

# CULTURAL SYMBOLISM BEHIND THE WOVEN MOTIFS OF THE IRANUN IN SABAH

*SIMBOLISME BUDAYA DI SEBALIK MOTIF TENUNAN IRANUN DI SABAH*

Juita JAAFAR MANAP\*<sup>1</sup>

Arba'iyah ABD AZIZ<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Jalan Ilmu 1/1, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

\*<sup>1</sup>juitajaafar@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>arbaiyah@salam.uitm.edu.my

Corresponding author\*

Received: 26<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Accepted: 4<sup>th</sup> October 2025

## ABSTRACT

The Iranun people, an indigenous community native to Sabah, Malaysia, are renowned for their woven textiles that embody a rich cultural heritage. Despite their significance, the symbolic meanings of these motifs remain underexplored, particularly from a semiotic perspective. These woven textiles function not only as utilitarian objects but also as repositories of cultural symbols reflecting the Iranun people's history, identity, and worldview. This study aims to identify the symbolism and cultural relevance of ten distinct types of Iranun woven textiles. Two primary methods were applied: interviews with skilled weavers and fieldwork involving visual analysis. Data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork, comprising interviews with Iranun master weavers and cultural experts, as well as visual examination of three textile samples. Drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory as the methodological framework, the study interprets the embedded signs and symbols within the motifs and examines their role as signifiers in the broader cultural system. The findings reveal that the motifs encapsulate complex narratives connected to Iranun customs, social hierarchies, and historical interactions, often blending indigenous and external influences. The study contributes to the understanding of Iranun cultural heritage by demonstrating the interplay between visual art and social values. It also recommends future comparative research between the weaving practices of the Iranun in Sabah, Malaysia, and those in Mindanao, Philippines.

**Keywords:** Iranun; cultural symbolism; woven motifs; semiotics; textile heritage

## ABSTRAK

Kaum Iranun ialah komuniti peribumi yang berasal dari Sabah, Malaysia, dan terkenal dengan hasil tekstil tenunan yang melambangkan kekayaan warisan budaya mereka. Walaupun mempunyai kepentingan yang besar, simbolisme motif tenunan kaum ini masih kurang diterokai, khususnya dari perspektif semiotik. Tekstil tenunan bukan sekadar berfungsi sebagai barangan kegunaan harian, malah menjadi wadah simbol budaya yang mencerminkan sejarah, identiti dan pandangan dunia masyarakat Iranun. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti simbolisme dan perkaitan budaya bagi sepuluh jenis tekstil tenunan Iranun yang berbeza. Dua kaedah utama digunakan, iaitu temu bual bersama penenun mahir dan kerja lapangan yang melibatkan analisis visual. Data diperolehi melalui pendekatan etnografi yang merangkumi temu bual dengan penenun utama serta pakar budaya Iranun dan analisis visual terhadap tiga sampel tekstil tenunan. Berdasarkan teori semiotik Ferdinand de Saussure sebagai rangka kerja metodologi, kajian ini menghuraikan tanda dan simbol yang tertanam dalam motif serta meneliti peranannya sebagai penanda dalam sistem budaya yang lebih luas. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa motif tenunan Iranun memuatkan naratif yang kompleks berkaitan adat, hierarki sosial, dan interaksi sejarah yang sering menggabungkan pengaruh budaya tempatan serta luar. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman warisan budaya kaum Iranun dengan memperlihatkan interaksi antara seni visual dan nilai kemasyarakatan. Kajian turut mencadangkan agar penyelidikan perbandingan dilakukan antara amalan tenunan Iranun di Sabah, Malaysia, dan di Mindanao, Filipina.

**Kata kunci:** Iranun; simbolisme budaya; motif tenunan; semiotik; warisan tekstil

## Introduction

The Iranun people, an indigenous ethnolinguistic group located in Sabah, Malaysia, possess a great culture that is mostly centred on the sea and arts of craftsmanship. It is well known that they are connected to the sea and trade; the Iranun were important actors in the trade circles around Southeast Asia (Chin & Smith, 2011). Their cultural heritage is embedded in their arts and crafts especially their fabrics which articulate and represent their societies, beliefs, and their everlasting relations with their ancestors.

The textile designs of the Iranun culture, which is native to the Kota Belud district, has far-reaching dimensions as artefacts of culture, arts and history. The textile products made from these textiles are filled with ornamental and practical purposes, incorporating elements that have been inherited over many generations (Araba'iyah & Juita, 2022). Such motifs and designs in the Iranun textile can provide information regarding the social organizations, religious practices, and ecological relations of the Iranun people (Miller, 2005; Maxwell, 1990). Whereas the history, resources, values, ideals, and geographical terrains of the Iranun people are not undertaken in a strained manner. Therefore, the enculturation of weaving patterns is fundamental to the people of Iranun since it forms a vital part of their cultural heritage (Othman & Baharuddin, 2017).

This study will analyse the motifs that are in Iranun textile by investigating their symbolic meaning. This research explores semiotic theoretical framework and ethnographic methods in the realization of what these symbols mean culturally, and what this says about the Iranun practices and history (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Saussure, 1983). The textile traditions of the Iranun culture carry not only the artistic values in them but are also very crucial elements in cultural reproduction. These traditions of weaving act as a language through which the textiles conceptualize their worldview, dominantly focusing on pictorial symbols (Geertz, 1973; Smith-Shank, 2004).

In as much as traditional textile crafts of Malaysia focusing on *songket* and *batik* have received quite favourable attention from scholars, little or no research has been done on the weaving traditions of the Iranun people (Roff, 2021; Khoo, 2015). The cultural history of the Iranun people has been the subject of research by various anthropologists and historians including, Majul (1973), Salgado (1983). However, there are still no general studies concerning the textile traditions of the Iranun. While Hadzarmawi (2015) offers narratives which detail what Iranun weaving involves, no narrative accounts of notes on the designs and their interrelationships have been done. This study strongly builds upon these previous works but changes the emphasis and aims at both ethnography and semiotics to understand the major aspects of the meanings of the Iranun textile designs.

To fill this gap, the present study examines the textile motifs of the Iranun focusing on their forms, meanings and the relevancy in contemporary culture. The study will explore thematic development using qualitative fieldwork such as interviews with the master weavers and experts of Iranun culture in Sabah, regarding processes related to the selection of motifs and the symbolism behind them.

## Literature Review

The motifs exist not only in textiles crafts but also in material culture, ethnography, and semiotics which regarded textiles as both practical and representational. Motifs can refer to recurring decorative patterns or designs, often serving symbolic or aesthetic purposes (Feldman, 1992). In that regard, Gittinger (1979) points out that textiles are not simply some objects made for everyday use, but rather tools used for the issues of social, cultural, and symbolic nature. In Walter's study, Malayan Iranun

woven textiles serve to address the fusion of cultural paternalism, construction of hybridity, and the role of symbolism. This literature review presents a state-of-the-art survey of the available literature on Southeast Asia textiles, indigenous weaving practices, and semiotic critique to situate the area of Iranun weaving art as part of vaster academic field.

Authors such as Maxwell (1990) and Forshee (2001) have elaborated about the uses of the textiles in the Southeast Asian region; being language in enculturation of ethnic identity, social order and religion. Particularly, in Malaysia, *songket* and *batik* fabrics originated from the Malayan Archipelago have also captured many scholars' attention especially on their designs and their iconographical attributes (Khoo, 1991). There has been a recognition of such textiles not only for their decorative qualities but also for the disclosing of intricate stories about people.

These motifs have been understood as cultural inheritances passes down through matrilineal tradition indicating that textile making is deeply connected to the transmission of cultural knowledge. Although Iranun textiles are relatively rare, their motifs demonstrate that these designs are not merely ornamental but carry profound cultural meanings and serve multiple purposes. For instance, the use of nature patterns in Iranun textile work reflects the community's close relationship with the environment, climate and nature (Ibrahim, 2018). This study contributes to existing debates by offering a detailed ethnographic analysis of Iranun textile motifs within both local and regional contexts.

Semiotic approaches are very useful in studying the textile motifs and exposes the underlying meaning hidden within the motifs. Saussure (1916) believe that, as social beings, we assign certain social meanings and understanding to visual pictorial representations that are found on the fabrics and other objects. However, in the case of Iranun textiles the patterns work as a language system whose complexities are sign systems that the weavers use to revolve the consumers around their surroundings, societal norms and identity.

The evolution of semiotics posed by Eco (1976) and Chandler (2017) has lately extended to covering the analysis of symbols through material culture and visual languages. An illustrative example is Schneider's (2006) work on African textiles to the extent that explains that motifs are nothing more than symbolic representations of the social orders and collective memory. Likewise, the motifs on the textiles of Iranun people are not random in nature, but very purposeful as a means of communicating cultural stories. Though semiotics is pertinent in such areas as appreciation of the beauty of the textiles, systematic attempts have not been made to use this approach in the case of Iranun weaving. This Research intends to address that shortcoming by using semiotic theory to categorize and explain the statements of the Iranun designs in relation to culture and its transmission.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing ethnographic methods of observation and interview to investigate the motifs of Iranun textile weavings from Sabah. The research sought to capture the symbolism of Iranun woven textile motifs. The methodology integrates participant observation of the Iranun people, especially weavers, and semi-structured interviews to answer questions regarding the types of Iranun weavings and motifs. A visual analysis of the textiles documented is to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the symbolism of motifs through Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics.

The interviews involved two interviewees who are master weavers, namely Hajjah Pandian Sulaiman and Hajjah Arijah Saman, and Iranun cultural expert Tuan Haji Masrin Haji Hassin. The participant observation method allowed the researcher to gain insights into the Iranun weaving process, including the selection of materials, the techniques used, and the context in which motifs are created. Special attention was given to the environment where weaving takes place, as well as the

behaviour and interactions of the artisans during the making process. These observations provided valuable data on the types of textiles and the motifs featured in them (Spradley, 1980). Detailed field notes were maintained to document these observations and served as a foundation for further analysis.

Visual analysis was employed to systematically document and analyse the motifs found in 3 samples of Iranun woven textiles. This involved photographing a wide range of textiles, followed by a detailed examination of the motifs' shapes, patterns, and arrangements. The visual analysis was conducted in two stages: first, a descriptive analysis to categorize the motifs by form and structure, and second, an interpretive analysis to explore the symbolism these motifs might convey (Rose, 2016).

To ascertain the deeper significance of Iranun woven textile motifs in with the application of semiotics, specifically that component of it which was developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's concepts serve as a frame for cultural understanding which textile motifs serve as signs which carry cultural and symbolic meanings among the Iranun society. More specifically, Saussure's theory of the signifier and signified is further employed to discuss how the elements of the motifs, also known as the signifiers, relate to the meanings depicted by the motifs, otherwise referred to as the signified.

Visual data collection involved two stages. The first stage consists of the gathering and interpretation of Iranun textile visual materials. This covers pictorial record, and analysis of the traditional Iranun weaving motifs. Specific areas include the two-dimensional designs (geometric design, and floral design) that depict the culture and physical environment of the Iranun religious activity. The patterns are distinguished and arranged according to their forms, commonness, and location on the textile. It is further established that the visual aspects of the commodities are signified, the paradigm ascribed to Saussure's view of signs. That means it is not inherent, the signifier (motif) has no direct relationship with the signified (cultural meaning) and vice versa for its success the usage of the sign must be viewed culturally (Chandler, 2017).

This second stage includes ethnographic fieldwork in the Iranun ethnolinguistic group in Kota Belud, Sabah Malaysia. Interviews were carried out with master weavers, Hajjah Pandian bte Sulaiman, Hajjah Arijah Saman and the late Tuan Haji Masrin Haji Hassin who was the Head of the Iranun community, to get their views on the motifs, the weaving and the cultural significance of the designs. The interviews were conducted with the intention of knowing what the symbols represent, how they are being taught to people and whether these concepts are changing with modernisation. This is part of the ethnography in Saussure's model, which stipulates that there must be descriptive data in the generation and comprehension of subjective signs (Geertz, 1973). The findings were then certified and confirmed by the respondents who are master weavers and expert in Iranun cultural heritage.

There are nine types of Iranun woven textiles collected as data for this study. They are *baraguru*, *dastar*, *mugah*, *selendang siambitan*, *siambitan*, *tapsila*, *tubau-a-siambitan*, *ampik* and *jali-jali*. However, only three samples will be shown here.

**Table 1: The types and functions of Iranun Woven Textiles.**

No.	Types of Woven Textiles	Source	Function of cloth
1.	 <i>Baraguru</i>	Muzium Kraf, Kompleks Kraftangan Jalan Conlay, Kuala Lumpur.	Sewn into garments and costumes.
2.	 <i>Dastar</i>	' <i>Warisan Iranun: Corak dan Ragam Hias Objek dan Budaya</i> ' by Ismail Ibrahim and	Used as headgear by men on special occasions and by the groom at a wedding ceremony.

			Humin Jusilin.	
3.		<i>Mugah</i>	Muzium Kraf, Kompleks Kraftangan Jalan Conlay, Kuala Lumpur.	Traditionally used as blankets and body coverings by both men and woman. Later be used to wrap around the waist as <i>samping</i> for men, sewn into garments for both men and women.
4.		<i>Selendang siambitan</i>	Hajjah Pandian Sulaiman	Used as head covering or worn over the shoulders by woman.
5.		<i>Siambitan</i>	Muzium Kraf, Kompleks Kraftangan Jalan Conlay, Kuala Lumpur.	Worn on special occasions as headgear and <i>samping</i> for men. It is the most complex Iranun weaving.
6.		<i>Tapsila/Tapk Sila</i>	Muzium Kraf, Kompleks Kraftangan Jalan Conlay, Kuala Lumpur.	Traditionally worn as blankets for both men and woman, body coverings and head coverings for women. Later, it is sewn into clothes for both men and woman, and <i>samping</i> for men. Today it is sewn to make costumes.
7.		Tubau-a-siambitan	Muzium Kraf, Kompleks Kraftangan Jalan Conlay, Kuala Lumpur.	Used as headgear and <i>samping</i> for men on special occasions and as wedding attire.
8.		Ampik	Hajjah Pandian Sulaiman	Traditionally worn as a <i>sarong</i> (a long piece of cloth in a tube-like structure covering the lower part of the body)
9.		Jali-jali	Hajjah Pandian Sulaiman	Used to be worn indoors daily as a headgear and is wrapped in such a way known as a <i>dimpau</i> . The name changes when the cloth is wrapped in a different style signifies that it is worn out of the house.

One of the main challenges faced during the research was gaining access to the deeper symbolic meanings of the motifs, as these are often considered sensitive cultural knowledge, particularly among older members of the community. Furthermore, the reserved nature of the Iranun people required the researcher to invest significant time in building relationships and trust before conducting interviews and obtaining detailed information. This limitation was mitigated by the extended duration of the fieldwork, which allowed for gradual engagement with the community (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

Overall, this methodology provided a holistic view of the motifs of Iranun textile weavings, allowing for an exploration of both the aesthetic qualities of the textiles and their deeper cultural significance.

### Semiotic Analysis

The visual data that have been gathered are understood from the perspective of Saussure's approaches, that is, dissecting the motifs into two components namely signifier the visual elements and signified the meaning they convey. In each motif, an attempt is made to decipher its connotative meanings considering the Iranun society. Rather, the analysis attempts to show the extent to which motifs represent broader cultural concepts such as the nature of the Iranun people, social organization and structure, and their spirituality.

Other ethnographic data collected from the interviews and participant observation are analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis seeks to put the motifs in relation to the meanings they hold in culture in terms of sight and values. Categories or themes such as “cultural identity,” “spiritual protection” or “social continuity” are used to illustrate how the Iranun people understand their woven motifs. The data obtained from the interviews are correlated with visual data of the motifs to achieve an accurate understanding of the meanings of the motifs within the society.

The study also employed the triangulation method to guarantee reliability and validity of the study which includes a combination of semiotic analysis with ethnographic data from various sources. This makes it possible to compare and validate results by the master weavers and cultural experts after using visual interpretation and contextual analysis of the motifs. In addition, a participant validation session was carried out where the results were relayed to the participants in their interpreted meaning to determine accuracy in the interpretation.

This study explains the motifs of the woven textiles of the Iranun by seeking answers about the hidden meanings of their semiotic theory as understood by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) as a visual language that represents the essence of the Iranun’s cultural identity. With the help of a semiotic approach and ethnographic field studies, the analysis provides a comprehensive interpretation of the motifs as symbols that relate to the nature, belief system, and social orientation of the Iranun. This method expands the knowledge of the scholarly community regarding traditional textile arts of the indigenous people and underscores the need to guard against losing such arts through modernity. The table below shows how Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiotics is used to find the symbolism behind motifs in Iranun woven textiles.

**Table 2: The Symbolism of Iranun Woven Textile Motifs Based on Three Samples.**

<b>SAMPLE ONE (1)</b>	
 <p><b>Figure 1</b> Ampik weaving. Photograph by the author, 2025.</p>	<p>Type of textile: <i>Ampik</i>                      Shape: Sewn into a woman’s blouse. Traditionally woven as a long rectangle cloth.                      Size: XS (Standard modern women’s dress sizing).                      Colours: Yellow, green, red.                      Weaving technique: Plain weave                      Function: A type of a woven fabric which is soft and is regularly used in making garments for blouses and sarongs. The <i>ampik</i> has a lighter weight in comparison to the <i>tapsila</i> hence can be used as day-to-day clothing. The motifs are more subtle with little detail and softer colours avoiding excess decoration owing to the more practical use of the fabric.</p>

Placement of Motif	
Signified	Signifier
 <p>i. Stripe (<i>jalur menegak</i>) Classification of motif: Geometric</p>	<p>Unidentified source of inspiration. This element is said to have been used as a secondary design element to create a pattern or divide areas on the cloth (Ismail, Humin, 2018). It encapsulates concepts of continuity, connection. Per.Com (Hajjah Pandian, 2011). The straight lines evoke concepts such as order, divine balance, and the axis of the cosmos or universe. The lines that are careful woven into geometric shapes are believed to reflect harmony parallel to the cosmos, as well as offer protection to the spirit of the wearer. The continuity signified by the line depicts the crusade of virtue while bridging the gap of the material to worship and spirituality. All forms of textile patterns with straight lines are often adorned during the rites of passage which include birth, marriage and even death. These lines are symbols which marks the journey of every single individual while facilitating the movement forward and continuity many times through other generations. Status is encapsulated by linear arrangements in woven fabrics as part of customary parades of grace and respect during formal events. Line motifs expressing the straight forms are as well context rich imagery presenting culture, society, and even philosophy. The intricate and rich patterns of the Iranun people form the foundation of history where every line acts as device embodying tales, genealogy, and heritage.</p>
 <p>viii. Bromeliad flower (<i>Tuarah</i>) Classification of motif: Floral</p>	<p>The <i>tuarah</i> flower, also known as <i>unga tuarah</i> is a type of bromeliad is a plant used as food source in traditional Iranun cooking (Ismail, Humin, 2018). It is described as an element to complete a setting, an occasion or an activity. Per.Com (Hajjah Pandian, 2011). When we think of an occasion it usually is complimented with a serving of food. This is suggestive of a celebration or festivities. It translates as joyfulness and happiness. The <i>unga tuarah</i> is considered a main motif in the <i>siambitan</i> weaving where this textile is worn only on special occasions such as weddings. This plant is a very hardy plant. It is known to survive very tough environments and weather conditions. It can be said that this unique plant is represented in textiles to symbolise strength, endurance and survival giving resilience to the wearer. The bromeliad plant is known to embody one's spiritual significance and protection. In Iranun culture, textiles with plant</p>

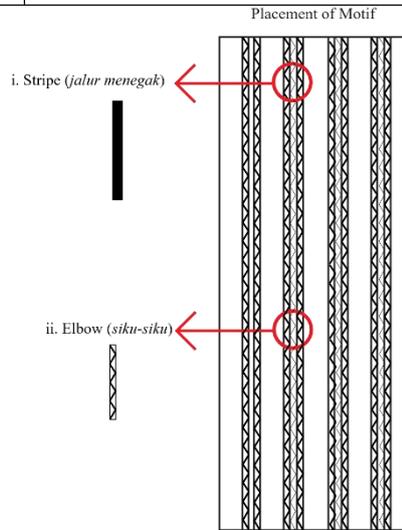
motifs are essential as they perform some form of specialized body work, also known as spiritual healing, needful to the universe. Motifs symbolizing protection, resilience, and strength encapsulated within the Iranun fabrics portray the values underlying the community. Attention on protective qualities and positive energy, along with ornamental Iranun textiles which do lots of good for people's positive spirit serves to prevent evil and provides a protective force toward ill fate.

**SAMPLE TWO (2)**



**Figure 2**  
Baraguru weaving. Photograph by the author, 2025.

Type of textile: *Baraguru*  
Shape: Traditionally woven as a long rectangle cloth.  
Size: 45 inches x 160 inches  
Colours: Red, yellow, white, black.  
Weaving technique: Plain weave  
Function: A cloth traditionally used as body coverings for both, men and women. For men, it is worn as a sarong and for women worn over the head and over the rest of the body showing only the face and parts of the legs and feet.



**Signified**



i. Stripe (jalur menegak)  
Classification of motif: Geometric

**Signifier**

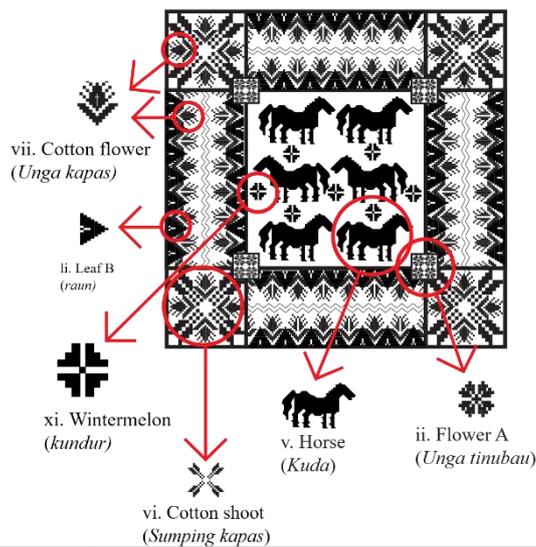
Unidentified source of inspiration. This element is said to have been used as a secondary design element to create a pattern or divide areas on the cloth (Ismail, Humin, 2018). It encapsulates concepts of continuity, connection. Per.Com (Hajjah Pandian, 2011). The straight lines evoke concepts such as order, divine balance, and the axis of the cosmos or universe. The lines that are careful woven into geometric shapes are believed to reflect harmony parallel to the cosmos, as well as offer protection to the spirit of the wearer. The continuity signified by the line depicts the crusade of virtue while bridging the gap of the material to worship and spirituality. All forms of textile patterns with straight lines are often adorned during the rites of passage which include birth, marriage and even death. These lines are symbols which marks the journey of every single individual while facilitating the movement forward and continuity many times through other generations. Status is encapsulated by linear arrangements in woven fabrics as part of customary parades of grace and respect during formal

	<p>events. Line motifs expressing the straight forms are as well context rich imagery presenting culture, society, and even philosophy. The intricate and rich patterns of the Iranun people form the foundation of history where every line acts as device embodying tales, genealogy, and heritage.</p>
 <p>ii. Elbow (<i>siku-siku</i>) Classification of motif: Geometric</p>	<p>It is quite unusual that the elbow or <i>siku</i> motif symbolizes status, wealth, fertility and growth (Ismail, Humin, 2018). However, the linear quality of lines moving upwards can depict something positive or better. This motif is usually used as part of the border design or as the alternate line quality that makes up a series of stripes. The S-shaped pattern resembling waves symbolizes the relentless willpower of a person's being, as well as self-improvement. The effortless continuation of the line represents value and relationships that transcend throughout time and are passed on between multiple generations. The motif greatly serves as a reminder of resilience and the lifelong effort to seek balance and peace. Metaphorically describing lines serve to represent voyage of life through cyclical means illustrating bond between every existence.</p>

**SAMPLE THREE (3)**

<p><b>Figure 3</b> Dastar weaving. <i>Photograph by the author, 2025.</i></p>	<p>Type of weaving: <i>Dastar</i> Shape: Square cloth Size: 45 inches x 45 inches Colours: Red, yellow, orange, green, white, black. Weaving technique: Plain weave with inlay Function: Used as headgear by men on special occasions and by the groom at a wedding ceremony.</p>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Placement of Motif



<p><b>Signified</b></p>	<p><b>Signifier</b></p>
	<p>The cotton flower or <i>unga kapas</i> is used as a complimentary design element which can be use on its own or to combine with other</p>

 <p>vii. Cotton flower (<i>Unga kapas</i>) Classification of motif: Flora</p>	<p>motifs and design elements). This motif is a prominent motif used to weave the <i>munsalah-a-siambitan</i>. Per.Com. (Hajjah Pandian, 2011). The cotton flower, or plant motif, denotes fertility and the continuation of life. As both a crop and a raw material fabric, it supports Iranun weaving traditions. The cotton flower motif is mostly associated with women’s creative power and domestic work which has been at the heart of global cloth production. Spinning and weaving cotton fibres goes beyond being functional and is rich with cultural meaning and rituals. Regarding post-modern rituals, the cotton flower symbol may be integrated in textiles as an emblem to invoke blessings, fertility, and uninterrupted continuity of the ancestral bloodline. The cotton flower motif serves as a symbolic representation of resilience and interconnectedness. Cotton plants yield abundantly and are flexible, qualities also found in the weaving communities that use it. It epitomizes agriculture, spirituality, and social identity.</p>
 <p>li. Leaf B (<i>raun</i>) Classification of motif: Leaf</p>	<p>The leaf is seen as a source of food and sustenance. Per.Com. (Hajjah Pandian, 2011). The leaf motif, usually stylized and exaggerated, strives to capture deeper thought or religion than mere decoration. Leaves embody symbols of life, growth and spiritual resurrection. Leaves serve superstitious functions and are used in rituals, said to repel negative energies and bring positive luck. The application of leaves on Iranun textiles also reveals deeper beliefs and practices. Motifs from nature such as leaves and flowers are abundant and show the community's agricultural heritage as well as the significance of nature in everyday life. The leaf motif features in ceremonial garments including wedding dresses and ritualistic cloths to express blessings, protection and the eternal continuum of life.</p>
 <p>v. Horse (<i>Kuda</i>) Classification of motif: Animal</p>	<p>The <i>kuda</i> motif is a commonly used in the <i>dastar</i> weaving. In the Iranun community, the horse is used in farming and as a mode of transportation. Today, a horse can be seen pulling the wedding love boat, also known in the Iranun language as <i>usungan</i>, which carries the groom from his house to the bride’s house. The horse as a beast can be seen as a symbol of strength, the carrier of burdens. The horse motif also suggests that the wearer be given strength in facing daily challenges. Since earlier times, horses possessed a certain pride that was generally associated with royalty and military commanders. Having horses enabled owning and flaunting great status thus showing class that owning horse designed fabric was associated with royalty. Fabrics with the image of the horse may have been ordered for use on a ceremonial day or for ostentatious display of power.</p>
 <p>vi. Cotton shoot (<i>Sumping kapas</i>) Classification of motif: Floral</p>	<p>The cotton flower or <i>unga kapas</i> is used as a complimentary design element which can be use on its own or to combine with other motifs and design elements. This motif is a prominent motif used in the <i>munsalah-a-siambitan</i> weaving. Per.Com. (Hajjah Pandian, 2011). The cotton shoot motif has been observed in relation to creation, fertility, and spiritual renewal. The cotton shoot's growth conveys the soul's advancement toward enlightenment and the constant cycle of life and death. Cotton shoot motifs are used in textiles which are issued during the passage rite of birth, marriage, and even death, which serve as new beginnings, symbolize joyful relationships, and are thus often seen in wedding garments,</p>

	<p>representing the merging of families. The cotton shoot also represents agricultural culture and nature admiration. Since cotton is a crucial crop, its representation in textiles highlights the dependence and regard that the community has towards nature. The motif functions as a protective charm, reputed to guarantee wealth and destruction, thus merging spirituality with everyday life.</p>
 <p>xi. Wintermelon (<i>kundur</i>) Classification of motif: Fruit</p>	<p>This symbol is a representation of the winter melon fruit (Ismail, Humin, 2018). It symbolizes sustenance in everyday life (Per. Com. Hajjah Pandian Bte Sulaiman, 2011). In the Malay world, motifs of fruit are considered an appreciation of nature's bounty and represent the farming culture which has influenced the region over many years. The Iranuns consider fruits as emblems of growth and wealth, and this explains their widespread use in fabrics meant for ceremonial dressing and casual wear. The fruits as the source of life are symbols of birth and life, of being one with nature, and as blessing to the people. The Quran describes paradise as a lush garden filled with fruits such as pomegranates, figs, and dates. These fruits symbolize eternal sustenance, divine blessings, and the spiritual rewards of a righteous life: <i>"In them [gardens] are fruits, date palms, and pomegranates."</i> (Quran 55:68). The Iranun community also use fruits to represent the same ideology.</p>

### Findings and Discussion

Iranun weaving culture is rich and diverse, with each detail serving a purpose. Motifs of lines, horse fruit structures, along with cotton shoots and leaves, are more than art; they project the community's ethos, history, and underlying beliefs. By applying Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which explains the relationship between a sign's form (*signifier*) and its meaning (*signified*) aid us in interpreting motifs to reveal what lies beneath the surface within the meaning of Iranun textiles. The linear and wave-like motifs in the Iranun textiles mark the continuity of life and the resilience of the community. These patterns are repetitive and flowing in nature, resembling the sea's waves, which are important to Iranun maritime culture. As signifiers, these motifs reflect the spirit of the Iranun people and their relationship with nature.

The bromeliad motifs of Iranun weaving symbolize protection and spiritual connection. These motifs, ranging from stylized to abstract, stand for the community's respect for nature and the protective powers some plants are believed to have. Weavers through these motifs articulate a culture deeply grounded in the belief of the interdependence between nature and the spirit world. The cotton shoot motifs are emblematic of the growth, fertility and prosperity. Used in the Iranun context, these motifs represent the community's agrarian roots and the socio-economic importance of cotton. These motifs mark prosperity and reflect the Iranun people's respect for the natural forces that provide for them.

Iranun textiles feature leaf motifs which are all rich in symbolism as they portray life, spiritual growth and even renewal. These designs are created based on local vegetation, which denote the relation of community with its surrounding and their faith in nature's healing ability. In religious and ceremonial contexts, the motifs of leaves emphasize purification as well as spiritual themes of enlightenment. The motifs of horses are powerful symbols marking strength, freedom and even nobility. In Iranun weaving these designs mark the community's historical dependence on horse transport and its relation to power and status. The horse placed on textiles also demonstrates the admiration of Iranun people for these animals who serve as living representations of the values the community cherishes.

The analysis of Iranun woven textile motif reveals their cultural, spiritual, and ecological dimensions, which these designs have, concerning them. These motifs, common among the people of Kota Belud, Sabah, bear a recognizable sense of association with the surrounding landscape, particularly with local vegetation, which is their everyday activity. Sometimes, flowers, leaves, and natural forms are also used in the motifs and are supposed to reflect cultural, and spiritual spheres and the outlook of the Iranun, who uses plants to mean reproduction, renewal, or nurture. This symbolism binds the aesthetic concepts of the Iranun to their environmental appreciation and their understanding of the cycle of nature that they regard as important for promotion of fertility, wealth as well as the well-being of the society.

The Iranun weavers take lots of inspiration from nature, but they abstract these elements into shapes rather than image. Squares, triangles and diamonds are examples of this abstraction where organic shapes are transformed into repetitive or symmetrical patterns. Such method is in line with the principles of Islamic art as there are no salient images of the living body in the pieces of art. Instead, geometric shapes pay homage to nature in a more artful and imaginative manner while signifying the embodiment of both life cycles and artistic aesthetics. In addition, these shapes have been adopted as metaphors to describe unity, diversity and balance of all animated beings whereby triangle is associated with energy and stability while diamond gets the meaning of favour and support.

Geometric shapes can be more than mere decorations; they are given social and spiritual meaning. Mountains may be represented by the triangle, which stands for spirituality and strength. A diamond pattern, on the other hand, denotes the protection of children or family riches. Such geometric forms have also had a spiritual aspect in the Iranun culture that practices Islam. Islamic patterns have deep meanings that express the concept of creation which is organized in a linear and endless space. It is through this faith that such textile designs fully become shields, enabling contact to the higher power together with the insight of peace within the person who wears it.

Like religion, the designs also serve as a marker of cultural groups, though, in most cases, the groups are within a specific family or the same land of an Iranun community. Each pattern represents a particular family, tracing back to what each textile speaks of. The design of these motifs and their interpretation and representation exist in the traditional form from families, that is, through practise which imparts beauty and culture. The process is accumulation of more cultural legacy thus making it more valuable by adding the significant of the history and culture of the Iranun.

The cultural values of humility, patience, and hard work are embodied in the plant motifs of Iranun textiles and are expected to help peace and balance in society. In a wider perspective, these qualities complement the broader Southeast Asian designs of textiles that are dedicated to promoting the ethos of the community as they possess such features as symmetrical patterns and repetitive symbols. Through these designs, the weavers are said to exemplify these qualities of discipline and hard work which is said to have been influenced by their desire to be able to acquire a blessing from Allah. The whole process of weaving in this case can be viewed from a spiritual perspective in that it is a form of ritual, and every pattern created, and the textile made is regarded as a source of hope for good health, prosperity, and safeguard.

The textiles are more than symbolic as they also provide a greater sense of strength especially during social and religious occasions for example during wedding ceremonies and funerals. Often in such practices, they help in enhancing one's body mobilization so that their mind is directed to the cause of the event. In such contexts, they are said to function as beacons of hope portraying togetherness even in moments of celebration and in times of difficulty. The weavings or Iranun textiles echoes with the ideas held in other indigenous societies where fabrics serve to motif, express creativity

and strengthen social relations. Through wearing such textiles, Iranun individuals can visualize and appreciate the blessings that are contained in the different symbols in the clothes, thus blending cultures with personal motivation. The weavers through such designs communicate the most important concerns of the person and the society for example the horse motif which is symbolic for strength and power.

The artistic meaning of the Iranun woven motifs goes beyond simple ornamentation. They are an expression of the love of culture for nature's unspoiled beauty for it provides love, protection and spirit like the *cotton shoot* motif which means appreciation of Allah's creation and a symbol of rebirth. By the looks of it, these motifs depict the Iranun world as creators of cultures and nations, woven them with their people and territories. This perspective view makes the textiles of Iranun to be categorically considered as containing both tangible and non-physical heritage and thus their conservation becomes necessary in a contemporary world. The study of motifs used for making textiles of the Iranun people exposes the depth of understanding and the cultural relevance of protecting such practices in the modern world. Textiles are not mere ornaments to be worn; they are the embodiment of the culture, defining the society's values and individual identities. The motifs of these textiles also serve to capture the identity of the community through strength, growth, and continuity, which are deeply rooted in the culture.

### Conclusion

The study shows that the embedded intricacies of Iranun weaving are important culturally, spiritually and aesthetically. They not only bridge ancient traditions but also preserve and transmit an Iranun ethnographic worldview thought. Every motif embodies an essential feature to Iranun life. For instance, the linear motifs indicate resilience, continuity, and the harmony with the sea, while the cotton shoot motifs represent renewal and agricultural prosperity. Horse motifs, on the other hand, connote social nobility, strength, and historical social standing. Signs and motifs such as leaves and flowers relate to life, renewal, and even spiritual protection. Such motifs are common in ritual textiles which suggests the use of nature in divinity which is sacred. These motifs are not empty patterns; they are part of a signifying system, as suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure's theory. Each design denotes certain signified ideas from natural circles to cosmological ideas, forming what is termed a symbolic language interpreted alongside the people in the society. Discussions with weavers confirm that such motifs are passed down from generation to generation, and each design comes with an accompanying narrative or lesson. This highlights the significance of weaving as an ever-evolving practice and storehouse of cultural heritage. As noted above, motifs on Iranun cloths are multidimensional weaves of spiritual values, cultural history, and aesthetic achievement. These motifs also underscore the importance of traditional weaving in the preservation of heritage in a globalized context. The study underscores the importance of ongoing research to document and interpret these motifs considering globalization and cultural shifts. Efforts to revive traditional weaving practices are crucial for preserving and transmitting Iranun art and knowledge to future generations. Focusing on the cultural and symbolic significance of Iranun woven textiles, future research and design practice needs to take two directions: one, the safeguarding of traditional weaving techniques, and two, the incorporation of traditional motifs into contemporary applications while safeguarding their meaning. This research contributes to broader discussions on indigenous art and cultural preservation, showing that Iranun textiles, like other Southeast Asian traditions, reflect the diversity of indigenous knowledge and its relevance in modern cultural preservation efforts. Advocating for sustainable preservation measures, this study emphasizes that protecting the Iranun weaving tradition means preserving both artistic and cultural practices vital to the community's heritage and identity.

## References

- Arba'iyah Abd Aziz, & Juita Jaafar Manap. (2022). *Motifs of Iranun Siambitan weaving in Sabah. Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, 7(21), 63–69. <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7i21.3675>
- Aziz, A., & Manap, J. J. (2022). *Motifs of Iranun Siambitan weaving in Sabah. Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, 7(21), 63–69.
- Bernard, H. R. (2011). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.). AltaMira Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Denzin, N. K. (2009). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Ismail Ibrahim, & Humin Jusilin. (2018). *Warisan Iranun: Corak dan ragam hias objek dan budaya*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Khoo, E. (2015). *Textiles in transition: Studies in Southeast Asian cloth traditions*. Routledge.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural anthropology* (C. Jacobson & B. G. Schoepf, Trans.). Basic Books.
- Mohamad, Z. (2018). Cultural heritage and craft: The role of traditional weaving in community identity. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24(1), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1347884>
- Ong, W. (2019). *Globalization and the future of Southeast Asian textiles*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Othman, H., & Baharuddin, S. (2017). The impact of modernization on indigenous weaving practices. *Textile Research Journal*, 87(6), 731–744. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040517515621081>
- Roff, W. (2021). *The fabric of tradition: Textile arts in Southeast Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Saussure, F. de. (1983). *Course in general linguistics* (R. Harris, Trans.). Open Court. (Original work published 1916)

Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires*. AltaMira Press.

Smith-Shank, D. (2004). Semiotics and visual culture: Sights, signs, and significance. *Studies in Art Education*, 45(2), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2004.11651768>

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

### **Fieldwork Data**

Hajjah Pandian Sulaiman. (Personal communication, 12 Mei 2025).

Hajjah Arijah Saman. (Personal communication, 13 Mei 2025).

Tuan Haji Masrin Haji Hassin. (Personal communication, 15 Mei 2025).