

Visual Arts in the Vernacular Settlements: Aesthetic Values and Significance of Beliefs in the Komburongo Ritual Tool in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

Komburongo is a ritual tool used by the Kadazan Dusun people in Sabah, Malaysia. Besides the *komburongo* rhizome, these tools feature various decorations, including wooden fruits, animal fangs, animal horns, beads, shells, small bells, coins, fabric or red thread, and small bottles. This paper examines the aesthetic values of the *komburongo* ritual tool and how its decorative materials relate to the beliefs of the Kadazan Dusun.

The central research question is whether the decorative materials of the *komburongo* ritual tool are believed to possess mystical powers. This field-based study gathered qualitative data through in-depth and focus group interviews with knowledgeable informants from Kadazan Dusun vernacular settlements in Membakut, Tuaran, Kota Belud, Ranau, Kota Marudu, and Pitas in Sabah. Additional data came from observing different *komburongo* ritual tools and reviewing related secondary published materials.

The analysis revealed that while some decorative materials are believed to have mystical powers, others do not. In addition to enhancing the tool as a visually appealing art piece based on the makers' creativity, some materials are rooted in Kadazan Dusun beliefs that they possess spiritual power, thereby augmenting the mystical significance of the *komburongo* ritual tool. Conversely, other materials serve solely to beautify the tool. This study underscores the importance of decorations both as a visual art form and in reflecting the ancestral beliefs of the Kadazan Dusun.

Keywords: *Komburongo*, Kadazan Dusun, ritual tool, visual arts, beliefs.

Introduction

Komburongo (*Acorus calamus*) is a type of plant that is cultivated around certain vernacular settlements of the Kadazan Dusun people in Sabah since the past to date. During field studies conducted in several districts in Sabah from 2014 to 2017, the researchers found that some Kadazan Dusun people in Kota Belud, Pitas, Membakut, Kuala Penyu, and Ranau, near their settlements (Fig. 1), cultivate this plant. From the rhizomes of the *komburongo* plant (Fig. 2), which are cut and dried, the Kadazan Dusun people create a ritual tool also known as

komburongo (Fig. 3). With this *komburongo* ritual tool, the ritual specialists among the Kadazan Dusun conduct ceremonies to invoke a type of important spirit, known as the spirit of *komburongo*, aiming to assist them in resolving various life crises such as unsuccessful crops, warding off malevolent spirits disrupting their peace, health issues, and many other challenges in their lives (Low and Ishak, 2018).



Fig. 1: *Komburongo* plant cultivated near the residential area of the Tobilung (one of the Kadazan Dusun subgroups) in Kota Belud, Sabah
Source: Courtesy of Ick Ellyrenzine Linsap



Fig. 2: Leaves (top), rhizomes (middle), and roots of the *komburongo* plant (bottom)
Source: Courtesy of Ick Ellyrenzine Linsap



Fig. 3: *Komburongo* ritual tool crafted from *komburongo* rhizomes (arrow)
Source: Authors

Based on observations of the *komburongo* ritual tool, the researchers found that in addition to *komburongo* rhizomes, most are decorated with various materials such as shells, wooden fruits, wild boar tusks, deer antlers, coins, and beads. Consequently, the designs of the

komburongo ritual tool among different Kadazan Dusun ethnic groups vary. This raises the question of why these decorations are necessary. Additionally, the answers obtained from different sources vary. For example, Low and Ishak (2018) note that adornments on the *komburongo* ritual tool serve the purpose of beautification only. In contrast, Evans (1953) records that the Dusun Tindal believe that seeds of plants like bakau and lampakau, which adorn the *komburongo* ritual tool, possess protective spirits and powers similar to *komburongo* spirit. Therefore, this paper explores the aesthetic values and the beliefs of the Kadazan Dusun in relation to those decorative materials attached to the various *komburongo* ritual tools. The objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. To analyze the aesthetic values in various *komburongo* ritual tools.
2. To analyze whether the decorative materials (aside from *komburongo* rhizomes) incorporated into this ritual tool serve purely decorative purposes or hold spiritual significance among the Kadazan Dusun.

Theoretical Framework

Ritual Beliefs

The ideas of ritual beliefs related to ritual objects among the Kadazan Dusun and their aesthetic values as artworks are central to this investigation. Regarding beliefs and ritual objects, Panner (2024) quotes the famous sociologist Emile Durkheim, who stated that the reference or object of a ritual represents the belief system of a society, which consists of the sacred and the profane. According to Panner (2024), belief systems, myths, and similar constructs are viewed as expressions of the nature of the sacred realm, with ritual serving as the determined conduct of individuals in a society, expressing a relationship to both the sacred and the profane. All rituals depend on a belief system for their full meaning.

According to Brown and Dissanayake (2018), the arts provide an emotionally felt and transcendent means of establishing contact with supernatural beings in rituals. Ladd and Spilka (2002), Spilka et al. (2003), and Poloma and Lee (2011) note that such contact involves drawing the being's attention to oneself, followed by expressions of request, penitence, praise, and so on. Hence, Brown and Dissanayake (2018) conclude that art-permeated religious ceremonial rituals are intended to attract and establish contact with supernatural beings.

Regarding ritual objects, Patera (2012) states that the only reason to label something as a ritual object is its presence within a sacred space. Additionally, Auboyer (2024) notes that ritual objects are used to compel the sacred (or divine) realm to act in a way that favors the participants of the rituals. The purpose is to prevent the transcendent realm from endangering them. These objects can thus serve as mediatory devices to contact the divine world, such as the drums used by shamans.

Aesthetic Values

In terms of aesthetic values in art, Shelley (2022) suggests that the concept of aesthetics is closely related to the concept of taste. The eighteenth-century theory of taste emerged as a counterbalance to the rise of rationalism, particularly in its application to beauty, and to the rise of egoism, particularly in its application to virtue. Sibley (2001) explains that aesthetics involves a type of perception, where people must appreciate the grace or unity of a work, hear the plaintiveness or frenzy in music, notice the gaudiness of a color scheme, and feel the power, mood, or uncertainty of tone in a novel. According to Beardsley (1982), the aesthetic value of an object lies in its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification when experienced correctly and completely. In contrast, Davies (2004) argues that the contextual ontology view considers an artwork not only by its aesthetic physical elements (aesthetic ontology) but also by its contextual aspects, including its historical setting, social role, function, the role of technology, and other cultural factors that influence the understanding of the artwork. Supangkat and Zaelani (2006) conclude that aesthetics is a field of knowledge centered on the concept of beauty. It encompasses both the creation of artwork and the ways in which people perceive and appreciate it.

Ismail (1989) formulates the elements of aesthetics associated with the production of designs in a creative composition. Fig. 4 below summarizes the theory of design production through the division of basic elements according to arrangement. Based on Fig. 5, it illustrates that the position of aesthetic design aligns with the position of functional design. Aesthetic design in the diagram implies the result of decorative techniques that emphasize ornamentation and pattern design. Ornamentation is determined by the form and style through motifs and patterns.

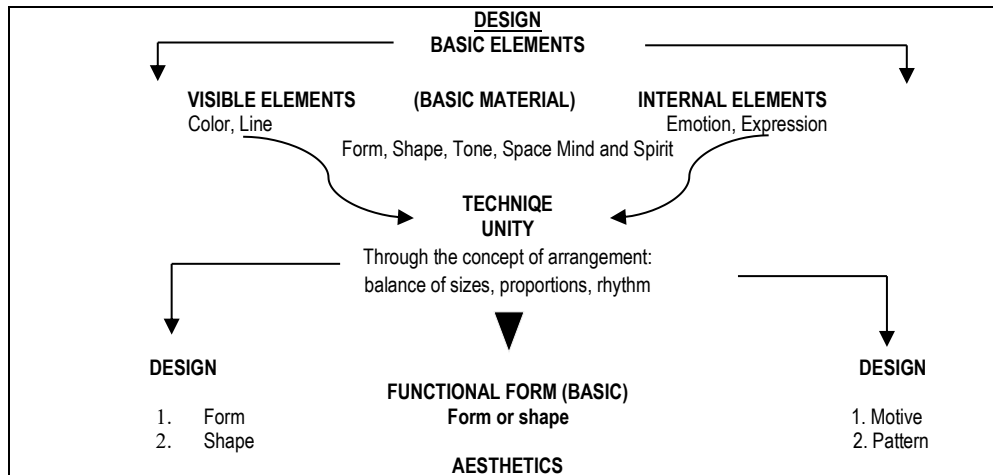


Fig. 4: Summary of design theory
Source: Ismail, 1989

Motifs and patterns do not exhibit a clear distinction as both serve as decorations. Motifs and patterns are integral parts of aesthetic design that are interconnected. Motifs are the primary elements in ornamentation that form the basis for paintings, carvings, clothing, and handicrafts. When motifs arrange in a space, patterns are created (Ismail, 1989).

Regarding aesthetic elements, Ab Hamid (2011) explains that the concept of aesthetics is something to enjoy directly through the appreciation of art. There are two approaches used in the aesthetic concept for art appreciation. First, the human desire to explore the beauty present in objects or surfaces found in works of art. Second, it is the feeling that arises from the experience of beauty (aesthetics) gained through art appreciation. Beardsley (1982) also presents three characteristics that can give rise to aesthetic elements, namely unity, complexity, and intensity. These three components are a framework that can give artistic works aesthetic value. These characteristics are used to observe and identify the aesthetic elements of a work from the perspectives of color, theme, and performance style. Researchers based on the aesthetic theory used can examine the essence of meaning in a work of art.

The design and aesthetics theory proposed by Ismail (1989), Ab Hamid (2011), and Beardsley (1982) clearly indicate that a produced design has a special aesthetic value. Researchers use this theoretical perspective to examine the design of *komburongo* and assess the aesthetic elements of the decorations present in the design of *komburongo*. The analysis of the design and aesthetics of the *komburongo* ritual tool aims to address the question of whether the decorations on this ritual tool are intended solely for beautification or hold significant beliefs for the Kadazan Dusun people.

From the perspective of the creation myth theory, Bascom (1957 & 1965) and Dundes (1984) explain that myths and legends are oral narrative prose passed down through generations, believed to be true by their followers. Myths, whose characters consist of the Creator and sacred deities, are considered holy. Therefore, Bascom (1965) reports that myths are accepted as faith and referred to as a source to answer questions related to ancient beliefs. Myths are also associated with religious knowledge and rituals.

Furthermore, Dundes (1984) explains that myths are a kind of sacred narrative that tells the origin of the world and humanity. This aspect of sacredness distinguishes myths from ordinary folktales, which are considered fiction. Unlike fictional folktales, myths contain elements of the beliefs of the community narrating them and are not considered mere nonsense. In other words, the sacred elements of myths, believed to be true and containing the beliefs of the community that inherits them, as articulated by Bascom (1957 & 1965) and Dundes (1984), serve as a guide for the researcher in analyzing the belief elements associated with the *komburongo* ritual tool later.

Review of Literature

Aesthetic Values, Beliefs and Tools in Rituals

There are a few previous significant research relating to the concepts of aesthetic values, beliefs and tools in rituals. Brown and Dissanayaki (2018) argue that the nineteenth-century concept of a total work of art has deep evolutionary roots in religious practice across cultures, supported by anthropological and ethological analyses of the arts. They suggest that ceremonial rituals, especially those in religious contexts, function as assemblages of artistic behaviors and objects, serving as precursors to later aesthetic practices with a quasi-religious flavor. They also claim that long before the formalization of the total work of art, religious ceremonies exhibited all its key features. This argument implies a co-evolution of religion and the arts throughout human history. Brown and Dissanayaki's (2018) analysis provides a compelling link between religious rituals and the evolution of aesthetic practices. However, their argument could benefit from more examples across diverse cultures to support the universality of their claims. Additionally, while they highlight the co-evolution of religion and the arts, further exploration into how this relationship influenced specific art forms and practices would enhance the depth of their study.

Brown and Dissanayaki (2018) emphasize the role of the arts in facilitating a transcendent connection during rituals, highlighting the emotional and aesthetic dimensions. Meanwhile, Ladd, Spilka (2002) concentrate on the procedural aspects of interacting with supernatural beings, detailing specific actions and expressions involved. While Brown and Dissanayaki (2018) provide a broader, more abstract perspective on the function of rituals, the latter researchers offer a more concrete, behavior-focused analysis. Combining these views could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between belief, ritual, and the arts in religious practices.

In relation to ritual objects, Patera (2012) emphasizes that many rituals rely on material supports, which act as identifiers of ritual attitudes alongside oral performances and gestures. Auboyer (2024) elaborates that throughout religious and cultural history, objects used in cults and rituals have served both utilitarian and symbolic purposes. These ceremonial objects facilitate communication between the sacred, supernatural, and profane realms. They are sometimes used to influence the sacred realm to act favorably toward participants or to protect them from harm. Patera's observation of the dual role of ritual objects—as both practical tools and symbolic markers—underscores their multifaceted significance. However, the analysis would be strengthened by incorporating specific examples of such objects from various cultures to illustrate this point more vividly. Auboyer's historical perspective enriches the discussion by highlighting the enduring dual nature of ritual objects. Yet, the claim that objects can compel the sacred realm warrants further examination, potentially by exploring the belief systems that support this idea. Integrating these perspectives offers a comprehensive understanding of the role of objects in ritual practices, but additional empirical evidence and cross-cultural analysis could further bolster the arguments.

In the context of Kadazan Dusun traditional beliefs, Mat Kib (2003) reports that before the natives of Sabah embraced Christianity and Islam, their lives were significantly influenced by beliefs in good and evil spirits, ghosts, and supernatural beings. Evans (1978) adds that the Kadazan Dusun believed spirits resided in all surrounding objects, plants, and household equipment. Consequently, their daily activities were shaped by these beliefs and governed by related taboos. According to Williams (1965), personal crises such as birth, sickness, death,

fortune, hunting, and crop yields were seen as events requiring specific ritual behaviors to interact with these spiritual forces.

Numerous studies have been conducted on Kadazan Dusun traditional agricultural practices, particularly concerning rice planting and the ritual significance of rice (Kitingan & Drynan, 1982; Metussin & Antaran, 2002; Hussein, 2006; Pugh-Kitingan, 2012). Low and Pugh-Kitingan (2015) explore the traditional beliefs and rituals of the Kimaragang, a Kadazan Dusun subgroup, related to rice planting and the impact of Christian conversion. They conclude that the Kimaragang's traditional hill rice cultivation was rich with ritual, performed by *bobolian* or priestesses, to avert bad omens, prevent attacks by evil spirits, and invite the favor of paddy spirits to ensure a good harvest. This collection of studies provides a comprehensive view of the Kadazan Dusun's intricate relationship with the spiritual world, particularly in the context of agriculture. Mat Kib, Evans, and Williams effectively highlight the pervasive influence of spiritual beliefs in daily life and personal crises. The detailed accounts of rice-related rituals by Kitingan & Drynan, Metussin & Antaran, Hussein, Pugh-Kitingan, and Low & Pugh-Kitingan underscore the cultural importance of these practices.

Ritual specialists play a very important role in conducting rituals among the Kadazan Dusun people. Typically, these specialists are mainly women, although there are also male ritual experts. The roles of male and female ritual experts differ (Low & Marshall, 2013). According to Evans (1953), women, known as *bobolian*, conduct almost all major religious ceremonies among the Dusun. In the Kimaragang community, for example, both women and men can be *bobolian*, although the spiritual power and knowledge of *rinait* (ritual poetry) among female *bobolian* are considered superior to their male counterparts. Male ritual experts assist in some other minor ceremonies (Low & Pugh-Kitingan, 2015).

Kimwah and Sauffi (2023) state that the ritual practitioner was pivotal in shaping the early beliefs of prehistoric societies in the Painted Cave of Sarawak, the neighbor state of Sabah. These practitioners led their communities in invoking supernatural powers to ensure safety, health, and protection from major disasters. In the similar context, the ritual practitioners of the Kadazan Dusun play an analogous role, guiding their communities in spiritual matters.

In Sabah, some Kadazan Dusun people as a traditional remedy for stomachaches and fever also use the *komburongo* plant (Tongkul 2002). Studies by Low and Ismail (2016 & 2018), Linsap and Low (2021a & 2021b) find that *komburongo* has three distinct identities: as a plant, a ritual tool, and a spirit assistant to the Kadazan Dusun people. In the belief system of the Kadazan Dusun people, *komburongo* serves as a spiritual assistant with the power to aid the Kadazan Dusun ritual specialist in resolving spiritual issues or any other spiritual disturbances in their daily lives. In the context of this study, all significant ceremonies conducted by Kadazan Dusun ritual specialist require the assistance of the *komburongo* ritual tool. This emphasizes the crucial role of the *komburongo* ritual tool in the spiritual matters of the Kadazan Dusun people.

In conclusion, previous studies have emphasized the spiritual beliefs and significance associated with many aspects of *komburongo*, but they have not focused on the aesthetic values of the decorative aspects of the *komburongo* ritual tool based on the local beliefs of the Kadazan Dusun people. While the existing studies provide valuable insights into the spiritual significance of *komburongo*, they overlook the aesthetic dimensions that are integral to understanding the full cultural context of the ritual tool. By addressing this gap, the authors offer a more holistic perspective on the *komburongo*, enriching the broader understanding of Kadazan Dusun cultural practices.

Research Method

This qualitative research gathers data related to the aesthetic values and beliefs associated with decorative materials through field trips. Researchers conducted field trips in various Kadazan Dusun villages in Sabah (Fig. 5). The researchers used both in-depth interviews and focus group interviews to gather information from informants knowledgeable about *komburongo* beliefs. The focus was on informants such as *bobolian* (ritual specialists) and knowledgeable elders. In addition to interviews, the researchers took photographs of the

komburongo plant and ritual tools belonging to the informants. Observation was also employed to study the design and materials used to make *komburongo* ritual tools.



Fig. 5: Field study districts of Sabah

Source: Authors

This paper analyzes data using two theoretical perspectives. First, it employs aesthetic design theory to examine the design and decorative aspects of the *komburongo* ritual tool. Second, it applies creation myth theory to interpret the belief aspects of the *komburongo* ritual tool. The objectives of the analysis are to examine whether the decorations on the *komburongo* ritual tool hold significant beliefs or are purely ornamental. Understanding this distinction is crucial for grasping the beliefs of the Kadazan Dusun people regarding one of the key ritual tools in their lives, both historically and in the present.

Findings and Discussions

The Kadazan Dusun, the largest indigenous people residing in the state of Sabah, Malaysia, consist of various subgroups, including the Tobilung, Dusun Ranau, Kadazan Membakut, and Dusun Lotud, among others. This study focuses on their vernacular settlements in Kota Belud, Pitas, Membakut, Kuala Penyu, and Ranau (Fig. 1). Traditionally, they are farmers who cultivate hill paddy and hunt animals for meat. For instance, Low and Pugh-Kitingan (2015) note that many Kimaragang (a Kadazan Dusun subgroup) still grow hill rice, maize, and vegetables on their sloping land.

Regarding their traditional beliefs, Mat Kib (2003) reports that before embracing Christianity and Islam, the natives of Sabah deeply believed in good and evil spirits, ghosts, and supernatural beings, which played a significant role in their lives. The Kadazan Dusun, for example, believe that surrounding objects, plants, and even household items possess spirits. Consequently, their daily activities have traditionally been influenced by these spiritual beliefs and are strongly governed by related taboos (Evans 1990). Williams (1965) adds that specific rituals to address the forces responsible for these events mark personal crises such as birth, illness, death, fortune, hunting and crop yields.

The ritual ceremony is conducted by the ritual specialist via reciting *rinait* (ritual verses) with the *komburongo* ritual tool (Low and Ishak, 2018). As mentioned before, *komburongo* ritual tool is used to invoke the spirit of *komburongo* in conducting various traditional rituals of the Kadazan Dusun. According to Low and Ishak (2018), the purpose of the *komburongo* ritual is to resolving various misfortune happenings in their life such as unsuccessful crops, warding off malevolent spirits disrupting their peace, health issues, and so on. Other than the rhizomes of the *komburongo* plant believed to possess *komburongo* spirit, the researchers observed that most of these ritual tools are decorated with various materials. In



relation to this, some informants believed that the decoration materials on the *komburongo* serve only to beautify the ritual tool (like Tialum binti Siwoi, pers. comm, July 18, 2014, Suanoi pers. comm., May 27, 2018 and Kansimin Dalani, pers. comm., December 21, 2021) while others mention that the decorations are assisting spirit that strengthens the mystical power of the *komburongo* spirit (Sigin binti Dalani, pers. comm., January 7, 2022, Bugar Gunting, pers. comm., June 6, 2022, Siti Nor Hasemah binti Sapuddin, pers. comm., April 23, 2016). The objective of following discussions is to unravelling whether the decorative elements on the *komburongo* ritual tool are purely decorating purposes or hold significant spiritual beliefs among the Kadazan Dusun people.

***Komburongo* Design and Its Aesthetic Values**

Before the connection between decorations and beliefs in the *komburongo* ritual tool is analyze, the authors will first analyze the design, decorations, and aesthetics of the *komburongo* as a product of visual arts. The design analysis is based on the imagery of *komburongo* decorations, and the meaning conveyed through the division of basic elements according to arrangement, as stated by the design theory presented by Ismail (1989). According to this theory, the basic elements are divided into visible elements and internal elements. Visible elements include elements contained in art, such as lines, textures, forms, shapes, space, and color. Internal elements, on the other hand, encompass implied meanings like emotions, expressions, soul, and thoughts. The presence of both these elements in *komburongo* decorations creates an aesthetic value, meaning the design results from decorating techniques that emphasize ornamentation and pattern design. To understand the design and aesthetic value in the decorations of the *komburongo* ritual tool, the researchers divide it into four components: basic elements (*komburongo* ritual tools owned by various Kadazan Dusun people), followed by an analysis of visible elements, internal elements, and aesthetic value in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Explanation of basic elements, visible elements, and internal elements of the *komburongo* ritual tool

Source: Authors and courtesy of Ick Ellyrenzine Linsap

No	Basic Elements	Visible Elements	Internal Elements
1	<i>Komburongo</i> of the Dusun in Ranau 	Organic form interwoven touches horizontal lines, vertical and circular.	The shape of a heart, also known as <i>tundu-undu</i> in the Kadazan Dusun language.
2	<i>Komburongo</i> of the Tobilung in Kota Belud. 	Organic form Interwoven touches Horizontal lines, Vertical lines, and radiating lines.	Form of a broom or called <i>mumuhau</i> in the Kadazan Dusun language.







3	<p><i>Komburongo</i> of the Kadazan in Membakut.</p> 	<p>Organic form Interwoven Machete shape, lines Vertical and horizontal lines.</p>	<p>Machete shape, known as <i>danggol</i> in the Kadazan Dusun languages.</p>
4	<p><i>Komburongo</i> of the Lotud in Tuaran.</p> 	<p>Organic form, circular shape, interwoven connections, horizontal lines, and vertical lines.</p>	<p>Form that resembles the shape of a quadruped animal.</p>
5	<p><i>Komburongo</i> of the Liwan in Bundu Tuhan.</p> 	<p>Organic form, circular shape, intertwining lines, horizontal lines, and vertical lines.</p>	<p>Basket or tray- shape in the Kadazan Dusun language.</p>
6	<p><i>Komburongo</i> of the Dusun Sungai in Pitas.</p> 	<p>Organic form touching interweaving horizontal lines, vertical and circular lines.</p>	<p>Form resembling a two-legged animal.</p>
7	<p><i>Komburongo</i> of Lobu in Ranau.</p> 	<p>Organic form Touching interweaving Horizontal lines, Vertical lines, and curves.</p>	<p>The shape of a sickle synonymous with the hunting equipment of the Kadazan Dusun community.</p>
8	<p><i>Komburongo</i> of the Tatana in Kuala Penyu.</p> 	<p>Organic form intertwining lines horizontal lines and vertical lines.</p>	<p>Form of a turtle living in water areas.</p>

Table 1 shows the analysis of basic elements, visible elements, and internal elements of the *komburongo* ritual tool for eight different types of Kadazan Dusun *komburongo* in Sabah. The analysis results indicate that the basic elements of *komburongo* have shapes formed from a combination of art elements such as organic forms, geometric shapes, intricate weavings, and various line elements. This is in line with Ismail's (1989) statement that the formed images

create aesthetic value. In terms of internal elements, it is found that the design of *komburongo* consists of images of human bodies, animals, and tools, namely images of hearts, brooms, machetes, two-legged animals, four-legged animals, baskets, sickles, and turtles. Out of these eight images, four (50%) are comprised of everyday tools of the Kadazan Dusun people; three (38%) consist of animal images, and only one (12%) consists of a human body image. Based on the percentage of image forms presented, it can be said that everyday tools and animals closely related to the daily lives of the Kadazan Dusun people have inspired the makers of the *komburongo* in shaping their *komburongo*. This is one of the examples of the local wisdom handed down from one generation to another by the Kadazan Dusun *komburongo* makers.

As stated by Ismail (1989), the basic elements are divided into visible elements and internal elements. Visible elements are the elements contained in art, such as lines, textures, forms, shapes, space, and colour. Internal elements encompass implied meanings like emotions, expressions, soul, and thoughts. Regarding the visible elements of form, each *komburongo* in this study was found to have lines, textures, forms, shapes, space, and colour. Implicitly, the analysis results found that due to the everyday utility tools and important animals in the lives of the Kadazan Dusun people, both these forms have inspired the makers of the *komburongo* to shape the ritual tool because both encompass their soul and mind. In other words, the makers of the *komburongo* ritual tool consider such forms aesthetic.

Relationship between the Decorations of *Komburongo* Ritual Tool and Beliefs

Based on the creation myth of *komburongo*, the majority of the Kadazan Dusun people believed the Creator (Low & Marshall 2013), whether in the form of a plant or spirit, created that *komburongo*. According to Kimo Gungurupa (pers comm, May 18, 2017), the Creator, known as Kinoringan created the plant and spirit of *komburongo*. In the researchers' opinion, from the rhizomes of *komburongo*, which are dried and then used to make the ritual tool, there is indeed a connection with the belief of the Kadazan Dusun people that when the Creator created the *komburongo* plant, it had an assisting spirit. Therefore, when the rhizomes of *komburongo* used to make the ritual tool, the ritual tool also possesses an assisting spirit. When the Kadazan Dusun ritual specialist performs the *rinait* (ceremonial poetry), the spirit of *komburongo* is awakened, and through it, humans can seek help from it.

In the creation myths of *komburongo*, no myth has been found (as of this study) that narrates the decorative aspects found in the *komburongo* ritual tool. Therefore, the researchers conclude that all the decorative materials found on the *komburongo* ritual tool are additions made by the Kadazan Dusun ritual experts, who are responsible for crafting the *komburongo* ritual tool. It can be observed that each Kadazan Dusun ethnic group has a different design and decorative aspect for the *komburongo* ritual tool (Fig. 6 – Fig. 13). The reason for this lies in the fact that the decoration of the *komburongo* ritual tool is not mentioned in the creation myths of their ancestors.

The analysis of the relationship between the decorations on the *komburongo* ritual tool and beliefs is based on the materials used for decoration. The corpus of the analysis consists of nine different types of *komburongo* ritual tools (Fig. 6 – Fig. 13). The focus of the analysis is on whether each decoration material used holds significant beliefs for the Kadazan Dusun people. From a theoretical perspective, if the material used holds significant beliefs for the Kadazan Dusun people, then the intended decoration serves a spiritual function. If a particular material used lacks significant beliefs for the Kadazan Dusun people, then the intended decoration is merely for adorning the *komburongo* ritual tool.



Fig. 6: *Komburongo* of the Dusun in the Ranau district, adorned with decorative material
Source: Authors

Fig. 6 shows a *komburongo* decorated with animal fangs, shells, wooden brush, small bottle, small bell, and other materials that not known by the researchers. As discussed earlier, *komburongo* with animal fang decorations is believed to indicate that the owner possesses hunting skills, as Kadazan Dusun hunters typically keep animal fangs as mementos. Other decorations such as shells, wooden brushes, small bottles, and small bells were owned by previous ritual specialist (*bobolian*), believed to have spirits. The spirits left in the form of decorations owned by the deceased are hung together with the *komburongo* to enhance its mystical power (Sigim binti Dalani, pers. comm., January 7, 2022).



Fig. 7: *Komburongo* ritual tool of the Tobilung, adorned with various decorative materials
Source: Courtesy of Ick Ellyrenzine Linsap

Fig. 7 shows the *komburongo* ritual tool decorated with *lampakakau* and *kucur* wood, beads, old coins, and small bells. Among the decorative materials used on this Tobilung *komburongo* ritual tool, *lampakakau* and *kucur* wood are found to hold significant beliefs in the Tobilung. This is in line with Evans (1953) that the Dusun ethnic group in Kota Belud believes that seeds of plants like *bakauk* and *lampakakau*, adorning the *komburongo* ritual tool, are believed to have protective value and possess mystical power similar to the spirit of

komburongo. Similarly, beads and old coins are believed to also have spirits, adding spiritual strength to the person who owns them.



Fig. 8: *Komburongo* ritual tool of the Kadazan in Membakut.
Source: Authors

Fig. 8 depicts a *komburongo* shaped like an unadorned knife. According to Tialum binti Siwoi (pers. comm, July 18, 2014), there is no mystical power in the knife-shaped piece of wood. The knife-shaped board serves only as a platform for her to place her fingers during the question-and-answer session with the *komburongo*. In other words, this *komburongo* ritual tool does not emphasize decoration. According to this informant, the spiritual power lies in the rhizome of the *komburongo*, especially after reciting the *rinait* (ceremonial poem) learned from previous ritual specialists. From this, the authors conclude that the decorative aspect is not significant to the maker of this *komburongo* ritual tool.



Fig. 9: Ritual tool of the Lotud.
Source: Collection of Minah Sintian, 2013

Fig. 9 shows a *komburongo* ritual tool decorated with dried *belimbing hutan* wood, beads, old coins, shells, and small bells. The dried *belimbing hutan* wood, beads, old coins, and shells are decorative elements on the *komburongo* that do not hold significant beliefs. However, these objects serve a specific function as decorations meant to attract the attention of spiritual beings during a ritual. Meanwhile, the small bells are believed to awaken supernatural spirits during a ritual. According to Jusilin and Kindoyop (2019), the sound of bells accompanied by the recitation of *rinait* (ceremonial poetry) can awaken invited spirits in a ritual. If so, the

decorative materials for the Dusun Lotud *komburongo* ritual tool indeed hold significant beliefs.



Fig. 10: The *komburongo* ritual tool of the Dusun Liwan
Source: Collection of Salbiah Kindoyop,2018

Fig. 10 shows the ritual tool of Dusun Liwan *komburongo*, adorned with wooden fruits, pottery, red-colored thread, and ivory. Bugar Gunting (pers. comm., June 6, 2022) explained that *komburongo* rhizomes are dried and cut into small pieces, then stitched together like beading. Furthermore, materials such as wooden fruits, pottery, red-colored thread, and ivory are stitched together to form the *komburongo* design. Dried starfruit, pottery, red thread, and deer ivory are believed to have mystical functions, enhancing the power of the *komburongo* in specific ritual ceremonies.



Fig. 11: The *komburongo* ritual tool of Dusun Sungai
Source: Collected by Amirah Syuhada in,2022

Fig. 11 shows the ritual tool of Dusun Sungai *komburongo*, decorated with dried betel nuts, dried *komburongo* tree leaves, beads, old coins, and a small bell. All these objects serve as decorative elements with significant functions in the beliefs of the Dusun Sungai community. Each of these decorative items is believed to possess a spirit that can enhance the mystical power of *komburongo* in specific rituals. For instance, the sound of the small bell is thought to awaken spirits through the recitation of *rinait* (ceremonial poetry) (Siti Nor Hasemah binti Sapuddin, pers. comm., April 23, 2016).



Fig. 12 : The Dusun Lobu *komburongo* ritual tool
Source: Courtesy of Maria Kani,2018

Fig. 12 shows the *komburongo* ritual tool of the Dusun Lobu, decorated with dried carambola, beads, wild boar tusks, shells, deer antlers, and a small bell. The decorations on the Dusun Lobu *komburongo* are predominantly made up of tusks and animal horns. Upon observation, the Dusun Lobu settlement is close to the forest and hunting areas. Maria Kani (pers. comm, September 13, 2018) mentioned that their livelihood depends on hunting activities in the forest. Therefore, tusks and antlers are used as decorations on the *komburongo* ritual tool. Other decorations such as wooden fruit, beads, shells, and bells are also believed to hold significant cultural beliefs, as beads are believed to have spirits, and the sound of bells can awaken the spirits' power.



Fig. 13 *Komburongo* ritual tool of the Tatana in Sabah
Source: Collection of Salbiah Kindoyop,2017

Fig. 13 shows a ritual tool of the Tatana decorated with wild boar tusks, deer antlers, beads, small bottles, and bells. The design of this Tatana ritual tool can be observed to be largely dominated by *komburongo*. This *komburongo* ritual tool is filled with dried *komburongo* rhizomes that have been sliced and then stitched together like bead-work. The *komburongo* pieces are also decorated with wild boar tusks, deer antlers, small bottles, and beads, all stitched into a *komburongo* design.

In terms of using fabric or red thread, the color red holds significance in Kadazan Dusun beliefs because they believe both color are suitable for supernatural spirits (Jusilin and Kindoyop 2019). Therefore, red fabric or thread is used so that the spirits can unite and help them connect with supernatural spirits. Interestingly, Gidah (2001), when analyzing the archetypal color patterns in Kadazan Dusun myths, found that red is the dominant color, as seen in the stories of Nunuk Ragang (the name of a place, meaning a red banyan tree) where the Kadazan Dusun Creator created their ancestors. Low and Shafie (2014) note that, similar to other Kadazan Dusun people, the Rungus in Kudat, Sabah also associates their ancestors with the origin from Nunuk Ragang.

In addition, objects like bells are also believed to awaken mystical powers during ritual ceremonies. According to Sibah binti Bolong (pers. comm., March 8, 2015), the recitation of *rinait* (ceremonial poetry) by the ceremony expert accompanied by the sound of bells aims to

awaken mystical powers during worship ceremonies. This is evident in *komburongo* decorations that feature bell ornaments capable of producing sound when shaken. This indicates that the small bell hanging on the *komburongo* ritual tool holds significant beliefs, rather than merely serving as a decorative item to beautify the *komburongo*.

In terms of beads decorating the Dusun Tobilung *komburongo* ritual tool, the researchers find that the Dusun Tobilung community is indeed renowned for their expertise in beadwork, which remains a supplementary source of income for them to this day. According to Normadia Nasir (pers. comm., January 23, 2015), most bead makers belong to the *bobolian* group (ritual specialists), and it is believed that when a *bobolian* passes away, their spirit remains in the beads hung together with the *komburongo* ritual tool. The spirit of the *bobolian* is thought to merge with the new owner of the *komburongo*, enhancing its mystical power. Ordinary people are discouraged from owning or touching beads containing such spirits as it is feared they might incur misfortune. In other words, besides serving as decorations on the *komburongo*, beads are also believed to possess mystical powers used for worship purposes.

In the context of decorative materials unrelated to belief elements, such as animal fangs and horns, it can be said that their purpose is solely to embellish the *komburongo*. According to Suanoi (pers. comm., May 27, 2018), hunting animals is a part of the Kadazan Dusun community's life to obtain food from the forest since the past to date. Whenever they return with game such as wild boars, deer, and barking deer, they like to keep the fangs or horns of the animals as mere mementos. Typically, these horns are attached to the walls of their homes as decorations and storage for other items. Hence, the authors in opinion that this is the reason why the *komburongo* maker use animal fangs to decorate the *komburongo*. In this context, these materials are ornaments not believed to possess mystical powers.

In addition to animal fangs, there are also other decorations such as shells hung together with the *komburongo*. According to Kansimin Dalani (pers. comm., December 21, 2021), shells are decorative materials collected from the beach. The majority of the Kadazan Dusun community resides inland, far from the sea. When they visit the coastline, they enjoy collecting shells and using them as ornaments. Therefore, when they come across objects considered special, such as shells, they incorporate them as decorative elements into their belongings, including the *komburongo*. Hence, this material is also not believed to possess mystical powers other than adorning the ritual tool.

In comparison, Kimwah (2024) finds the inclusion of bone ornaments, such as the teeth of leopards, civet cats, and dogs in the cave paintings of Sarawak (neighbor state of Sabah) revealed that the ancient people here were hunters. Besides, deposits of marine life shells also found in the Niah Cave of Sarawak revealing that the ancient people also went to coastline to gather shells. In a similar vein, the researchers find that the Kadazan Dusun used animal fangs and seashells as part of the decorative materials in their *komburongo*. This parallel suggests that both Sabah and Sarawak ancient society shared almost the same hunting and ornament liking culture.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that certain decorative materials are associated with mystical powers. They are small bells, coins, beads, black cloth, red cloth, thread and dried wild fruits. These materials can strengthen the mystical power of the *komburongo* ritual tool while making them look nice (aesthetic). Besides, materials like wooden brushes, small bottles, and small pottery owned by previous *bobolian* believed to have spirits left in the form of ornaments belonging to the deceased, hung together with the *komburongo* to enhance its mystical power. On the other hand, decorative materials such as animal fangs and horns, coins, and shells are function purely as embellishments, aimed at beautifying the *komburongo* ritual tool without possessing mystical powers. Among the eight types of *komburongo* ritual tools, only one type is without decorative materials. Therefore, the authors conclude that certain decorative materials play a role in the aesthetic formation of the *komburongo* as a piece of visual arts based on the local wisdom of the Kadazan Dusun people. Otherwise, the *komburongo* ritual tool

would simply be a piece of *komburongo* rhizome, which would not appear aesthetically pleasing.

In terms of strengths, this paper distinguishes between decorative materials with mystical significance and those used purely for aesthetic purposes, providing a nuanced understanding of *komburongo* ritual tools. Additionally, it connects the use of these materials to the cultural and spiritual practices of the Kadazan Dusun, highlighting their ritual importance. However, the analysis is limited by its reliance on only eight *komburongo* ritual tools, which may not fully represent the diversity and variations across all Kadazan Dusun subgroups. A larger sample size would offer a more comprehensive understanding of these ritual tools and could reveal regional and subgroup-specific differences in the use and significance of decorative materials.

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