's silk shirts or vests <sup>49</sup>, or Tom Abang's shawls, the *pua* motifs can be seen to circulate on the bodies of these foreign tourists. The tourists themselves therefore contribute to the sea of *pua kumbu* motifs circulating through Kuching, reinforcing its importance. When these motifs circulate through Kuala Lumpur via the tourists, they become a reaffirmation of the Sarawak and Malaysian tourism boards' strategy of highlighting and marketing indigenous cultures. Not only can myths and folklore be 'attractive tourism products' as a local politician once claimed, so too can the motifs of animist and non-Islamic headhunting objects ("Myths and Folklore Legends Can Be Attractive Tourism Products'," 2003). When the tourists travel home with their souvenirs of *pua* inspired clothing, the articulations around the motifs then take on meanings of, among other things, an exotic holiday in the east, in the land of the headhunters of Borneo.

Apart from designing and manufacturing modern manifestations of the *pua*, Ong's most significant innovation is concentrated in his marketing skills. He is an effective campaigner, intermediary and culture broker for tribal or indigenous art. Consequently, he has achieved success in his efforts at identifying, developing and educating new markets for the *pua kumbu* product and other tribal art of Sarawak (Hooi, 2006). Ong's success at marketing stems from his ability to articulate and manipulate culture in the sense that Clifford (2001) describes in *Indigenous Articulations*. Fragments of Iban cultural expressions, meanings and practices are reconstituted, joined in surprising combinations and choreographed into an effective marketing strategy. Ong's enterprise is set up as a business and survives on profits; to

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<sup>49</sup> Pua kumbu inspired vest in Edric Ong's shop. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

that end marketing and publicizing the object are essential to the success of the enterprise. By using the intangible cultural heritage surrounding the *pua* in an innovative way, he adds value when marketing the object for international consumption. However, it is this aspect of Ong's activities around the *pua kumbu* that is the cause of the strongest tensions with the Iban foundation.

The literature liberally positioned in Ong's gallery catalogues his efforts at revitalising an ancient art. They note the steps he is taking to salvage the technical and scientific (chemical) skills and knowledge developed by Ibans and passed down through the generations to master weavers today, thereby ensuring the survival of the art. Framed newspaper articles and copies of books on *pua kumbus*, *ikat* weaving and information about eco-textiles displayed in his shop in Kuching pay tribute to his important role in ensuring that the retention and acquisition of skill levels necessary to weave these complicated and sophisticated pieces remains economically viable.

In recognition of all his efforts, the New York-based, Aid to Artisan organisation, bestowed him with the aid to artisan advocacy award in 2006 (*Fifth Annual Aid to Artisans Awards*, 2006). He works with the ASEAN Handicraft Promotion and Development Association (AHPADA) in collaboration with UNESCO. Together, these two organisations award the UNESCO – AHPADA Crafts Seal of Excellence for Handicraft Products in Southeast Asia. This award pays “careful regard to cultural authenticity and environmental conservation” (*AHPADA Seal of Excellence for Handicraft Products in Southeast Asia*, 2004). *Pua kumbu* inspired designs created under his auspices won the award in 2001 (prior to Ong becoming president of the organisation in 2004). His efforts in marketing and promotion are consistent with the goals of UNESCO-AHPADA, which amongst others are to: “develop and promote the marketing of crafts, strengthen and improve the status of crafts people, create employment opportunities especially in the rural areas and preserve traditional craft skills within the context of conservation of cultural heritage” (Ong, 2004: 1).

Ong bridges the gap between the *pua kumbu* and its various social networks by means of his skills as a promoter and marketer. He is more reflexive and in tune with the demands of the global market than the Tun Jugah foundation. He has expert ability which is imperative in transcending borders and narrowing the gap between the object and its potential global audiences and consumers. This mediation is especially important as new or non-Iban audiences do not share knowledge of Iban religion, oral history and literature, or have familiarity with Iban performances. His extensive circle of influence spans the local scene and extends to global organisations. Some marketing is aimed at local, wealthy, urban middle-class Iban elites and other Malaysians such as

dignitaries and government ministers, and he also has contacts in foreign embassies, as well as organisations like the Delphic Games and Atelier, the art society in Kuching. The main thrust of his marketing however, is aimed at an international audience. This market includes a network of textile experts, scholars, gallery and museum curators, university academics, tribal art collectors, cultural and heritage organisations, and antique collectors.

Ong's construction of Iban culture in the late 2000s, embraces the articulations that the Kalimantan Dayaks, referred to at the beginning of this article, tried to shed in the 1970s. His construction of authenticity wrapping the object mines seams in Iban mythic and gendered landscapes. The cultural load that the object bore historically forms a significant part of the appeal of the high-end *pua kumbus* sold as art. Historical meanings and contexts where the object would have been used are amplified in the publicity and packaging and form a part of an arsenal of marketing tools. He builds on and repackages past articulations and weaves selected aspects of cultural expressions together. Elements of intangible cultural heritage and meanings are layered over new sources of stories. New religion, Christianity in this case, is layered over old Iban spirituality and shamanism. In his travels Ong experiments with and injects new inflections into cultural performances, adjusting the combinations of weavers and musicians. He attaches these articulations to the original form of the *pua kumbu* as well as modern manifestations of the cloth.

This process of value adding is what Rowlands (2002) terms 'commodification of the past' and Geismar (2001) labels, the 'construction of authenticity'. Geismar explains this process and its relation to the pricing of (tribal) art objects at auctions in Europe and North America:

It is necessary to understand the peculiar commodity status of tribal art: each object's price is defined in relation to an identity selected from its various cultural histories. This selective presentation of the relation of object to context exploit a classificatory device commonly called 'authenticity', which, for the purposes of tribal art market, is used in a highly strategic and not necessarily consistent or coherent manner (2001: 26).

Ong's introduction of innovation to the art can be seen as changing cultural practices at a faster rate than some Ibans are comfortable with. Or, seen from another point of view, this contest is reminiscent of Myer's observations of Australian Aboriginal art: "the circulation of acrylic paintings was not (and is not) contained easily

within a single régime of value. Neither simply commodity nor fully sacred object“ (2002: 6). In an interview with Janet Noel (2004), the curator of the textile department, and various high-ranking, knowledgeable Iban culture bearers or staff members at the Tun Jugah foundation, the tension was palpable when the discussion turned to Edric Ong. The sentiments expressed were that Ong was pushing at the boundaries of what was considered acceptable as culturally appropriate and sensitive ways to consume the object. They expressed that Ong proceeded without consultation or the support and permission of the foundation. They felt aggrieved that what they considered their cultural property was being marketed as a product. Ong, a non-Iban, was profiting from commercial use and sale of Iban cultural objects. This tension was illustrated by two examples that the weavers provided.

The first example was an incident at an international conference on textiles in Thailand. Weavers and culture bearers, members of the foundation and representatives from various international art and academic organisations were present. The staff members described how Ong made a grand entrance into the meeting room, wearing a high status and sacred *pua kumbu*, which he had cut, and was wearing as a poncho. Surrounded by tribal culture bearers who continue to attach mysticism to the cloth, the weaver of that particular *pua*, who happened to be present, was appalled and humiliated by that performance. The staff explained that they were taken aback for several reasons. Ong had used a sacred *pua* in a manner that offended the cultural values of the producers. They emphasised that the object still carries a patina of the sacred. It was an object to be treated with respect and not one to be cut and made into a makeshift item of clothing. They were at pains to explain that a *pua kumbu* is a not an ordinary piece of clothing worn by laypeople. Only initiated shamans wear them, and they only wear them when performing sacred rituals at life crisis moments. Apart from being interpreted as a clear cultural slight to the Ibans present, the performance had the added element of being interpreted as a personal slight. Noel explained that the weaver had attained high status. The cause of consternation could have been that Ong singled out her cloth to be cut instead of another piece. To her, it indicated that her cloth was not valued as highly as other pieces. The valuable ones would be sold whole as artwork, rather than as a prop for a performance or a grand entrance. This light-hearted show, apart from being insensitive to the artist, was not well received by the other Iban culture bearers present.

Ceremonial Iban finery used in a non-ceremonial context was the next example the staff provided. In 2004, an exhibition entitled ‘*Bejalai - A Malaysian-Australian Journey*’ was held in Kuala Lumpur at the Australian High Commission. Nancy Ngali



and Bangie Embol, the same weavers I had visited in their longhouse home, were featured at a live demonstration of weaving on a back-strap loom. What was unusual about the demonstration was that Nancy and Bangie were sitting on the floor, dressed resplendently in ceremonial Iban finery complete with massive silver headdresses. A photographic image of Bangie in ceremonial dress while at the loom has since been reproduced onto a giant poster that graces the entrance of Edric Ong's shop in Kuching. This image of the weaver sitting on the floor, in what is essentially wedding finery, was considered humorous to the staff. For appropriate weaving attire the staff referred me to a framed picture hanging in the foundation building. The pencil drawing by Monica Freeman in the 1950s depicts a bare-breasted weaver dressed only in a plain black homespun skirt.

The problem the staff voiced with the ceremonial finery is difficult to pinpoint. The sentiments were couched around the problem of superimposing one aspect of Iban culture, that is traditional ceremonial Iban attire worn at weddings or harvest festivals, onto another unrelated context, weaving. It is true that in the longhouse in the past, women did not weave in their bridal costume, but neither did they wear casual western clothing, like the foundation weavers wear today in the Kuching gallery. Neither of these images fit the 1950s drawing. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that heritage interventions are about slowing the rate of change. The difficulty in reconciling the three images indicate that the tension between the two organisations is not about authenticity, but rather contestation about control over the nature, degree and speed of change and also about the tangible and on-going material representation of the Iban.

Ong's reconstitution of Iban culture from fragments is not bound by tradition or restricted by historical Iban cultural taboos. The fact that he is not Iban, means that he is not constrained by having to portray a culturally and historically accurate representation of Iban culture. This freedom to choreograph the performance, using all elements available, without having to slavishly follow 'tradition', could be one reason why Ong's representations of Iban culture are more flamboyant and consequently well received overseas. His focus is now on international audiences. Apart from being more lucrative, the international markets and venues mean that he is removed from intense scrutiny and critique by culture bearers. Decisions to include the spectacular and eye-catching headdresses and ceremonial or wedding finery, even if the context is not entirely accurate or authentic, fit in to this successful marketing strategy borne of the freedom to innovate without many restrictions. Such means of marketing are used the world over by indigenous groups to market their wares. In this sense, the

representation of the Iban weaver, as highly cultured and well dressed, was not out of line with international norms.

When the Iban foundation staff discuss their problem with Ong, I discern that their predicament lies in the fact that he is a non-Iban marketing what is identified as the singularly most culturally significant object for the Ibans. The foundation staff have difficulties in reconciling traditional Iban values of aversion to self-promotion, of elevating oneself or praising one's own art, with the kind of marketing necessary to promote a product. Ong, on the other hand, has developed marketing strategies that are effective to the extent that his name brand, not the foundation's, is more closely associated with the object internationally. At this point in time, Ong is in control of telling the story of the Ibans to an international audience. He wields control over reconstituting fragments, constructing the narrative and choreographing elements of Iban culture. The foundation is not the most vocal or well-known voice, nor does it orchestrate the performance of Iban cultural identity to the outside world. The representation of Ibans, in relation to the *pua kumbu*, to an international audience, is therefore outside the authority, influence and control of Ibans. Likewise, the speed of change surrounding the *pua kumbu* is in the hands of a non-Iban. Ong can be seen as testing the tensile strength of the yarns. His articulations can be seen as challenging the limits to which art objects, or their motifs that were/are considered sacred or religious, can be copied, reproduced and made into new objects. Ong's articulations push at boundaries where elements of intangible cultural heritage can be reconstituted to form part of a marketing strategy.

### **Pulling in many directions**

In conclusion, this thesis examined articulations around the *pua kumbu* as it circulated through socially active regimes. Longhouse communities do not migrate and the men do not go on *bejalai* journeys to earn prestige anymore but women continue to construct and weave their social status around the *pua kumbu*. Out of these more settled communities Nancy and Bangie's present circumstances are starkly contrasted to the men's. Their skills with an old status enhancing artform take them, the cloth and a version of Iban culture downriver and out to global locations. Instead of the men going to war or on forest product gathering expeditions or adventure, it is now the women who travel. For women, the *pua kumbu*, the most traditional of women's art and cultural activities, has enabled global travel and some degree of participation in the market economy.

Chapter three examined the construction of social networks on my river journey towards the object. Theoretically, the chapter regarded the object as actively constructing networks. My fieldwork tested the existence and strength of social connections created around the pua kumbu. The remote Kapit region functions on connections. Acquiring and maintaining the right family connections were therefore the only ways for me to achieve my goal of travelling in the interior. These family connections provided an almost palpable sense of protection; the connections and influence of the Tun Jugah family manipulated local contacts and facilitated my journey. Connections to the most powerful Iban family in the region however, came intact with inbuilt hostilities from certain unfriendly quarters. Connections articulated around the object created allies and manifested others who distanced themselves from us.

Chapter four was based on a ceremonial poles or *tiang ranyai* design pua kumbu that Nancy Ngali, a weaver from the remote Rumah Garie longhouse, was weaving on her loom. The pua kumbu is now disentangled from the original context and network of connotations and associations with farming, fertility and headhunting. However, new meanings and affiliations have been found for the pua kumbu. Chapter five examined the pua kumbu circulating through the contested tropical rainforests of Borneo. It entered the zone of friction over the colonial legacy of native customary rights land. The pua kumbu, once made out of jungle vegetation and inspired from the forest, now represents the richness of the biodiversity of a fast-disappearing ecosystem. The cloth of the rainforest now comes from a landscape filled with rows upon rows of plantations. Changing physical landscapes now create new layers of meanings for the cloth. Chapter six examined the circulation of the cloth downriver in multicultural locales. It examined articulations around the cloth outside of Iban locales, finding its way in an Islamic environment. Chapter seven explored the tension, represented by the back-strap loom, between freezing and addressing the processual nature of culture in articulations around the pua kumbu.

The tensions around the cloth pull in many directions. With the emergence of new tribal artists, control in the hands of one Iban organisation, no matter how well funded, is even more elusive. The tension now comes from within the Iban tribe. New generations of tribal artists are pulling the *pua kumbu* in even more directions. They push at boundaries, exploring new articulations to suit the present dynamics and circumstances. Emerging tribal artists are exploring their artistic heritage, embracing their cultural histories and creating new articulations around modern manifestations of the *pua kumbu*. With this new generation of artists, the tension around the *pua kumbu*

does not centre on the cloth alone anymore. The weaver continues to manipulate and control the message and meanings on the original form. Some segments of the audience continue to share an understanding for deeper, more personal, spiritual, psychological or dream-inspired meanings. However, the object now morphs and takes on many forms. With modern manifestations the motifs themselves, removed from the cloth, have come to play a role.

In 2005, final year students from the faculties of art, marketing and graphic design at the University of Malaysia, Sarawak, UNIMAS held an exhibition at the Kuching pavilion. At the exhibition, there was a notable wealth of artwork inspired by the material culture of the various tribes in Sabah and Sarawak. There were objects inspired by Bidayuh embroidery, jewellery and decorations inspired by Bajau women head-dresses, and sculptures exploring the Iban concept of *ngayau* – travelling in war parties, with the Iban sword and shield. There were cartoons of cultural heroes, warriors and demons.

Among the exhibits there were two featuring the *pua kumbu*. One featured *pua kumbu* motifs used as decoration on stationery and packaging paper. This project had the sponsorship and support of the Tun Jugah Foundation. In another exhibit, artist Jackson Seliman reproduced isolated, striking and graphic elements of *pua kumbu* motifs, and transformed them to a different material. His series of four life-size bronze sculptures depict women in the shape of individual *pua* motifs<sup>50</sup>. He explains that the figures are “a painstaking effort to document my translations of the narrative symbols and the motifs that represent the spirit of ancient dreams” (Seliman, 2005). In this artwork, Seliman has managed to evoke generations of weavers passing down their individual skills, expertise, knowledge and stories, and the fame and status associated with certain cloths or categories of themes or ancestors. These sculptures also represent a crossover between women’s art and men’s art, men making sculptures and effigies out of wood, women weaving.

The involvement of emerging Iban artists, with their own interpretation and ownership of their culture, use of new media, methods of publicity, marketing and political activism, focuses attention back to tensions around the cloth. Although the Tun Jugah foundation and Edric Ong can be seen as pulling against each other, they are not necessarily cast in an antagonistic relationship. Although there are discernible

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<sup>50</sup> Jackson Seliman, artist, University of Malaya, Sarawak, (UNIMAS) end of year exhibition in Kuching, 2005. Pua kumbu motifs transferred into a series of four life-size sculptures. (Photograph by Audrey Low).

tensions between the two organisations at present which are articulated around the cloth, the model for the relationship can be synergistic rather than antagonistic. This contestation pushes each side to clarify, defend and make the articulations more robust. The tension nudges them to find areas of agreement and to find ways of collaborating or to unite in opposition to other articulations.

Once the cloth is cut from the weaver's loom, it is cut adrift from the backs of the weavers and their personal dreams, intentions and messages. It circulates in various non-Iban locales. Over a prolonged period of time different organizations and people, from within the community and outside, come into the object's sphere and pull it in many different directions. The development in the tensions around the pua kumbu has pulled so far it has moved beyond the original form of the sacred blanket-size cloth. Tensions are now active around pua kumbu motifs reproduced on other objects. Emerging generations of Iban artists are now articulating Iban cultural identity around motifs reproduced onto other objects. These are the tensions or dynamics pulling at the object at a particular point in time, to suit the present sets of circumstances and that fit their current interests and challenges.

The pua kumbu has journeyed far from the tropical rainforests that inspired it. It still evokes ideas of ancient lifestyles in the jungle. These romanticized notions are actively marketed locally and overseas. New meanings are layered over old connotations creating rich and unexpected articulations for a tribal object finding its way out of the jungle.

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## Glossary

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**AHPADA** - ASEAN Handicraft Promotion and Development Association

**ASEAN** – Association of South-East Asian Nations.

**Backstrap loom** – a weaving loom with one end tied to a post and the other end tied to the back of the weaver. The weaver calibrates the tension of the yarns with the movement of her body.

**Bejalai** – men’s journeys and expeditions, historically undertaken for adventure and also to acquire prestige.

**Bumiputera** – a term coined in West Malaysia to incorporate Malays (who are Muslims) and the indigenous people from Peninsular Malaysia, and Sabah and Sarawak. This category of citizenship excludes the migrant Indian and Chinese races. The Dayaks from Sarawak now call themselves minority *Bumiputeras* to distinguish themselves from the majority Muslim *Bumiputeras*.

**Dayak** – a word coined by the Dutch colonists to refer to non-Muslim local residents. This term has been adopted by the Ibans.

**Headhunting** - men’s headhunting was the Iban method of war, and incidents continued to be reported until the late 1950s and 1960s. Historically, there was a spiritual aspect to this practice. Weaving the *pua kumbu* (as opposed to other types of weaving Iban women did) was seen as a parallel act.

**Women’s headhunting, women’s war** – (see mordanting) the process of mordanting yarns before the dyeing and weaving process was called women’s headhunting or women’s war. This is because the process was considered spiritual in nature.

**Iban** – originally from Kalimantan, Indonesia, the Iban people migrated into Sarawak beginning in the 1600s.

**Ikat (warp ikat)** – *Ikat* is part of the dyeing process in weaving. It is the process of wrapping sections of warp threads with *lemba* leaves or raffia string so that the tied off areas resist the dye during the dye process. *Pua kumbu* cloths are usually dipped in dye several times. Once dipped in red, the tied off sections of the yarns are then cut open to reveal undyed sections. New sections are then tied off, and the yarns are dipped in other colours, such as indigo.

**Kalimantan** – the southern half of the island of Borneo, now part of Indonesia.

**Mordanting** – the process where the naturally occurring oils on cotton yarns are stripped, to enable dyes to adhere to the yarns. The chemicals used in this process are sourced from jungle vegetation. This complicated and spiritual process is taboo laden.

**Rajah** – king. James, Charles and Vyner Brooke were known as the White Rajahs of Borneo and they ruled Sarawak from 1841-1941.