



Heppell, Michael: *The Seductive Warp Thread. An Evolutionary History of Ibanic Weaving.* Phillips: Borneo Research Council, 2014. 189 pp. ISBN 1-929900-16-3. (Borneo Research Council, Material Culture Series, 1) Price: \$ 50.00

Anthropologist Michael Heppell discusses the historical development of the textile culture of the Ibanic people in Borneo. Heppell focuses not only on exquisitely crafted textiles, he also deals with textiles of lesser quality, and this may also support his overall argument of historical and ethnological interests. This viewpoint observing the lesser-quality textiles of the people is supposedly significantly challenging the collection policies of museums and galleries, where only the very best examples of the artworks are sought out, and that huge body of information of the material culture is lost as a consequence. Heppell clearly emphasizes that while the textiles once functioned as a sort of memory bank for the Ibanic people, embedded with meanings and messages, they were lost over time due to those stringent museum and gallery policies, among other reasons.

Weaving traditions of small groups in the world have rapidly declined in the 20th century, especially after the Second World War. Heppell contrasts this “economy of action” principle with the Ibanic, who were able to maintain their custom of weaving due to its cultural function in the sexual realm: women indicated their reproductive fitness to men through their weaving skills. Nevertheless, this “economy of action” principle proved relevant among the Ibanic after the 1970s, when modern education was brought widely to villages, and traditional values in weaving, as well as the meanings and messages associated with those values, were lost to a great extent.

As Heppell considers Ibanic weaving as a thing of the past, he narrows his discussion on the issues of memory, conservation, and dismemberment of Ibanic weaving. Heppell’s main fieldsites of the Lubok Antu District and other major Iban/Ibanic regions are experiencing it, but at the reviewer’s fieldsite, Kapit District of Sarawak, even though the local Iban consider it to be disappearing, there are still many women of all ages who actively engage in traditional weaving. These women do not partake in weaving for commercial purposes, however, even though the local government strongly encourages them to do so.

Heppell’s attempt at theorizing the waning of traditional weaving is accomplished through observing regions, ethnic traits (including Malays and others), and historical backdrops. Though Heppell considers the early 20th century to be a time “when weaving was still expanding with great vitality” (91), there exists a contrast-

ing observation by a Christian missionary from the early twentieth century, who reported that Iban weaving in Sarawak was a disappearing culture. Again, in the 1960s to 1970s, there were some studies that predicted that the Iban population of Sarawak would rapidly decline due to the advancing of modernization, though this evidently turned out to be false as they flourish today, comprising the largest percentage of the state’s population. The possibility of waning, remaining, or prospering in such a context is greatly varied, completely irreducible when it comes to particular regions, ethnic groups, or eras. As a mere matter of perception, the increasingly popular dialogue of the “waning of traditional culture” is not a solid fact but rather a matter of the observer’s view.

What, then, is particular about Ibanic weaving? I agree with Heppell that Ibanic textiles have been potently seductive. Further, I would personally suppose that although almost unknown to the world, the earnest craftsmanship of the Iban, together with their usage of customary ritual activities, are perhaps worthy of global attention in a cultural heritage context. Heppell considers Ibanic weaving to be one of the most difficult subjects to ethnographically study due to its secretive nature; weavers are reluctant to speak about their woven design motifs (153). Heppell fully supports symbolic representations associated with cloth: “The extraterrestrial powers which could be captured in a cloth were dangerous and required sufficient spiritual powers on the part of a weaver to ensure that they were contained within the cloth ... Its complex iconography made important statement about their cosmology. On *pua*’ cloths, women depicted motifs the combination of which produced a symbolic statement about an event or idea a woman wanted to memorize” (138).

The Iban believe that spirits are captured in some powerful motif designs, and often manifest in real life and eat the people concerned. Accordingly, weavers are afraid to name the motifs for fear of awakening spirits that may curse them. In fact, there have been some reported cases of such instances actually occurring among the people (cf. p. 155). Although the locals do explain these instances in such a way, do they really believe in those spirits? Heppell further explains: “Every motif represents something from the human, the extraterrestrial, the animal and the plant worlds and exemplifies their attachment to their beliefs about universe and their forefathers” (117).

Although addressing such cosmological and symbolic ideas as meanings in textiles, Heppell’s assertion is that these are lost entirely and no longer traceable. It is also necessary to consider that neither weaving nor similar rituals assign or involve much verbal information. Therefore, this may make fact-finding efforts difficult, and certainly poses a conundrum to ethnographers.

Symbolism, the 19th-century artistic movement, has been the generally accepted perspective of cultural anthropology since the 1960s, and is still predominant today. This 20th-century scholarly tradition, especially of Iban/Ibanic weaving, can be traced back to the study of A. C. Haddon, the pioneer of Iban textile studies who led the famed Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits in 1898. He proposed the theory that wo-

ven designs were “coded symbols,” or “visual languages for illiterate societies.” This scholarship may or may not have influenced later literatures written by the 1980s local Sarawak scholars who seem to have followed Haddon’s perspective. Despite the paradox of the secretive nature of weaving and the inability to interpret it through words, the accumulation of contextual information, especially by local Iban scholars, or “educated Iban,” are considered by Heppell to be worthy of attention (154). He emphasizes their value and significance as cultural heritage, which should not be overlooked by foreign scholars.

What is the crux of the investigation into the core world of Ibanic seductive weaving, a great enigma for ethnographers? To break this deadlock, Heppell directs his interest to the historical context and examines the development of weaving. His analysis traces the available information of their migrations. The oral history has been calculated as possibly spanning across 16 generations; Heppell converts into 400 years by calculation of 25 years a generation. Though it is questionable whether this is applicable to Ibanic society, Heppell concludes that Ibanic weaving has remained in the region for at least 700 years, but possibly has existed for an entire millennium (141). Examining this historical aspect has been the principal interest of the book, but it is still a multi-faceted read. Heppell’s effort is notable and influential indeed, and undoubtedly contributes to constructing Ibanic weaving culture through an ethnographic context.

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