

Welyne Jeffrey Jehom

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya

Iban women weavers weaving dream designs: A journey from sacred to commercialisation

This paper argues that the product of intangible cultural heritage dies out so quickly because of poor marketing experienced by artisans and by “cultural heritage” products that do not sound “contemporary”. Pua kumbu, an Iban traditional hand woven ikat textile in Sarawak, is facing such challenges. It is very hard to put a price and value on a piece of newly-woven pua kumbu in comparison to older pieces partly due to factors such as production, ownership, rights and sale of the textile. Pua kumbu has been marketed at prices that arguably does not take into consideration the value of the age of these pieces, the natural dyes used, the region of origin, the designs as well as the personal skill of the weavers themselves.

Older pua kumbu pieces are sold at higher prices even if the workmanship is not as good as newly-woven pieces, which are skilfully made. Standard prices are given to natural-dyed pieces without taking into consideration the type of dyes used, scarcity of the raw materials and labour productivity. If the pua kumbu were to be valued according to folklores or narratives and rhymes that explain each piece, weavers’ skills and knowledge, complexities of the motifs and the type of natural dye used, then every piece should be priced differently.

The pua kumbu has acquired international mobility as weavers travel through international textile art exhibitions and conferences. These Iban weavers help promote pua kumbu as they display and even demonstrate the weaving work involved in creating a pua kumbu piece. It is possible that these weavers are not aware that their involvement in these international events indirectly contributes to a re-valuation of the pua kumbu in the international textile market.

The questions to ask are: how much do the women weavers benefit from all these promotions of their great passions? How much of their indigenous knowledge being marketed brings about their community progress? And most importantly, how much of the promotions sustain the weaving traditions, thus determining the survival of this so-called intangible cultural heritage?