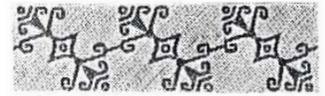


Decorated Mats



OF THE PEOPLES OF THE BORNEO HINTERLAND

By Jonathan Fogel and Bernard Sellato

FIG. 1: Map of Borneo showing only the ethnic groups mentioned in this article. *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest* identifies 105 distinct groups.

Cartography by Alex Copeland, www.PolarisCartography.com.

Plaitwork has long been seen as existing in a world of its own. Its emergence in the course of world history as one of the oldest non-lithic crafts—probably second only to cordage and netting (Adovasio 1977)—reaches back more than 10,000 years to when human groups began settling down and farming (Sentance 2001). For millennia, this “humblest of crafts” was employed to produce functional objects that featured in all aspects of daily life.

Despite such age and significance, Western scholarship has given relatively little attention to this ancient craft in general—and to Southeast Asian examples in particular. Captain James Cook’s expedition journals mention baskets “in a thousand different designs” used for “multifarious purposes,” but not a single specimen was collected, as Bryan Sentance notes. Sentance (2001) goes on to suggest that this may have been because basket making was considered women’s work. Although the literature on Indonesian “arts and crafts” has been developing for nearly 200 years, for whatever reason much of it hardly represents plaitwork and basketry, and when it does they are often mentioned only in passing, as in the catalogs of many of the major Western exhibitions on Indonesian culture. This, we believe, has much to do with the perishable nature of the materials used, as well as with the status of basketry in Western perception, where it is viewed as “craft” as opposed to “art.”

Borneo arguably is home to the world’s richest, most diverse, sophisticated, and aesthetically appealing plaitwork traditions. These derive both from the island’s complex cultural history and from its many people’s respective creativity and ingenuity. The roots of Borneo’s plaitwork traditions and the successive outside influences that fashioned them must be viewed in the broader insular Southeast Asian historical context dating from the earliest Austronesian settlement of the island c. 2500 BC (Sellato 1992, Bléhaut 1997, Heppell 2005).

Within Borneo’s rich plaitwork history is a fascinating but little-documented tradition of mat making by the indigenous peoples of the island’s interior. Such mats take a variety of forms and vary considerably from group to group. They can be used for basic floorcovering, for sitting, for sleeping, and for ritual purposes. Some are subtle but beautiful compositions of interlocking geometric patterns and others are just a relatively simple checkerboard. Still others are elaborate figurative compositions that hint at mysterious narratives. While there is some overlap, sleeping and ritual mats generally tend to be the





FIG. 2 (left): Mat with longitudinal panels of lozenges, keys, and flowers. Tingalan, Upper Sembakung River, 2010. Photo: Bernard Sellato.

FIG. 3 (above): Checked mat with a broad outer strip of Punan-style motifs and a complex pattern in the center. Kenyah. Rattan. 322 x 203 cm. J. B. Spurr Collection. Photo: D. Bonstrom.

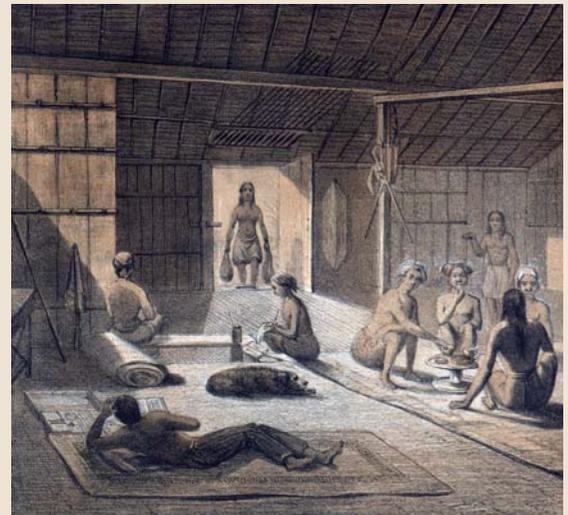
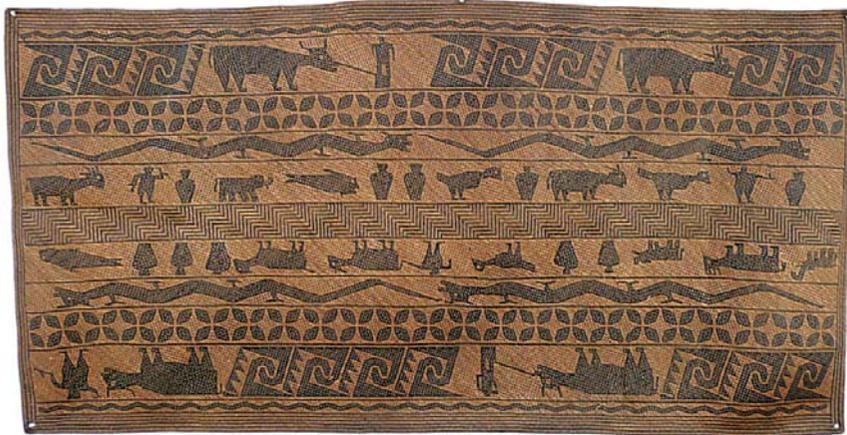


FIG. 4 (above): Interior of a Dayak house with floor mats and sleeping mats, either rolled or laid out. Probably Ngaju. 1853. From Schwaner, 1853.

FIG. 5 (below): "Iban women dancing with the heads of enemies at a festival." Plaited floor mat of rattan and bark. 1926. From Hose, 1926.





most elaborately decorated and may feature sacred motifs more frequently than is immediately apparent.

Geography and Society

The island of Borneo is a huge land mass, covering some 750,000 square kilometers—three times the size of the United Kingdom, one and a half times the size of France, and significantly larger than Texas. Two-thirds of its territory forms the five Indonesian provinces of Kalimantan. Its northern third is divided between the states of Sabah and Sarawak, part of the Federation of Malaysia, and the small, hydrocarbon-rich sultanate of Brunei Darussalam. The island's population remains relatively low—an estimated twenty million—and is unevenly distributed, with some highland areas showing a density of less than one person per square kilometer.

The geography of the island is defined by a star-shaped system of ridges separating river basins, each of which provides water routes between the highland regions and the coast. Coastal areas, or *pesisir*, are populated by “Malay,” or Melayu, groups as well as by Chinese and Bugis settlers. Their towns are open to interisland and international trade. The hinterland regions are home to more isolated “tribal” groups, the multi-ethnic “Dayak,” who have long relied on subsistence agriculture, largely swidden rice farming. The subtleties of their ethnic and linguistic classifications have yet to be definitively established or agreed upon, though basic subgroups are conventionally referred to. Among the better known of these are the Iban, Kenyah, Kayan, Bahau, Ngaju, Ot Danum, and various subgroups of traditionally nomadic Punan/Penan. With the exception of the latter, traditionally these peoples tended to occupy relatively small village units, the central feature of which was the communal longhouse. Mats that were woven for utilitarian purposes were intended to cover the rough plank floors of these, sometimes strengthening the floor structure (Munan and Noel 2012) or used for drying rice. The more elaborate examples that concern us here were typically used for creating a more comfortable personal space.

Unlike the Indianized, later Islamicized coastal population, these upriver peoples have long maintained their subsistence lifeways, organized into chiefdoms, some rather well integrated as river-based clusters and others with scattered, fluid affiliations. Some had a stratified social structure similar to feudalism in the West (Rousseau 1979, 1990); others had a rather egalitarian yet highly competitive social organization (Sutlive 1978); while still others had an “amorphous” organization in nomadic bands—now mostly settled in tiny hamlets (Sellato 1994; and Sel-



lato and Sercombe 2007). Manufactured trade goods circulated from the coast upward along the major rivers, together with Indian religious and political influences, followed later by Muslim influences. The upriver people, in return, delivered to the ports the much-sought-after forest products (Peluso 1983), as well as gold and, sometimes, slaves. Certain items traded upriver—brass or bronze gongs, porcelain jars, and glass beads, for example—became important sacred and heirloom objects, *pusaka*, among the peoples there and frequently occur in the iconography of their plaiting traditions. References to the long practices of intercultural warfare and headhunting also figure prominently in decorated mat motifs, as do sacred and power-invoking motifs, often from Kaharingan religious concepts. As discussed below, many of these motifs can be subtle and difficult to identify.

Technique and Style

In a not so remote past, Borneo peoples created a broad range of plaited objects adapted to specific functions. In the relatively isolated communities of the interior, each household was able to make everything necessary for daily life, including the plaited articles needed for its activities. In addition to decorated and plain-woven mats, these included sun hats, burden and storage baskets, fans, and a variety of other object types, many of which share decorative motifs. These were created mostly for local needs—whether daily use, prestige, or ritual purposes—although some were also traded or bartered away. Status among the interior peoples was always gained through expertise and, since Borneo people have a keen eye for beauty, the best artisans—plaitresses included—could achieve local fame for their work, even



Facing page top to bottom
 FIG. 6: Mat woven in 1951 by Mirentje Bahoei referencing elements of the *mihing* origin myth. Ngaju. Rattan. Photo: A. H. Klokke.

FIG. 7: A naturalistic rendition of the soul ship, here named *banama ruing*. Note the inscription at the bottom, which is the name of the plaitress and the date. The largely traditional motifs are augmented by ones of Western origin, including anchors and guns. Ngaju. Lamunti village. 1950. Rattan. 226 x 94 cm. Collection and photo: Roger Dashow.

FIG. 8: Sleeping or sitting mat with parallel rows of motifs varying within each row, including water buffalo, dragons, chickens, fish, human figures, and heirloom ceramic jars, all figuring in the paraphernalia of a major ritual. Probably Ngaju. Rattan. 201 x 102 cm. Collection and photo: Mark Johnson.

FIG. 9: Modern free composition with male and female human figures and blank areas filled in with various motifs. Iban of the lower Baluy River, Sarawak. Rattan. 234 x 132 cm. Collection and photo: MH.

FIG. 10 (top): A tricolor striped mat with two large figures; a house of spirits; and various other motifs including jars, gongs, and dogs. Ot Danum. Rattan. 196 x 94 cm. J. B. Spurr Collection. Photo: D. Bonstrom.

FIG. 11 (above): A free composition mat of dragons (*nabau*) and human or godly figures. "Iban" of uncertain origin. Rattan. 294 x 139 cm. J. B. Spurr Collection. Photo: D. Bonstrom.

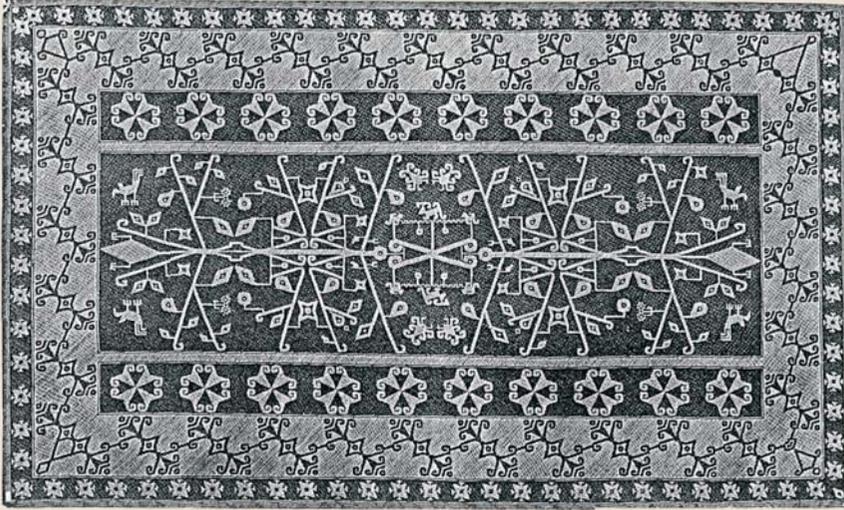


FIG. 12 (above): Motifs on an Ngaju ceremonial rattan mat. 1939.

From Schophuys, Siti, and Ismaël, 1939.

FIG. 13 (below): Kebang, also known as Indai Limput (mother of Limput), plaiting a large pattern mat. Iban of Nanga Beretik, Batang Ai River, Sarawak, 1986.

Photo: MH.



FIG. 14 (right): An eye-challenging mat with amalgamated octagonal and star patterns. Lisum of upper Belayan, Tabang area, East Kalimantan.

Rattan. L: 195 cm.
Photo: G. Perret.

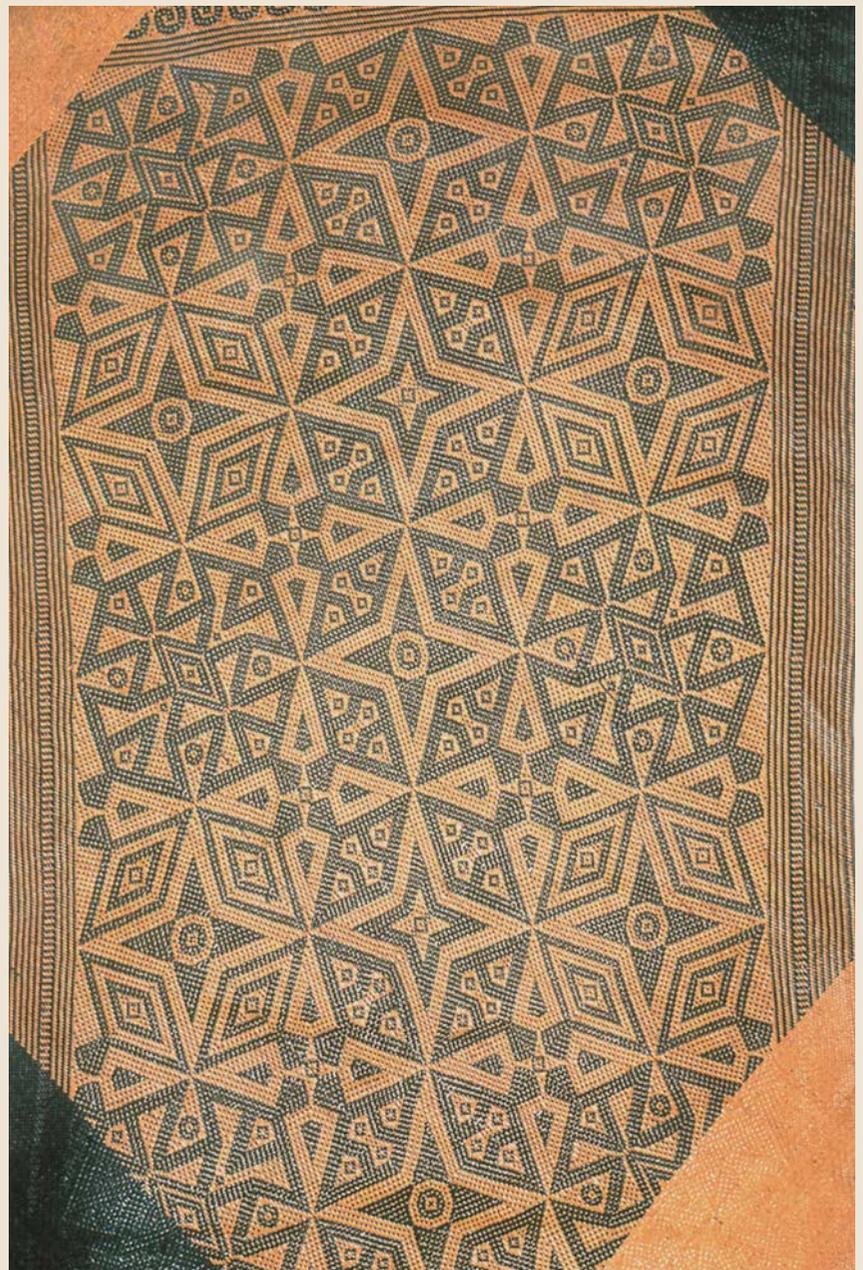


FIG. 15 (above): Floral pattern mat in white over white. Iban, Nanga Beretik, Batang Ai River, Sarawak. 1976.

Rattan. 208 x 75 cm.

Collection and photo: MH.



though they were ordinary farmers engaging in what was considered to be an ordinary skill, not unlike knitting or quilting in the West. Indeed, Heidi Munan and Janet Rata Noel note that among the Iban, “today’s grandmothers occasionally complain that their school-educated granddaughters are ‘quite useless—can’t cook, can’t mind babies, can’t even make a mat!’” (Munan and Noel 2012).

In Borneo, as elsewhere in traditional societies, craft making may be subject to certain restrictions and not just anyone may manufacture any kind of craft. This division of labor is often based on gender, with rules varying with the region. Such divisions may be prescriptive or proscriptive—that is, governed by a set of obligations or taboos—or just a matter-of-fact arrangement following labor availability of the household.

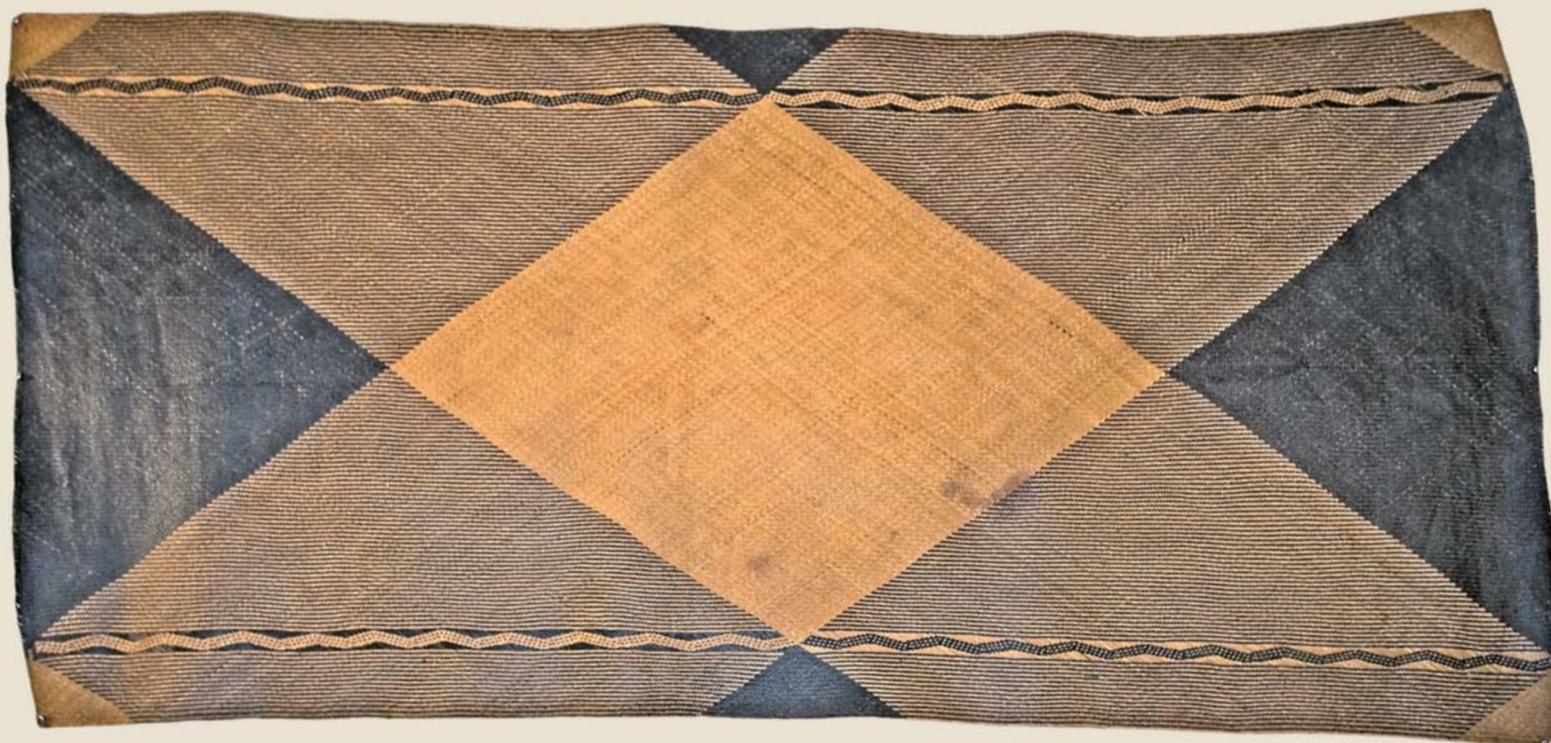
There is a salient contrast between orthogonal and diagonal (or straight and oblique) techniques used in the plait-

on creamy white is most typically found. Medium brown is occasionally used for the dark tone. A carmine red known as dragon blood is sometimes incorporated, though rarely in mats. Decorated white-on-white mats are made by plaiting strands with the outer skin of *bemban* facing up across strands with the outer skin facing down.

Weaving cloth is generally a female activity in Borneo and is sometimes subject to taboos. The relationship between weaving fabric and plaiting mats is a complex one that is not particularly well understood and likely varies from group to group. The Iban are known to share motifs between their textiles and plaited works (Munan and Noel 2012), but this is not necessarily known to be the norm elsewhere.

Transmission of plaiting knowledge is both vertical—from mother to daughter within the household or, more generally, from one generation to the next within a com-

FIG. 16: Unusual mat with extremely large-scale “checks.” “Kayan” style. Origin unknown. Rattan. 185 x 103 cm. J. B. Spurr Collection. Photo: D. Bonstrom.



ing of mats and baskets (Bléhaut 1997). Generally speaking, rough floor mats plaited from rattan (in some cases supplemented with bark strips) are created by men using an orthogonal weave, sometimes on a framework, whereas both plain and elaborately decorated mats are twill-woven by women almost always on the diagonal, or oblique, without the use of a loom. These latter are generally plaited from rattan, although this is locally regressing due to forest depletion in recent years, but other fibers are also traditionally used, such as pandanus (screw-pine) or *bemban* (an arrowroot reed grown in swampy areas). Whatever the fiber, some of it is dyed for contrasting colors. Black/dark brown

community—and lateral, through diffusion by contact between communities. In the former case, it tends to promote conservative practices (Tillotson 2012), whereas in the latter it promotes change. Although craftspeople easily keep in mind basic decorative motifs, many groups eagerly store away old dilapidated mats to be able to reproduce complex plaited patterns later. Among some groups, such as the Ot Danum and Ngaju, master plaitresses deliberately create for their own use or for that of their daughters special sampler mats that serve as handy catalogs of motifs and patterns (Klokke 2012). Such a sampler may include local as well as “imported” motifs.

When no sample of a given pattern remains in a community, the pattern is “lost.” Villagers have often expressed that they could no longer make a pattern because the last sample of it had been discarded or given away. Certain decorated mats feature a sampling of patterns, although this seems to be done in a non-systematic way, as among the Iban—who appear keen on keeping samples of sacred patterns (Heppell 2009)—and some nomadic groups.

Those familiar with woodcarving from the inland cultures of Borneo will find little artistic commonality with the motifs and patterns that appear on decorated mats. Art styles—that is, the manner in which an artifact is executed—are strongly medium dependent and few if any Borneo groups display consistent styles in all mediums. Moreover, like all cultural traits, styles are in a constant state of flux and “their course is determined by the general cultural history of the people” (Boas 1955).

Motif, Name, and Meaning

Decorative elements on mats and other plaited objects are usually named after elements from the local natural environment. The question of the meaning of such names, however, is a complex one. Equally complex are the questions concerning the actual relation between the motif and the name, or between the name and a possible cultural or symbolic value behind it.

The constraints placed on plaiting by its techniques (Dunsmore 2012) led to the appearance—probably independently in various regions—of a number of simple, basic motifs (that is, individual decorative elements) such as the dove’s eye (*mata punai*) and the hook (*kait*), which are found throughout Borneo (and even beyond) under the same name. Complex patterns (defined here as an aggregate of combined motifs) are a trickier issue, as it is often impossible to ascertain whether the presence of the same pattern in distant, apparently unrelated regions resulted from independent innovation or historical diffusion. Mats with very similar patterns are found among the Iban of the northwest (Sellato 2012) and the people of Sabah (Regis and Lojiwin 2012), two groups that had little interaction before the mid twentieth century. Whereas for complex patterns, diffusion would seem more likely, an alternative rationale could be that such patterns belong to an ancient common Bornean cultural legacy that survived separately in diverse groups.

Motifs and patterns also evolved along different paths, varying with ethnic styles and ingenuity through stylization, expansion, or reinterpretation (Bléhaut 1997; Sellato, 1992). Thus, despite technical constraints, local creativity has allowed for the development of a huge variety of decorative motifs and patterns, many of which have become

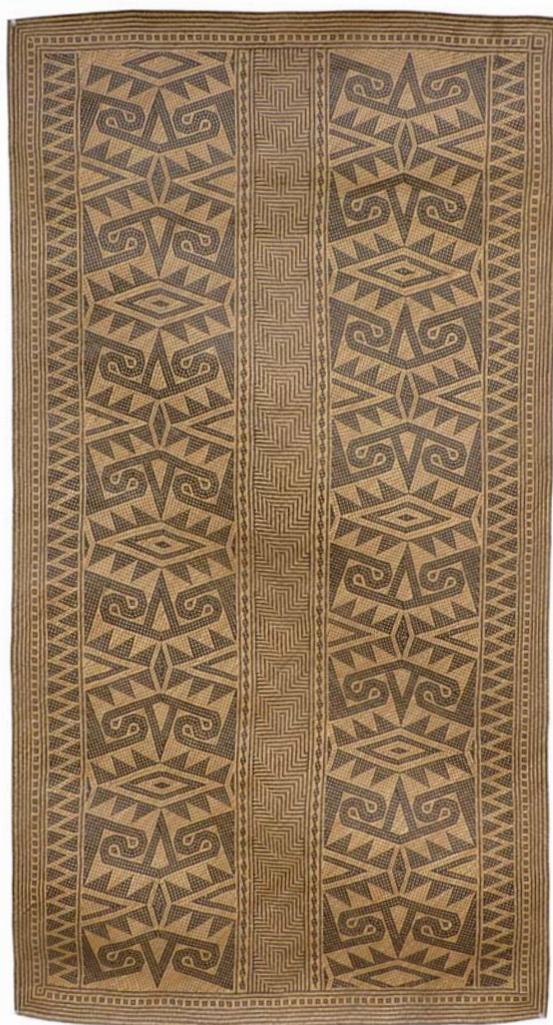


FIG. 17 (left): Mat with two longitudinal patterned panels and a central herringbone strip. Punan, Kalimantan.

Rattan. 166 x 92 cm.
J. B. Spurr Collection.
Photo: D. Bonstrom.

FIG. 18 (below): Mat with torso motifs optically arranged to form either a star or octagon. Punan or Bukat.

Rattan. 232 x 122 cm.
J. B. Spurr Collection.
Photo: D. Bonstrom.

FIG. 19 (top right): Sleeping or sitting mat with parallel rows of motifs including a celestial being. Motifs are repetitive in each row except for the center, which serves as a sampler. Ot Danum.

Rattan. 193 x 103 cm.
J. B. Spurr Collection.
Photo: D. Bonstrom.

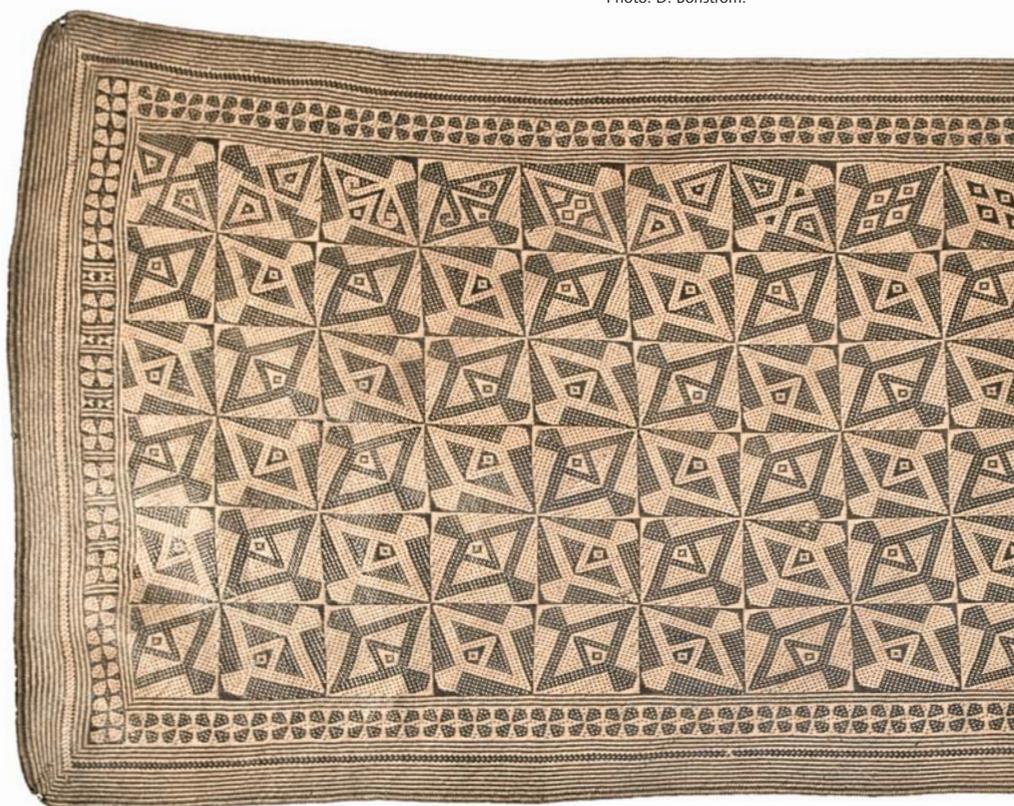




FIG. 20 (right): Mat with four rows of motifs, from left to right: *hudo' lino* (torso motifs), *kusong tuvo* (tuba root motif), *hudo' kejavo* (star motif), and *anyam bua* (an Iban fruit motif). Made by Tipung, Bukat, Long Aya', upper Baluy River, Sarawak.

Rattan. 189 x 140 cm. Photo: MH.

FIG. 21 (below right): Single central panel with three octagonal motifs with diamond centers and a stylized dragon at bottom. Possibly of Beketan origin. Iban, Nanga Beretik, Batang Ai River, Sarawak.

L: over 300 cm. Photo: MH.



particular to certain ethnic groups and even emblematic of certain regions.

Names given to plaitwork motifs and patterns derive from a number of sources: most commonly from surrounding nature (“flower,” “scorpion”) or manufactured articles (“hook”), and sometimes from the name of the person who first invented or imported a motif (“Mrs. X’s motif”), a neighboring ethnic group from which the motif originated (“Penan motif”), a mythical or heavenly character supposedly depicted in or by the pattern, or even from momentous historical events.

Scholars have long disagreed on the importance of the name of a motif to an understanding of its meaning and symbolic value (Bléhaut 2012). This has been debated since colonial times, and while the subject of that discussion has largely been textiles, it certainly holds true for decorative plaitwork as well. In any case, as many have

tifs continue, it therefore seems that the relation between a motif and the name by which it is called is often neither relevant nor consistent. Several scholars who have developed inventories of motifs (Klausen 2012; Klokke 2012; Lenjau, Sirait, and Sellato 2012; Tillema 2012; Van der Hoop 1949) stress the difficulty of interpreting motifs through names.

Sources vary considerably as to the meaning and interpretation of motifs and patterns. Describing the Iban, Heidi Munan and Janet Rata Noel (2012) note “Each craftswoman names the completed mat as she sees fit.” A new pattern may be revealed to her in a dream and only she can “tell the whole story” behind a mat’s pattern. Arnoud H. Klokke conducted an interview with Ngaju master plaitress Mirentje Bahoei in 1951 about an elaborate narrative mat she had woven that same year (fig. 6). The story that she revealed in detail revolves around the *mihing* origin myth (Klokke 2012). Conversely, Mashman, regarding the Kelabit, concludes that the motif or pattern “does not represent the object after which it is named,” as “Kelabit weavers themselves are saying [that] ‘the motifs have no meaning’” and we should “consider the name given to a motif as a simple *aide-mémoire*” (Mashman 2012). A similar discrepancy of interpretation exists with *pua’* cloths. However, as Bléhaut (2010) notes, such a “label” as a mnemonic aid is precisely what would remain after everything else about a pattern has been forgotten.

In some cases, a more or less elaborate story behind a pattern is forthcoming. The *namboyunan* (“mad”) pattern of the Murut is said to represent the track of a woman who was lost in the jungle and wandered about until she went mad (Woolley 2012). Although this may be a post facto explanation, the critical point here is that a pattern is correlated with a narrative beyond its name.

Certain mats—as well as other basketry items such as baskets and hats—may carry or refer to entire pictorial narratives. They tell about mythical heroes, spirits, and gods and have profound social and ritual significance. Among the Iban, certain patterned mats are infused with spiritual power associated with motifs, such as the dragon, that they carry. Made by famous plaitresses, these powerful mats are given “praise names” (*julok*), and sleeping on such a mat, covered in a powerful patterned *pua’* blanket, is said to produce important dreams (Heppell 2009, Couderc 2012).

Like weaving *pua’*, the plaiting of such powerful motifs and patterns in mats entails grave spiritual risk. Swayne (2012) reports that among the Rajang, three plaited patterns—the dog, elephant, and crocodile—are taboo, and that anyone making them is thought to be in danger of

FIG. 22 (below): Mat with three central diamonds and rows of bamboo shoot motifs at both ends. Melawi groups, West Kalimantan.

Rattan.
J. B. Spurr Collection.
Photo: D. Bonstrom.



FIG. 23 (opposite): Mat with three rows of motifs and alternate black and white corners. Punan of Belayan or Apo Kayan, East Kalimantan.
Rattan. 183 x 123 cm.
Collection and photo: John Barker.

noted, names of motifs vary widely from one ethnic group to the next, and within the same group, “even experts will differ” (Haddon and Start 1982, quoting Hose and McDougall 1966).

Apart from certain simple motifs that are widely shared, as noted above, others, just as basic, appear under varying names. To cite but one example, the triangle motif is called “bamboo shoot” by the Iban, as elsewhere in the Malay world (Bléhaut 1997); “bud of the areca palm” by the Ngaju (Klokke 2012); “blade point” by the Kenyah Badeng (Davy Ball 2009); and either “durian thorn” or “bat’s elbow” by the Aoheng. Figurative motifs are equally subject to variation in names. For example, the torso motif, figuring the upper body or a human figure with arms akimbo and usually called “person,” is called “blades” by the Kenyah (Davy Ball 2009) and “kite” by the Ngaju.

Among certain communities, “many motifs have lost their names completely” (Davy Ball 2009). Since the mo-



going blind. Interestingly, old persons and, formerly, slaves (viewed as outsiders to the community) could make them without risk. Here, the reference may be the central feature rather than the name. Among the upper Mahakam River peoples, for example, “dog” is a common alias for “dragon” (see Sellato 1992), as it is widely believed that even uttering the word “dragon” brings about danger. Alternate names for a pattern, therefore, may not necessarily be incongruous, as they refer to the same concept. Similarly, the names of various fruits or leaves with more or less the same shape may all “summon the idea of ‘fragrance’ and be connected with head trophies, which bring fertility” (Bléhaut 1997). Likewise the dragon-dog and its more concrete avatars, the deer and the water buffalo, may all refer to the underworld, as do the crocodile and the lizard (Sellato 1989, 1992).

Being themselves perilous to handle, motifs that refer to divinities, powerful spirits, or head trophies certainly possess marked symbolic value. They are produced for ritual reasons and are used, or are at least present, during religious festivals. Furthermore, articles thusly decorated are imbued with power of their own. The plaiting of (or indeed any form of representing) the dragon at once invokes the great dragon goddess and creates a new dragon as well as its dwelling place. The artist and the artifact are under its protection, rendering its presence far more significant than a mere decorative motif.

Aesthetics

Undeniably, all humans have a taste for beauty and experience aesthetic pleasure, but in Borneo this is expressed primarily in relation to objects. Whereas author Bernard Sellato has never witnessed an Aoheng person showing admiration for a colorful sunset, he has often observed people handling an object at length and commenting appreciatively on its workmanship. In many languages of interior Borneo, no word is found for “beauty” or “beautiful,” although recently Malay words have come to serve for these. Traditionally, the idea of “beautiful” is rendered by the word for “good” in the general sense of “superior.” The same word for “good” is used concerning people, where it also means “superior” in the sense of “rich” or “noble”—though it does not carry the sense of “good-hearted.”

Contrary to what might be assumed, decoration is not considered essential to beauty in the art of inland Borneo, but technical excellence is primary. Apart from personal aesthetic pleasure, it is widely believed that a beautiful object or pattern—that is, a well-made one—is pleasing to the gods.



The above essay is derived from sections of the recent publication *Plaited Arts of the Borneo Rainforest*. Thanks are due to the many authors who contributed to this volume.

Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest, Bernard Sellato (ed.), 2012, Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation; Singapore: NUS Press; Copenhagen: Nordic Institute for Asian Studies Press; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; 536 pp., 1,260 photographs.

NIAS Press price (Europe): £45; UHP price (USA & Americas): \$70; NUS Press price (Asia): S\$78.

FIG. 24: Large mat with three longitudinal rows of octagonal medallions in which the torso motif is still recognizable.

Beketan, upper Belayan River, Tabang area, East Kalimantan.

Rattan.
Photo: G. Perret.

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FIG. 25: Unusual mat displaying influence of Iban motifs including keys, tuba root, animals (probably crocodiles), and anthropomorphic figures. Penan, Upper Baluy area, Sarawak.

Rattan. 194 x 81 cm.
Photo: MH.



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