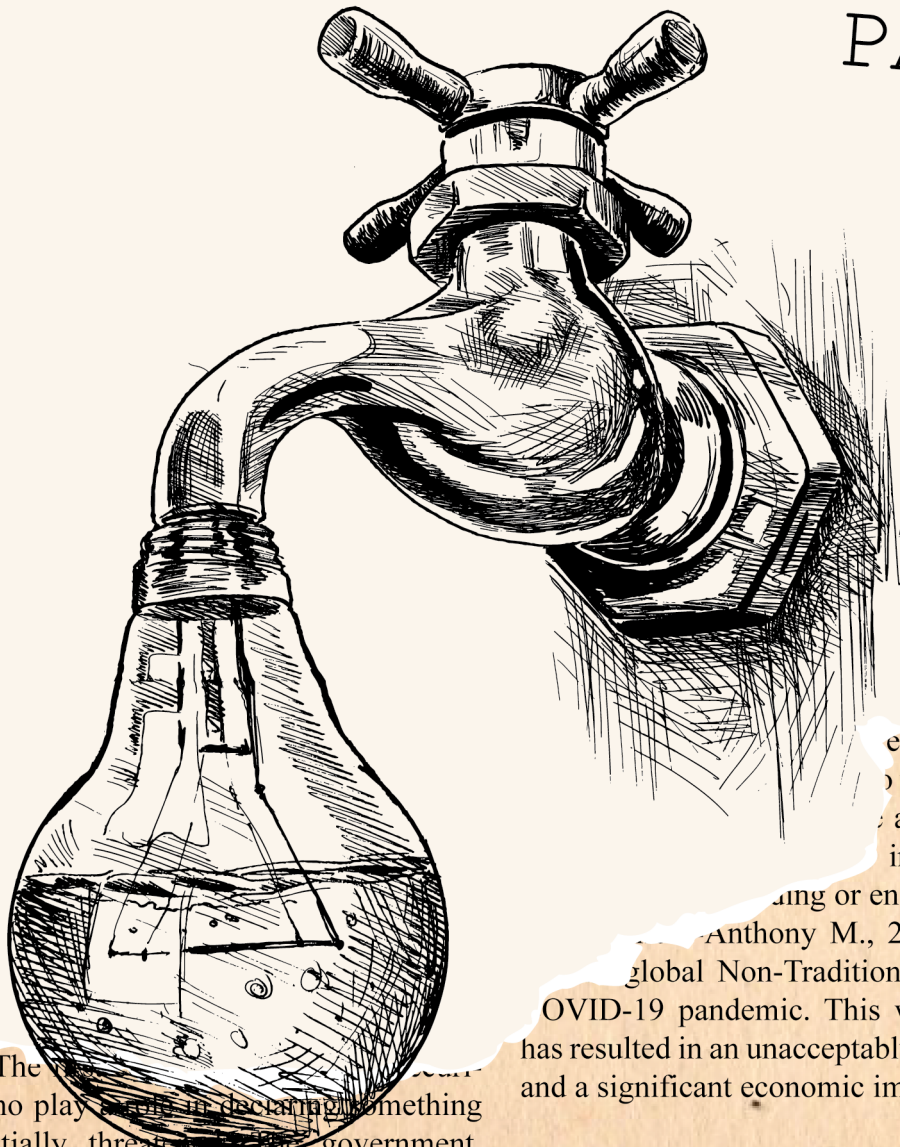


A R T /

I N N O V A T I O N

PART I



... issue. The
... actors who play
... something
... that is existentially threat
... government,
... represented by high-ranking officials, lobbyists, and
... even pressure from a group are all examples of securitizing
... tizing actors. Next is the issue or threat that potentially
... brings harmful effects towards peace and stability of
... of the country and lastly is the reference object or who
... needs the security. This is how actors secure the

ec
... that those mo
... actors, political
... individuals can h
... ing or ensuring their own se
... Anthony M., 2018). One of the m
... global Non-Traditional Security risks is the
... COVID-19 pandemic. This worldwide health crisis
... has resulted in an unacceptably high number of deaths
... and a significant economic impact.

Securitization theory, which is employed as a frame-
work analysis, is the basic theory that underpins the
analysis in this study. Securitization developed from
Copenhagen School (COPRI – Copenhagen Peace
Research Institute) of security studies pioneered by
Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver and Jaap De Wilde (1998),

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A REFLECTION ON TRADITIONAL DUSUN COPPER-SMITHING

Saring As Literary Work

a chapter by

MOHD IQBAL HASHIM

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak



Becoming a Dusun Coppersmith: An Artisanal Praxis

This essay is an academic extension to my participatory immersion as a coppersmith whose praxis centred on cultural revival. An ethnographic experiential reflection of the sort, this essay will propose a discourse on Dusun brassware – henceforth called *saring* – as a literary work beyond being an object culture. This essay used *saring* interchangeably to refer to traditional and contemporary brass cultural object. As a student-in-orientation to a Dusun revivalist coppersmith, I learned the art of cold working copper which was practised by the Dusun traditionally. In addition, interaction with other practitioners studying the same subject contributed significantly to the mediation during the *saring* production. Both methods were followed by corroborating the insights with the existing literature on the Dusun oral culture.

Documented evidence since 1800 pointed out that *saring* was used to be worn daily. On several occasions e.g., at weddings and rituals, more components and accessories were added, increasing the intricacy of the brass ensemble. That being said, our focus will be on the daily-used *saring*, specifically the bracelet, one of the essential brass accessories of the Dusun. We have seen more rediscovery of Dusun cultural heritage in recent years². It is undoubtedly a positive trend, but eager artisans and excited buyers might risk misappropriating Dusun local wisdom.





Figure 1(a)-(e): Dusun saring bracelet.
(Source: Author)

This brings us to the inquiry in this essay: the meaning of the saring. This essay will not describe the semiotic of saring more than by itself; it embodies the Dusun cultural construction. On the other hand, the inquiry prompted the exploration of other problem that warrants this reflective essay. Is the pattern the saring also a form of popular literature? Why, if ever, carve patterns on saring? This essay is a serious attempt to interpret the patterns on the saring beyond the semiotic value. This significant perspective will add depth to appraising the Dusun tradition.

The saring as literary works can be better understood when being looked at in a two-part production process of the object culture, each with its consumption. What the pattern embodies and how it tells a story will be discussed in the sequence: the making, its change of hands, and finally, its use. This is the basis of Marxist view that production is incomplete until the object's

consumption (Marx, 1939) and Glaserfeld's view that knowledge is never passed, only reconstructed (Von Glaserfeld, 1995). In other words, this essay would argue that the saring production is only completed as it is reappropriated with different meanings.

Patterns as the Embodied Oral Culture

While retracing the traditional process of Dusun copper-smithing, constraints such as tools and equipment, methods, and raw material characteristics are recognised as technical mediating factors to produce the saring pattern. However, this technical complexity is of little concern other than acknowledging that the coppersmiths also actively negotiated this complexity during pattern-making, i.e., the patterns on the saring, at least technically, are never arbitrary.

Instead, the consumption of transferred knowledge is of great importance here. In the context of informal education, teaching is hands-on. The learning involved an active student appraisal of his new knowledge. He then puts into practice of the teaching whilst the master judges the correctness of his apprentice. This informal learning shows that the apprenticeship cycle is an oral culture where the student's knowledge is mediated verbally and consumed. This master-student oral culture can then be assumed to embody the pattern.



Figure 2: General shaping hammers used in saring production. Sledgehammer (top), Karakami (middle), and Genno (bottom). (Source: Author)



Figure 3: The chasing hammers (*Otafuku*) used during *saring* bracelet production. (Source: Author)



Figure 4: Handmade texturing punches. Top row: Fine line tip makeshift from tile chisel (left), broad line tip makeshift from the concrete nail (middle), and various tips made from steel blanks (right). Bottom row: shaping wooden punch (left) and various steel blanks (right). (Source: Author)



Figure 5: Secondary tools in *saring* production. From top: Bastard file, pincer, fine file, various grade whetstone. (Source: Author)

The deduction is significant as we can now appreciate that the line of masters transferred layers of knowledge and embodied the pattern on

the *saring*. The patterns now have a cultural depth as they reproduced the layers of methods of those previous masters. In other words, the student becomes the extension of the masters before him. This is apparent where consensus is seen on the motifs' usage and meaning. Here, the traditional societal order plays an important role: the Dusun strives to achieve human-nature harmony (Low & Lee, 2012).

Beauty, as understood by the Dusun is the harmony between men and nature. The theory of inherent beauty and justice by Al-Attas explains this human-nature relationship phenomenon when he defines justice as 'putting things in their proper place' and achieving justice is uncovering an inherent beauty (of the thing) (Al-Attas, 2015). An example of this is the cooling ritual (*sogit*) which is carried out, to settle disputes. Although this may be a reprimand, the reasoning is to necessitate submission by creating dependency on society.

The masters' teaching may differ, but the consensus on the motifs is achieved by putting the teaching in its rightful meaning and place. The relationship is also embodied as the patterns and not only the consumed knowledge. This phenomenon emerged during the erection of megalith (*watu*) as well. Similar to its counterpart in Peninsula Malaysia, Dusunic megalith culture can be considered as an embodied worldview of a culture. As suggested by existing works on the megalithic culture of Malaysia, the stones are heavily revered objects. This is to say that erected stones command a respectable presence. This can be seen in cases throughout Malaysia where the stones were used to mark graves, mark land ownership boundaries, and mark places of significance. From the work by Adnan Jusoh et. al., we can imply that the megaliths in Negeri Sembilan and Melaka are anthropomorphised and attached to a supernatural patron (Jusoh et al., 2018). Hence, they were given names and respectable titles. This is different from the Dusun, where the supernatural quality of the megalith came from the attachment to the natural spirit. Another significant departure from the megaliths in Peninsula Malaysia is that the stones were erected to record an event, for example, a declaration of peace as in Batu Sumpah Apin-

Apin or a raid as in Batu Sumpah Kg. Tebilong. They described the events that occurred in the place, containing the stories of that event (Basrah Bee, 2020; De Silva & Abdullah, 2020). Lia Genovese pointed out these particular material in her comparative studies on the megalithic culture of Laos and Sabah. Being one of the megaliths erected to commemorate headhunting raids in Pogunan, several notches were carved on the stone erected to record the number of heads taken during the event. This material suggests that the Dusun megalith is a storytelling device (Genovese, 2019).

Storytelling in Dusun also comes in the form of oral culture. Works on the subject suggest that oral storytelling central to the Dusun are the folktales (tangon), riddles (sundait), and incantations (rinait) (Appell, 2010; Binbang, 2011; Gallus & Low, 2016; Williams, 1963). The core of this storytelling is Dusun's worldview on society, kinship, nature and the cosmos – their local wisdom. The three prevailing storytelling variants extracted from several authors are crucial in my reflection. Suffice to say that the objects associated with the storyteller, the place, and the time embody the storytelling. What is pertinent in this essay is the local wisdom they contain because it corroborates the human-nature harmony order previously discussed. The motifs symbolising the local wisdom emerged from their desire for a harmonious human-nature relationship. They are used while negotiating for a pattern, effectively embodying popular storytelling.

Within my artisanal praxis, the primary aim is reviving the traditional Dusun copper-smithing. During the production of saring, negotiation in pattern-making leans heavily on determining what is true to the local wisdom. This is to say that to revive culture, one must negotiate his aspiration for self-discovery as a Dusun. In his sense, the scenery patterns are consumed to satisfy the need for – social – belonging (Hashim, 2020). For example, the pattern 'paddy field between mountains' will be appropriated as someone from Ranau to consume it. Now culturally belonged, it becomes 'Ranau plain' because that is what Ranau is: a paddy plain sitting in a valley. Furthermore, the pattern consumed embodies the story of that place. The story of the landslide

and fallen bundu trees will be embodied as the 'tree on a hill' pattern when someone attached to Bundu Tuhan used the saring.

The arguments above establish that the production of saring is a complex mediated process, and negotiations play a significant role in the mediation. Knowledge is transferred and reconstructed, and the production of the material (saring) consumes it (Kossak, 2008).

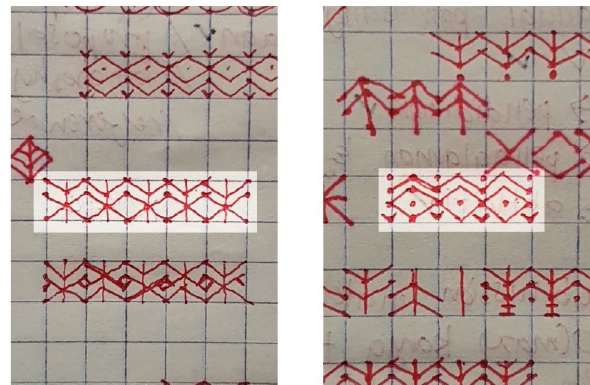


Figure 6: Sketch pattern. "Paddy plain" (left) and "Paddy valley" (right). (Source: Author)



Figure 7: Textured pattern close-up. "Paddy plain" (top), "Stream" (middle), and "Paddy valley" (bottom). (Source: Author)

Post-exchange consumption

The existing works on Dusun motifs had been discussed extensively in their semiotics. What concerns this essay is the story told by the composition of these motifs – their pattern. Several authors described the use of the pattern to tell stories of significant events (Basrah Bee, 2020; De Silva & Abdullah, 2020). The motif by itself carries only a distinctive meaning. This is not unlike constructing a meaningful sentence using a selection of words. However, when carefully arranged with one another, they form a pictorial narrative for reading.

In his seminal book on urban culture, Aldo Rossi explained this idea of constructing a narrative from the assemblage of visual cues. He describes this consumptive construction of a city based on the visual logic from which the public can read the city while walking through it (Rossi, 1982). In other words, the experience of the city is exchanged as the reader constructs the city from his perspective while reading the city's patterns. In the context of Dusun saring, the exchange must happen between the maker and the user – the reader. We have discussed previously the consumption of knowledge and worldview that led the negotiations to produce patterns on the saring: creating the story. Now we shall see the second consumption as the saring changes hand, worn, and reappropriated, consuming it to create a new story.

The exchange occurred twice. The first was when the saring changed from the coppersmith to the owner. The second was when the story narrated on the saring was told as the owner read it. Suffice it to state that the first exchange is essential as the first pre-condition for the exchange to happen.

The other two pre-conditions are that patterns need to be non-dictating and that the reader to be receptive. Having fulfilled all three will create room for story reappropriation followed by consumption of the reader. As the user reads the pattern on his saring, he reappropriates the stories. He reads the story told by the pattern and recreates it from the negotiations of his desire and aspiration (Hashim, 2020).

The exchange of object culture, the recognition of patterns, the appraisal, and reconstructions make up the production process as the user consumes the saring. This consumption marks the completion of that production. As the user consumption reproduces a story, his storytelling embodies the pattern – once again becoming literary work. It is helpful to reiterate that the saring both tells a story and contains stories. Just like the pattern as an extension of the previous masters through inherited knowledge, the saring is the extension of its previous owners through the inherited heirloom. This quality gives the saring its value as a heritage (Susanto, 2021).

Telling the Dusun Stories with Saring

My artisanal praxis suggests that Dusun storytelling is extended beyond their oral culture into their object cultures. This essay established that the production of the saring is analogous to the production of literary works. However, there is complexity in embodying storytelling as the saring pattern. The storytelling starts as the consuming producer negotiates his way to create the pattern. The production of the saring continues as it changes hands with the consuming user. The production ends as the user consumes the saring by wearing. The post-exchange consumption allows the user to appraise the story narrated by the pattern and subsequently give a new meaning – a new story to tell. This is completed by the user appropriating a new story according to his experiential values.

Previously, the attachment towards the Dusun object cultures was shallow. In the Dusun saring context – as with other object cultures – this is due to the object exchange that has ceased. Stories from the past were stopped from being told, and the cultural value of the saring dropped.

The traditional copper-smithing and storytelling culture should be highly regarded as one of the Dusun intangible heritages. More artisanal practices should be encouraged to be set up, whether following the same praxis or not. The artisans are crucial as they are the starting point of the object culture's production, the start of a new story. The public can only consume the object culture through the artisans, giving meaning to that story.

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Mohd Iqbal Hashim is a conservationist-designer based in Kuching. He graduated with a Master of Architecture (2020) and a Master of Arts in Conservation & Regeneration (2016); his works are heavily informed by his research interest: Anthropology in Architecture. For his Master of Architecture, he investigated the influence of consumption culture on the place-making of Pasar Serikin, Sarawak. Working across several disciplines, Iqbal primarily draws from his socio-spatial investigation to experiment with architecture and culture. These interests originated from his Master of Arts dissertation, where he proposed relativity between ritual and spaces in the traditional wine-making hamlet in Galicia, Spain. His joint work, "Palimpsest City", with Ismail Rahim, was exhibited in REX:KL during the Kuala Lumpur Architectural Festival 2019. He also wrote *Inherent (Ir)Rationality & Embodied Consumption* for Lanai Zine in 2021. Currently, he is lectures on architecture at Kolej Pengajian Alam Bina while collaborating with NORIS Architect as one of their associates.

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