

BOOK REVIEW

Borneo Ikat Textiles: Style Variations, Ethnicity, and Ancestry
By Traude Gavin

Reviewed by Louise M Macul, PhD

The textiles of Borneo's Iban people have been collected and documented by foreigners to this land since at least the 1800s. The most well-known are the *pua kumbu* (ritual cloth) and *kain kibat* (skirts), ending up in personal and museum collections worldwide. Most of these textiles were created using the warp *ikat* (tie and dye) technique. The existence of these ikat textiles in collections is well documented. Although, as Gavin claims in her recent book *Borneo Ikat Textiles: Style Variations, Ethnicity, and Ancestry*, much work remains to be done on their existence in Iban communities in Borneo today. However, an equally important problem Gavin claims is the abundance of misleading information surrounding these textiles' style variations and ancestry in often-referenced documentation. With a focus on West Kalimantan and Sarawak, Gavin attempts to rectify the latter situation in her book. Traude Gavin is no newcomer to ethnographic research on Iban textiles. She has published three seminal books: *The Womens' Warpath* (1996), *Iban Ritual Textiles* (2003), and *Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia* (2012), which are testaments to her nearly forty years of fieldwork and meticulous research. Thus, Gavin is well-placed to recognise the problem of discrepancies in information interpretation and offer amendments.

This book is essential for those working with collections and interpretations of Iban ikat textiles. It critically examines a specific region of Borneo and persuasively argues the inter- and intra-Iban differences in ikat style variations. Gavin achieves this in a well-structured text accompanied by detailed photographic evidence. The study is "art-historical"

and cleverly identifies “style characteristics as an index of ethnic affiliation” within Iban diversity, including the people and their history. As such, the textiles are not considered separate objects from their makers but are seen as inclusive of them. The book is organised into three sections: Background, Field Data and Connections. Gavin’s personal travel diary through the region at the beginning of the book sets the scene for the study of the textiles and the culture she discovered them in. Following this is a broader look at the background, history, and origins of the ethnic Iban groups of the region, with a conclusive warning not to rely on linguistic and ethnic labels exclusively. This serves as an introduction to sources, dating and collective labels of the textiles under examination.

Gavin admits that the Iban groups she studied are not an exhaustive list, but that is because she could not locate any textiles made by the other Iban groups in the region. In Sarawak, she followed the longhouses on the Undup River, Lingga, Pantu and the wider Sri Aman Division. In West Kalimantan, she followed the rivers: Belitang, Lebang, Kebiyau, Ketungau, Mereka, Merakai, Kantu’, Emapanang, Sai and the areas near Sintang, Lanjak, Putussibau and Bika. All of these are well-marked on a map for reference. The weaving groups she followed were defined by their common Ibanic-language group, their shared origin and migration stories, and their cultural traits.

In the second section of the book, Field Data, Gavin takes a deep dive into the characteristic style of the weaving groups, which she has clearly defined. Each group is further, but briefly, explained before sharing the featured textile styles. This places the textiles squarely within an understanding of their identified group. The written descriptive text combined with excellent photographic examples leaves no doubt about the stylistic