

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**ARBITRARINESS AND
CONVENTIONALITY IN
POLYSEMIC MURUT MOTIFS**

NADIA MAHMUD

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ABSTRACT

The Murut ethnic group is one of the earliest ethnic groups in Sabah. The traditional craftwork and attire of the Murut are decorated with motifs that are derived from figures (anthropomorphic and zoomorphic), floral and objects. Due to the inevitability of modern conveniences and technology, the knowledge of the denotation as well as connotation of the motifs are being threatened. In an effort to preserve the motifs, they have been constantly used not only in traditional medium but adapted to non-traditional medium as well. The message or themes presented in the visual composition of the motifs must be carefully regarded to avoid misinterpretation and cultural appropriation. This research aims to evaluate the conventionality of polysemic Murut motifs through determining the level of arbitrariness in the semiosis between the representamen and its object and interpretant. This study employed a mixed-method approach through semi-structured interviews with Murut representatives, a questionnaire survey with respondents with Art and Design backgrounds and a semiotic analysis of the motifs' structure and semiosis. The research discovered that the arbitrariness and conventionality of the object of the motifs were influenced by its motif type where motifs that represented human figures were the least arbitrary therefore the least conventional and motifs that represented animals were the most arbitrary and thus, highly conventional. The interpretants of the motifs were found to be generally accepted, despite some having their individual objects unidentifiable.

Keywords: Arbitrariness, Conventionality, Murut, Motifs, Semiotic

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

The Murut ethnic group is one of the largest indigenous groups in Sabah, consisting of 3.2% of Sabah population in 2005 (United Nations Development Programme, 2008). During the rule of colonial powers, the Murut were reported to be concentrated in the north part of Borneo (Hose & McDougall, 2005). More recent and local sources specify their concentration to the interior and south-eastern parts of Sabah, parts of Brunei as well as territories close to the Sarawak-Kalimantan border (Sabah Tourism). The Murut of Sabah once dwelled in communal longhouses usually containing 15 huts, one for each family. However, in recent times, this communal way of life is rarely practised among members of the Murut as they were forced to abandon their traditional ways for a more modern way of life (Sokial, 2005). The Murut consists of a few division of sub-ethnic groups that can speak 15 different languages and up to 21 dialects, though the most widely used dialect is that of the Timogun Murut (Sabah Tourism). However, despite their variety of languages, the Murut historically did not possess a written language system prior to the arrival of a formal education system instilled by the British after their colonization of North Borneo (Polunin, 1959).

To overcome this absence of a written language, the Murut employed different types of visual communication to convey their non-literary messages. The concept of non-literary visual communication in the Murut culture was touched on by Ivan Polunin (1959) in his article A Note on Visual Non-Literary Methods of Communication Among the Muruts of North Borneo for the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland's journal, *Man*. He suggested that the use of non-literary visual communication is due to the fact that the general population at that time were illiterate and thus, required methods of communication that did not involve the use of text. Though his article was concentrated more on the use of announcement sticks in Murut culture, Polunin implied that only important, significant messages were conveyed in their mediums of communication due to the ability of such mediums