Ibanic Textile Weaving
Its Enchantment in Social and Religious Practices

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The weaving of attractive textiles is one of the features that distinguishes the Ibanic peoples of Borneo from neighboring Dayak groups. The peoples referred to here as Ibanic speak related languages and have similar cultures; they include the Iban proper (sometimes called the Sea Dayak), as well as the Mualang, Kantu, Sebuyau, and Seberuang. Traditionally, the women of Ibanic societies wove fabrics with distinctive designs from locally grown, homespun cotton thread on a simple backstrap loom. Nowadays, the thread is imported, as are the aniline dyes, although the designs are executed by the same

1 A Iban man dressed and posed as a war leader with an old trophy skull. This row of ikat blankets (pua) hanging in the background marks the area in which the man is posed as sacred, or ritual, space. Photo taken in 1952 at Lubok Antu, Sarawak. (Sarawak Museum photograph)
**Ritual Use of Textiles**

Ibanic cultural logic enchant the cloth as well as the weaving process. Thus ikat textiles may have the ability to attract the beneficence of the gods, or may contain powerful magic that is conferred by spirits that the cloth encounters. In former times, blankets were used by warriors to obtain propitious and beneficial dreams for headhunting exploits. At present, skirts (bindang; Figs. 4–5), jackets (kelambit; Figs. 4–6), and loincloths (sint; Figs. 6, 14) made of woven cloth are worn for ceremonial occasions when important rituals are to be performed and it is believed that deities will be in attendance. In their capacity as container or bearer of supernatural potency, blankets are used in rituals to mark off sacred space and to decorate shrines and offerings to the gods.

Ikat technique that has been used for generations.

As is generally true of the textile traditions of Indonesian societies, Ibanic weaving has been associated symbolically with social and religious practices; the cloth occupying an important place in social ceremonies and religious rituals. This article will be concerned primarily with the symbolic meanings of Ibanic textiles, and with the complementarity between the female activity of weaving, and the male activity of taking trophy heads (Fig. 1).

**Ikat Weaving**

The ikat technique involves tying off portions of the warp threads in such a way that they resist absorbing color when the entire warp is dyed, thereby producing a two-color design. When still another color is desired, the parts of the warp that were initially dyed can be tied off, while some undyed portions can be untied, and the warp dyed a second time or more. The resulting cloth is of warp-vein weave in which only the warp is visible; hence the design is produced by the differentially dyed warp threads alone. Supplementary weft techniques are used on occasion, as is post-loop embroidery. Weaving is done exclusively by women, and can absorb a great deal of their time. A single blanket (pasir; Figs. 4, 5), for example, may take two years to complete. Understandably, the product is no mere utilitarian object (see box).

Two phases of the textile weaving process are imbued with mystical enchantment. The first involves dyeing the threads. The dyeing process is conducted by an expert who can perform the necessary rites (gosai), including the sacrifice of a fowl or pig. It is said that perhaps only one in fifty women can perform this ritual, and so several women may participate in the tying-off of patterns and submerging the threads in various colors of dyes. The dyeing process involves exposing the dyed threads to the dew for up to 35 days and nights. Derek Freeman, an expert on the Iban, has characterized the magical rites of
dying the thread as the most crucial stage in the preparation of the cloth (1577-173). This is a highly fetishized procedure and has been called "women's war" (ikun indi), a point that is frequently cited in support of the parallelism of weaving and headhunting as explained in greater detail below.

The second phase of magical significance is the weaving of the cloth. During the weaving the tied-dye design emerges, and the weaver is considered to be in some danger if the design has potential spiritual power. Potent patterns originate in dreams, and dreams are thought to be communications with the spirit world. There are risks involved in encounters with spirits. Consequently, spirit-communicated designs must be executed precisely or the spirit may become enraged and, as one weaving expert describes it, may "attack the weaver, make her ill, or even kill her" (Vogel-Sarosi 1986: 118). Many women possess charms to protect themselves during the dangerous period of weaving. In addition, a pig is sacrificed to the spirit in order to secure its cooperation in the endeavor.

The weaving of pot patterns is a source of prestige for Iban women. Students of Iban society have concluded that the achievements of women in weaving are the basis of a prestige system that parallels the male prestige system once associated with headhunting. This can be illustrated by describing how the system worked among the Muang, one of several Iban tribes that dwell along the northern tributaries of the middle Kapuas River in Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia (Fig. 7).

The Muang Model

In former times Muang women wove several kinds of cotton cloth and decorated them by a variety of methods. Only one kind—the red-colored, tie-dyed textiles called kain amun (real true cloth) are found here. Among these true cloths were the kain kebang, which were decorated either with original designs dreamed by the weaver (Fig. 10), or with rather conventionized motifs not inspired by dreaming (Fig. 11). The latter, consisting of parallelized geometrical designs that were shared with the Iban, involved no danger to the weaver. An original, dream-inspired design, however, put the weaver at some risk, should she fail to get it exactly right. These designs involved "animals"—not animals of the real world, but dream-encountered creatures that were representations of the inspiring spirits. Not only was the form of the creature discovered in the dream, but also the food that it required to eat had to be precisely determined and included in the pattern. If unfulfilled, such a creature could change into an evil spirit and injure the weaver with blindness, madness, illness, miscarriage, and even death.

Among the most common spirit-representation motifs used by the Muang was the double naban pattern, a pair of snakes stretched out head to tail and supplied liberally with fanciful creatures to eat (Figs. 8, 9). This motif was the most potent and the most dangerous to execute. For any motif involving animal figures was so dangerous that only women beyond the childbearing years would risk weaving it. A woman must have made several textiles without animal designs before attempting one with animals.

As Muang women moved through various stages of life, certain customarily specified expectations were appropriate with respect to weaving. The potency of woven designs, levels of skill, and the prestige attained by weavers varied directly with age. A maiden with an eye to marriage began to acquire fundamental skills from an expert by joining in the preparatory processes (Figs. 12, 13). This indicated that the young woman would be a worthy wife. The pattern she first wove were traditional, geometric, and decorative; hopefully, they are pleasing to the gods and spirits, beneficial in their capacity to charm.

Through married life the products of a woman's loom should become more sophisticated, as she masters more creative combinations and elaborations of traditional motifs. The power of the weaving to please the gods is enhanced by greater artistry, and, correspondingly, the charm capacity of the fabrics is strengthened. By the time this stage of accomplishment is reached, certain women have begun to distinguish themselves by being both extraordinarily adept and more highly motivated than others. However, because at this stage of accomplishment a woman is still in her childbearing years, the risks of originating new patterns are prohibitive. Robert McKinley, an Iban scholar, suggests that this avoids bringing a pregnancy to the attention of the spirits (pers. com.). The Iban attribute miscarriages and infant death to competitive evil spirits fighting over a baby's soul (Freeman 1967; Sather 1976).

As with the Iban, the Muang attach high value to the creation of an original design, and a weaver's prestige depends on her accomplishments in this regard. When a woman who has enjoyed particular success in weaving is past her childbearing years she can seek out guidance from the spirit world, through dreams, for the creation of new designs. Thus, it is in the postmenopausal stage of her life that a woman achieves prestige for originating dream-inspired, potent fabrics that occupy such prominent place in many Iban rituals. This highest level of weaving achievement appears to have some
The Ideology of Gender Roles

The division of labor among the Ibanic peoples, whereby men went on headhunting raids (Fig. 14) while women stayed home and wove beautiful tie-dyed textiles, has been developed into an ideology of gender role distinction. Both weaving and headhunting appear to be highly valued activities in which women and men compete with members of their own sex for prestige, which is validated by commensurate material prosperity.

Head-hunting has been characterized by Freeman as a male fertility cult. In this vein, weaving can be characterized as a female charm cult. The double meaning of “charm” is applicable here: a charming textile skirt worn by an Ibanic maiden at an important ceremony symbolizes beauty and prosperity; hopefully, it will be irresistible to the young man of her acquaintance. Similarly, a charming textile blanket will be irresistible to the gods who can assist humans in beneficent and protective ways (see box, p. 30).

Beauty is a high ideal for Ibanic women, just as courage in head-hunting is a male ideal. These two gender-defining ideals are joined in the Ibanic understanding of rice production. Reaping rice (the taking of the heads of the rice plants) is symbolically expressed in their cosmology as the taking of the heads of enemy tribesmen. This is what the cultural heroes taught them to do in order to maintain the good life. The head of a slain enemy symbolically contains the sacred rice seed upon which the fertility of all Iban depends: “the trophy head, phallic and procreative, becomes a veritable foot of fertility” (Freeman 1979:243).

On the other hand, the ideal, beautiful Ibanic female weaves charmed cloth that protects and renders prosperity to threads incorporating dew, a vital substance that requires further explanation.

Trophy Heads, Cloth, and the Theory of Prosperity

Within Ibanic cosmology, dew is a substance that forms an essential link between rice and human souls. After death the souls of people (semangat) continue a cyclical course of existence. As described by Eric Jenson, an expert on Iban religion, “the semangat remains an entity spirit in style (the land of the dead) for an indefinite period until eventually dissolving into dew. The dew is taken up into the ears of rice which are eaten by living men who in their turn die” (1974:108).

The invocation received at a ritual conducted to promote the ripening of the rice for an abundant harvest is as follows: “May the dew of those who harvest rice in plenty—abundant sweet rice, who have success, fame and wealth—enter into my rice” (p. 189).

Dew, the germinating rice seed, and spirits of both the ancestors and the living constitute phases in a cycle of regeneration. Men invigorate the cycle by taking the heads of enemies, and women enhance it by weaving charmed textiles that capture dew—the skeletal essence. No better illustration of the conjunction of male and female contributions to this cycle of regeneration can be found than in that part of the ritual in which a newly taken trophy head was received at a longhouse. Standing at the top of long-
house steps, the woman received the head from the successful warrior, wrapping it in her charm blanket. By so doing, she symbolically unified the phallic symbolism of head hunting with the feminine quality of nurturing, and, by the same action, welcomed the newly acquired power to promote prosperity and fertility to the longhouse community. Thus, the creative and procreative character of the female, as represented by weaving, is a necessary element in a ritual and ideological system embracing both life and death in a coherent theory of regeneration in humans and in nature. 24

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A Mualang man in full battle dress. He wears a traditional loincloth and sleeveless war jacket; his war cap and sword sheath are decorated with tail feathers of the rhinoceros hornbill. Late 1930s. (Photo courtesy of Edna Mowr)