



A Case Study on Motifs and Ornaments of Orang Asli Craft Design (Batek's Tribe) in Kuala Lipis Pahang, Malaysia

Muhammad Faiz Sabri*, Suhaila Mohd Saleh & Mohd Khairezan Rahmat

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 42300 Bandar Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*E-mail: faizsabri@uim.edu.my

Abstract. Craft products are among the most intricate and unique artifacts produced by indigenous people in the Malay Peninsula. They have also become a major attraction for tourists to come and visit Malaysia. For hundreds of years, the indigenous people known as Orang Asli have extensively produced different art forms that reflect their philosophy and belief system. This study aimed to investigate in-depth the artistic expressions of craft motifs and ornaments produced by Orang Asli, specifically in Kuala Lipis Pahang, Malaysia. The objectives of this study were to determine the types of motifs in Orang Asli craftwork; to investigate the different elements of motifs that appear in Orang Asli craftwork; and to analyze the meaning embedded in selected motifs of Orang Asli craftwork. This study employed a case study approach through a series of interviews with experts, or traditional craftsmen, followed by observations as well as document analysis. This study highlights the beauty of traditional Orang Asli craftsmanship, which needs to be revisited and showcased in order to preserve their important culture and heritage for future generations.

Keywords: *Batek tribe; craft design; cultural heritage; Malaysia; motifs; Orang Asli; ornaments; traditional craftsmen.*

1 Introduction

The indigenous people known as Orang Asli in Malaysia are one the populations that have lived in the Malay peninsula for a very long time. This group of people has languages, a philosophy, and a belief system that are unique and serve them in their way of life. Orang Asli in the Malay Peninsula can be categorized into three main tribal groups, i.e., Semang (Negrito), Senoi, and Proto-Malay (Aboriginal Malay) [1]. These three groups share a similar philosophy of illustrating their culture through artistic expressions. This can be seen through the motifs and ornaments produced by these people, which reflect the philosophy behind their traditions. They also serve as symbols of their spiritual beliefs in most of their traditional crafts, such as wood carvings, weavings, ceramics, pottery, baskets, blankets, clothing, fabrics, leather goods, and pieces of jewelry [2].

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However, due to globalization, the artistic expressions on Orang Asli craftwork such as motifs and ornaments have somehow been neglected by the modern Malay society. As reported by the *Daily Express*, Orang Asli's arts and culture are hardly appreciated by modern society [3]. This may have had a significant impact on both the community and biodiversity of Orang Asli integrate into the present situation through their culture or lifestyle [4].

Although a lot of initiatives have been initiated by the Malaysian government to increase Orang Asli's privileges, the success and effectiveness of these efforts have yet to be determined. Besides, some of Orang Asli's places are now more accessible compared to before, but still, the level of understanding and appreciation towards this group of people is still lacking in Malay society. Therefore, to uplift the importance of enriching Orang Asli's artistic expressions in the form of craft motifs, this study was conducted to investigate the in-depth meaning and narrative of the ornaments, pattern, and symbols on selected Orang Asli craftwork.

Thus, it is hoped that the findings of this study can serve as a guideline for researchers, students, and Malay society, who are seeking the beauty and meaning of Orang Asli motifs and ornaments. This research will contribute to developing proper documentation and references for the Malaysian government and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture towards preserving the beauty of Orang Asli traditional culture for future generations.

To meet the research objectives, three research questions were proposed:

1. What are the types of motifs that are found on Orang Asli craftwork?
2. What are the elements of motifs that appear in Orang Asli craftwork?
3. What are the narratives that are represented in selected motifs on Orang Asli craftwork?

In order to achieve the aim of this research, the following objectives were outlined:

1. To determine the types of motifs on Orang Asli craftwork.
2. To investigate the elements of motifs that appear on Orang Asli craftwork.
3. To analyze the meaning embedded in selected motifs on Orang Asli craftwork.

2 Literature Review

In the Malay peninsula, there are three major ethnical groups of aboriginal people. According to data from the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), these ethnicities consist of Negrito (3.24%), Senoi (54.38%), and Proto-Malay (42.38%) [5]. These statistics show that the dominant ethnicities of Orang Asli in Malaysia are Senoi and Proto-Malay, with a huge difference in size compared to the Negrito. All these three ethnicities have their own philosophies and traditions.

Besides the culture and belief system that they uphold, one of the unique features of these traditions lies in their crafts. Craft production has become one of the tourist attractions that provide an opportunity to Orang Asli in the Malay peninsula to be self-employed. The effort of learning the skills unique to their craftsmanship is vital in order to earn an income and protect them from destitution [1]. The sales of these aboriginal crafts products can also uplift and promote their cultural heritage, thus contributing towards preserving their culture in modern Malaysian society.

The Batek are among the tribes of indigenous people in the Malay peninsula and are considered Negritos. According to Yunus et al., the Batek can also be referred to as *Bateg* or *Ngok*. They live in lowland forests in Kelantan, Pahang, and Terengganu. The Batek tribes in Pahang primarily dwell in Taman Negara, but they also reside in Sungai Tembeling, Sungai Kechau, Teluk Gunung. As the tribes dwell in the vicinity of forests, their craftsmanship and economy rely on the forest, underlining its significance for the Batek communities [6].

Historically, they refer to themselves as *Batek Hep*, ‘the people of the forest’, underlining the importance of their presence in continuing the existence of the forest [7]. Currently, one of the economic activities of the Batek is the enterprise of manufacturing crafts for selling to tourists who visit Batek tourism areas [8]. Cultural tourism related to settlements of indigenous people has become a popular attraction in various parts of the world [7]. In Malaysia, it provides an opportunity for the Batek people to interact with people who want to learn about their way of life and buy their handicrafts, mainly blowpipes and darts.

The Batek maintain a strong sense of cultural continuity by seeing their past in the present, retelling stories encapsulated in their crafts as a way to remember past events [8]. Yunus et al. (2014) describe the innovation of Batek craftsmanship into four types: invention, extension, duplication, and synthesis. However, the underlying cultural continuity is preserved by utilizing traditional animal motifs, such as chickens, lizards, and butterflies, as well as plant motifs of coconut trees and ferns [6]. Skills and arts within the Batek tradition are preserved through knowledge transfer, whereby a teacher/mentor moves through

the forest, delivering his own knowledge of the flora, fauna, and landscape based on the path they take, hence the inter-relationship between location and knowledge.

A snake-like motif in Batek art, possibly representing a river, previously investigated by Nurul Fatanah in 2010, can no longer be found due to the possible death of the original carver or changes in the art of the current generation [9]. Based on limited studies regarding the elements in Batek decorative art, flora and fauna are the main motifs used through the process of imitating nature [6, 8, 9].

The study by Abd Halim et al. discusses the existence of mathematical influences in Batek decorative arts, e.g., Fibonacci numbers, sequential patterns, and the golden ratio, which subsequently direct attention to the natural surroundings, as they imitate nature and are applied in a sophisticated manner in their crafts [9]. Such refined patterns and motifs also show the accuracy with which Batek craftsmen exercise their craft, which further raises the cultural value of the craft products. Details in Batek craftwork such as patterns on dart cases have been documented and described, showing representations of trees or sprouts [9]. Meanwhile, images depicted on Batek craftwork not only represent plants that the craftsmen find when moving through the forest but also narratives that retell the past. Each craft contains a non-identical pattern that is unique in terms of geometrical and linear patterns of great precision.

Speaking of the uniqueness and visibility of Orang Asli crafts, the government has embarked on several inclusive development programs in an effort to develop and preserve the rights of the Orang Asli community since Malaysia's independence in 1957. These developments can be seen through many initiatives that have been initiated by the Malaysian government to increase Orang Asli's privileges and support their values. Against this background, the present study is an effort to improve their living standard, which is set to determine the cultural values of Orang Asli's artistic expressions, specifically motifs and ornaments in craft products.

A more in-depth study needs to be done, as they vary and may be different within different contexts and situations. Thus, it is hoped that the findings from the present study will provide a clearer picture of the beauty and meaning of Orang Asli's motifs and ornaments, and hence contribute to the abovementioned efforts of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture by forming a guide and a reference towards establishing improved quality of life and equity for Orang Asli communities.

3 Methodology

This research was designed based on a qualitative research methodology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomena. Hence, the case study method was employed, which involves a process of acquiring information through field observation, document analysis, and interviews. Creswell defines a case study as a researcher exploring in-depth a program, event, activity, process, of one or more individuals [10].

This method is suitable to be used either by referring to a single case or cases bounded by time and place. The data collection that is collected for a case study in general comes from several sources, including site visits or direct participant observations, interviews, archival records or documents, physical artifacts, and audio-visual materials. This method usually lets the researcher spend time on-site to observe the study material that is required for completing the research. The study report includes lessons learned or patterns found that connect with theories. In relation to the present research, a number of craftsmen from the Batek Tribe in Kuala Lipis Pahang were interviewed and pictures were taken on-site, specifically regarding motifs that appear on some of their craft products.

In terms of analyzing the motifs, this research employed the theory of iconology by Erwin Panofsky to obtain an in-depth visual content analysis. The analysis was performed according to Panofsky's three steps of iconological analysis: description of the visual image; analysis based on symbolic and conventional interpretation; and analysis based on cultural interrelations [11]. The population of this study were Malaysian Orang Asli from one of Negrito tribes known as 'Batek', who are located in Kuala Lipis Pahang, Malaysia.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Decorative Carved Crafts

Documentation of crafts produced by one of the craftsmen of Orang Asli Batek in Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis, Pahang was conducted on 29 November 2023, as shown in Figure 1. It shows the unique carvings on blowpipes and dart cases, which are well decorated with patterns of geometric shapes, featuring horizontal and vertical symmetry. The Batek traditionally use blowpipes and dart cases as hunter gear. Many of the images depicted on them are based on the landscape, flora, and fauna that they come across within the rainforest while hunting.

Figure 2 shows the patterns carved on the dart case, which also contains rattan webbing on the top part. The pattern is symmetrical in a horizontal composition, with rope-like images as emphasis. The pattern above is more complex but shorter

in height compared to the pattern on the bottom part, which is much wider vertically. A shape that is repeated consists of a triangle and vertical lines with occasional horizontal lines in the positive space.



Figure 1 Blowpipes designed by Orang Asli craftsman in Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis Pahang (2023).

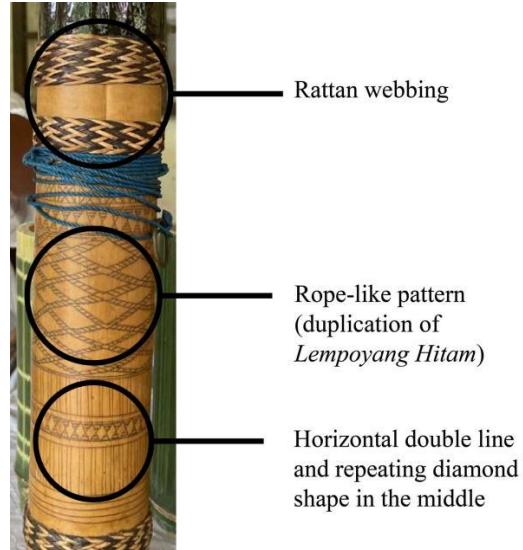


Figure 2 Motifs on the blowpipe.

Specifically, the sequential patterns and symmetrical elements on the blowpipe are taken from the Lempoyang flower, as shown in Figure 3. The patterns and shapes of plants are often present as motifs in Batek Hep decorative craftwork [6]. The repetitive lines create a rhythm, which presents a path for the viewer's eyes to follow from left to right and vice versa. As shown in Figure 2, the pattern of the rattan webbing at the top and bottom is similar to the pattern that typically exists on rattan craft products, which is created through a natural dyeing process similar to that used by the Temiar people in rattan crafts, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 3 Flower of *Lempoyang Hitam* [12].



Figure 4 Wristband produced by Temiar people, picture taken by Mariam [13].

Other than horizontal lines, the dart case also shows vertical double lines that appear to represent trees. Moreover, the horizontal lines drawn inside the

triangular shape that is carved in a mirrored composition suggest a visual representation of the profile of the highland rainforest, where the base is much bigger than the top. Furthermore, the triangles being vertically mirrored creates a balance and thus symbolize the principle of unity.

As the Batek tribe resides in the vicinity of the forest, the representation of the local flora is synthesized into simplified lines and shapes on the Batek craft products. Thus they show their present way of life and retell their past, surrounded by the flora existing in Malaysian forests.



Figure 5 Decorated wooden craft designed by Orang Asli craftsmen in Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis Pahang (2023).

Figure 5 shows a geometric pattern that is vertically symmetrical, arranged through an assortment of triangular shapes as a decorative motif, along with horizontal, jagged, and dotted lines. The shapes are also arranged vertically, mirrored with two dots as the center point. Triangular shapes are majorly visible on Batek craft products, representing the landscape of the highland rainforest. The replication is simplified into a geometric sequence, which is repeated above and below the focal point. The lines mostly are not smooth but rather jagged ones, as shown in detail in Figure 6 below. Smooth, straight lines are only carved in a few areas. This shows that the jagged lines have a symbolic meaning of movement, as they go from left to right and vice versa. The interplay between lines and shapes also represents a narrative told by the carver, engraving a remembrance of the past on present-day craftwork.

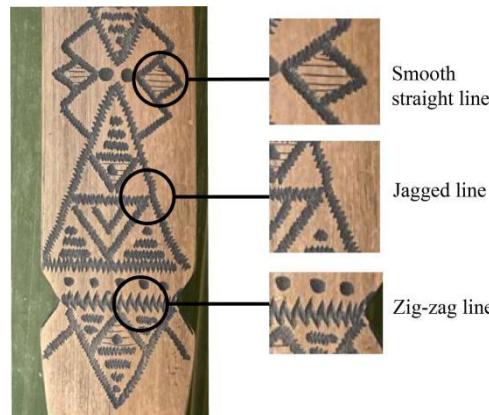


Figure 6 Jagged lines carved on the decorative wooden craftwork.

The choice of subject for the motifs shows the perspective of the Batek. As they live in the vicinity of lowland forestry, their surrounding view consists of mountains, specifically the Titiwangsa mountainous region. The patterns and narrative of the motifs are similar to those on the bamboo dart case in Figure 7 and the blowpipes in Figure 11.



Figure 7 Bamboo dart case designed by Orang Asli craftsmen in Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis Pahang (2023).

The bamboo dart case shown in Figures 7 and 8 has similar patterns, where symmetrical and geometric patterns appear in different styles. In the bamboo case, the carved pattern is symmetrical in a horizontal sequence through an assortment of triangular shapes, dots, and lines. However, there is no center point as the emphasis; rather, the pattern exists in a continuous style, suggesting an infinite movement of a never-ending sequence. The triangles and dotted patterns represent the rainforest landscape. The triangular shapes were created using

jagged lines instead of smooth ones. This suggested a moving sequence like the movement of water flowing or the current of a river. The river contains rigorous waves that differ from the ocean; the path is winding and the surface is filled with big and small stones, hence, it is jagged, much like the pattern. Finally, the dotted line provides a contrast, but is balanced with its counterpart, similar to the elements in the forest, in which all kinds of shapes exist together in harmony.

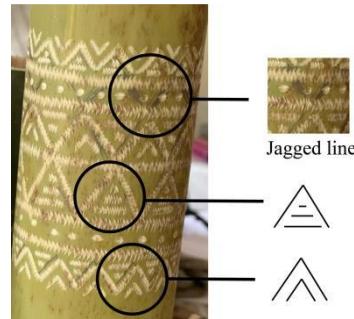


Figure 8 Details of the pattern of the bamboo dart case.

The imitation can first be seen in triangular shapes enclosed by three or two lines, showing a replication of the highland elevation. However, it could also suggest a simplified version of plant motifs, where the carvings are derived from the shapes of plants that exist in the vicinity of the Titiwangsa range in Taman Negara. According to Haron et al. in 2014, the use of plant motifs is common to indigenous tribes, as they live near forests or rivers [14]. Moreover, triangular motifs are present on historical artifacts found in Kelang in 1964, which the researcher interpreted to be *pucuk rebung* or bamboo shoots, shown in Figure 9.

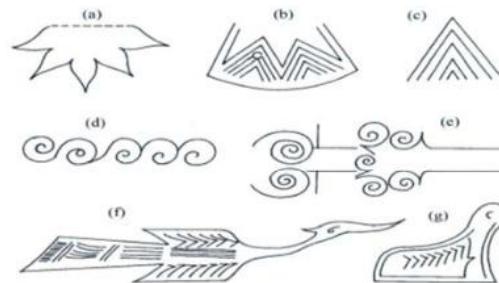


Figure 9 Motif found on Dong-son decoration [14].

The triangular motifs (b) and (c) are respectively interpreted as star and *pucuk rebung*, and *pucuk rebung/cone* [14]. Furthermore, it can be seen that the patterns created by the Batek people are quite different from those of other indigenous tribes in Malaysia. For example, the decorations on cultural artifacts of the Dayak tribe are based more on organic patterns interlaced with geometric patterns

compared to Batek motifs, which are significantly more often dominated by geometric shapes. The difference can be seen in Figure 10 below.



Figure 10 Bamboo dart case originates from Borneo [15].



Figure 11 Blowpipes.

Figure 11 shows a similar geometric pattern of triangles, jagged lines, horizontal lines, and dots as in Figure 7. The carved pattern here is presented as a block repeated horizontally and the same pattern is replicated on a smaller scale on the bottom area of the blowpipe. The pattern starts with a dotted line followed by a jagged line and a triangle, then a vertical line, and ends with a jagged line. The block pattern suggests a landscape in the rainforest, where the dots represent the clouds in the sky, while the triangles represent the highland and the vertical lines are trees. The pattern encloses the landscape with lines horizontally across,

suggesting the lowland or solid ground. The overall pattern imbues the principle of unity, as it comes together as one whole scenery.

The decorative patterns on the blowpipe in Figure 11 show the patience and harmony of the carver. The continuous lines give out a sense of coherence, as they suggest a never-ending narrative continued from one point to another with no definite end. This effect fosters the idea of connection through the process of obtaining and producing the craftwork. In an interview with the craftsman, he described the motif as a way of connecting Batek culture with outsiders, people who are not familiar with their crafts. The motif creates a question about the pattern and can be a conversation starter between the carver and the viewer, as the interviewee stated in the interview session: “*...It teaches us about unity when someone asks, ‘What is that?’ or, the brother will say ‘What is it?’ Well, he started to open his mouth. When we currently do it, this thing creates attention...*”

Moreover, the motif that can be observed is exquisite and the details of the pattern are similar in scale, showing the carver’s high carving skills and patience in achieving perfect and similar shapes. The motif is filled with simple shapes, but the narrative will not be successfully understood if the composition is askew. As the interviewee stated: “*...It tests our patience... In one corner, I encourage the children, so that they are steady, they learn it. Some will get it in one day, while others get it in two or three days...*” Yunus et al. in 2014 found that Batek crafts are based on movement, where the master craftsman will move through the forest in order to pass their knowledge and skills to other *Batek Hep*. Patience and hard work are the keys to unlocking the decorative style and motif in their crafts [6].

4.2 The Webbing Crafts

Plants such as rattan or aromatic woods are among the main supplies of commercial extraction of forest products [16]. These types of plants can be seen depicted on functional and decorative objects such as baskets and storage cases. The motifs on the craftwork include Bunga Melur, Destar Siga, and geometrical patterns. Figure 12 shows a rattan basket with a handle that is made with a soft plant fiber. The repetitive motif creates a continuous pattern through interwoven plant fibers. The basket in this figure is utilized by the Batek when they collect forest products such as wood or fruits, hence it was woven to provide airflow and protect the collected items from spoiling due to the influence of the environment. The interwoven pattern is created by one slanted line going across another, subsequently producing a honeycomb hexagon with a singular color. The basketry serves a purpose similar to Temiar’s *raga alas*. Based on the research conducted by Mariam et al. in 2024, Figure 13 shows that the weaving patterns on Temiar’s *raga alas* are quite similar, as well as their functional value, which is to store food products or to carry forest products [13].



Figure 12 Basket with handle designed by Orang Asli craftsmen found in Muzium Kesenian Orang Asli, Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis Pahang (2023).



Figure 13 Temiar's *raga alas* made from rattan [13].

Contrasting with a basket in Figure 12, Figure 14 shows a tightly woven tray with no negative space. It shows that the craft is meant to keep things inside and reduce the risk of dropping the stored items. The trays are woven in a horizontal and vertical direction with two contrasting colors. The horizontal lines are made with a lighter color in contrast with the darker color of the vertical lines, hence creating equal sides of two sizes of square geometrical shapes. The elevated sides of the tray are tightly woven fiber to lock the design in place in spite of the absence of glue or other modern aids. The use of two colors, black and white, creates a contrast yet balancing out the symmetrical pattern. It is visually consistent, thus reducing the cognitive load on viewers as they see a simple pattern with no complex shapes. Moreover, the motif suggests a unity of two counterparts that are enclosed in a tightly bound relationship, a recurring theme that can be observed in every motif in Batek crafts.



Figure 14 Woven tray designed by Orang Asli craftsmen found in Muzium Kesenian Orang Asli, Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis Pahang (2023).



Figure 15 Woven basket designed by Orang Asli craftsmen found in Muzium Kesenian Orang Asli, Sungai Koyan, Kuala Lipis Pahang (2023).

Similar webbing techniques can be seen in the woven basket shown in Figure 15. However, instead of two separate directions of color, this basket consists of a mix of three colors in similar directions over and under one another. In other words, in one single line, three colors of plant fibers are woven together. The choice of color plays a significant role, as it shows a harmonious blend of color and design. Apart from the colors balancing out in terms of tone, the design consists of symmetrical positive and negative spaces, each contributing a unique design to create a basket that is a work of art and functional.

Batek people have innovated their crafts based on their forest environment, as each of the motifs created is according to stories and techniques that have been passed down from generation to generation. Traditional crafts that connect with cultural heritage will bring in much more interest from outsiders who have the opportunity to be exposed to the tribe's crafts [17]. Moreover, Ariffin has stated that traditional crafts have the potential of generating income for the youth, as they can receive support from government agencies in the form of financial assistance, programs, and exhibitions [17]. Wide marketing is readily available through technology, as buyers are not limited to physical walk-ins but also come from online platforms. Orang Asli Batek, who have an extremely hospitable nature, certainly view tourists as beneficial and ecotourism for the Batek have been receiving support from the local government since 1984, when Taman Negara Pahang was designated an ASEAN Heritage Park [18]. This potential is not only good for economic development but is also a way to preserve Batek cultural history. The Batek people have long embraced ecotourism and have a deep history with tourism related to Tembeling River. The tribe itself has widely accepted tourism as a source of additional income [19].

5 Conclusion

One of the significant targets of studying and understanding each motif and ornament of Orang Asli craft is to be able to preserve and uphold the arts and its culture in Malaysia. This study was conducted as an effort to increase the level of awareness among Malay society, especially the younger generations, to get to know about the uniqueness of Orang Asli's craft in Malaysia. This is because this particular area of research is rarely visible, which may unite and enhance the dignity of the nation's art and may also further the development of arts and crafts in Malaysia. The former Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Datuk Mohamaddin Ketapi, said at the 8th World Summit on Arts and Culture 2019, that Malaysia would always make every effort to bring the nation in the eyes of not only Asia but the whole world. The government of Malaysia, through *306 Bernama* (March 2019), recognizes that art and culture not only could contribute towards constructing the individual's capabilities but also enhances unity and increases the quality of life through the involvement of all groups in artistic and cultural activities. The findings of this study can be used to support efforts in promoting, educating, and preserving the unique arts and crafts of the Orang Asli and their culture, not only in Malaysia but throughout the world.

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