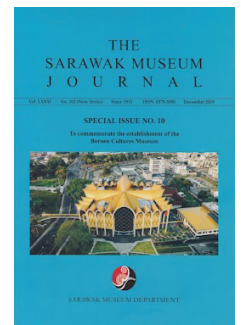




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PROTECTIVE POWER: THE NABAU OR WATER DRAGON AMONG THE IBAN OF SARAWAK

Monica Janowski

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the origin, nature and significance of the nabau, which I gloss in English as 'water dragon'. I show how there are clear indications that the nabau is regarded by the Iban as protective. The nabau has been woven into pua cloths, skirts and strips of cloth called labong Bungai Nuing. The nabau on labong Bungai Nuing are regarded as manifestations of a culture hero from the parallel semi-spirit world of Panggau Libau, Bungai Nuing, and they are used as protective amulets. This is the clearest demonstration of the protective nature of the nabau. I suggest that the significance of the nabau should be understood in the context of its association with water and with beliefs about the flow of cosmic power and fertility through water. The use of the figure of Bungai Nuing hints, I suggest, at the nature of beliefs about the flow of cosmic power, kuasa, and the ways in which humans engage with this.

Keywords:

PROTECTIVE POWER: THE *NABAU* OR WATER DRAGON AMONG THE IBAN OF SARAWAK

Monica Janowski

Abstract

This article discusses the origin, nature and significance of the *nabau*, which I gloss in English as ‘water dragon’. I show how there are clear indications that the *nabau* is regarded by the Iban as protective. The *nabau* has been woven into *pua* cloths, skirts and strips of cloth called *labong* Bungai Nuing. The *nabau* on *labong* Bungai Nuing are regarded as manifestations of a culture hero from the parallel semi-spirit world of Panggau Libau, Bungai Nuing, and they are used as protective amulets. This is the clearest demonstration of the protective nature of the *nabau*. I suggest that the significance of the *nabau* should be understood in the context of its association with water and with beliefs about the flow of cosmic power and fertility through water. The use of the figure of Bungai Nuing hints, I suggest, at the nature of beliefs about the flow of cosmic power, *kuasa*, and the ways in which humans engage with this.

On 10 November 2017, a craft market was being held along the waterfront in Kuching, the capital of the state of Sarawak, in conjunction with the international dragon boat regatta which takes place yearly in the city, and I was browsing the stalls. At one stall, I spotted some hanging strips of cloth, dyed using the *ikat* technique.¹ I saw that these strips bore representations of what appeared to be snakes or dragons with very large heads (see Fig. 1). I asked what they were, and the explanation I received was rather startling. Doris Dawa Jubin, also known as Hajjah Abdullah as she had converted to Islam, was the Iban maker of the strips. She told me that she had made them in the 1960s to sell to local soldiers going to fight in the Confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia. She confirmed to me what I had suspected, that the snakes/dragons on the strips were what the Iban call *nabau*, a type of powerful spirit being closely associated with water. Talking to other informants, I soon discovered that the strips are called *labong* Bungai Nuing. The term *labong* refers to a type of traditional headgear worn by Iban men which consists of a strip of cloth wrapped around the head. Bungai Nuing is one of the heroes



Fig. 1: Doris Dawa anak Jubin, @ Hajjah Abdullah wearing a *labong* Bungai Nuing which she made in the 1960s for sale to soldiers going to fight in the Confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia. (Photo credit: Kaz Janowski)

who inhabits Panggau Libau, a spirit or semi-spirit world parallel to the one in which humans live, and he might appear as a *nabau* in this world. *Labong Bungai Nuing* continue to be made, and they are used as amulets to protect against accidents and misfortune. I will return to them.

The findings I present here are the result of ongoing research which I am pursuing into beliefs about water snakes and dragons in Borneo, which has been initiated as part of a one-year research project with the Sarawak Museum Campus Project between 2017 and 2018, in preparation for new galleries at the Sarawak Museum, to be opened in 2020. This has included discussions with weavers from the Iban longhouse of Rumah Garie on the Kain river, a tributary of the Balleh river, both during visits some of them made to Kuching in November and December 2017 and during a visit I made to Rumah Garie in February 2018, facilitated by Welyne Jeffrey Jehom, an anthropologist who has been working with the weavers there for some years. I am grateful to her for her support. My research has also included discussions with many Iban in Kuching, both casually and through more in-depth discussions, and I am very appreciative of these. A list of the main informants with whom I spoke is provided at the end of this article. I would like to thank in particular Janet Rata Noel, Curator of the Tun Jugah Foundation, Vernon Kedit, who has published on Iban weaving (Kedit 2009 & 2013) and who is descended from a master weaver, and Bangie Embol, a master weaver living at Rumah Garie on the Balleh river, for their input.

The *nabau* and the *naga*: avatars of the water dragon

The *nabau* is one of two related spirit beings believed by the Iban to have great power (*kuasa*), both of which are strongly associated with water. The other is the *naga*. Given the centrality of water in cosmological beliefs worldwide (Strang 2015), these beings are of particular interest in understanding local cosmologies. Beliefs about such watery spirit beings are present throughout the island of Borneo, and I argue elsewhere (Janowski 2018) that they may be regarded as expressing beliefs about the nature and distribution of sentience itself. I shall here explore beliefs about both the *naga* and the *nabau*, but with a particular focus on the *nabau*, which I shall suggest is the more ‘Iban’ of the two spirit beings. I shall suggest that the ways in which these beliefs are expressed through the weaving of representations of the *nabau* by Iban weavers and the use of these representations as protective amulets, allows us a window into Iban beliefs about the nature of cosmic power (*kuasa*) and the ways in which humans can engage with it.