

# Sustaining Ethnic Identity Through Fashion

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**Abstract** — This study focuses on implementing the Kadazan Dusun ethnic identity into modern fashion. In the recent years, the local designers had been striving to the challenge of creating a contemporary representing the Kadazan Dusun, with the Unduk Ngadau as the main platform to showcase their creation. With this new category added to the competition, modern fashion has clearly made its way into the traditional event. This study will be conducted through qualitative research methodology, by interviews and observation with the people who are directly and indirectly involved in the competition. This study will give a proper suggestion and recommendation on how the modern fashion can be used as a medium in sustaining the Kadazan Dusun identity.

**Keywords** - Ethnic identity; tradition; unduk ngadau; fashion; costume

## I. Introduction

For a community with a deep culture and tradition such as the *Kadazan Dusun* (Pugh-Kitingan, 2012), sustaining their identity is an important issue in order to prevent ethnic extinction. When British first came to Sabah in 1881, they brought along with them modern technology, ideas, religion and their own culture to the people in Sabah (Kim, 1981). Since then, the influence of outsiders can be seen to affect the local community. From learning new languages to a more efficient lifestyle and as well as the way they dress, the local people went through changes in their daily lives (Sansalu, 2017). Although we cannot deny the positive impact of the civilization brought by the British to the people in Sabah, there are also the negative impact that simply cannot be ignored. The religion of Christianity has made less and less people to practice the traditional religion of the *Kadazan Dusun* who believed in their God, *Minamangun*, the availability of clothes with better material, look and modesty replacing the more revealing traditional clothes, this has affected the culture and tradition greatly as nowadays, some of the younger generations of the *Kadazan Dusun*, have no knowledge of the traditional religion and the traditional costume. This issue has called for the efforts to ensure the sustainability of the *Kadazan Dusun*'s ethnic identity through many aspect, and one of it is the traditional costume which represent the visual identity of the community.

## II. Pesta Kaamatan and The Unduk Ngadau

Every year in the month of May, the *Kadazan Dusun* in Sabah celebrate *Pesta Kaamatan*, which is a harvest festival, to honour the *Bambarayon* or the rice spirit as a sign of gratitude for their bountiful harvest (Irene Benggon-Charuruks, 1993). Events such as traditional sports, music performances, dances and traditional ceremonies called *Magavau* by the Bobohizan are held during this festival. Other than that, the main event during the festival is the local beauty pageant called the *Unduk Ngadau*. While the *Magavau* ceremony is held according to the traditional religion of the *Kadazan Dusun*, the *Unduk Ngadau* competition is held as to remember *Huminodun*, the transformed spirit of Minamangun's daughter who was sacrificed during the drought, ending the suffering and starvation of the people. The winner of the competition is chosen as the one who resemble and represent the personality of *Huminodun* (Who is HUMINODUN?, 2004). Every year there are 44 contestants representing each district in Sabah including each from the community of *Kadazan Dusun* living in Klang Valley and Johor Bahru. During the height of the competition, the contestants is paraded in traditional costume from their respective district, making this competition as one of the main platform of displaying the traditional costumes to the public, as the event usually attract the attention of majority of the public. The originality and authenticity of the costume including its complete accessories will be assessed by the judges.



Fig.1. Winner of the 1962 *Unduk Ngadau* competition. Source :(George Mani Valerian, 2016)



Fig.2 Winner of the 2015 *Unduk Ngadau* competition. Source :(George Mani Valerian, 2016)

### III. Kadazan Dusun Traditional Costume

Although there are 81 sub-ethnic of Kadazan Dusun, not all of their traditional costume is recognized by the *Kadazan Dusun* Cultural Association (KDCA), and some of them are still trying to find their traditional costume through records and old pictures as there are no more elders producing the traditional costume in their community (Antah, 2018). There is no doubt that the traditional costumes commonly seen nowadays has gone through series of changes and unavoidable alterations because of the different material accessible to the community. In the old days, fabric are often handmade, woven from natural sources available to the people, nowadays, it is more convenient to use fabric such as cotton and polyester which can be easily bought from stores (Rita Lasimbang, 1997). Other than the materials used for the costume, changes on the designs can be seen with more embellishment compared to the one from the old days, but the reason to this changes remained unclear (Fatt, 2017). Traditionally, most of the costumes is only black or brown in colour, this is due to the lack of fabric dye, as the *Kadazan Dusun* only uses dye they obtained from natural resources back then, but nowadays some ethnic group uses other colour as well, such as the *Dusun Tinagas* from *Ranau* which uses dark blue fabric to make their traditional costumes and also added some embroidery and lace on their traditional costume. Gold coloured trimmings are also one of the most common addition on most traditional costumes nowadays.



Fig.3 The original look of the *Dusun Tinagas* traditional costume.



Fig.4 The new look of the *Dusun Tinagas* traditional costume.

#### IV. The Contemporary Dress Design Competition

With the television shows and internet being easily accessible nowadays, the local beauty pageant *Unduk Ngadau* has also has its fair share of influence from the modern-day beauty pageant such as Miss World, Miss Universe and Miss Earth, especially in terms of fashion and the costumes worn by the contestants. With the emergence of contemporary dress worn by the contestant during their introduction at the start of the competition in 2013, the committee of the competition has made it an official additional event since 2014, for designers and local fashion enthusiast to express their creativity in producing contemporary dress inspired by the traditional costume (Sangol, 2016). Since it was first made into competition, it has attracted more participants each year with some district also organizing such competition at district level before choosing the winning dress to be brought to the state level *Unduk Ngadau*. Other than the contemporary dress competition held during the *Unduk Ngadau*, similar competitions has frequently been held by different organizer such as the Sabah Cultural Board, which held similar competition during the *Pesta Moginakan* held in *Ranau*. Compared to the one held during the *Unduk Ngadau*, this competition mainly focuses on the contemporary aspects of the design, giving much more freedom to the participants. More competition being held is resulted by the increasing participation, not only from the designers but also many of the local fashion enthusiast. This is probably due to them being more interested in the modern fashion than the traditional costume, but at the same time wanting to express their traditional identity in a more familiar method to them. Although this competition has attracted a lot of attention from the *Kadazan Dusun* community itself, there are also those who are not quite agree to the competition, as in the early days of the competitions, the decency of some of the dress are being heavily questioned by the public, stating it was too daring and not suitable to the competition (Sangol, 2016). The authenticity value of the design has been marginalised when some participants and audience questioned the conflicting design characteristics on the contemporary dress (Gompul, 2016) (Jinos, 2016).



Fig.5 *Unduk Ngadau* 2014 contestant wearing the contemporary design dress. Source: (David Aramaitii (Video & Photo), 2016)

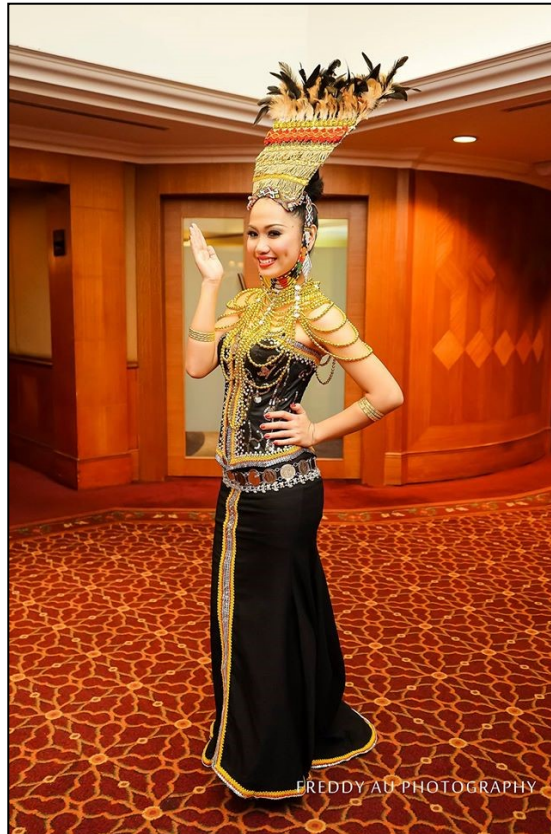


Fig.6 *Unduk Ngadai* 2015 contestant wearing the contemporary design dress. Source: (Freddy au Photographer, 2016)

## V. Conclusion

The contemporary design dress competition has, without a doubt, attracted the attention of the community, especially the younger generation to the traditional costume of the *Kadazan Dusun*. By implementing the modern element into the traditional costume, it has brought the issue of ethnic identity into the centre of the community, and somehow open new opportunity for more people to study and get to know their own traditional costume. This approach will somehow keep the tradition alive, thus ensuring the sustainability of the ethnic identity in the future. Although by exposing the younger generation to the contemporary dress has brought negative effect where some thought that the contemporary dress are in fact the actual traditional costume, it also unveil the urgent need of educating the whole community, especially the younger generations on the knowledge regarding their traditional costume. This will give them better understanding on their own identity in the future and on how to implement them in a contemporary design so that it won't be mistaken and lost in the future. The organizer of such competition also need to educate the designers and local fashion enthusiast on the implementation of their inspiration onto their design, so that they can have better understanding and appreciation on the ethnic and traditional element of the design instead of focusing on the modern elements.

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