

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1996

Naming and Meaning: Ritual Textiles of the Ihan of Sarawak

Traude Gavin

Museum of Ethnography

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Gavin, Traude, "Naming and Meaning: Ritual Textiles of the Ihan of Sarawak" (1996). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 860.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/860>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Naming and Meaning: Ritual Textiles of the Iban of Sarawak

Traude Gavin
North Yorkshire YO17 0SH
U.K.

In conjunction with the exhibition of Iban ritual textiles I curated at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles in 1996, I gave a number of lectures based on my field research. The present paper will address some of the questions that were raised by the audience in Los Angeles. All these questions are characteristic of the manner in which members of a Western, literate society tend to approach Iban cloth patterns.

This paper is divided into several parts. I begin with a brief background on the Iban people and on the ritual and social function of Iban textiles. This is followed by a condensed account of the two main categories of pattern names used by Iban weavers. The last part is devoted to common Western preconceptions regarding Iban cloth patterns; why we have them, and why we are so reluctant to let them go.

The Iban

The Iban number about 500,000, the majority of whom live in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, in northwestern Borneo. While today many Iban live in Kuching, the capital, or in other urban centres, most continue to reside in longhouses, cultivating hill rice, the staple. Iban society is egalitarian without any form of hereditary leadership or rank. Status differentiation is based on personal achievement. Formerly, the main means of achievement for men was headhunting, and for women, the weaving of textiles.

Ceremonial textiles

Textiles are used only on ritual occasions. One basic function of cloth is to mark a ritual as such. The use of cloth indicates to humans that ritual action is under way and signals to the gods that their attention is being sought. Ritual functions vary. Shamans use cloth as a form of protection while performing healing rites. Cloths are hung in an enclosure around a corpse while it remains in the longhouse. Cloths are wrapped around a temporary shrine which is erected at major rites in order to create a sacred space.

On important occasions, cloths with powerful and high-ranking patterns are essential for the efficacy of the rite in question. The temporary shrine is one such occasion; others are the awning of cloth that is erected over sacrificial pigs, and the reception of the pig's liver on a plate which is formally received by a woman of high standing on a folded cloth. High-ranking patterns are distinguished by being given a title to reflect their status. Titles thus indicate the rank of the pattern, the ritual occasion for which it is appropriate, but also the status of the weaver. Only acclaimed weavers dare to weave powerful patterns, aided by helping spirits and powerful charms.

Name categories

The most important textiles made by Iban weavers are blanket-size cloths called *pua*. Titles of high-ranking *pua* patterns generally refer to powerful concepts, such as the trophy head pattern (see Gavin 1996:46,81) with its associations to headhunting, and the creator deity pattern (fig.1), which refers to a powerful, beneficent personage in the Iban pantheon. It is important to note that in both examples there is no pictorial representation of either trophy heads or the deity. Iban weavers explain that pattern titles are like proper names. They say, "It is the same as you being called Traude and I, Bidah, she Rose, and so on". It follows that pattern titles cannot be deduced from the pattern itself, just as we cannot deduce a person's name from physical appearance or facial features. I tested this proposition again and again by taking cloths with titled patterns from one river area to another area where the pattern was not known. Invariably, I was told that the title can only be known by the people who made the pattern.

The second name category comprises what I refer to as labels. Labels simply indicate what a motif or pattern is called. Labels are a weaver's tools that are used to refer to practically each and every element in the Iban design repertoire. Vine-like patterns are usually filled with "rice grain" and "spirit's eye" motifs (fig. 2), to give just one example. The names of skirt patterns are also labels, rather than titles. Skirt patterns are not associated with ritual efficacy in the same way as are titled patterns of the larger *pua* cloths. The most well-known and oldest skirt patterns are named after animals, such as the deer, leech and hawk patterns, none of which are representational (for examples, see Gavin 1996:60-63,76,77).

Alfred C. Haddon

The subject of skirts brings us to Alfred C. Haddon whose study, first published in 1936, focused on skirt patterns. Haddon's study, reprinted in 1982, remains the standard reference today. Haddon visited Sarawak in 1898 at the invitation of Charles Hose, a colonial officer in the service of the Brooke Raj. Haddon later purchased a number of Iban cloths from Hose who had attached the names of motifs to the cloths. It is on the identifications provided by Hose that Haddon's study is based. While there is nothing wrong with Hose's original identification of motifs, Haddon's interpretation is rather problematic. Haddon is renowned for his pioneering work in anthropology as well as for his role in art history. In the latter discipline, he was instrumental in propagating the realist-degenerationist school of thought (Haddon 1895). Designs were thought to originate as realistic depictions of nature which eventually degenerated into simplified forms.

The problem of which Haddon was well aware is that, in the Iban case, no known realistic prototypes exist. More importantly, if Haddon had been able to interrogate Iban weavers himself, they would have told him, as they told me, that names of motifs do not tell us what is depicted or represented, but simply what the motif is called (and, in some cases, what it resembles). Examples from a Western cultural context are the checkerboard, the herringbone, and the houndstooth patterns. In these instances we do not assume that the original intention was to depict dogs' teeth or fish bones.



Figure 1:
Creator deity pattern (*buah Selempandai*); private collection (also featured in Gavin 1993:201; and Gavin 1996:87).

Persistent presuppositions

However, the question is, why do people who have never heard of Haddon and his theories expect depiction and representation when looking at Iban cloth patterns? This brings me to my first point, or what Ernst Gombrich (1979) refers to as the psychology of perception, or how we process visual information. When confronted with an unfamiliar image, our eyes scan the image in search for something recognizable so that we can “make sense” of it; or, to use a more appropriate term in this context, so that we can make “head or tail” of the image (Gombrich 1979:143). Iban patterns lend themselves to the process of “reading-in”. It is often almost possible to make out some kind of shape or figure. Above all, we tend to seek human faces and figures in the welter of lines. In the literature it is quite common to find apparently abstract Iban patterns described as containing “stylized” human figures (for an example, see Bullough 1981:13, plate VIII; the design is commonly referred to as the whirlpool pattern by Iban weavers; see Gavin 1996:86).

Orality and literacy

The term “reading-in” brings me to my second point: literacy versus orality. In studying Iban textiles, we inadvertently apply the principles of a literate culture to objects that were produced by an oral culture. For literates, it is near impossible to imagine life without the written word and, more importantly, to imagine life without the mindset that comes with literacy (for details, see Ong 1982). As a thoroughly literate people, we also tend to see images linguistically. This is clear from the terminology that we commonly employ without much thought. We seek for “encoded” meaning (Morphy 1994) and want to “decipher” the “iconography” of patterns. In short, our dominant models are linguistic ones (cf. O’Hanlon 1995:469). Haddon assumed that designs devised by primitive man were “pictographs”, or a primitive form of language (1895:217). In the case of Iban textiles, we expect named design motifs to add up to a story that can be “read”, if only we can find the key. However, the notion of “reading” an image in this way is not part of orally based thought.

Orality differs fundamentally from literacy. Without written records, knowledge must be organized in a very specific way if it is to be accessible. As Ong writes, “You know what you can recall” (1982:33). If a cloth motif is to become part of a widely known design repertoire, its name has to be memorable and easy to recall. One of the cloths that were shown in the Fowler Museum exhibit may serve as an example from a Western context. The lenders of the cloth refer to the design as the “sock” pattern because the most prominent motif looks like a cartoon impression of a sock (see Gavin 1996:45). While organizing the exhibit, there was a succession of exhibition lists, involving the inevitable reshuffling of numbers. However, there never was a problem referring to this particular cloth, because once the connection is made between the design and the name “socks”, it is a highly effective memory aid. Many Iban motif names are likely to have been conceived in a similar way. Nonetheless, as with the “sock” example, such names are almost always culture-bound and it is therefore often difficult to see why a particular name is so effective. To give an example, the name of a common border pattern is *bali mabok* (see both borders following the weft in figure 1); *bali* is a prefix commonly used

in composite design names, and *mabok* is “drunk”, or “intoxicated”. The name is always given with a laugh, but no-one can explain the joke. What is clear, however, is that the name is effective since it is remembered by everyone.

Names of design motifs function as a mnemonic device. Often, names are chosen to reflect a formal characteristic of the design. Names that make use of some comical element are particularly effective. As with the sock example, part of the joke is that “socks” is not what the design “is” or represents, but what it looks like. Other properties that make names memorable are assonance, rhythm and rhyme. For example, a zigzag line often included in borders along the warp (see Gavin 1996:53) is called “crossing a river”, which in Iban is *semerai sungai*, a rhyme that runs easily off the tongue.

A crucial distinction

To recapitulate, the distinction between titles and labels is critical if we want to understand the “meaning” of Iban cloth patterns in an Iban cultural context. In Iban oral art forms, powerful concepts must be referred to obliquely, using similes and metaphorical allusions (Masing 1981:205). The same applies to the titles of powerful patterns which are meant to invite the search through layers of meaning, hinted at in wordplay and double entendre. However, meanings should ultimately remain opaque and elusive. Keeping meaning opaque is a means of showing respect (cf. Barrett and Lucas 1993). To give an example, the title of the honeybear (*jugam*) pattern is a conundrum. Honeybears are ferocious animals and to kill a honeybear formerly could be counted as taking a human head. This meaning is appropriate in this context, for the *jugam* pattern is high in rank. *Jugam* also means “black”, in reference to a honeybear’s fur which is black. This meaning applies here as well. The distinctive characteristic of the *jugam* pattern is that it is dyed entirely with indigo (rather than the usual red), a colour which is also referred to as “black” in Iban (for an example, see Gavin 1996:84). The title thus combines both metaphorical and descriptive meaning and it is this combination that keeps its “real” meaning uncertain and hence elusive.

While the search for layers of symbolic meaning is appropriate in the case of titles, it is entirely inappropriate in the case of labels (for detailed field examples, see Gavin 1995:230-2). As Iban weavers say, these names are “just names”. Labels are a weaver’s reference system, or *aides-mémoire*, which are used to recall and refer to a whole repertoire of designs and motifs. Iban labels function in a similar way as the names of our herringbone and houndstooth patterns: they denote a variety of cloth designs.

The problem with “original” meaning

The question that I am often asked by a Western audience is, “How about originally? Could these names not have had symbolic meaning when they were first conceived?” To begin with, there is no reason to assume that Iban weavers lack design names whose sole function is to denote. In asking this question, we deny the Iban the sort of two-dimensional thinking that we take for granted in our own culture. We do not presume that the names of the herringbone and houndstooth patterns were originally conceived with symbolic connotations in mind. However, in Indonesian textile studies it is common to

assume that *all* motifs were originally endowed with symbolic meaning. When provided with named design motifs, it is accepted practice to search for the meaning of that term in a religious or ritual context and then to juxtapose or connect that meaning to the cloth motif.

For example, one common border pattern in Iban *pua* cloths is called the bamboo shoot motif (*pemucok tubu*; for an example, see the row of pointed triangles of the bottom border in Gavin 1996:54). In healing rites, the bamboo shoot is seen as the plant-counterpart of a person's physical vitality and vigour. It is this ritual significance of bamboo shoots that is applied by Western commentators to the cloth motif (see Sellato 1989:48 and Appel 1991). In our own culture we do not confuse different contexts so easily. Thus we would not connect the cross-stitch to the Cross as the most central symbol of the Christian world, nor would we draw a connection between the herringbone pattern and the fish as a symbol of Christ.

Crossing disciplines: art theory

The problems under discussion have been part of art historical and theoretical discourse for over a century. In his study in the psychology of decorative art (1979), Gombrich devotes an entire chapter to the issue, titled *Designs as Signs*. The discussion covers different art forms from all over the world, both from ancient and living cultures. Haddon's evolutionary theories are discussed in this section and placed into historical perspective. As indicated in the chapter's heading, the central issue is the distinction between designs and signs, between the merely decorative and the symbolic. As Gombrich points out, the problem is that, at least today, the assumption is that *all* motifs were originally conceived as symbols. What is called for then is a reassessment of our premises. Any study of decorative art forms should make allowance for both possibilities: designs as symbols, as well as designs as ornaments.

A change of paradigm

My research of Iban textiles challenges long-held views. However, my findings do not stand in isolation, but are part of a trend which, if it gains momentum, may lead to a paradigmatic change in how we approach the study of Indonesian textiles and other art forms.

Writing on New Guinea shield designs, O'Hanlon (1995:476) points out the defects of an iconographic approach and concludes that the names attached to designs are "little more than a set of fairly rough and ready mnemonics, used to recall and refer to design motifs". The existence of two name categories, the one descriptive, the other related to referential meaning, has been recognized in other Indonesian cultural traditions. Writing on Javanese dance, Hughes-Freeland (1991) discusses the content and meaning of a dance performance as being distinct from the sum total of its components. Javanese dance includes named hand gestures, which, as the author argues, tempt Western analysts to embark on a "quest for meaningfulness", searching for a "lexicon of gesture" (1991:347). Instead, these names serve as a memory aid and classificatory system.

In an even more striking analogy to the Iban case, writing on Javanese batik patterns, Boow (1988:154-5) distinguishes between proper names which are carefully chosen symbolic referents and names which are simply descriptive of design features, providing a kind of shorthand. These are just a handful of examples, which already may make it necessary to reassess part of the literature on these subjects. Batik filler designs are often interpreted as stylized representations of the objects after which they are named (see for example Fraser-Lu 1986:29).

The new paradigm may be viewed in some circles as being “less” than the old one with its insistence on symbolic meaning. However, in the search for a code of symbols, we tend to forget that the meaning of textiles and other material culture lies primarily in their ritual and social function (cf. Gombrich 1979:225-9). This applies most emphatically in the Iban case. The weaving of patterned cloth was, up until the middle of this century, the women’s main means of gaining status and prestige. Most importantly, textiles are made to be used. On ritual occasions textiles are, and continue to be, essential. And this brings me, in a roundabout way, to the theme of this symposium: Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles.

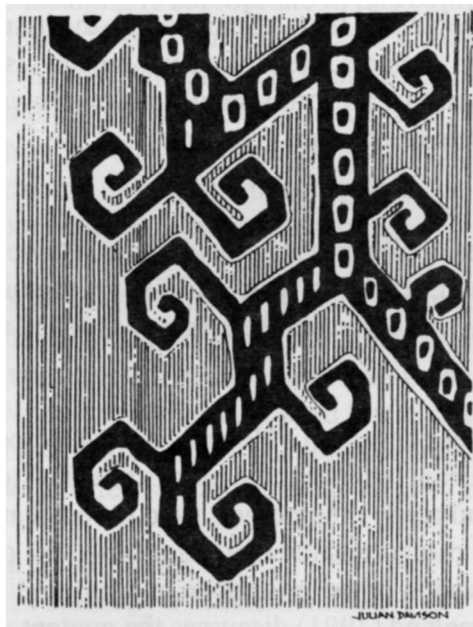


Figure 2:
Design elements called “rice grain” (*igi beras*) and “spirit’s eye” (*mata antu*); drawing by Julian Davison (also featured in Gavin 1993:202; and Gavin 1996:81).

REFERENCES

- Appel, Michaela
 1991 Zur zeremoniellen Verwendung der Textilien. In *Borneo: Leben im Regenwald*. Illustrierte Texte zur Ausstellung. Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, München.
- Barrett, R.J. and Lucas, R.H.
 1993 The skulls are cold, the house is hot: interpreting depths of meaning in Iban therapy. *Man* 28:573-96.
- Boow, Justine
 1988 *Symbol and status in Javanese Batik*, Monograph series No.7, Asian Studies Centre, University of Western Australia.
- Bullough, Nigel
 1981 *Woven treasures from Insular Southeast Asia*. Auckland Institute and Museum.
- Fraser-Lu, Sylvia
 1986 *Indonesian batik: processes, patterns and places*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Gavin, Traude
 1993 The patterns of *pua kumbu* in an Iban cultural context. In M.L.Nabholz-Kartaschoff, R. Barnes, D.Stuart-Fox (eds) *Weaving patterns of life: Indonesian textile symposium 1991*, pp.191-202. Basel: Museum of Ethnography.
 1995 Iban ritual fabrics: their patterns and names. PhD thesis. Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hull.
 1996 *The women's warpath: Iban ritual fabrics from Borneo*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- Gombrich, Ernst H.
 1979 *The sense of order: a study in the psychology of decorative art*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Haddon, Alfred C.
 1895 *Evolution in art: as illustrated by the life-histories of designs*. London: Walter Scott Ltd.
- Haddon, Alfred C. and Start, Laura
 1936 *Iban or Sea Dayak fabrics and their patterns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (new edition 1982; Carlton: Ruth Bean Publishers).
- Hughes-Freeland, Felicia
 1991 Classification and communication in Javanese palace performance. *Visual anthropology*, 4:345-366, Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Masing, James J.
 1981 The coming of the gods: a study of an invocatory chant (timang gawai amat) of the Iban of Sarawak. PhD thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Morphy, Howard
 1994 The anthropology of art. In Ingold, T. (ed.) *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology*, pp.648-85. London: Routledge.
- O'Hanlon, Michael
 1995 Modernity and the "graphicalization" of meaning: New Guinea Highland shield designs in historical perspective. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.) 1.
- Ong, Walter J.
 1982 *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sellato, Bernard
 1989 *Hornbill and dragon*. Jakarta: Elf Aquitaine Indonesie.