

Tikar Bergerang: The Reflection of Culture and Heritage of the Saribas Malay, Sarawak

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Abstract

This paper investigates the indigenous knowledge of mat making and its social context in Malay community of Saribas. It focuses on *tikar bergerang* in particular. The mat which incorporates open weave, creates a lace impression pattern around the body weave frame. As stated by Awang Azman (2010), material culture's scholar, there is an urgency to study Sarawak Malay due to a significant dissimilarity between them with the Malay of Peninsular Malaysia in many aspects of local knowledge and heritage. Thus, the aim of this research is to discover the production technology, role and values of *tikar bergerang* in the Saribas Malay community in Sarawak. Through in-depth interviews with *tikar bergerang* weavers and observation, the cultural object is analysed using material culture study developed by Fleming (1974). The result indicated that the mat is only intended for important function and perceived as a sacred material object. The mat complex patterns and complicated weaving techniques reflect the idiosyncrasy of Saribas region compared to other parts of Sarawak, the intellectual, indigenous technology and common values shared among its community.

Keywords: Saribas Malay, Material Culture, Tikar Bergerang, Value, Craft, Indigenous Technology

Introduction

This study is an early attempt to introduce one of the many traditional material culture of the Saribas Malay, *tikar bergerak*. The main purpose is to uncover this cultural object and its representational element and value to the makers' community. The finding will provide an important knowledge base in the form of a documented reference.

Origin of the Saribas Malay

The scholarly studies of Benedict Sandin (1969) and Sanib Said (2012, 2013) suggested that the Malays of Saribas was originated from two roots; Abang Gudam from Pagaruyung, Minangkabau Sumatra and Temenggong Kadir from Brunei.

According to Sanib in his article *Early History of the Malay Archipelago* (2012), Saribas was long existed among other kingdoms such as Sarawak, Samarahan, Saribas, Kalaka and Malanau (The Lost of Five Kingdoms of Sarawak). These toponyms were revealed in the two indigenous primary sources; i) the royal genealogy of the Sultanate of Brunei in various manuscripts and ii) the 1365 Javanese chronicle, Nagarakertagama. Sanib's extended work on the Malay-Jawi manuscript, *Syair Tarsilah Cetera Abang Gudam Dangan Temenggong Kadir Negeri Saribas*, which was first discovered by Anthony Richards in 1961 narrates about the Lost Kingdom of Saribas that founded by Temenggong Kadir who ran from the sultanate of Brunei and Abang Gudam, who also ran away from the kingdom of Pagaruyung in Sumatra. In present days, five districts of Saribas – Betong, Spaoh, Debak, Puas and Meludam are under the administration of Betong Division.

Material Culture Study of Saribas Malay

According to Prown (1982), the importance of cultural studies is based on four elements: 1) cognitive level - expertise / wisdom, 2) activity activity, 3) accessibility of material and manufacturing technology and 4) value, In cultural object research, objects are used as primary data, linking human relationships with material in understanding various aspects of culture and society, beliefs, values and environment.

Cultural studies of Sarawak Malay society are still new. Although Sarawak is part of Malaysia, there are significant differences in local knowledge and heritage between Sarawak Malay and Malay in Peninsular Malaysia (Awang Azman, 2010). The study of Sarawak Malay culture is mostly focused on Malay in Kuching, for instance, in a book by Hajjah Maimunah (1999) 'Glimpses of Malay Life in Sarawak' and Siti Zaharah Abang Husaini (1991 cited in Awang Azman, 2010). The two books show the lives of Sarawak Malays in the villages around Kuching generally cover culture, language, legacy and tradition activities. Whereas, cultural studies of the Malay community in other parts of Sarawak are very few. Hence the need for this study is seemed to be critical.

Something to Ponder

Whether *tikar bergerang* is part of a cultural influence from Sumatera or somewhere else through the diaspora of Islam is not certainly known as no study has ever associated those similar looking mats found in Sumatera, made by Malay of the Minangkabau and the Romblon mats in the Philippines with the one found in Saribas.



Figure 1

a) Sumatera mat (Source: Nieuwenhuis, 1913) and b) Romblon mat (Source: Bureau of Education, 1913)

Figure 1 shows mats from Sumatera and Romblon Island of Philippine adapted from two different written sources.

Methods and Analysis

This qualitative research approach applies interview, observation and artefact study to gain insight of object's relationships with humans, cultures, values and technologies

The fieldwork was done in two locations; Kampung Hulu Pusa and Kampung Semera in Sadongjaya where the weavers of *tikar bergerang* were identified. Although Sadong Jaya is not part of Saribas, but since there are weavers who still actively weave *tikar bergerang*, skill they have learned from a lady from Saribas, thus they are selected as the respondents of the study. Several sessions of interviews were done with the weavers as well as observation to gather data about *tikar bergerang*. A visit to Sarawak Museum Archives to get access to the *tikar bergerang* collection.

The data gathered is analysed using analytical methods study developed by Fleming (1974) which include observations on physical evidence (design, form, shape, motif), methods and materials of manufacture; and function of *tikar bergerang*. The result is important and help to support narration and description from the interviews.

Result and Discussion

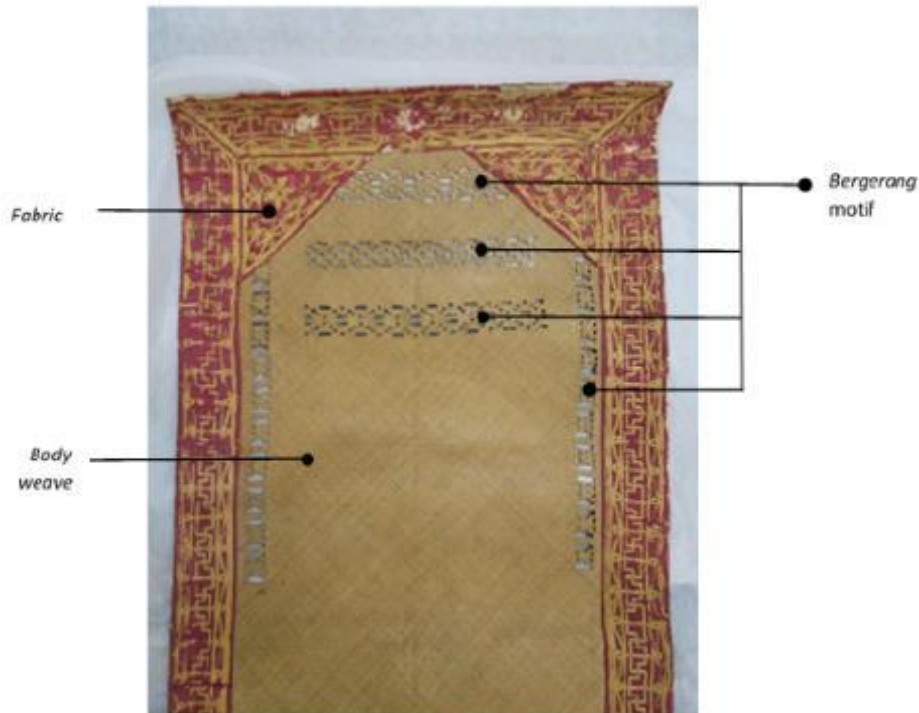
The discussion begins with the interpretation of design, the role and function; material and production and then extended to the challenge and future of *tikar bergerang*.

Design

Tikar bergerang is divided into two main parts; body weave and frame; the *bergerang* motif can be either incorporate with body weave or along the frame.

Figure

2 *Tikar*

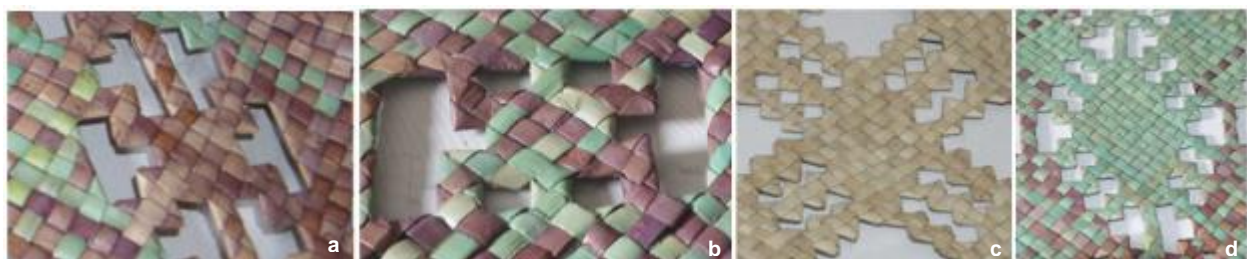


bergerang of Saribas (Source: Sarawak Museum Archive, 2011)

Figure 2 shows *tikar bergerang* from the Sarawak Museum archive, recorded as a prayer mat. The mat was decorated with gold thread embroidered fabric. In another variation, *tikar bergerang* used for prayer mat found with an additional feature, a pouch at a top of the mat to keep *telekung*.

Weaving Technique and Pattern

The weaving technique uses for the body of the mat is the most simple and basic diagonal closed weave. For the *bergerang* pattern, the open work weave is applied. The patterns are inspired by the natural surroundings with geometrical and symmetrical shapes. For example empelam and bunut are local fruits that weavers imitate to create patterns of *bergerang*. Figure 4 shows some common patterns used in *tikar bergerang* such as *katak*, *empelam* and *empelam bertiang*.



Role and Function

Tikar bergerang or berkerang (Saribas local term) is a *pandan* mat with open weave pattern. This mat is believed to be originated from Saribas. This is because, this mat is rarely made and found in other regions in Sarawak. Pusa, Tuie', Spaoh and Semarang are some Malay villages in Saribas where the mat is still made and used. The uniqueness of the mat lies in the intricate open weave pattern, so fine it can create the impression of lace pattern framing the body weave of the mat.

For the Saribas Malay, *tikar bergerang* is a non-utilitarian mat. It reflects their social values and indigenous technology in mat weaving and can be easily distinguished from other mat from the other parts of Sarawak for its distinct characteristics. In the past, the mat had been used as a prayer mat and serves as ceremonial purposes in the wedding and newborn celebration.

The Production

The production of *tikar bergerang* is extremely time consuming since the pattern is intricate and complicated to create. The fundamental material of *tikar bergerang* is *pandan* or srewpine, the most common mat-making material among the Malays in Sarawak. The choice and deployment of the constructive material are dictated by abundant sources of *pandan* within the Saribas locality, easily work on and can be cultivated.

Tools Use in the Production

The tools used in *tikar bergerang* weaving are similar to the ordinary *pandan* weaving. All tools are made by the weavers themselves. Among them are *jangat*, *kikis*, *kayu perapi* and *pisok* (cutter).



Figure 4 Weaving tools

Table 1

Weaving Tools and Functions

No.	Tool	Function
1.	<i>Jangat</i>	The blades to cut <i>pandan</i> leave in longitudinal direction. The interval gap is determined by the size of the <i>bilak</i> (<i>pandan</i> leave size strand). The most common <i>bilak</i> size used are 3mm and 5mm.

2.	<i>Kikis</i>	Metal piece to flatten and straightening the <i>bilak</i> .
3.	<i>Kayu sulat</i>	A piece of wood (<i>kayu belian</i>) that can have variations in the shapes of the tip, pointed and flattening used for lifting the weave when another strip is required to pass through and when an edge is being finished.
4.	<i>Pisok</i>	Cutter to cut the required length of the <i>bilak</i> and for finishing.

The Weavers' Profile



Figure 5 Tikar *bergerang* Weavers: Hajijah and Ngot

Hajijah binti Abg Gom and Ngot binti Bi, are both *pandan* mat weavers. They were introduced to tikar *pandan* *bergerang* and learned the *bergerang* weaving technique by a lady from Tuie, Spaoh through a workshop organized by Kraftangan Sarawak in the late 90's.

Hajijah, aged 70 years old is from Kampung Hulu Pusa where as Ngot is in her eighties from Kampung Semera, Sadong Jaya Samarahan who can master the *bergerang* technique. They are among a small group of individual weavers that have benefited from the workshop by Sawarak Kraftangan.

According to Ngot, although her parents and herself born and stay In Sadongjaya, her grandfather was married to a Beladin's lady, which actually makes her half-Saribas.

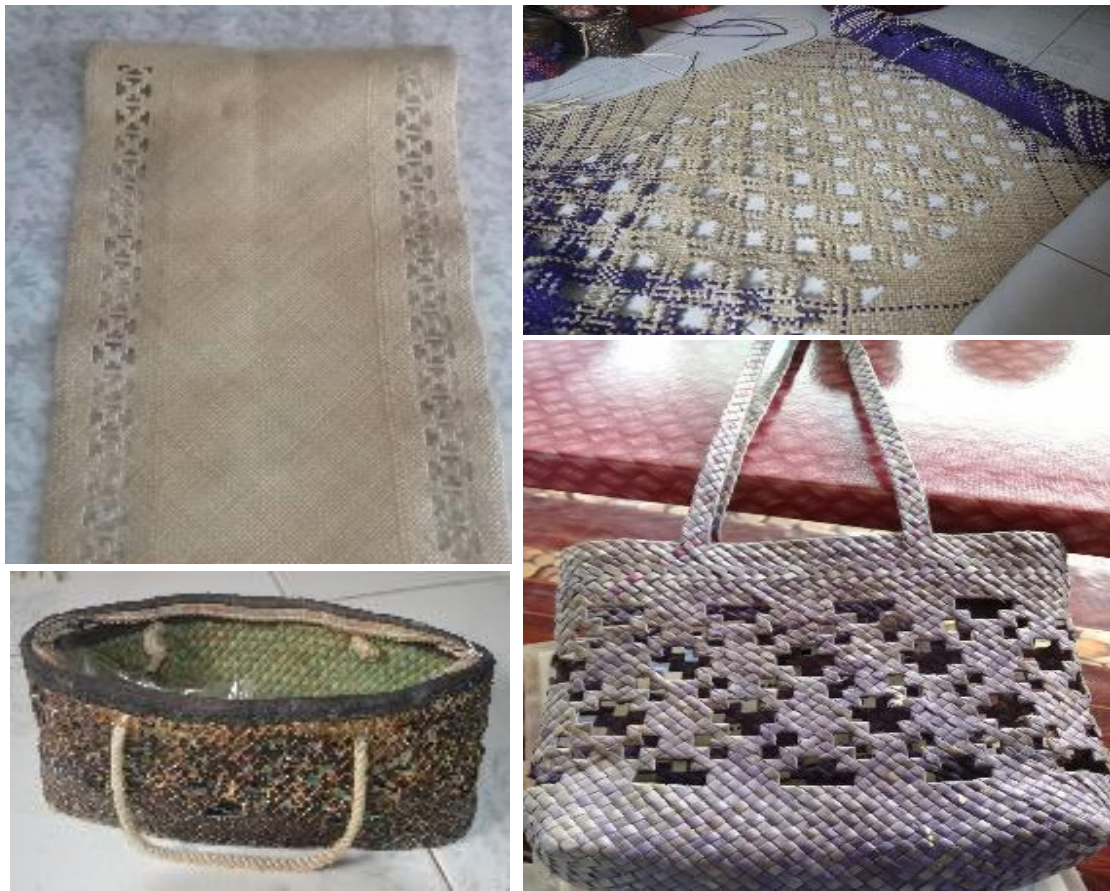


Figure 6 Some Bergerang Products by Hajijah and Ngot

The Future of *Tikar bergerang*

The challenge of *tikar bergerang* or *bergerang* pattern sustainability is twofold – the scarcity source of *pandan* and a number of people who have *bergerang* weaving techniques and able to teach.

Hajijah will only weave when there is *pandan* and demand for *tikar bergerang*. According to her, in Pusa, *pandan* is not easily found now as land is developed for infrastructure road and housing construction. For Ngot, she receives a high demand from craft traders from Kuching. In order to ensure continuous supply of raw material, she cultivates *pandan* in the farm.

The *bergerang* weaving technique is complicated, even though going through the lessons, some just could not grasp the skill. In addition, the young generation is not interested to learn making this tradition and heritage in jeopardy.

Bergerang pattern should not only focus to mat only, but can be diversified into other potential product such as furniture, bags and interior furnishing products. Figure 7 shows *bergerang* pattern that has been integrated with furniture table, chair and panel room divider.



Figure 7 Innovative Products of *Tikar Bergerang* (Photo: Author's Collection, 2012)

Conclusion

Tikar *bergerang* is a reflection of culture and heritage of the Saribas Malay in Sarawak. It was used as a prayer mat and in wedding and newborn celebration imply how it was valued in the community. This indigenous material culture and technology must be sustained as part of the Saribas Malay identity.

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