



Brunei Culture through its Textile Weaving Tradition



Siti Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah*

[*Abstract*]

Brunei Darussalam is a Malay Islamic Monarchy practicing and upholding traditional heritage. Brunei Darussalam is rich with tangible and intangible cultural heritage shaped by its way of life. One of the traditions maintained and preserved in the country is traditional textile weaving. The tradition covers both consumption and production. In the context of consumption, traditional textiles have multiple roles and symbolic meanings. In the context of production, the tradition showcases great skills and the distinctive cultural, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional values of the people of Brunei. This paper will explicate the distinctive values and characteristics of Brunei people from the practices of textile weaving.

Keywords: Traditional Textiles, consumption, production, identity, social values

* Professor, Universiti Brunei Darusslam. norkhalbi.wahsalfelah@ubd.edu.bn.

I . Introduction

Brunei Darussalam is a Malay Islamic Monarchy practicing and upholding -traditional heritage. Brunei Darussalam is rich with tangible and intangible heritage shaped by its way of life. One of the traditions that Bruneians maintained and preserved is traditional weaving. Traditional textile is one practice of material culture that people of Brunei are proud of. Material culture is defined manifestations of culture through material productions. Material culture can be used to understand culture, and discover beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time. The underlying premise is that human made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belong (Prown 1993: 1).

In Brunei Darussalam, there has been much emphasis on the sustainability and continuity of material cultures, especially on traditional textiles. In the context of consumption, traditional textiles have played multiple roles and symbolic meanings. In the context of production, the tradition showcases great skills and the distinctive characteristics of Brunei culture. In addition, the production and consumption of traditional textiles are also seen as important initiatives to generate economy and express identity (Siti Norkhalbi 2007). This paper will discuss the consumption and production of traditional textiles as reflective of the identity and characteristics of Brunei culture.

II . Historical Background

Evidence indicates that weaving has been existing in Brunei since the ninth century (Pengiran Karim 2000). This is according to artifacts derived from archaeological excavations in Kota Batu led by Tom Harrison in 1952-1953, where different parts of weaving implements have been found. Radiocarbon dating indicates that the implements may be dated to 800-850 AD (Pengiran Karim 2000).

Early accounts on the consumption of traditional textiles were noted by foreign travellers. Chau Jua Kua, the Chinese traveller who visited Brunei in 1225, noted that women from rich families wore sarongs of brocade and silk (Mohammed Jamil 2000). It was also noted that a Brunei envoy paid homage to Chinese Emperor Yung Lo (1402-24) and brought native products, including cloths (Mohammed Jamil 2000).

When Pigafetta visited Brunei in 1521, he was impressed by the imposing splendor and ceremonial order of the courts. He noted that the dignitaries wore traditional woven cloths. Palace men had worn clothes of gold and silk to cover their privates. They also carried daggers with gold hafts adorned with pearls and precious gems, and worn many rings (Nicholl 1975). However there was no mention of the color and motifs of the clothing. Pigafetta also noted that traditional textiles were used as curtains in the halls of the palace. Textiles were also used as gifts to foreign guests and were seen as a significant factor in establishing and strengthening relationships between two parties (Siti Norkhalbi 2007). Andaya (1992: 411) asserts that such display of affluence was a major reinforcement on the claims made about the Brunei ruler as the region's overlord.

In the genealogy of Brunei rulers recorded by Datu Imam Aminuddin during the coronation ceremony of Sultan Muhammad Jamalul 'Alam in 1919, the Pengiran Bendahara (one of the viziers) wore a white suit, including a white jong sarat *sinjang*, whereas the Pengiran Shahbandar (one of the *Cheteria*) wore a black jong sarat *sinjang* (Sweeney 1998: 124).

III. Textiles and Identity

In the book, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue for the need to see "goods as an information system"; goods are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture. They stress that such an approach emphasizes the double role of goods: providing subsistence and drawing lines of social relationships. To my mind, textiles in

Brunei have been consumed according to cultural categories which respond to cultural logics (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Such textiles are being utilized in different spaces and rituals to show how society is structured around certain restrictions in order to maintain their value and enhance the rank of the people who control them. Textiles are used to distinguish social and political status. Types, patterns, designs, motifs, and colors of textiles are used as markers of status. At the royal court, there are specific codes of conduct. Forms of dressing are prescribed according to the status of the people in attendance. Only people of certain social and political affiliation are allowed to wear specific colors and designs of traditional woven textiles. Such codes of conduct and dress reflect the social and political structure of Brunei society.

IV. The Process of Identification

In exploring the consumption and production of traditional textiles, it is necessary to consider the elements of identity in Brunei Darussalam: religion and ethnicity, social stratification, and social values and virtues. According to Abdul Latif (2001), the construction of social identity in Brunei Darussalam is governed by several characteristics, all of which are inter-related. First, social identity is influenced by religion. Islam is the official state religion, although other faiths are allowed to be practiced as well. The Muslims in Brunei Darussalam are mostly from the Brunei, Kedayan, and Tutong ethnic groups, and the majority of the Belait have converted to Islam as well. Substantial numbers of Dusun and Bisaya have also converted to Islam. Many of them continue to practice traditional beliefs (pagan) while some converted to Christianity. The majority of Murut have become Christian, although there are also small numbers who have converted to Islam. Since Islam is the official religion of the state, its adherents are positioned at a higher status than followers of other religions. Adherence to Islam is one of the criteria to be the Sultan, and the Prime Minister in Brunei Darussalam must be a Sunni Muslim of the Shafi'i school of thought.

The other significant element in the construction of identity in Brunei Darussalam is ethnicity. The Brunei Constitution constitutes seven ethnic (*puak*) groups - Brunei, Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut, and Tutong, which are also classified into one category, Malay. These groups are also known as *puak jati* (genuine ethnic groups of Brunei Darussalam). However, among these, *puak Brunei* is the predominant ethnic group and has higher social and political status. The Sultan belongs to this group, as do most of the state's dignitaries, traditional and modern. While other ethnic groups are politically peripheral, some members of these groups are conferred with titles by the Sultan and designated to be representatives of their ethnic group. Such conferment therefore grants them a higher status socially and politically.

Different kinds of textiles may indicate affiliation to certain ethnic groups, although it is not known whether this role is age-old or recent-the consequence of a nineteenth and twentieth century explosion of design possibilities associated with the availability of industrial yarn and dyestuff, and of modern political strategies to manipulate ethnicity (Schneider 1987: 413). The production of traditional textiles is predominantly the work of women from the *puak* Brunei. Although other Malay ethnic groups also consume traditional textiles, their use of these cloths is not as prominent as it is among the *puak* Brunei.

Social identity is also constructed through social stratification and status. Social stratification and status can be expressed, and are especially manifested in royal customs, such as the system of titles conferment, clothing, royal gifts, and regalia, as well as the seating arrangement in the royal court. Social stratification in Brunei Darussalam is pyramidal, with the Sultan at the top followed by high ranking nobles. High ranking non-noble officials and their descendants make up the middle ranks followed by low ranking non-noble officials, including non-Muslim Malay representatives of their local communities. The lowest rank is the commoner, comprising of ordinary citizens and residents of Brunei Darussalam. The skill of weaving is associated with women of high, non-noble status (Zaini 1960, in Brown 1974: 58). Furthermore, the privilege of wearing traditional cloths at certain occasions was granted only to

members of the higher social classes.

Education has provided an avenue for social mobility in recent years, especially among the commoners. Education has thus become one of the elements in status construction. Knowledgeable and well-educated people are not only respected, but usually also have high positions within the society, such as in government administration and in the traditional and modern political systems. Holding high positions in either the traditional or modern political systems also grants officials the right to be invited to certain functions, such as events in the royal court; there they are privileged to wear ceremonial dresses of traditional cloths signifying their position in the hierarchy.

Brunei identity is not limited to religious, ethnic, social, political, and educational status. It also includes *nilai jatidiri* or the “essence of character,” a model of ethno-personality grounded in values and virtues which are drawn from a notion of culture based on wisdom and knowledge (Wan Zawawi 2003). Such character traits include loyalty, unity, cooperation, and solidarity, courtesy, politeness, honor, and respectfulness. This notion of a Malay “essence of character” has been perceived as a significant attribute of Brunei society (Hashim 1999).

V. Traditional Textiles and reflection of Religious Identity

Religion, as a system of ultimate beliefs and cosmologically grounded practices, plays a great role in all cultures (Layton 1981). In the west coast of Borneo, Brunei was recorded as being one of the earliest centers of Islam in Southeast Asia (Maxwell 1990: 299). Islamic teaching had a great impact on the community. It has continued to exercise the strongest cultural influence; the strength of Islamic beliefs and the degree to which Islamic religious practices have absorbed older customs and traditions are clearly evident.

Most of the traditional textile weavers are Muslims. In addition, such textiles are mainly utilized by Muslims, although they are also consumed by non-Muslims. Geometrical and floral shapes,

as well as environments, have characterized traditional textile pattern and designs. Furthermore, plaids and striped designs are also widely used. As a later development, the use of the Roman alphabet and Arabic calligraphy have been adopted exclusively for gifts and decorative items. The adaptation of animal and human figures is not common, especially among Muslim weavers and designers, as Islamic teaching does not permit the employment of animal and human figures in the creation of art. This indicates that Islamic teaching has had a significant impact upon the creators of the traditional textiles, reflecting their religious belief.

Islamic principles have always played an important role in influencing motifs among Muslim artists to beautify, since this conforms with Islamic teaching and is strengthened and supported by the saying of the Prophet, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty” (Burckhardt 1967: 161). Within the spiritual universe of Islam, symbolism is a dimension that is used as a catalyst for contemplation directed towards the presence of Allah and the unity of the universe (Mohammed Sharif 2001).

In the early times, the animal motifs in crafts were seen in Brunei. However, once the Islamic influence became stronger, motifs that portrayed animals were abandoned among the Muslim craftsmen. Islam has had a strong influence on the imagery and production, not only in traditional textiles, but generally in Brunei’s arts and architecture. The concept of art in Islam encourages the expression of beautiful visuals, but must be bound by the fundamental faith system of Islam based on the belief that “There is no Divinity other than Allah” (Mohammed Sharif 2001). Islam forbids creation resembling human beings and animals in its visual art. The prohibition of such images in Islam is based on the principle that it could lead to idolatry. However, designers still use animals as inspiration for motifs. They take some part of the animal’s body such as wings and scales of the animal and adaptation of their shape. As long as the motif does not display the exact figure of the animal, it may be tolerated. The designer may also modify the motif to conform to Islamic values. Examples of animal motifs that have been adapted in weaving motifs are *sisik tenggiling* (the scale of scaly ant-eater) and *siku keluang* (the wing

of the flying-fox).

Although Islam forbids the use of human and animal images in the creation of arts, floral and geometric motifs are acceptable. Connors (1996: 25) suggests that geometric designs, such as the hook and rhomb, were ascribed to the Dong Son culture. The patterns used in Brunei are also widely used by other Malay peoples in the region, and many of these may also be traced to Dong Son culture. However, there are also some instances where patterns were adopted from Moslem sources. Although it can be argued that the continued use of such patterns was inspired by Dong Son culture, the prohibition on the use of human and animal images in the Islamic faith to a certain extent promoted the widespread and enduring use of geometric and floral motifs which conform to the religion's aesthetic requirement (Morrell 1997). The use of these motifs is a visual analogy to the religious rules of behavior by Muslims.

Flowers and fruits, such as *teratai* (lotus or water lily), *bunga matahari* (sun flowers), *bunga melur* (jasmine), *bunga keramunting* (rose myrtle), and fruits, such as *buah manggis* (mangosteen), *buah nonah* (custard-apple), and *buah pedada* (fruits of seaside tree, sp. *sonneratia acida*), are popular motifs that have been incorporated into weaving designs. Motifs inspired by parts of fruits or flowers, such as the stalk, seed, skin, and calyx are also used (Siti Norkhalbi 1999). Motifs such as the *biji buah timun* (cucumber's seeds), *seri kelapa* (coconut's shoot), *tampok manggis* (a stalk of mangosteen), among others, are also utilized. The *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) motif, inspired by the triangular-shaped shoot of a giant bamboo, is commonly used to decorate the center of woven cloth. This motif is also commonly found in fabrics produced in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

The use of vegetal ornaments or arabesques, which are characterized by a continuous stem that splits regularly, producing a series of counterpoised, leafy, secondary stems that in turn split or return to be reintegrated into the main stem, are commonly used in designing the borders of the traditional cloths. The arabesque has two basic elements, the interlacement derivative of geometrical and

plant motifs, which represent a graphic formulation of rhythm, expressed in spiraloid designs. According to my informants, the motifs are believed to be inspired by both the plants and waves of the sea or river. Specific names are given to motifs depending on their composition. An example of vegetal arabesque is the vine-like (*daun menjalar*) motifs of interlacing leaf scrolls and branches winding back on themselves that are stylized in an undulating and spiraloid form (Bantong 1989). Another example is the continuous series of spirals twining and untwining like waves in the sea locally known as *air mulih* (Metusin 1995; Masnah 1996). These motifs are commonly found on the upper and lower parts of the horizontal borders and as vertical decoration on either side of the center of traditional cloths. The shapes, which move smoothly and constantly in one direction, have been interpreted by the designers as coming back to its roots and according to them, as Muslims, we are urged to go back to the root of our existence according to Islamic teaching. Such designs connote a conscious return towards the fundamental teaching of Islam as the primordial religion [*din al-fitrah*] (Burckhardt 1967: 109).

Geometric motifs are popular among Islamic artists and designers in all parts of the Muslim world, and the spread of Islam has extended the influence of such motifs. In Brunei Darussalam, geometrical motifs such as the circle, rhombus, triangle, square, and hexagon are combined, duplicated, interlaced, and arranged in intricate combinations. In conformity with the Islamic teachings which insist that its followers act in balanced fashion in order to gain blessings from Allah, the symmetry of the motifs symbolizes balance. Furthermore, the composition of the geometrical forms and the absence of figurative images have proven that there is no obstacle to artistic fertility which expresses creative joy (Burckhardt 1967: 104).

Critchlow (1976) suggests that all Islamic geometrical patterns originate from the circle and its center which is an apt symbol of a religion that emphasizes one God. It also connotes unity. In Malay, the circle means "*bulat*" and expressions derived from such word such as *sebulat suara* (one voice) and *sebulat hati* (one heart) are common to express unity. In Islam, great unity is reflected in

facing Mecca in prayer where the Kaaba is located (Morrell 1997). The circle has always been regarded as a symbol of eternity, without beginning and end. It is also the perfect expression of justice and equality (Critchlow 1976).

Not only has Islam exercised influence on the patterns and designs of traditional textiles. It has also influenced the use of raw materials in the production. Most of the traditional textiles in Brunei Darussalam are made of cotton, as the major consumers of such textiles are men. Some currents of Islamic teaching indicate that men are not permitted to wear silk. Although this teaching is not stated in the Quran, it is elaborated in the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad. However, silk textiles may be produced for female consumers and for other purposes that do not involve clothing for men.

VI. Textiles and Social Hierarchy

The representation of social status is objectified through the act of consumption of traditional woven textiles. Traditional textiles have also been adopted and assimilated as parts of the ceremonial dress at state functions and in the royal court where they have become part of "official attire." The textiles' patterns and colors are important in the dress codes for royal court ceremonies. Motifs and colors indicate status and political allegiance. They show ceremonial and political importance, and rights are earned to wear particular patterns and colors. Conformity to the customary dress code shows homage, and it follows that disrespect for these codes is to be seen either as ignorance, or at worst, an act of rebellion.

In a complexly organized society, there is a need to express political legitimacy in a symbolic form (Geertz 1983). Such expression justifies the existence of the governing elite and orders its actions in terms of ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that may be inherited or even invented (Geertz 1983). The ideas of sovereignty and power in Brunei Darussalam are embodied and symbolized in the Sultan's body (Lomnitz 2001). The Sultan's freedom to select and wear clothes of his own choosing indicates

that he has supreme power and expresses his sovereignty. He stands not only at the top of hierarchy, but also outside of the system, which confirms his being “above the law.” In addition, the employment of traditional woven textiles as a ceremonial dress and part of regalia in the royal court, especially among dignitaries, plays an important role in emphasizing the tangible expression of status and power.

At all court events, the color of the dress is specified according to the status of the wearer, as well as the time when the function is held. Generally, all guests are required to wear black for day functions and white for evening ones. Malay guests are directed to wear the national costume *baju cara Melayu*, whereas non-Malays may wear formal Western-style clothing. For males, the national dress consists of a tunic, a pair of trousers, *sinjang* of traditional woven cloth, and headgear. The headgear may be a black velvet cap known locally as *kopiah* or *songkok*, *dastar* (especially folded headgear from traditional woven cloth), *ketayap* (white skullcap with a piece of white cloth bound around the head), or *serban* (turban). Other forms of male head dress are not acceptable. For females, the national dress is either *baju kurung* or *baju kebaya*. The wearing of a head scarf (*tudung*) is encouraged, especially for Muslims.

Traditional or royal dignitaries wear different types, pattern, designs, motifs, and colors of traditional woven *sinjang*, *arat* (belt), and *dastar*, according to rank. Each male dignitary carries a kris. Among the traditional noble dignitaries, only the *Cheteria* are provided with ceremonial uniforms for court functions. The traditional textiles for the *Cheteria* have the same pattern and design for all levels of wearers. However, rank may be distinguished by way of the color differences. The cloth has a *Jong Sarat* design decorated with *bunga cheteria bersiku keluang* (the wing of flying fox motif). The color for the chief *Cheteria* is dark purple. Light purple is for *Cheteria* 4. Additional *Cheteria* under *Cheteria* 4 would wear green with red stripes, while *Cheteria* 8 would wear orange. *Cheteria* 16 would wear blue, and additional *Cheteria* under *Cheteria* 16 are tasked to wear black with red stripes. *Cheteria* 32 wears magenta.

Non-noble, traditional officials can be divided into three categories. The levels of offices can be distinguished through the colors and motifs of their ceremonial *sinjang*, *arat*, and *dastar*. Different colors and motifs are used to decorate their ceremonial costume. Higher non-noble traditional officers are also ranked to four, eight, sixteen, and thirty-two. However, unlike the noble office of *Cheteria*, there are no distinctions in the color and designs of uniforms for this office. The only color is magenta. The design for the traditional cloth uniform is a scattered pattern arrangement decorated with *bunga butang arab gegati* (rhombus and button floral motifs). Lower ranking non-noble, traditional officials include the *Manteri Istana* (officials of the palace), *Manteri Agama* (traditional religious officials), *Manteri Dagang* (officials of foreigners), *Manteri Hulubalang* (officials of defense), and *Manteri Pedalaman* (officials of the home affairs). The traditional cloth for the *Manteri Istana* and *Manteri Hulubalang* is similar in color and design. The color of the cloth is purple with a scattered pattern arrangement decorated with *bunga tampuk manggis* (the calyx of mangosteen flower) motif. The *Manteri Pedalaman* uniform is blue with a scattered pattern arrangement decorated with *bunga kembang setahun* (year round blooming flower) motif. The base color for the costumes is scarlet. Traditional religious ministers and officials have been prescribed an Arabic-style long dress known as a *jubah* and a headdress known as a *serban* (turban). The color of the *jubah* depends on the time - black for day functions and white for evening functions.

The state dignitaries or modern administrative ministers, deputy ministers, and other senior officials must wear ceremonial costumes prescribed for them. The colors, as well as the designs of ceremonial dresses, vary according to position and rank. The ministers and deputy ministers of the cabinet wear woven cloths of similar designs and motifs for their *sinjang*, *arat*, and *dastar*, which is of *si lubang bangsi* design decorated with *bunga berputar kembang bertatah* (rotating bloom with multi colored motif). The color of the cloth for the ministers is golden olive. Deputy Ministers wear silvery olive colored supplementary weft cloth. Senior officials in the government sector wear the traditional cloth of *jong sarat* design decorated with *bunga teratai* (lotus motif). The color of the

cloth is maroon. Traditional cloth of similar design and color is attached to the lapel and the sleeves of the costume and for the *kain kapit* worn by the female senior officers.

VII. Textiles and Social Values

Abdul Latif (2008) suggests that production of arts and handicrafts can be seen as one way of conserving and reflecting cultural identity. The core social values for the people of Brunei is dictated by the Malay Islamic Monarchy. Abdul Aziz (1993: 14) noted that Brunei values include ways of thinking, ethics, attitudes, and attributes such as diligence, thoroughness, and tolerance. In addition, Islamic values have also strengthened the Brunei social values such as honesty, trustworthiness, helpfulness, cooperation, and determination. These values are integrated and demonstrated in the production of traditional textiles.

Traditional textiles consist of certain designs, patterns, and motifs. In order to produce attractive traditional textiles, designers must be smart, creative, and innovative. The designer's ability to create such designs and patterns demonstrate creativity and innovation. For instance, one of the designers, Dayang Hajah Kadariah, has reproduced about thirty six older patterns which were handed down to her from her grandparents. In addition, she has also come up with new designs, some used for official attires. Apart from designs and patterns, she also invented the names of the designs which sounds congenial and unique. Hajah Kadariah told me that in naming her designs, she was inspired by the stories she read when she was young, as well as her environment.

The production of traditional textiles consists of a systematic process which requires meticulous effort and patience. It is also important for weavers to remain focused when conducting their tasks. The tasks include the preparation of heddles, preparing the warp and weft, selecting pattern and creating design, and finally, the weaving process. Some tasks require more than one weaver to work. Teamwork is essential to ensure that the tasks can be done properly. For instance, at least three weavers are needed to transfer the warp

to warp beam. The warp is rolled around the warp beam and at the same time, the warp has to be combed constantly so that the threads will be arranged properly. This task reflects team spirit and cooperation among weavers producing fine quality materials.

One of my weaving informants, Datin Hajah Azizah, emphasized that it took motivation and determination to complete the weaving tasks. Although there are many tasks that can be done collaboratively, there are also that are done individually, such as threading, *mengani* (preparing the yarn for warp), and weaving the fabric. To be able to complete the task perfectly, a weaver need to be thorough and persevering. In the process, a weaver might face certain challenges such as broken yarns and miscalculations of threads for the warp. Such challenges, if not addressed accordingly, will affect the quality of the fabrics.

Commercialization has exerted significant impact on the production of traditional textiles. Not only has it provided an economic orientation, but it has also reflected the characteristics of weavers and the entrepreneurs. To ensure a lasting relationship between suppliers and consumers, there must be a certain degree of trust. Consumers put importance to the quality of the products, but significantly, consumers also want the products to be delivered in a very timely manner. According to my informant, producers/ weavers must be trustworthy in delivering commissioned fabrics. They must also have negotiation skills shaped by much tolerance (*tolak ansur*) and courtesy (*sopan santun*).

As an entrepreneur, Datin Hjh Azizah said that it is crucial for her to look after the welfare of her employees. She looks after their needs and ensures excellent working conditions by providing air-conditioned rooms, hygienic restrooms, a kitchen, and comfortable living quarters. She does this to retain her weavers and attract new employers. She reported that she treats her employees as family. She believes that providing a comfortable working environment for her weavers enhances the quality of her products. Colleagues from University of Philippines Open University attest to this recently after they visited the weaving workshop.

VIII. Conclusion

For centuries, traditional woven textiles have always been part of Brunei traditions and are commonly utilized in many cultural and social events especially among the Malays. The production and consumption of traditional textiles not only demonstrate their instrumental usage in the society but more interestingly, their symbolic meanings rooted in historical and sociocultural conditions and processes, which distinctively reflect the characteristics and identity of Brunei, based on the national concept of the Malay Islamic Monarchy.

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