

Repositioning Pua Kumbu Through Artistic Practice: Globalising The Local By Drawing Upon Diverse Malaysian Cultural Forms

Penyusunan Semula Pua Kumbu Melalui Amalan Artistik: Mengglobalisasikan Unsur Tempatan Menerusi Kepelebagaian Bentuk Budaya Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the stimulus behind, and implications of the artistic work of Pua Kumbu, the traditional fabric from Sarawak, experimenting with combinations of computer-mediated imagery, text and 'traditional' fabrics manufactured in Malaysia. This paper will look at the creative stimuli of the 'modern' and 'traditional', positing the modern as a product of globalisation and westernisation and the 'traditional' researcher's work recombines diverse products of Malaysian oral and visual culture using 'traditional' fabrics as the canvas onto which words and imagery are placed. This paper will explain how the researcher practice-based approach to research examines the importance of expanding the Malaysian visual culture heritage in light of the enormous impact of globalisation on the art and visual culture in Malaysia. It will discuss the main objectives of this research and artistic output, which are to understand the problems, consequences and effects of globalisation towards art and visual culture and to produce artefacts that explicitly illuminate a new understanding of the dynamic that obtains between globalisation, contemporary art and craft traditions in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: Pua Kumbu, Culture, Globalisation, Local, Artistic Practice

Abstrak

Kertas ini akan membincangkan rangsangan di belakang, dan implikasi, kerja-kerja seni Pua Kumbu, kain tradisional dari Sarawak, eksperimentasi dengan kombinasi imej komputer-pengantara, teks dan fabrik 'tradisional' yang dikeluarkan

di Malaysia. Kertas ini akan membincangkan rangsangan kreatif 'moden' dan 'tradisional', penyusunan aspek moden sebagai produk globalisasi dan pembaratan dan kerja-penyelidik 'tradisional' yang menggabungkan produk pelbagai lisan dan visual budaya Malaysia menggunakan 'tradisional' fabrik sebagai ruang penyusunan perkataan dan imej. Kertas ini akan menerangkan bagaimana pendekatan penyelidik berasaskan amalan penyelidikan studio mengkaji kepentingan mengembangkan warisan budaya visual Malaysia dalam konteks impak globalisasi terhadap seni dan budaya visual di Malaysia. Ia akan membincangkan objektif utama penyelidikan dan hasil karya kreatif, sepertimana bertujuan untuk memahami masalah, akibat dan kesan globalisasi kepada seni dan budaya visual dan untuk menghasilkan artifak yang jelas menerangkan pemahaman baru dinamik antara globalisasi, seni kontemporari kraf dan tradisi dalam konteks Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Pua Kumbu, Kebudayaan, Globalisasi Tempatan, Amalan Artistik

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Malaysian Fabric (Pua Kumbu) was used in my first exploration of hybridity in my practical studio work. This is where the process of hybridisation can be seen in my practice, in the process of production of media and images that portray Malaysia as a multiracial country. These artworks were constructed as an opportunity for me to voice out my ideas on themes of globalisation, modernisation and hybridisation in contemporary Malaysian art. Apart from that, political issues were touched upon, as well as the juxtaposition of images, text and medium.

The fabric Pua Kumbu comes from the Iban tribe in Sarawak, which is one of the two Malaysian states on the island of Borneo. Known as Bumi Kenyalang (Land of the Hornbills) it is situated in the north-west of the island. The Iban are a branch of the Dayak people of Borneo. They were formerly known by the British during the colonial period as Sea Dayak (Strouthes, 1993). In the process of modernisation the Iban today are generally becoming increasingly heavily urbanised but still retain most of their traditional heritage and culture (Kedit, 1997).

The uses of Pua Kumbu are closely related in the traditional life of the Iban. These textiles are used in ceremonies and rituals surrounding birth, marriage, death and mourning, healing and Harvest Festivals. Sarawak Museum (2005) has stated that, technically excellent in comparison to any ikat weaving of other cultures, powerful in its allegorical symbols which are related to flora and fauna in Iban ritual, the warp-ikat Pua Kumbu is an outstanding material culture of Sarawak (Sarawak Museum, 2005). The technique of ikat, the Malay word for "to tie" or bind, and the textiles, which are woven on back-strap looms with indigenous techniques of warp-faced weaving and resist-bound dyeing, are an important part of the rich culture of craft of Sarawak (Ong, 1997). Furthermore, Pua Kumbu are also used to veil structures containing charms and offerings in farming rituals. As Ong (2006) indicates, they are not merely cloths for garments, but have a special and religious significance. This might well instil a curiosity towards the cultural heritage of the people and the largely anonymous weavers. All the images were considered mystic in the Iban tribe's ceremonies until the design was fully commercialised as nowadays.

Although the process of hybridisation and modernisation is quite rapid in Sarawak, traditional values are well-treasured. However, a unique cultural fusion is happening and it can be seen from the perspective of visual arts. Traditional ways of producing Pua Kumbu was modernised, to cater to the escalating demand to make them as souvenirs. Modern machinery has helped those in the industry to experiment with different materials and to cut the processing time whilst enabling them to maintain the pattern of the fabrics.

Digitally altered imagery and texts derived from Iban proverbs were combined on Pua Kumbu textiles to suggest a recontextualisation of these various cultural streams. In my artwork, the proverbs are meant to invoke a tension between traditional local life and the rapid changes in lifestyle caused by Malaysia's increasing participation in global political and economic developments. Each proverb is meant to resonate with and recontextualise the image that it accompanies.

The Iban proverbs were taken from the book *Jaku' Dalam* by Janang Ensering, published by The Tun Jugah Foundation, Malaysia, 2006. There are more than 9,457 proverbs in the book and only forty-six were selected at the final stage. The proverbs were translated into Malay prior to English translation. Translation from Malay to English was done as I found that the Malay words are easier to translate into English. It was quite difficult to retain the "essence" of the proverbs. This is mainly due to the limitation of appropriate vocabulary to really fit the context of the proverb. Apart from that, there is currently no Iban to English translation of Iban proverbs.

In order to ensure the meaning of each proverb was retained, I decided to use simple English to highlight the main issue addressed in each proverb. The text was then silk-screened together with constructed images on the fabrics. The proverbs were selected based on their relationship or reference to attitudes towards local life and the modern way of life style. The size of Pua Kumbu is approximately 107cm X 53cm and 180cm X 44cm. This project comes from a response to the hybridity in culture and technology for the Malaysian peoples, especially the Iban. The Iban today are becoming heavily urbanised but they still retain most of their traditional heritage and culture.

The Iban texts were chosen as the Pua Kumbu is a fabric work by that tribe. The combination of selected texts and Pua Kumbu is a new experimental process of producing artwork from the fabric of Pua Kumbu. I am not from the Iban tribe, therefore there might be a furor and these artworks might be considered as being disrespectful towards the tribe by exploiting a version of 'sacred fabrics'. As with other visual artists in Malaysia, it is almost impossible to display so-called controversial artworks in local art galleries or open exhibitions, even in the name of artistic experimentation. Artists are bound by certain restrictive regulations.

However, I have my own reason to attempt such experimentation. I strongly feel that by adding a textual element the process of recontextualisation of Pua Kumbu would add more value to the existing functions of the selected materials. Even now, Pua Kumbu no longer serve their typical function in Malaysian society, such as decorative wall items or as a part of traditional clothing. Crafts such as shoes, handbags and accessories based on these materials flooded the markets, showing that the process of cultural commercialization is widespread in Malaysia. Nonetheless, it is almost impossible to stop the process of hybridisation and modernisation. For example, printed

Pua Kumbu, although the printed form is not considered as authentic, nevertheless is accepted as representative of the real thing. Coupled with the arrival of the information age and the impact of ongoing globalisation, the production of Pua Kumbu attempts to explore new directions. Technological advancement also plays its role, as the original handwoven Pua Kumbu, once considered a sacred cloth, can be bought online via the internet. Ancient artefacts are traded daily and replicas are accepted as representations that retain the intricacies and the beauty of the originals. As the production of these artworks retain the original designs of the Pua Kumbu and Batik, the cultural values that are embedded in the materials are not ruined by my process of recontextualisation and hybridisation.

One of the methods of this research is image selection. I have a collection of Malaysian images ranging from the field of politics, economics and society from a database on visual culture with Malaysian subject matter. As well as these images, visual images of western arts were combined. Images from western reference points were chosen as there are visual similarities between the religious elements, cultural performance and the way of life in that work and the Iban culture. Besides images related to the impact of colonialism, significant events from pre and post-Independence Day were also selected. I feel that these had an important impact on Malaysian visual culture and are also an important element needing to be enhanced in the production of the artefacts.

As Anuar (2004) claimed, politics has a dominant role in Malaysian culture: the economy and the social field are very much shaped by the aspiration to achieve political stability, and the local contemporary art scene is very much affected by these too. In Malaysia, contemporary visual arts have their roots in the 1930s. I feel that local cultures should be introduced and presented in a way that is appropriate to the process of hybridisation. Therefore, selected images in this project also act as a symbol of the “mind journey” of my experiences, based on my knowledge and interpretation, that could well shape the Malaysian arts scene. The concept of “mind journey” is the understanding of a process of a journey through Malaysian cultures from my experience as an academician, artist and performer to explore and to produce artworks from this cultural involvement.

The Artefacts

An array of issues related to the process of hybridisation on Malaysian social, political and economical life was presented in the printed artwork on Pua Kumbu and Batik. The selected texts and images narrow down the sociological aspects which relate to traditional and modern values of Malaysia in dealing with changes on the global scene. The combination of texts and images opens up a space for dialogue, as an opportunity for me to explore the possibilities of such media. I have chosen the colonial era as a turning point in the artwork production, and the choice of the aforementioned fabrics as a symbol of local values. Starting from the colonial era of Sarawak, and the pre and post- independence of the Malay Peninsula, the social, economical and political development was very much influenced by the Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, and English. These influences shaped the formation of Malaysia. The administrative

system in Malaysia was inherited from the British government during the colonial era. Malaysia, which consists of the Malay Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak, was formed on 16 September 1963. The effect of this merger is the Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan, known as the National Cultural Policy, where the way of local life and value creates an identity of Malaysian society. I have tried to construct images and text in response to the impact of colonisation. Thus, it is important to reveal these post-colonial influences and the impact they have on the current development of the country.

Silkscreen printing was experimented with as a way to convey the intended meanings. During the solo exhibition, the artworks were placed in the tradition of Malay people welcoming their guests. The use of *Tepak Sirih* as a symbol of respect to guests started in the feudal era in the Malay Archipelago. Nowadays, it is still used in Malay weddings, hence, in my first work (Fig.1), the use of the word “Welcome” metaphorically signifies a cordial invitation for the audience to experience the exhibition. In Malay culture, guests are respected and should be addressed in a proper manner.



Figure 1 *Pua 1, Pua 2*, 2011
Silkscreen on cloth, 180cm X 88cm

The history of colonialism in Sarawak, a state in Malaysia, was presented with images from the White Rajahs family, a dynasty that founded and ruled the Kingdom of Sarawak from 1842 to 1941, named the Brookes, who came originally from England. (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4)



Figure 2 *Pua 3*, 2011
 Silk screen on cloth,
 107cm X 53cm.



Figure 3 *Pua 4*, 2011
 Silk screen on cloth,
 107cm X 53cm.



Figure 4 *Pua 5*, 2011.
 Silk screen on cloth,
 107cm X 53cm.

My thirteen years' experience of teaching in Sarawak revealed the impact of colonialism on the social strata of the Sarawakian community during British rule. This occurred when Indonesia claimed Sarawak as part of their country and the Philippines claimed Sabah, which was under the rule of the Sulu Kingdom, which is a part of Muslim government who controlled the Sulu Sea in South Philippines. When Malaysia was created in 1963, people from Sabah and Sarawak decided to be part of Malaysia. In relation to what Ashcroft (2000) has mentioned, "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone", colonisation has affected the local cultures. Buildings, transportation, religion and the formation of the residential areas were heavily influenced by English culture. Before constructing these type of artwork, my previous artwork dealt with icons related to the Sarawakians. Thus, the selection of "The White Rajahs of Sarawak" - James Brooke, Charles Brooke and Charles Vyner Brooke, who ruled Sarawak for almost hundred years - suits the theme of external influences having an impact on traditional Sarawakian culture.

In Malaysia, Sarawakians represent a unique multicultural element and I feel that the Sarawakian dances are an important element that should be highlighted. I try to bridge this element with Edgar Degas' images of ballet series as a juxtaposition with local dance tradition (Fig. 5). The traditional dances from Sarawak, Ngajat and Datun Julud, which were performed to celebrate Harvest Festival and to welcome important guests to the longhouse, is a symbol of local culture yet has become part of Malaysian identity in performance art. The traditional dance from indigenous group in Malaysia has been thought to ensure it will still remain. These traditional dances have also been performed during the Harvest Festival and other Malaysian Festivals. I aimed to make a statement in the artwork with the production of the ballet series from Edgar Degas and the image of traditional dances – Ngajat and Datun Julud (Fig. 6, Fig. 7).



Figure 5 Pua 6, 2011
Silkscreen on cloth
107cm X 53cm



Figure 6 Pua 17, 2011
Silkscreen on cloth
107cm x 58cm



Figure 7 Pua 21, 2011
Silkscreen on cloth
107cm x 58cm

A prominent western image, ‘La Orana Maria’ or ‘Hail Mary’ (1891) by Paul Gauguin was also selected and appropriated in my artwork (Fig. 8) due the similarities of the elements, especially the clothing and ambience.



Figure 8 Pua 8, 2011
Silkscreen on cloth 107cm X 53cm

From a religious aspect, the selected hues were tailored according to local values which accentuate the Iban’s unique perception of beliefs. It is closely related to the selected Iban proverb - “The satisfaction that one experiences in other countries is no better in one’s own country, therefore, whether it is good or bad, one should always be

thankful.” Iban people are always reminded to cling strongly to their roots in facing the process of modernisation. Emphasis is given to religious and traditional values – areas that are considered as the most important in Malaysian culture. Both factors have been important elements of the National Foundations of Culture since it was implemented in 1971. This is due to Malaysia being a multiracial country where many types of traditional culture are practised by its citizens. Through this National Foundation of Culture, I believe that traditional values should be retained.

One of the biggest impacts of colonisation in Malaysia is the presence of Indians and Chinese in the Malay Peninsula. The British brought in the Chinese to work in the mining sector and the Indians in the rubber plantations. The divide-and-rule strategy had been implemented by the British to split the Malay, Indian and Chinese into different areas of the economy. There was no unity among the races and the British government in the Malay Peninsula easily ruled the nation before Independence Day. When the Chinese and Indian remained in Malay Peninsula, it was important for them to be integrated with the Malay population. Through the spirit of independence for the country, the Malay majority were willing to play a part in the development of the political, economic and social fabric on 31st August 1957, Independence Day of Malay Peninsula. This has shaped the local cultural landscape, leading to these minority groups being granted permanent residency. The Indians brought with them their cultures and freely practised them, and now are already generally accepted as part of the vast identity of Malaysia. Now, the Indians are accepted as a part of the Malaysian family, and this symbiotic relationship blossomed into unique Malaysian cultural hues (Fig. 9).



Figure 9 Pua 13, 2011
 Silkscreen on cloth 107cm X 53cm



Figure 10 Pua 14, 2011
 Silkscreen on cloth 107cm x 58cm

This artwork touches the importance of understanding among the society even when there are different elements in their traditional practice and, as the artist put it, “ai’ ditetak enda’ putus; ai’ ditunu’ enda’ angus” (No matter how serious the dispute is among brothers/sisters/family members, they will eventually reconcile/be good as usual/before). The Chinese worked together with the British and the local people to develop the Malaysian economy prior to Independence Day. Even after Independence Day, the concept of unity as preached by the government has helped Malaysians to stay together to face the challenges of globalisation (Fig.10).

Conclusion

This paper discussed my own practice as a researcher and artist to crystallise the process of hybridisation and Malaysia’s national identity via the production of artworks. The arrangement of texts, images and the local fabrics as a medium enhanced another new concept of how to look at local craft from a different natural environment. The selection of text and digitalized images was related to the visual narrative starting from the period of colonisation in Sarawak, Malaysian national identity, political images, images from Western art history and the development in Malaysia’s cultural context. The use of Iban proverbs was chosen because Pua Kumbu came from this indigenous group. Furthermore, as a part of my “mind journey” to explore a new presentation in this heuristic practice, another transformation was undertaken through my next project.

The continuous issue of hybridity and Malaysia’s national identity in my next project started a new dimension of artwork in contemporary Malaysian art practice. It is important to stress that in this production, the project dichotomously expresses an ideal as well as a source and conflict towards the process of hybridisation in politics and social life which has been symbolized in a visual language. Thus, the new understanding of the dynamic process in my practice in the relation to hybridity, contemporary art and craft traditions in a Malaysian context has inspired me to expand to another artwork production in the future.

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