



SEMIOTIC

PERCEPTION AND REPRESENTATION IN THE ARTS

Editors

Yakup Mohd Rafee

Yow Chong Lee

Awangko' Hamdan Bin Awang Arshad

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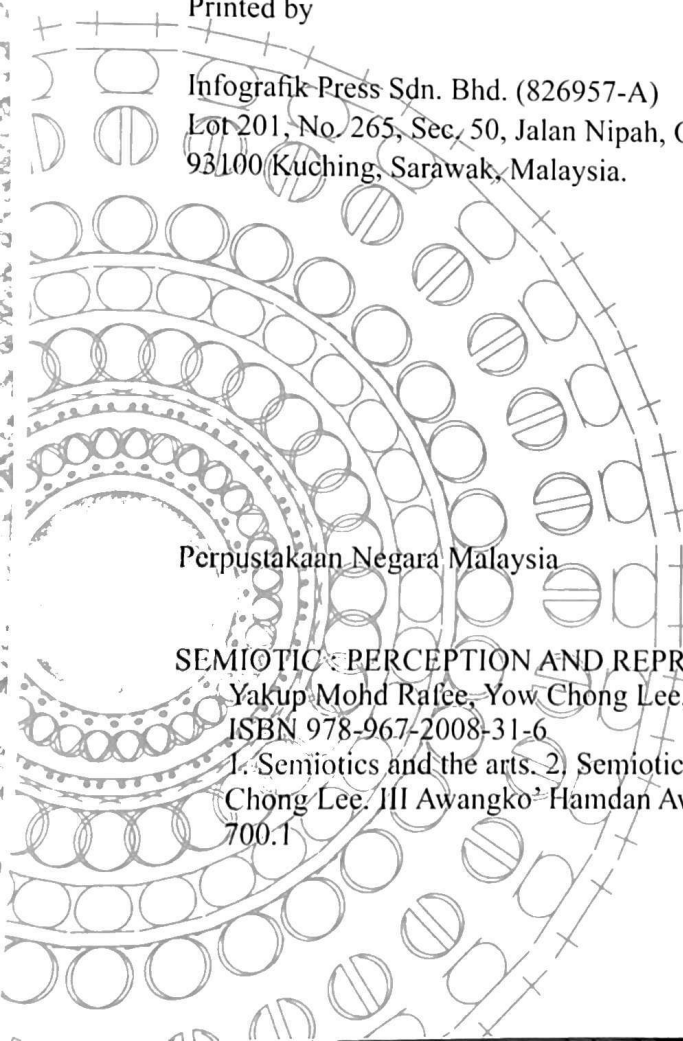
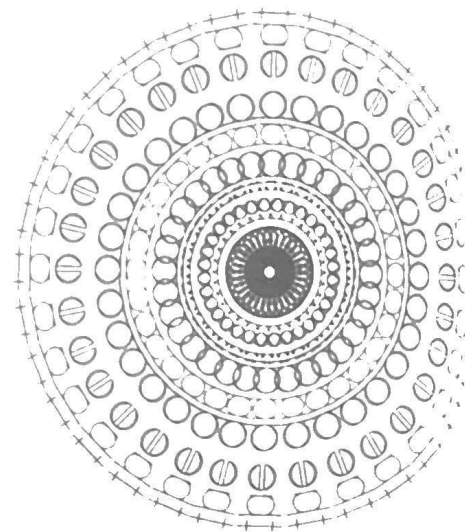
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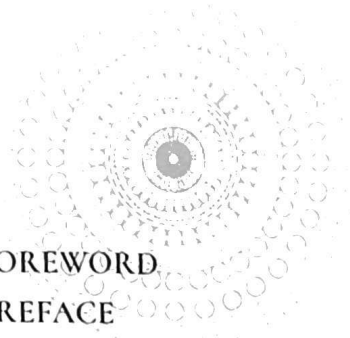
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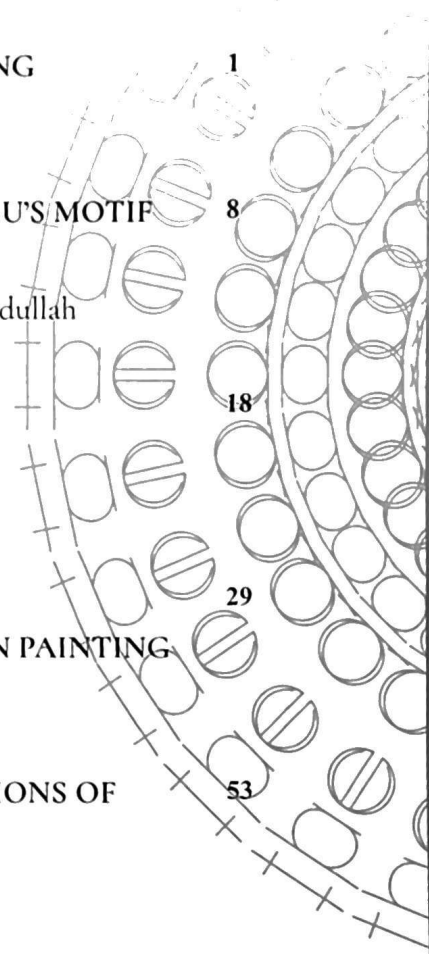
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THE IBAN'S BELIEF TOWARDS THE PUA KUMBU'S MOTIF

Alexander Chelum, Anna Durin, Connie Lim Keh Nie,
Asrul Asshadi Mohamad Morni, Noria Tugang & Qistina Donna Lee Abdullah.

Introduction

The Iban are the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Iban people are categorized under the Proto-Malay group which is the same as Sumatera Malay and Peninsular Malaysia (Freeman, 1995:6). By tradition, the Iban are riverine people, living in longhouse communities located along the main rivers and small streams of the forested interior. Here they live as subsistence shifting cultivators with rice

as their main crop. Studies by Freeman (1955) and Padoch (1978) described the traditional Iban shifting cultivation system in details. According to Kedit (1973), the Iban people are originally known as the Sea Dayak. This is because the Iban people uses the river or sea as a mode of transportation. Thus, the Iban feels proud to have great history of adventurous forefathers.

Based on the year 2010 census, the Ibans were estimated to number 713,421, (Sarawak: Population by Ethnic Group and Administrative District, 2010), contributing almost 30 percent of Sarawak's total population. As they made up of the majority of Sarawak's population, today, the Iban could be found over the Sarawak state. Majority of the Ibans still resides in the longhouse (Gana, 1998:17). Looking from the view of their belief, they are still holding to their traditional animism belief which they inherited from one generation to another generation (Umbat 1998). Before the arrival of Christianity, the Iban do not have any religions as they are seen practicing their pagan belief and they strongly believe their lifestyle are closely related to the cosmology. As once summarized by Appell (2001), "The Iban World incorporates both humans and gods and spirits in a relatively seamless fashion, and different aspects of this world are perceived through changing levels of consciousness". Sather (1985) mentioned the lifestyle of Iban community is closely related to the life in the natural world.

The life in the natural world refers to the birds or omens. In the other hand, the Iban also believe their life is closely related to the world of God known as *menoa petara*. The Iban cosmos was divided into the overlapping categories of *mensia* (human) and *antu* or *petara* (spirits). The interaction between the human and spirit are occurring constantly in *burong* (augury), *piring* (sacrificial acts), and *mimpi* (dreams). The majority of the Iban had converted to Christianity over the past decades, but still they are willing to marinate their traditional customs, ceremonies, oral traditions and functional rituals in the longhouse socio-cultural contexts (Kedit, 1980; Pringle, 1970). Although the wave of modernization had brought economic growth in Iban society, but the belief of animism's belief is still strongly embedded in Iban's lifestyle.

Viewing from the animism belief, the Iban belief system is related to the living things such as the birds, animals, insects which

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are closely related to the spirit world. Therefore, the movements of these living things related are closely related to the spirit world. Therefore, the movements of these living things related to their spirits are always being observed as a sign, warning or as an indication of inquiry and invitation from the deities or spirits. Therefore, it is not surprising the motif uses in *Pua Kumbu* textile are based on the natural resources such as the animals and plants. The Iban believes that these motifs are embedded with specific meanings related to the cosmology. Motif which comes with specific meaning had a great influence of the belief of Iban people. Some had been turned into a meaningful symbol of their animistic belief. "A symbol usually has no physicals at all to justify its abstract meaning" (Korq, 1959:14). In the context of community, the symbol had become a sign, a characteristic, a symbol or symbolic emblem comes with abstract meanings which convey a message to a scenario or an idea to a person.

In the olden days, the *Pua Kumbu* is used in the ritual ceremonies related to God, Goddess or Deities. Today, the usage of *Pua Kumbu* textile had changed. It had become a decorative accessory, a piece of artwork displaying on the wall, tablecloth, bag and other newly invented craftwork solely for decorative use. The evolution of the *Pua Kumbu* textile is now used as a modern apparel in fashion and scarf. If we were to compare to the traditional usage, today, the function of its usage has changed greatly. In the pessimistic side, many does not know the meaning of the motifs used in *Pua Kumbu* textile is actually portraying the belief of the creator. These motifs are often related to their animistic belief and taboos. The example of animal applied in the motifs are crocodile, snake, frog, tiger, mouse, and insects.

According to Iban belief, *Selampandai* refers to the ladies spirit which is an incarnation from a frog. *Selampandai* is known as a spirit

with a power of creating a baby. The tiger and mouse (*tikus kasturi*) motif are often created in an abstract manner. It is believed that people who wear this textile are crowned with the title of bravery and courage. The birds are believed as a good signal, promises, and sign. The textile that are weaved with the bird are believed to have the power to heal the sick and it will bring wealth, good fortune, and prosperity in whatever jobs a person is involved. The deer motif will bring success and good luck during the hunting. The insect motif like spiders, fireflies, scorpions and centipedes are often used in Pua Kumbu weaving. What causes the worries is the current generation only uses the Pua Kumbu as a decoration and apparel, but they do not know the inner meaning of it. Therefore, they may not be able to appreciate the premium quality of textile weaving as a product which is seen in the past.

In the Iban society, the Pua Kumbu motif is divided into two categories namely as the high motif and the low motif. Usually, the high-status

motif are embedded with meaning and beliefs of Iban society. According to Daya Jerlikan, a Pua Kumbu weaver, the print design or Pua Kumbu motif which is inspired from a dream which is considered to be of a higher status. Not every lady in the Iban society is capable of weaving the high motif and not all ladies are inspired by dreams although they are skilful Pua Kumbu weaver. She added that if a weaver would like to try to weave the high-status motif which is not her delusion from a dream, the weaver who started the weaving will have to finish the Pua Kumbu. Normally, to complete a high-status motif is a complicated task. If the weaver is not capable of completing the Pua Kumbu, the Iban society believes that the weaver has a weak spirit (*alah ayu / layu semengat*), she will then feel sick and sooner or later she will die. This is one of the reasons that Pua Kumbu brings about a significant meaning and endowed with high respect by the Iban community. It is not surprising only the low motif such as the insects, flora, and fauna motif is used in Pua Kumbu

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today. As the influence of animistic belief is still practiced by some of the Ibans, the motifs that carry the names of dangerous creatures such as tiger, gigantic python (*nabau*), and crocodiles are hardly weaved in modern day *pua*.

Apart from these dangerous creatures, there are some challenging motifs to be woven by the contemporary weavers such as motifs which carry the name of animistic ritual and deities. Among the example of these motifs are the ceremonial tree known as *mulung merangau* and motif *Kumang*. Literally *mulung merangau* refers to a very old sago palm, which has bear lots of fruits but in this context, it means the ceremonial tree for the animistic ritual for those warriors who are going to war or *ngayau*. *Kumang* is the most beautiful deity who possessed supernatural power and helps the weavers to create very beautiful and complex motifs.

It is seen that the Pua Kumbu plays a significant role and function in the traditional

society. It is used in various ceremonies and ritual such as wedding ceremony, festivals, child bathing ceremonies, funeral rituals, agricultural rituals and so forth. During the ritual of *Gawai Batu*, the Pua Kumbu is used to wrap the stone known as *Batu Basah*. During the funeral ritual, Pua Kumbu will be used as *sapat* to protect the dead body. Besides, Pua Kumbu is also used as a *pandong*, which is a place to put the sacrifices during the paddy planting ceremony. During the wedding ceremony, the Pua Kumbu is often used to decorate the space known as *tempat bersanding*, where the bride and bridegroom are seated. The couple will be seated on top of the gong under the Pua Kumbu canopy while ready to receive the blessings from the elderly.

The motif which comes with power is the one that carries the name of a dangerous creature like the crocodile motif as mentioned above. As the crocodile and snake motif are believed to be dangerous, thus the motifs are required to be fed with food (*pemakai*) motif. This is to ensure that

it does not hungry. It is also believed that when the dangerous motif are fed with food motif, it will not disturb the weaver. The food motif is usually in the form of small creatures such as a house lizard or even fruits such as motif *kembayau*, food for the Hornbill motif. In this context, the food motifs are placed either in the mouth or in front of the mouth of the dangerous motifs.

Besides employing the food motifs, another option is to weave the dangerous motifs in pair and positioned as confronting each other. This may depict that the pair is discussing something or even arguing in order to keep both of them occupied and busy so that they will not bother to disturb other people especially the weaver. If these taboos are not being observed, it is believed that the weaver herself will be eaten. She will then become weak in spirit (*ayu*), sooner or later she will fall sick and die. Despite of embracing Christianity, these beliefs are seen well-kept but it is seldom being practiced by the Iban today. There are some places in Lubuk

Antu, Saribas and Betong that still practice the custom of Pua Kumbu until today. The Iban community in these three places, practices the specific ceremonies of *begawai*, if someone encountered a bad dream about Pua Kumbu.

Pua Kumbu Motifs which Carry Meanings as Believed by The Iban Community

Crocodile Motif (Motif Buaya)

The Iban belief that the crocodile motif is powerful as it protects the paddy cultivation. They believe the crocodile is an incarnation of their relatives, and thus they avoid the killing of crocodiles. They believe that if they kill the crocodiles, the living crocodiles will attack and kill them in return. Another Iban belief relating to the crocodile is that it has a spirit which can understand and hear if somebody might say something or *puni*. Their belief in Puni is the main reason why the Ibans who are still practicing the animistic belief must take food or drink before executing any activities

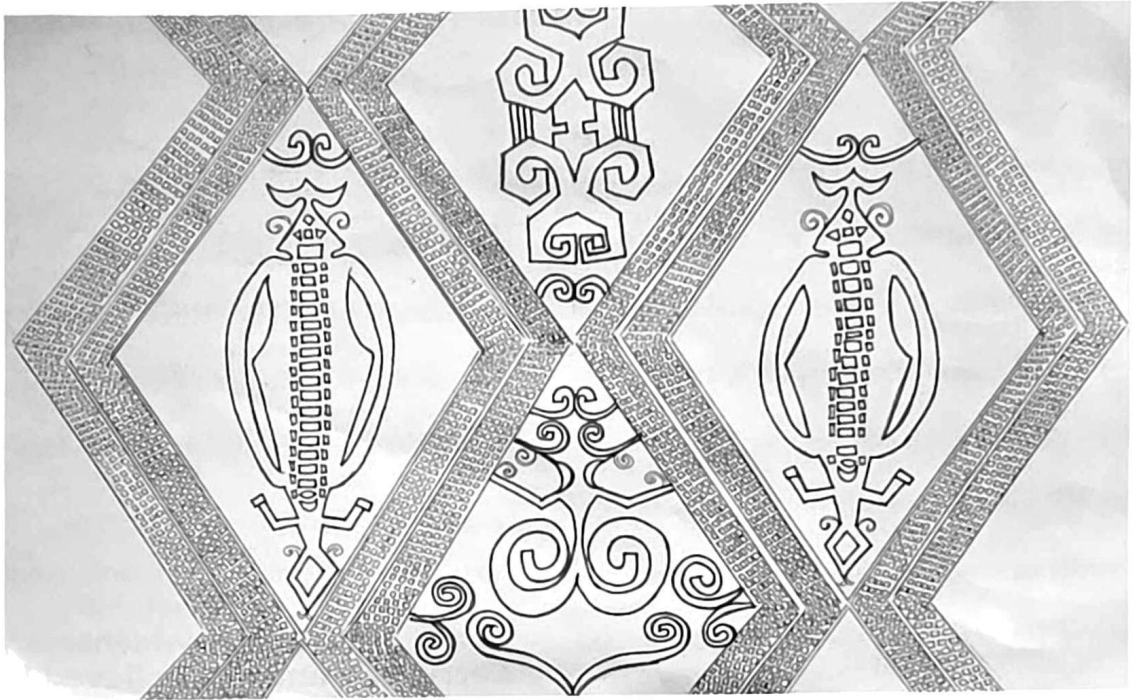


Figure 2.1: Crocodile motif

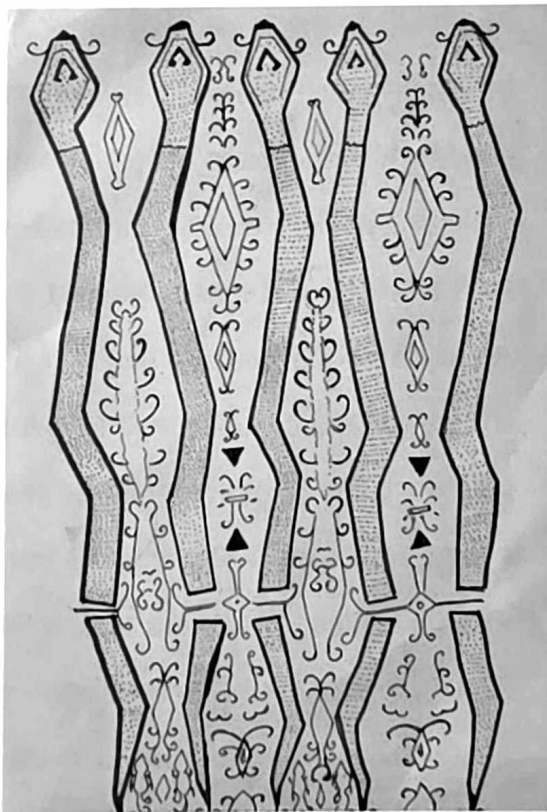


Figure 2.2: Snake motif



Figure 2.3: Engkeramba motif

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Yakup Mohd Rafee (Editor)



Yakup Mohd Rafee is a senior lecturer in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Malaysia, and obtained his Ph.D. in Fine Arts from the University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom, in 2011. His current research interests include research methodology, representational painting & drawing, visual ethnography, visual culture, cultural object and visual anthropology. Currently, Yakup is an Associate Fellow of Borneo Research Institute; UNIMAS. Previously, he was a Research Fellow at Institute of Design and Innovation(InDI), UNIMAS from 2011 until 2015 and Visiting Lecturer in College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah, UAE from 2014-2015.

Yow Chong Lee (Editor)

Yow Chong Lee is a film lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Apart from teaching courses he loves most such as Film History, Film Theory and Criticism, Documentary Filmmaking, and Scriptwriting he also enjoys writing and researching on subjects in relation to film festivals and Southeast Asian Cinemas. He also spends most of his time in exploring the arts and cultures in Sarawak, a place where he believes has had offered him so much inspirations be it in writing, photography or filmmaking.



Awangko' Hamdan Bln Awang Arshad (Editor)



Awangko' Hamdan is currently a senior lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. A trained artist and designer from the School of Art and Design, UiTM Shah Alam, Selangor, he obtained his MA in Visual Arts from Australian National University, Canberra in 2002. Awangko' enjoys engaging research pertaining to the subjects of traditional arts and ethnic cultures of the Malayo Polynesian, cultural materials, cultural objects, local history and local folk lore. He specializes in the realm of fine art ceramics and has widely exhibited his contemporary sculptural works held both nationally and internationally. Awangko' is an active member of Sarawak Artist Society, an artist member of National Art Gallery and also a member of Asian Ceramic Network artist.

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