

THE INFLUENCE OF DAYAK CULTURE ON ARTISTS IN SARAWAK: INSIGHTS FROM VISUAL ANALYSIS AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

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Abstract: This research explores the influence of Dayak culture on seven selected artists, comprising four Dayak and three non-Dayak individuals, residing in Sarawak, East Malaysia. Through semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to understand the significant inspiration that Dayak culture provides to these artists. The findings indicate a noticeable difference in the representation approaches used by each artist in depicting Dayak culture. Formal analysis of the paintings shows that Dayak artists often draw inspiration from local flora, fauna, and landscapes, leading to more abstract representations, whereas non-Dayak artists, influenced by their observations and research, tend to focus on figurative depictions, including traditional Dayak lifestyles and cultural elements like headgear and beads.

Keywords: Dayak Culture, Artist Influence, Visual Analysis, Semi-Structured Interviews, Cultural Representation, Sarawak Artists, Abstract vs Figurative Art

1. INTRODUCTION

Dayak culture has significantly influenced artists in Sarawak, with both Dayak and non-Dayak artists drawing inspiration from it. Historically, Dayak art was created using local resources to depict religious beliefs and traditional motifs. The Brooke period introduced Western artistic styles to Sarawak, leading to diverse representations of Dayak culture. This paper delves into the narratives of seven selected artists to understand why Dayak culture is a major source of inspiration for them, examining the differences in their representational approaches. By analysing the visual representation of Dayak culture in the artworks of these artists, this study explores how they employ various techniques and styles to portray their cultural heritage. Utilizing Stuart Hall's three approaches to representation—reflective, intentional, and constructive—this paper provides a comprehensive discussion of these artistic representations.

Furthermore, this research investigates the differences in how Dayak culture is represented by the selected artists in Sarawak, seeking to understand the diverse perspectives and methods they use. Through this exploration, the study aims to shed light on the broader implications of these representations, particularly in relation to identity politics in Sarawak. By examining how the depiction of Dayak culture in modern art reflects and influences identity, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics and artistic expressions within Sarawak.

In addressing these themes, this paper not only highlights the rich cultural heritage of the Dayak people but also underscores the ongoing dialogue between traditional and contemporary artistic practices in Sarawak. The insights gained from this study provide valuable contributions to the fields of visual arts and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of representation in shaping and reflecting cultural identity.

1.1 Statement Of Problem

Misrepresentation is a major issue in cultural representation within art, leading to stereotypes and superficial perceptions. Essentialism, the idea that artworks must have specific properties to represent a culture, remains a debated topic. This study addresses the need for more research on the representation of Dayak culture in Sarawak's modern visual art to enhance education and understanding of Malaysian Art history.

1.2 Purpose Of The Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the various methods used by seven selected artists to represent Dayak culture. By examining their narratives and the visual elements of their artworks, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between Dayak culture and the artists, as well as its influence on their artistic choices.

1.3 Significance Of The Study

The study will contribute to Malaysian Art history literature and improve understanding of cultural representation in Sarawak's visual arts. It aims to provide valuable insights for researchers, students, and artists, and promote the inclusion of Sarawak art history in Malaysian art education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping artistic expression, yet its specific impact on Sarawakian artists, particularly in relation to Dayak culture, remains insufficiently explored. This paper aims to examine how Dayak cultural influences manifest in the artworks of Sarawakian artists through visual analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Representation within visual arts has been extensively theorized by scholars such as Dyer (1993) and Hall (1997), who argue that media representations influence societal perceptions of identity and culture (Dyer, 1993; Hall, 1997). Sheriff (1996) explores European artists' engagements with non-Western cultures, highlighting how these interactions shaped modern European art (Sheriff, 1996). Such insights into cross-cultural artistic exchanges provide a framework for understanding how Dayak culture may influence Sarawakian artists.

Draper's (2000) study on South African artists underscores the intersection of racial identity and artistic representation, offering parallels for exploring Dayak cultural influences in Sarawakian art (Draper, 2000). Barbour (2015) critiques cultural representations within popular media, emphasizing the implications of misrepresentation and appropriation (Barbour, 2015).

Moreover, the literature underscores the critical role of culture in shaping artistic identities and expressions. Articles by Tettoni and Ong (1993) and Gill (1998) discuss traditional arts and crafts in Sarawak yet fail to explore contemporary artistic practices and their cultural dimensions. Avé and King (1996), Chin and Mashman (1999), and

Thung, Maunati, & Kedit (2003) provide glimpses into the multiethnic and multicultural identity of Sarawak, laying the groundwork for understanding how Dayak culture influences contemporary artistic practices.

Further exploration of Sarawak's visual arts reveals that despite advancements in documenting traditional arts, there remains a dearth of research on how contemporary Sarawakian artists interpret and incorporate Dayak cultural elements into their artworks (Avé & King, 1996; Tettoni & Ong, 1993; Gill, 1998).

The literature review reveals a comprehensive overview of how cultural representations influence artistic practices globally, with a particular focus on Sarawakian artists' engagement with Dayak culture. By examining visual artworks and conducting interviews with Sarawakian artists, this paper aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which Dayak culture influences artistic practices in Sarawak, contributing to a deeper understanding of cultural representation within visual arts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative research investigates the profound influence of Dayak culture on contemporary artists practicing in Sarawak, exploring how cultural elements shape artistic identities, thematic choices, and creative expressions. Drawing on Stuart Hall's framework of representation (Hall, 1997), the study conceptualizes artworks as dynamic sites where cultural meanings and identities are constructed and negotiated, rather than static reflections of cultural heritage.

3.2 Sampling Method

The research employs purposive sampling to select a diverse group of artists whose works prominently feature Dayak motifs, symbols, or narratives, reflecting varied interpretations and engagements with Dayak culture within the local art scene.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with participating artists to explore their personal connections to Dayak culture, motivations for incorporating cultural elements into their art, and reflections on the cultural significance of their creative outputs. Through these interviews, the study captures rich qualitative data on artists' lived experiences, perspectives, and the interplay between personal heritage and artistic practice.

3.3 Selection Criteria

Artists were selected based on the following criteria:

- Active professional or semi-professional artists.
- Known to incorporate elements of Dayak culture in their artwork.
- Represent a mix of Dayak and non-Dayak backgrounds to provide diverse perspectives.

3.4 Selected Participants

The study involved seven artists, four of whom are of Dayak heritage and three of whom are non-Dayak. Below is a list of the participating artists along with a brief background for each:



Figure 1:
Narong Daun

Narong Daun: A celebrated Dayak artist for her vibrant batik silk paintings, a craft she has mastered over a span of 15 years. Her artistic themes draw inspiration from Sarawak's rich flora, fauna, and Dayak cultural heritage. Her works have graced exhibitions across Malaysia, Thailand, India, Australia, and even Hawaii. Despite being self-taught without formal art education, her talent and dedication shine through in her expressive creations.



Figure 2:
Petrus Alfred

Petrus Alfred: A Dayak artist and was a lecturer in the Faculty of Graphic Design at Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology and the current president of Sarawak Artists Society. He is renowned for his stylistic human figures and impressionist depictions of local landscapes, often highlighting rural Dayak lifestyles and environments. Known for his keen eye for light and shadow, he frequently incorporates movement into his paintings. Petrus also specializes in graphic design, metal sculptures, and caricatures. He studied at PA.LIN Art School in Singapore and Billy Blue School of Art in Australia, where he was introduced to impressionism and abstract art.



Figure 3:
Sylvester Wielding Anak Jussem

Sylvester Wielding Anak Jussem: A Dayak artist and a lecturer at the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts at University Malaysia Sarawak. His paintings feature a wide range of imagery reflecting his interactions, experiences, and observations of the Sarawak rainforest and Dayak culture. He earned a diploma in Fine Art & Design from the Institute of Technology, Shah Alam, Selangor, and a Master's in Fine Art from the Pratt Institute School of Art & Design, Brooklyn, New York, USA.



Figure 4:
Raphael Scott Ahbeng

Raphael Scott Ahbeng: One of Sarawak's most established and admired abstract Dayak artists. While studying in Europe, he travelled extensively and was heavily influenced by European masters. However, his heritage and culture remain his greatest inspirations. Raphael is renowned for his bold strokes and striking colour combinations, particularly in his depictions of Sarawak's natural landscapes. He studied Art and Photography at Bath Academy of Art in the UK and later took a drama course in London, during which he travelled to Germany, Spain, Italy, and France.



Figure 5:
Gabrielle Lim Mei Joo

Gabrielle Lim Mei Joo: A non-Dayak artist skilled in various mediums, including acrylic, watercolour, ink, charcoal, and mixed media. She primarily paints realistic subjects, with a particular focus on human figures, drawing inspiration from the Dayak community in Sarawak. Formerly a member of Atelier and Sarawak Fine Arts Society (2001-2002), she has been a member and the secretary of Sarawak Artists Society since 2002. Gabrielle studied at Sarawak Fine Art Academy, where she learned to paint in various mediums. She holds a Diploma in Graphic Design from the Malaysian Institute of Art and a bachelor's degree in graphic design from Berkeley International University.



Figure 6:
Emmanuel Osakue

Emmanuel Osakue: A West African visual artist now based in Kuching, Sarawak, is known for his unique technique of burning and scraping plywood to create images, earning him the nickname "the artist who paints with fire." His artworks are inspired by traditional cultures from both Nigeria and Sarawak. Currently a senior lecturer, Program Leader, and Academic Coordinator at Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology, Osakue holds a Bachelor's degree in painting from the University of Nigeria (1994), a Master's degree from UNIMAS (2003), and a Doctorate from UNIMAS (2015).



Figure 7:
Ramsay Ong Liang Thong

Ramsay Ong Liang Thong: A non-Dayak artist whom earned recognition as an award-winning batik artist. He travelled extensively in the 1960s, drawing inspiration from artists in Hawaii and Australia, and began using bark cloth as a canvas for his paintings. Upon his return, he further developed his painting career by using processed bark from the *Tekalong*, or wild breadfruit tree, which the Dayaks of Sarawak traditionally used to make garments. Ramsay is a self-taught artist without any formal education in art.

3.5 Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with each artist to gather detailed narratives about their inspirations, artistic processes, and perspectives on Dayak culture. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed to identify common themes and unique insights.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis integrates thematic analysis of interview transcripts with systematic examination of artworks, aiming to identify recurring themes, motifs, and stylistic approaches that characterize the influence of Dayak culture on Sarawakian artists. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and cultural sensitivity, are rigorously observed throughout the research process to ensure respectful engagement with participants and their cultural narratives. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks with empirical insights, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Dayak cultural heritage informs artistic expression in Sarawak, highlighting the role of artists as cultural interpreters and the significance of art in preserving and transmitting cultural identities across generations.

4. DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Dayak Culture as Inspiration

From the narratives gathered through the conducted interviews, a notable contrast emerges in how Dayak culture inspires selected artists, particularly between Dayak and non-Dayak artists. The Dayak artists are primarily inspired by nature and their childhood experiences, while non-Dayak artists draw inspiration from their observations and research on Dayak culture.

4.1.1 Getting Inspiration from Nature and Childhood Experience

Narong Daun, a self-taught artist, attributes her inspiration to the natural surroundings she has been exposed to since childhood. She recollects:

"I like to seek inspiration from nature because it exists without human interference. It's very peaceful and not busy. Nature is a beauty we often don't realize, and that's why I choose to paint it. If I paint it on silk and hang it on a wall, people will eventually see its beauty. Growing up in a Bidayuh community, we were always exposed to nature, which is why it remains my preferred subject matter. There's a lot of unnoticed beauty in nature that reveals itself only when we observe it properly."

In addition to nature, her childhood experiences living with her grandparents, who practiced native rituals, made her more aware of her cultural identity as an artist. She describes:

"My late grandfather was a ketua Gawai (Shaman). Watching him and my grandmother perform rituals during Gawai (Dayak festival) in traditional costumes with special beads left a lasting impression on me. I remember them performing chants on the veranda and wearing traditional garments. I loved seeing their costumes and helping with the rituals. These experiences deeply influenced my artistic expression."

Similarly, Petrus Alfred recalls his childhood in the Singgai army camp, where he often doodled scenes from his excursions in the jungle with friends. He states:

"As a child, I would go hunting for fruits and berries in the jungle. It was our source of entertainment. I loved the scenery, the different kinds of leaves, small streams, and water snails we found. These experiences inspired my drawings."

Sylvester Jussem's inspiration came after realizing how little was known about Dayak culture overseas during his studies. He recalls:

"In 1983, I participated in the ASEAN Youth Workshop in Thailand, where I met the late Thawan Duchanee, a great Thai painter. He critiqued my work, asking me about my roots and where I came from. This prompted me to return to Sarawak and explore my cultural heritage. I began drawing totem poles and researching Iban and Orang Ulu motifs. The native lifestyle, especially the Punan's wood carvings, inspired me deeply. Observing their daily lives and rituals gave me rich material for my art."

Raphael Scott Ahbeng credits his rough childhood experiences in a boarding school as part of his artistic inspiration and self-development. He recalls:

"My childhood memories, though not always pleasant, educated me and made me a better person. These experiences are reflected in my art. I used to draw cartoons of my schoolmates and whatever they were doing. My interest in art was natural and never waned. Living in a Bidayuh village also influenced my art, as I observed their daily routines and lifestyle."

These narratives emphasize how the selected Dayak artists draw significant inspiration from their natural surroundings and childhood experiences, shaping their unique artistic perspectives.

4.1.2 Getting Inspiration from Observation and Research

Gabrielle, a non-Dayak artist, respects Dayak culture and incorporates its elements into her work through careful observation and research. She explains:

"Dayak culture is a significant part of Sarawak's identity. Although I live a Sarawakian Chinese lifestyle, I find Dayak culture fascinating, especially their rituals and garments. To portray the culture respectfully, artists should research it thoroughly. With modernization, traditional rituals and garments are slowly forgotten. I travelled to Penan and Bidayuh rural areas to observe these traditions firsthand, aiming to celebrate and conserve them before they disappear."

Emmanuel also emphasizes the importance of research in his representation of Dayak culture. He states:

"Creativity is influenced by the environment. The Dayak culture, with its rich motifs, is beautiful and significant. After studying these motifs extensively, I reflect them in my work unconsciously. I've explored many Dayak cultural elements, particularly Iban and Bidayuh, through intensive research."

Ramsay Ong, captivated by Dayak culture, has dedicated significant effort to researching it. He recollects:

"I find Dayak culture enchanting and representative of Sarawak. I used to be obsessed with collecting hornbill carvings, which connected me to the culture. Observation is crucial for an artist, but it's also important to engage the mind and interpret the culture beyond what is seen. Developing a unique artistic identity requires going beyond mere observation."

These narratives reveal that the non-Dayak artists approach Dayak culture through extensive observation and research, resulting in a more reflective representation of the culture in their artworks.

4.2 Politics of Identity of Sarawak Through Representation of Dayak Culture in Modern Art

This section explores how representations of Dayak culture reflect the politics of identity in Sarawak, examining the cultural identity and perception of the selected artists regarding Dayak culture.

From an essentialist perspective, cultural identity is seen as having 'true meanings' that must be present for accurate representation. Most of the artists in this study exhibit essentialist tendencies by depicting traditional Dayak elements in their work. For example, Gabrielle's artworks highlight traditional Dayak cultural accessories, which she considers the 'true meaning' of the culture. This strict essentialist viewpoint can limit Dayak culture to specific objects and practices, potentially creating a reductive view of the culture.

However, there is a noticeable shift towards an anti-essentialist perspective among the artists, where identities are seen as fluid and ever-changing. This viewpoint is evident in the narratives of Petrus, Sylvester, and Raphael, who recognize that cultural identity is complex and constantly evolving. This shift allows for a more multifaceted representation of Dayak culture in Sarawak's modern art.

5. DISCUSSION

The data reveals a significant difference in the approaches to representation among the selected artists, influenced by their perceptions of Dayak culture. The non-Dayak artists, such as Gabrielle, Emmanuel, and Ramsay, exhibit a sense of separation from Dayak culture, often employing a reflective approach in their artworks. Their representations focus on traditional Dayak elements, reflecting their appreciation and admiration for the culture.

In contrast, the Dayak artists, such as Narong, Petrus, Sylvester, and Raphael, have a more flexible and indefinite perception of Dayak culture. Their representations are influenced by their rural childhood experiences and a deep connection to nature, leading to a more constructive approach in their artworks. The study highlights that the perception of Dayak culture and ideas about cultural identity significantly influence the representation approaches of the selected artists, showcasing the crucial role of culture in art.

Analysing the artworks and narratives from the interviews reveals a clear difference between Dayak and non-Dayak artists in their representation of Dayak culture. The Dayak artists draw inspiration from local sceneries and childhood experiences, resulting in a more suggestive and abstract representation of Dayak culture. In contrast, the non-Dayak artists' inspirations stem from their appreciation and admiration for Dayak culture, leading to more straightforward representations based on observation and research. Their respective perceptions of cultural identity and Dayak culture significantly influence their approaches to representation,

demonstrating the diverse ways in which Dayak culture is interpreted and expressed in Sarawak's modern art.

6. DISCUSSION

This study explored how representations of Dayak culture in modern art reflect identity politics in Sarawak. Through participant narratives, it became evident that while traditional aspects of Dayak culture remain prevalent in artworks, many artists have adopted a fluid and evolving view of cultural identity. This shift challenges rigid definitions, emphasizing a dynamic understanding of identity that evolves with time and experience. This research addresses a significant gap in the literature on Sarawak visual arts by examining the representation of Dayak culture. The findings highlight the pivotal role of Dayak culture in shaping artists' works and reveal distinct approaches to its representation. For non-Dayak artists, a perceived separation from Dayak culture influences their representation, often focusing on traditional elements. This contrasts with Dayak artists, who embody a more fluid and nuanced perspective, aligning with anti-essentialist viewpoints in Cultural Studies that reject static cultural definitions. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions on culture and identity in art, encouraging a deeper exploration of Dayak culture's impact on Sarawak's modern arts scene. It is anticipated that this study will stimulate further dialogue on the relationship between Dayak culture and Sarawak's modern arts, fostering awareness of diverse cultural representations and their significance within the artistic community.

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