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Art and Expression

INTRODUCTION

ARTE: Art and Expression is a biannual book chapter, published under collaboration of Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM Perak Branch with Galeri Al-Biruni under the supervision of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. 'ARTE' is an amalgamation of english word 'Art', and malay word, specifically Perak slang 'Ate' which translate as conversation starter. 'ARTE' uses the concept of book chapter that platform art enthusiasts to express their inner-creativity in the form of literacy conjecture

VISION

Art and expression as aspiration towards stylistic and artistic practices

MISSION

- To enhance the culture of research and academic publication among academician and artist for international recognition
- To promote intellectual, cultural and knowledge sharing through artistic expression
- To celebrate the diversity and differences in arts practices thus creating and intellectual platform for artist to express their interest in art

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CHAPTER 7



“WHAT DO EXPERTS SAY?” VISUAL COMPLEXITY AND COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE OF PUA KUMBU

Wan Juliana Emeih Wahed

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Abstract

This chapter highlights the aesthetic perceptions of academicians regarding the complexity of Pua Kumbu design motifs and the community acceptance of this tangible heritage. The complexity of the symbols presented in the design motifs contributes to the current lack of interest in this art form, especially among the young generation, tourists and other races in Sarawak. The complexity of the symbols has also led to these motifs being further misunderstood, as well as the mistreatment and misuse of this majestic art form. Therefore, this research used a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of four academicians in the fields of textiles, art and culture. In-depth interviews with semi-structured questions were conducted, as was observation and analysis of the relevant documents. According to the findings, weavers are the masterminds behind the visual complexity of Pua Kumbu, which reveal Iban knowledge through the design motifs. In conclusion, prior knowledge of Iban culture can broaden the community acceptance of this art form, minimise the knowledge gap and prevent these masterpieces from being forgotten and neglected.

Keywords: Aesthetic Perception; Community Acceptance; Design Motifs; Pua Kumbu; Visual Complexity

7.0 Introduction

Visual complexity is an activator that prompts individual preferences towards the tangible object of cultural heritage. Studies on visual complexity have been conducted since early 20th century and influenced by its origin in the Gestalt psychology theory and still being studied up till today. Sun and colleagues (2018) defined visual complexity as the degree of difficulty in the reconstruction of a description of visual art. It is associated with factors such as colors, texture and edges, curvature, object number, object size, pattern regularity, pattern compositions, and other related elements (Sun et al., 2014, 2018). The complexity plays a significant role in the perceiver's aesthetic preferences (Ball et al., 2018; Reber, 2012) in building perceivers' lifelong interest in deciding whether to like the visual arts or vice versa (Huang et al., 2020; Myszkowski et al., 2018).

Analyzing a work of art is not just merely looking, but also appreciating the work intrinsically to obtain some form of understanding and contributing to the perceivers' knowledge pool. Relatively, the acceptance of the perceiver towards the work of art depends on many factors such as the visual complexity of the visual art (Sun et al., 2018), the art knowledge (Tschacher et al., 2015), and "aesthetic fluency" through direct instruction and prior experience (Smith & Smith, 2006). Smith and Smith (2006) further pointed out that the interaction of aesthetic perception can be perceived when the aesthetic value is effortlessly attached to the art knowledge, which is measured closely based on perceivers' age, art training and art education.

Grüner, Specker and Leder (2019) stated that the establishment of art knowledge by the perceivers is treated as a foundation in forming better understanding of art. As for those without basic art knowledge, extra effort is required in comprehending the visual art displayed to them (Grüner et al., 2019; Miller & Hübner, 2019). The distinction between untrained and trained perceivers creates a gap in evaluating and criticising a work of art, which also depends on the level of art appreciation possessed by a person (Silvia, 2009). Thus, to explore the perspective of academicians in the Malaysian landscape is necessary in order to have an insight of the design motifs visual complexity of the Pua Kumbu textile, and to explore the community acceptance toward the art piece. It is believed, to analyse an object of cultural heritage is not only by 'look', but understand inherently to achieve collateral form of understanding.

7.1 Methodology

This research used the qualitative research method to explore the visual complexity and the community acceptance of the Pua Kumbu design motifs based on the perspective of academicians. The semi-structured questions, observation and analysis of relevant documents were conducted in answering the research questions:

- i. What is the perspective of academicians on the visual complexity of the Pua Kumbu design motifs?
- ii. What is the perspective of academicians on the community acceptance of the Pua Kumbu textile?

In the initial phase, the research questions were developed thematically to align with the aim of the study. Purposive sampling was employed, and specific samples of Malaysian academicians in the textile and art culture fields were chosen. Their expertise in the area of textile, and art culture fields related to the present study were greatly needed to strengthen the findings (Newman, 2014). Due to time and distance constraints, the qualitative data were collected in a variety of ways, including virtual discussions and physical face-to-face discussions, depending on the agreement of both interviewer and the interviewee. A question list was used as a guideline, and the questions were addressed in accordance with the conditions, emotions, and locations of the respondents. Closed observations on the actual Pua Kumbu in exploring the motifs complexity and on relevant documents were conducted to support the findings of the study. All data received were transcribed, and member checking was completed and finally, the qualitative data from the interviews were analysed. Table 7 shows the description of the respondents which are coded systematically to ensure personal data are hidden.

Table 7: Descriptions of the Academician and Coding

Name	Position & Qualification	Expertise	Coding
Academician 1	Senior Lecturer, Dr.	Iban Arts, Culture and Heritage	A(1)
Academician 2	Professor Dr.	Malay Art Culture, teaches weaving	A(2)
Academician 3	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Iban Arts, Culture and Heritage	A(3)
Academician 4	Senior Lecturer, Dr.	Iban Arts, Anthropology and Sociology	A(4)

Thematic analysis was used where the interview questions were constructed in two main themes, which are i) Visual complexity, and, ii) Community acceptance and knowledge acquired. Seven questions were designed and categorized according to each theme, as shown in Table 8. Each question created is considered to collect and analyse information from the respondents.

Table 8: Descriptions of the Academician and Coding

Themes	Categories	Questions
Visual Complexity (Design Characteristics)	Pattern's regularity & compositions	1. Do you understand the design motifs applied? 2. What do you think of the design motif applied in terms of complexity?
	Colours	What is your opinion on the colour combination applied on Pua Kumbu?
	Object Size	What do you think of the size of the design motifs applied on Pua Kumbu?
Community Acceptance and Knowledge Acquired		1. Do you think the community understands the design motifs applied to the textile?
		2. What is the best way to preserve Pua Kumbu for future the benefits?
		3. What is your recommendation for Pua Kumbu future design and development?

7.2 Literature Review

The Pua Kumbu textile is one of the cultural artefacts from the Iban indigenous tribe, and it is a tangible cultural heritage which is protected sacredly by the Iban community, especially the older generation (Wahed et al., 2020). The way of living and belief practised by Iban are implicated in the local products such as the Iban's textile which is embedded with design motifs inspired from flora, fauna, and animism.

However, the complexity of the symbols presented in the design motifs contributes to the current lack of interest in this art form, especially among the young generation (Magiman et al., 2018), tourists, and other races in Sarawak (Wahed et al., 2019) in further understanding these motifs. This has led to the mistreatment and misuse of this majestic art form. Recently, a video of a social media influencer mocking the 'Ngepan Iban' - the traditional Iban costume publicly was posted on social media platforms (Emma, 2021) caused anger among the people of Sarawak, and the Iban people exclusively. This disrespectful action resulted due to lack of exposure and knowledge barriers. Wahed et al. (2020) suggested that those exposed to the art would have better aesthetic perception of Pua Kumbu. Perceivers with Pua Kumbu knowledge were able to form positive aesthetic perceptions while accepting and preserving to this tangible cultural heritage of Sarawak, Malaysia at its best. Pua Kumbu art knowledge is only acquired through observation and demonstration. Most Pua Kumbu research is done on personal or public blogs, not academic publications (Jehom, 2015). The beauty of Pua Kumbu's intangible cultural heritage is not just a cultural expression, but also a wealth of knowledge and the ability to pass it on from generation to generation. Arai remarked that conserving and propagating cultural values and customs is a global obligation (Arai, 2004).

7.3 Results and Analysis

This section reflects on the results of the interviews with the focus group. It presents the analysis of their verbal responses during the interviews. The responses were categorised into two sections, which are (i) Visual Complexity (Design Characteristics), and (ii), Community Acceptance and Knowledge Acquired. Table 9 shows the coded answer of the respondents in four different questions on the design characteristics which are categorized into (i) understanding of experts on patterns, (ii) complexity & compositions, (iii) colour combinations, and (iii) object size.

Table 9: The Interview Coding and Theme (Visual Complexity)

Interviewees	Visual Complexity (Design Characteristics)			
	Understanding (Patterns)	Complexity & compositions	Colour	Object Size
A(1)	Yes, I understand.	Complicated. It was the identity of the Iban motifs.	The original Pua colour is marron, but blue and green are more modern.	The mix of big and small motifs creates a complete pattern.
A(2)	Understand the technique, not the meaning	Complicated.	The printed colour has to be diluted since it is too bright.	Preferably small and detailed. If the image is large, make it repeated.

A(3)	Yes, I understand.	The complexity is depending on the patterns and should have complete set of every design.	Natural colour. Green, yellow, orange is not relevant to Iban.	Smaller motifs make finer patterns, yet larger motifs appeal to others.
A(4)	Yes, I understand.	Based on the difficulty of motifs, traditional IP issues, and taboos.	Natural colour.	The design motif size does not reflect Pua Kumbu.

Meanwhile, to obtain the understanding of the acceptance and knowledge acquired of the design motifs applied on the Pua Kumbu from the point of view of the experts, five questions were carefully delivered. The responses of each respondent are disclosed in themes and coded in Table 10

Table 10: The Interview Coding and Theme (Visual Complexity)

Interviewees	Community Acceptance and Knowledge Acquired		
	Community Understanding	Preservation	Future Design
A(1)	Do not understand unless they have the knowledge.	Competitions	Keep weaving, publish book, competition, implement the design as a decorative wall, or product.
A(2)	Do not understand unless they have the knowledge.	Apply the design to scarf, textile, souvenir product	Incorporate the design motifs to current textile fashion.
A(3)	Do not understand unless they have the knowledge.	Early education and exposure, seminars, workshops, conferences, documentaries	Integrated the design motif with product
A(4)	Do not understand, unless explained.	Just continue weaving and preserve it.	Cannot integrate into other design.

7.4 Discussions

Based on the findings, several discussions are held, which include (i) prior knowledge leads to positive aesthetic perceptions, (ii) weavers determine the visual complexity of the Pua Kumbu, and, (iii) versatility of promotional approaches can broaden community acceptance.

i. Prior knowledge leads to positive aesthetic perceptions

Most of the academicians agreed that Pua Kumbu does not receive positive recognition from the community due to lack of knowledge, which led to the mistreatment of the textile. This is supported by a study on painting artwork (Pietras & Czernecka, 2018) whereby greater aesthetic perception are influenced with prior knowledge on artwork. Therefore, it can be expected that fluency of the perceiver (community) in processing information regarding Pua Kumbu depends on the

art knowledge of the perceiver (Hager et al., 2012). The interrelation between knowledge and perception significantly impacts the aesthetic interest of the perceiver by either developing a positive or negative aesthetic perception to safeguard this art piece.

According to respondent A(2), those with exposure of the Iban culture and are from the state of Sarawak, have a better understanding on the intangible cultural heritage. However, those who lack exposure of the Iban culture, are unable to understand further. This is due to the natural environment and the adaptation of the cultural environment that contribute to a better aesthetic perception (Redies, 2015). This is supported in the study by Wahed et al. (2020) whereby background knowledge determines the understanding of the perceivers on the art piece. The findings revealed that participants from Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah demonstrated the lowest understanding on the Pua Kumbu design motifs. Art knowledge or skill in the field of Pua Kumbu design motif is depicted to be insufficient (Wahed et al., 2020). Academicians mutually agree that the establishment of positive aesthetic perception among perceivers is by education.

ii. Weavers determine the visual complexity of the Pua Kumbu

The concept of producing the design motifs of Pua Kumbu is based on the weaver's interpretations, where some weavers prefer big shapes of design motifs, and some prefer small sizes of design motifs which contribute to the greater visual complexity of the perceivers. The visual complexity of the Pua Kumbu design motifs is very subjective, which not only focuses on to the shape, line, form, size, colour and forth, but also relies on the stories portrayed by weavers in an art piece. Every design motif applied in the Pua Kumbu are interconnected to one another which, and with the combination the designs, the interpretation of the weaver can be translated, and only a person with the Pua Kumbu art knowledge, can successfully 'read' it. Academicians believe that the visual complexity of the Pua Kumbu lies within the weavers, as they are the storyteller of this majestic textile.

iii. Versatility of promotional approaches can broaden community acceptance

Academicians opine that this authentic textile should receive better recognition based on the credibility of the Pua Kumbu design motifs and the originality of the intangible features which are the emblematic of the Iban community and Malaysia in general. The integration of the Pua Kumbu design motifs to other surfaces of product can enrich acceptance of the community and enhance the perceivers' aesthetic perception and safeguarding the art piece from being inexistent. In the study conducted by Mathew (2018), the use of African and Ghana Adinkra design motifs by adapting them into different mediums was deemed as a way to safeguard the knowledge of its design motifs (Mathew, 2018). The integration of the traditional or heritage content into contemporary practice can enhance acceptance within the community, especially to young generations.

In addition, competitions, seminars, workshops, conferences, documentaries, and books will initiate the interest of the community and further preserve the heritage. Various promotional approaches, such as exhibitions, workshops, social media, knowledge sharing, and tourism education will foster knowledge and safeguard the cultural heritage for future generations.

7.5 Conclusions

The perspective of academicians on the visual complexity of Pua Kumbu design motifs and community acceptance on the textile were narrated in this chapter. Authors attempted to identify the optimal and significant discussion based on the interviews conducted, literature review, and observations which indicate that the textile has yet to receive adequate recognition from the community, either internally or externally, and this phenomenon is caused by various factors which resulted to textile mistreatment and misinterpretation. In summary, safeguarding the Pua Kumbu is not one person's mission but must involve collaboration between multiple organisations, stakeholders, and governments. Therefore, cooperation between communities and the tourism and heritage sectors is required to preserve this tangible art piece worldwide. Promoting the tangible cultural heritage product can broaden community acceptance and eliminate knowledge barriers, and contribute to the global preservation of the 'unspoken' knowledge. Finally, the tangible cultural heritage of Pua Kumbu should be recognised for its contributions to the preservation of traditional human values.

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