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THE TRADITIONAL VALUES AND FUNCTIONS OF PUA KUMBU

Empiang Jabu

Pua kumbu and the art of its weaving, is perhaps one of the best known aspects of Iban Material Culture. According to the Director of the Sarawak Museum, Mr. Lucas Chin, *pua kumbu* became well-known especially to the outside world after 1920 and are eagerly sought after by museums and collectors. *Pua kumbu* is the warp-*ikat* weaving that is widely practised in this region, but the finest is the *pua* woven by Iban women of Sarawak.

Throughout history women have been inextricably linked to the textile arts. No matter what materials are used, no matter what form of culture is referred to, their participation has remained constant, influencing, shaping and involving those numerous varied techniques. When one reviews historical and anthropological writings, this fact is seldom recognised or is relegated to rather insignificant cultural importance. Thus it is not surprising that much had been written on Iban culture with emphasis on male dominated activities. As a result of such an attitude very little had been done on the female counterpart resulting in a lack of in-depth knowledge into women's contribution in the cultural context.

The first objective of this paper is to seek to appreciate the application of the creative and artistic skills of the weavers and dyers that signify or symbolize the social values of traditional society. Secondly it is an attempt to understand the traditions of textile symbolic language in *pua kumbu*, and thereby to examine their related functions. It is also my hope that this modest paper can provide some information and thereby create greater cultural understanding of Iban textile weaving.

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It cannot be emphasized enough how important *pua kumbu* is to an Iban cultural practitioner. The application of their textile skills cover the entire gamut of social life in the traditional society. Many if not all of Iban life rituals could not be completed without them. The *puas* are given greater meaning by an understanding of the textiles used in a given ritual of life event, which privatizes these rituals for the culture.

Many notable writers and anthropologists had made rudimentary exploration of the Iban textile tradition, but it is noted regrettably that nobody had succeeded in bringing into focus these traditions in any other