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978-0-521-18345-1 - Iban or Sea Dayak Fabrics and their Patterns: A Descriptive Catalogue  
of the Iban Fabrics in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Cambridge

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A DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE OF  
THE IBAN FABRICS IN THE MUSEUM OF  
ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY  
CAMBRIDGE

by

ALFRED C. HADDON

and

LAURA E. START

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## PREFATORY NOTE

During the last half of December, 1898, I had the good fortune to be the guest of Mr R. Shelford, the Curator of the Sarawak Museum at Kuching. Most of my time in Kuching was spent in the Museum, where more especially I studied the fine collection of Iban cloths, as many patterns on the cloths were named. I took ninety-three photographs of sixty-nine cloths in the Museum and of some twenty cloths belonging to various people; more than two hundred sketches of patterns and designs were made of which the names were obtained.

I collected a few cloths and names, and subsequently purchased a large number of cloths from Dr Charles Hose, on which names had been affixed to their respective patterns and designs. These cloths I have given to the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Cambridge. There are, however, two or three cloths in the collection obtained from other sources.

This material, together with numerous data from other tribes, was accumulated in the hope that I should be in a position to study the decorative art of the natives of Sarawak, which ambitious scheme can now be only partially realized.

The Cambridge Museum thus possesses a fine representative collection of Iban cloths, consisting of 14 *kalambi*, jackets, 49 *bidang*, petticoats, 7 *sirat*, loin-cloths, 1 *bedong*, woman's girdle, 2 *dangdong*, shawls, and 11 *pua*, blankets; some 84 in all. These bear names of more than 1500 patterns and designs.

The British Museum possesses about the same number of Iban cloths. On the fifty-nine specimens purchased from Dr C. Hose there are comparatively few named patterns, and there are none on the cloths obtained from other sources.

The names on the foregoing cloths and those which I gathered in Sarawak afford a basis for a study of these interesting and beautiful fabrics.

I was fortunate to enlist the enthusiastic co-operation in this study of Miss Laura E. Start, M.Ed., Lecturer in the Education Faculty, Victoria



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### PREFATORY NOTE

University of Manchester. To it she has applied her practical experience and thus, so far as I am aware, there is for the first time a full technical description of the manufacture of Iban cloths and garments, and in addition an adequate account of their decorative motives. Miss Start also made all the drawings.

A. C. HADDON

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## INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the large collection of Sarawak cloths in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Cambridge. The equally large collection of cloths in the British Museum has also been examined by us, and we have compared the available specimens with the numerous photographs and sketches made by one of us in Sarawak. We therefore venture to claim that there is sufficient material for a preliminary study of this nature. There is a considerable number of designs and patterns which are not here mentioned and for most of them we do not know by what names they are called.

Although some of the designs are sufficiently realistic to make identification possible, most of them are highly conventionalized. Indeed, in many cases it is almost impossible to see any resemblance between the design and the object it is intended to represent. No doubt some students will question whether there is any such connection, but we must remember that these are traditional representations which have been transmitted through very many generations and it could not be expected that a realistic treatment could often persist.

The Iban certainly admit that most of the designs or patterns are intended to represent some concrete object. Cloths that have been collected in different places and at various times show designs that resemble each other to a remarkable extent, and, furthermore, in most cases the Iban apply similar names to them. Every Iban cannot be expected to know the names of all the designs and patterns, so it is not surprising that identifications should occasionally vary. There are numerous tribes or groups of Iban and this fact may cause some discrepancy in the names given, not only in identification but through dialectic differences; added to this are divergencies in the spelling of words by the transcribers.

If a native is not sure what a pattern really means he will be apt to describe it as looking like some particular thing or as representing that thing. It is obvious that the nearest approach to certainty can only be attained by inquiry from the actual woman who made the pattern.

It sometimes happens that apparently very similar designs may have different names applied to them. These usually are simple designs or

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## INTRODUCTION

patterns, and in such cases there may be no recognized general name for them. To take one example, a zigzag has its own name, *lelingkok*, but it is often termed *semerai sungai*, which implies the conception of going in a canoe from one bank of a river to the other so as to avoid or make use of stronger currents. It has also been described as the movement or progression of a snake.

The vast majority of the names in our collection, as well as all those on the specimens in the British Museum, were collected by Dr Charles Hose and naturally we have accepted these as accurate, but either he or the persons whom he employed made variations in the spelling of a given word; usually we could ascertain the most common or likely variant and in some cases we adopted instead the spelling of the word given by the authors of the *Sea Dyak Dictionary*, as that must be regarded as authoritative.

In many cases, but by no means in all, a translation was given by Dr Hose of the native name—sometimes literally, sometimes freely—these we have copied and printed in quotes. Occasionally the translation of a word differed from that given in the *Sea Dyak Dictionary*; these cases have usually been noted by us. Unfortunately there are many native names for which we cannot find a translation; they are given as written by the transcribers. Translations by us are printed without quotes.

Originally the labels were pinned on to the cloths in what was intended to be their appropriate position, but even so, on account of the relatively large size of the labels it is not always apparent to which design or what part of it the label applied. Subsequently numbers written on tape to correspond with the labels were sewn on to the cloth by Mrs Haddon, who took great care to retain the original position of the labels. In some cases there evidently was a mistake in the original position of a label. These sources of error are not quite so serious as might be feared, since we have such a large number of names on different cloths that checking is almost always possible. We venture to hope that few mistakes due to these causes have been perpetuated by us.

A card catalogue of drawings of every design bearing the same name was made, and the most typical examples in each group were selected and have been included in pls. I to xxv.

Our procedure in the following pages is to give the weave, colour and methods of producing the patterns of a considerable number of individual

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cloths, and in the case of the jackets how they were constructed. The patterns and designs are described and illustrated as copiously as space permits, and we have added what information we have been able to find with regard to their significance; very rarely have we hazarded suggestions of our own.

We gratefully thank those Museum authorities who have afforded us opportunities for examining the cloths under their charge and the various unknown Iban who have given information. We feel that especial thanks are due to the late Dr Charles Hose for having supervised the identification of the designs on the cloths that have formed the basis of our study; the help afforded by these names has been invaluable.

The cloths themselves, together with the photographs and sketches made in Sarawak, are placed in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and are available to those who would like to consult them.

We candidly admit that we are merely pioneers in this investigation and it remains for others who can interrogate the Iban themselves to confirm, modify, or correct our provisional statements and to enter more deeply and securely into the motives that lie behind these expressions of Iban aestheticism.

The admirable compilation *The natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo* (1896), by H. Ling Roth, has been of very great assistance to us, especially his chapter xvii. His *Studies in primitive looms* (1918) is invaluable, as it is based on his own investigations. We have quoted with due acknowledgment from various authors whose observations have elucidated our subject and to those whose names are most frequently mentioned we offer our thanks. Particular mention should be made of the excellent *Sea Dyak Dictionary* by the Rev. W. Howell and D. J. S. Bailey, to which we have so often referred under *S.D.D.*, and we have found their English-Sea Dyak Vocabulary useful.