IBAN OR SEA DAYAK FABRICS
AND THEIR PATTERNS

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CONTENTS

Prefatory note page vii
Introduction xiii
The Iban or Sea Dayaks 1
Iban costume 3
The production of cloth:
Bark-cloth 4
Cotton cloth 5
Spinning 7
Warp tie-dyeing 9
Weaving 11
The making of patterns other than warp-dyed:
Embroidery 14
Tapestry or weft-mosaic 15
The brocade method 17
Weft-manipulation to form pattern 17
Weft-patterned cloths 18
Dyes 19
Kalambi or jackets 22
Bidang or petticoats 52
Sirat or loin-cloths 91
Bedong or woman's girdle 102
Dangdong or shawls 103
## CONTENTS

*Pua* or blankets .......................... page 106

An analysis of the patterns
  - Anthropomorphs ..................... 123
  - Zoomorphs .......................... 124
  - Phyllomorphs ....................... 125
  - Objects in daily use ............... 133
  - Natural phenomena ................ 135

General considerations ................. 136

Iban religion and its expression in decorative art .... 137

Vocabulary of Iban words ............... 142

Bibliography ............................ 147

Plates I–XXXV ............................ 156

Plates I–XXXV ............................ 159
INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the large collection of Sarawak cloths in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Cambridge. The equally large collection of cloths in the British Museum has also been examined by us, and we have compared the available specimens with the numerous photographs and sketches made by one of us in Sarawak. We therefore venture to claim that there is sufficient material for a preliminary study of this nature. There is a considerable number of designs and patterns which are not here mentioned and for most of them we do not know by what names they are called.

Although some of the designs are sufficiently realistic to make identification possible, most of them are highly conventionalized. Indeed, in many cases it is almost impossible to see any resemblance between the design and the object it is intended to represent. No doubt some students will question whether there is any such connection, but we must remember that these are traditional representations which have been transmitted through very many generations and it could not be expected that a realistic treatment could often persist.

The Iban certainly admit that most of the designs or patterns are intended to represent some concrete object. Cloths that have been collected in different places and at various times show designs that resemble each other to a remarkable extent, and, furthermore, in most cases the Iban apply similar names to them. Every Iban cannot be expected to know the names of all the designs and patterns, so it is not surprising that identifications should occasionally vary. There are numerous tribes or groups of Iban and this fact may cause some discrepancy in the names given, not only in identification but through dialectic differences; added to this are divergencies in the spelling of words by the transcribers.

If a native is not sure what a pattern really means he will be apt to describe it as looking like some particular thing or as representing that thing. It is obvious that the nearest approach to certainty can only be attained by inquiry from the actual woman who made the pattern.

It sometimes happens that apparently very similar designs may have different names applied to them. These usually are simple designs or
patterns, and in such cases there may be no recognized general name for them. To take one example, a zigzag has its own name, lelingkok, but it is often termed semerai sungai, which implies the conception of going in a canoe from one bank of a river to the other so as to avoid or make use of stronger currents. It has also been described as the movement or progression of a snake.

The vast majority of the names in our collection, as well as all those on the specimens in the British Museum, were collected by Dr Charles Hose and naturally we have accepted these as accurate, but either he or the persons whom he employed made variations in the spelling of a given word; usually we could ascertain the most common or likely variant and in some cases we adopted instead the spelling of the word given by the authors of the *Sea Dyak Dictionary*, as that must be regarded as authoritative.

In many cases, but by no means in all, a translation was given by Dr Hose of the native name—sometimes literally, sometimes freely—these we have copied and printed in quotes. Occasionally the translation of a word differed from that given in the *Sea Dyak Dictionary*; these cases have usually been noted by us. Unfortunately there are many native names for which we cannot find a translation; they are given as written by the transcribers. Translations by us are printed without quotes.

Originally the labels were pinned on to the cloths in what was intended to be their appropriate position, but even so, on account of the relatively large size of the labels it is not always apparent to which design or what part of it the label applied. Subsequently numbers written on tape to correspond with the labels were sewn on to the cloth by Mrs Haddon, who took great care to retain the original position of the labels. In some cases there evidently was a mistake in the original position of a label. These sources of error are not quite so serious as might be feared, since we have such a large number of names on different cloths that checking is almost always possible. We venture to hope that few mistakes due to these causes have been perpetuated by us.

A card catalogue of drawings of every design bearing the same name was made, and the most typical examples in each group were selected and have been included in pls. 1 to xxv.

Our procedure in the following pages is to give the weave, colour and methods of producing the patterns of a considerable number of individual
INTRODUCTION

cloths, and in the case of the jackets how they were constructed. The patterns and designs are described and illustrated as copiously as space permits, and we have added what information we have been able to find with regard to their significance; very rarely have we hazarded suggestions of our own.

We gratefully thank those Museum authorities who have afforded us opportunities for examining the cloths under their charge and the various unknown Iban who have given information. We feel that especial thanks are due to the late Dr Charles Hose for having supervised the identification of the designs on the cloths that have formed the basis of our study; the help afforded by these names has been invaluable.

The cloths themselves, together with the photographs and sketches made in Sarawak, are placed in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and are available to those who would like to consult them.

We candidly admit that we are merely pioneers in this investigation and it remains for others who can interrogate the Iban themselves to confirm, modify, or correct our provisional statements and to enter more deeply and securely into the motives that lie behind these expressions of Iban aestheticism.

The admirable compilation The natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo (1896), by H. Ling Roth, has been of very great assistance to us, especially his chapter xvii. His Studies in primitive looms (1918) is invaluable, as it is based on his own investigations. We have quoted with due acknowledgment from various authors whose observations have elucidated our subject and to those whose names are most frequently mentioned we offer our thanks. Particular mention should be made of the excellent Sea Dyak Dictionary by the Rev. W. Howell and D. J. S. Bailey, to which we have so often referred under S.D.D., and we have found their English-Sea Dyak Vocabulary useful.
THE IBAN OR SEA DAYAKS

The general appearance and psychical characteristics of the Iban have been well described by Hose and McDougall (I, p. 32, and measurements taken by Haddon are given in II, pp. 339, 340). They are industrious and energetic, and are great wanderers; this latter peculiarity struck the Kayans, who termed them “Ivan” (immigrant or wanderer), and this name has been adopted by large numbers of them in recent years and modified into Iban (II, p. 250). “When the Ibans became associated in piratical matters with the Malays of the coast, these latter assigned to their allies the heads of their enemies, as a sort of perquisite. This state of affairs lasted until well into the nineteenth century; and it is from their association with the Malays of the coast in their piratical expeditions that the Iban became known to Europeans as a Sea Dayak” (Hose, 1926, p. 145). The term Dayak, Dyak, etc., merely designates a non-Malayan inhabitant of Borneo and has no ethnic or tribal significance. It is probably derived from the Malay word *daya*, “inland”.

The Iban can be distinguished from the other peoples of Borneo by their physical and mental traits and by many differences in culture. There appear to be two main ethnic stocks in Borneo: (1) a narrow-headed type, often termed Indonesian, but, to avoid ambiguity, the term Nēsiōt is preferable (Haddon, 1929, pp. 22, 119); (2) a broad-headed type, Proto-Malay (or Oceanic Mongol), which is a branch of the Pareoean or Southern Mongoloid (l.c. 1929, p. 32), to which stock the Iban may be assigned (cf. Haddon, 1901). Hose and McDougall (II, p. 248) regard the Iban as belonging to the same “stock from which the true Malays of Sumatra and the Peninsula were differentiated by the influence of Arab culture. A large number of the ancestors of the present Ibans were probably brought to Borneo from Sumatra less than two hundred years ago [Hose, 1926, p. 7, says, “less than three hundred years ago”]. Some two centuries ago, a number of Malay nobles were authorised by the Sultan of Brunei to govern the five rivers of
Sarawak proper, namely, the Samarahan, the Sadong, the Batang Lupar, the Saribas, and the Klaka rivers. These Malays were pirate leaders, and they were glad to enrol large numbers of pagan fighting men among their followers...[they] found, no doubt, that their pagan relatives of Sumatra lent themselves more readily to this service than the less warlike Klemantans of Borneo, and therefore, as we suppose, they brought over considerable numbers of them and settled them about the mouths of these rivers”. “It seems to us probable that the greater part of the ancestors of the Ibans entered Borneo in this way. But there is reason to think that some of them had settled at an earlier date in this part of Borneo and rather farther southward on the Kapuas River....In most respects they closely resemble the other Iban tribes, but they are distinguished by some peculiarities of language and accent; their manners are gentler, their bearing less swaggering; they are less given to wandering” (II, p. 249).

We are not in a position to criticize the supposition that some 200 or 300 years ago Malay chiefs introduced Iban warriors from Sumatra to Sarawak, but Hose and McDougall recognize an earlier population of Iban in Borneo. It seems doubtful whether the characteristic Iban culture is so recent as Hose and McDougall seem to imply, and it would be interesting to know from what part of Sumatra “their pagan relatives” came, and if there are any traces there now of such people. We suggest that the Iban migration into Borneo may be regarded as an early wave of the movements that culminated in the Malay Empire.

Hose and McDougall (I, p. 31) state that the Iban “have spread northwards over Sarawak during the latter half of the last century, chiefly from the region of the Batang Lupar, where they are still numerous. They are still spreading northward, encroaching upon the more peaceful Klemantan tribes. They are most densely distributed in the lower reaches of the main rivers of Sarawak, especially the Batang Lupar and Saribas rivers, which are now exclusively occupied by them; but they are found also in scattered communities throughout almost all parts of Sarawak, and even in British North Borneo, and they extend from their centre in Sarawak into the adjacent regions of Dutch Borneo, which are drained by the northern tributaries of the Great Kapuas River”. The different tribes or groups of Iban are distinguished by the names of the rivers along which they dwell, thus they
are known as Batang Lupar, Saribas, Rejang, Kanowit, etc. The physical characters of the various ethnic groups in Sarawak are described by Haddon in an Appendix to Hose and McDougall’s monograph.

**IBAN COSTUME**

The Iban are extremely fond of dress and both men and women wear many ornaments as well.

The usual male attire consists of:

- **Sirat** (*chawat of the Malays*), or waist cloth, usually of red or blue cotton cloth, sometimes having an embroidered end made of native material.
- **Labong**, a headkerchief, which is usually richly decorated; or a cap of woven cane, both of which are often ornamented with feathers.
- **Takai buriet** or seat mat, usually made of skin or cane matting, the edge being finished off with cloth and beads or buttons.
- **Kalambi** or jacket, with or without sleeves, used chiefly on ceremonial occasions.
- **Dangdong** or shawl is also sometimes worn over the shoulder.

The women wear:

- **Bidang** or petticoat, reaching to the knees and usually made of home-made cloth elaborately decorated with warp-dyed patterns.
- **Bedong** or woman’s waist band or girdle.
- **Rawai** or corset, made of a series of split ratan rings upon which brass rings are threaded. The ratan rings fit so tightly that it is difficult to bend the body.
- **Kalambi** or jacket, sometimes rather longer than the men’s but of the same shape.

Girdles of coins, silver and brass chain or strips of coloured cane are also worn round the waist, and **tanggok** or necklaces of beads, cane and silver coins round the throat. Heavy earrings in the distended lobe of the ears are worn by most tribes.

Some idea of the women’s costume can be gathered from the frontispiece, which shows a group of four women and two children. The women are wearing skirts, **bidang**, with patterns; spider designs can be seen on the