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THE SENSE OF ORDER OF ORANG ULU DECORATIVE ARTS: MOTIFS, DESIGNS AND PATTERNS

Rashidah A. Salam

INTRODUCTION

Societies are becoming ever more multi-cultural and there is now a desire to see how patterns have been 'borrowed' and developed by successive cultures. This has led to an appreciation of the importance of design in contemporary society, and a need to encourage learning by investigating the vital role that pattern structures play in ornamentation. The *Orang Ulu* culture has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the use of surface ornamentation, especially in domestic decoration, personal adornment and textiles. Design, or in this case, 'decorative arts' have always been important for each culture.

Like other tribal customs, the visual art of Orang Ulu takes many forms, from paintings to the more ephemeral arts of body decoration, bark and ground paintings and ceremonial wood sculpture. The supernatural, symbolic beliefs appertaining to various motifs in Orang Ulu tribe are passed down through generations by word of mouth being elaborated, amended and changed each time. The motif then becomes part of the folklore and legends of the tribe.

Design, however, can never just be seen as a decorative value. It plays an integral role in the whole process. From initial concept stage through the development, design is to be adored and appreciated. The structure and order of the design are very important and interesting elements for us to discover.

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by

Rashidah A. Salam

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The People

Orang Ulu is a Malay term which means "people of the upriver". They inhabit the interior areas of Sarawak, mostly covering the Upper Rejang and its tributaries, the Upper Baram areas, Limbang, Lawas and

Trusan. They live in longhouses. Under the OUNA Constitution, *Orang Ulu* covers the people of Bukitan, Bisaya, Kayan, Kajang (including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan, Tanjong and Kanowit), Kelabit, Kenyah (including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan), Lugat, Lisum, Murut (Lun Bawang), Penan, Sian, Tabun, Ukit and Saban.

Traditionally the *Orang Ulu* shared a similar system of social organization. Their groups are divided into four different classes, that is, the ruling class, the lower aristocrats, the commoners and the slave. The aristocrats are usually identified by their genealogies, their manners, skill of oratory, prowess in war and their knowledge of the *adat*. They were also differentiated by their tattoo designs, their costumes, large funerary monuments and the distinctive murals painting on the outside wall of their *bilek*.

The original painted decorative walls of the longhouses use motifs derived from nature. The practice later is expanded and applied into other forms of ornamentation and decoration based on the ritual and spiritual needs. The outstanding works by the renowned Kenyah artist, the late Tusau Padan is the testament of the exquisiteness of *Orang Ulu* arts. The famous paintings portraying the "Tree of Life" can be viewed at the Sarawak Museum. Works of the *Orang Ulu* have even been shown internationally.

The Religion and Beliefs

A majority of *Orang Ulu* are Christian. However, a few of the older generations still practise the animistic worship or *bungan*. According to Kayan mythology and the beliefs of other Borneo peoples, wood is everything. The "Tree of Life" which was derived from the wood (tree) was originally believed to be a man. It was believed that the "Tree of Knowledge" stood in a garden, along with the *Kayu Aru* or "Tree of Life". The "Tree of Life" was generally surrounded by various animals while the "Tree of Knowledge" was typically shown carrying numerous fruits. The *Orang Ulu* also believed that the "Tree of Knowledge" was particularly beautiful; standing in perfect unity and harmony, as represented by the long curling and balancing tendrils. Any man or animal

that ate the fruits from the "Tree of Knowledge" would become knowledgeable. Although the tree bore many fruits, one of them, called *bua penisen* found at the apex of the tree, was of distinct importance. Whoever ate this particular fruit would become not only knowledgeable but also wise.

In regard to these beliefs, ritual ceremonies must accompany any event, for instance, for works which has been created and ready to be located or relocated. A ritual ceremony, like the slaughtering of animals such as pigs, should be performed at a scheduled time prior to or after the set up of the burial or ceremonial poles. If the ritual was not performed the ceremony would be considered incomplete. If an artist was commissioned to carry out the task, that is, to paint or carve, a '*pamali*' (Kenyah) or '*p[r]osos*' (Bidayuh) in forms of beads and/or a '*parang*' (heavy knife) should be given to the artist. This is, "to protect the works or the artist in the future if the works are found to be marred or imperfect".¹

Craftsmanship

The *Orang Ulu* are probably Borneo's most artistic people. Their massive longhouses are ornately decorated with murals and superb woodcarvings, and their utensils are embellished with intricate beadwork.² Their aristocratic ladies decorate their hands, arms, legs and feet with finely detailed tattoos. Crafts produced by the *Orang Ulu* like other ethnic groups in Borneo are more integrated with household activities. Therefore, the artistic influences are assimilated into tools for farming, hunting, constructing; also musical instruments (*sape*) and personal adornments (tattoos, beads, textile and home/longhouse decoration).

Many *Orang Ulu* are master woodcarvers, producing superb boats, statues, masks and *klirieng* (burial poles) from tough jungle hardwoods. Their longhouses are broadly similar to those of the Iban in construction but they are far more ornately decorated with woodcarving and large, bright murals rendered in the traditional "Tree of Life" motif than those of the Iban and Bidayuh.