

The Evolution of Women's Traditional Costume Production in Tambunan

¹Joanna Datuk Kitingan, ²Salbiah Kindoyop ³Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan

^{1,2}Academy of Arts & Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah

³Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the evolution of the traditional clothing of the people of Tambunan District from the perspective of history, culture and contemporary transformation. Traditional clothing not only serves as a basic necessity, but also reflects the community's ethnic identity, social structure and belief system. However, the process of modernization and globalization has had an impact on the form, function and meaning of such traditional clothing. This study used a qualitative approach through interview methods, field observation and analysis of old photographs. The findings of the study show that the change of traditional clothing occurs through the adaptation of materials, design innovations and market influences, yet still retains certain symbolic elements. This study contributes to the understanding of cultural sustainability as well as the implications of transformation in the context of local community identity.

Keywords: Evolution, Traditional Clothing, Tambunan District, Cultural Sustainability, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Traditional clothing is an important manifestation of cultural heritage that reflects the identity, values and social structure of a society. In the context of the Dusun community of Tambunan District in Sabah, traditional clothing not only serves as a daily necessity, but also plays an important role in traditional ceremonies, rituals and festivals such as the annual *Kaamatan* or Harvest Festival that is celebrated at village, District and State levels. Nevertheless, the current developments driven by globalization, lifestyle changes and the influence of the modern fashion industry have led to significant transformations in the design, materials and functions of these traditional clothing forms. Despite efforts of cultural preservation, the changes that have taken place raise questions about the extent to which the authenticity of traditional clothing can be maintained. Therefore, this study is important to understand the evolutionary process as well as its implications for the cultural identity of the people of Tambunan District.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of traditional dress is often associated with the concepts of cultural identity, heritage, and social change. Traditional clothing is not just a basic necessity, but a symbol that reflects the values, beliefs, and social structure of a society (Kaiser, 2012). In the context of indigenous peoples, traditional clothing plays an important role as a marker of ethnic identity and cultural heritage that is inherited from generation to generation.

According to Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992), clothing serves as a form of non-verbal communication that carries symbolic meanings related to an individual's social status, gender, and role in society. In ethnic communities such as the Dusun of Tambunan, traditional clothing is not only used in daily life but also in ritual ceremonies, festivals, and customary events, which shows the close relationship between clothing and worldview. From a historical perspective, the evolution of traditional clothing is often influenced by cultural interactions and economic changes. Craik (2009) pointed out that traditional clothing underwent a

transformation due to the factors of globalization, colonialism and the development of textile technology. In the Malaysian context, a study by Ibrahim and Hassan (2020) shows that traditional ethnic clothing has undergone changes in terms of materials, manufacturing techniques and designs due to modern influences and market demands.

In addition, globalization has also had a significant impact on the transformation of traditional clothing. According to Appadurai (1996), the global flow of culture and economics has changed the way people interpret and use their cultural symbols. In the fashion industry, this phenomenon can be seen through the adaptation of traditional clothing into more practical and commercial contemporary forms. Nevertheless, these changes often create a dilemma between the maintenance of cultural authenticity and the need for innovation (Niessen et al., 2003). In the context of Sabah, studies by Pugh-Kitingan (2012, 208-222) and Ibrahim (2018) show that the traditional costumes of the Kadazan Dusun ethnic group, including Dusun of Tambunan, have symbolic elements that are closely related to social status, spiritual beliefs and community identity. The motifs, colours and accessories of traditional clothing often carry a certain meaning that reflects man's relationship with nature and belief in the importance of one's heritage. Clothing is a very important aspect of human life.

Qualitative approaches are often used in studies related to traditional clothing because they allow researchers to deeply understand cultural meanings and experiences (Creswell, 2014). Methods such as interviews, field observations, and analysis of old photographs help researchers in examining the changes that have occurred as well as how society interprets those transformations. From the point of view of design innovation, a study by Gwilt (2014) emphasizes that the adaptation of materials and designs in traditional fashion can contribute to cultural sustainability if done sensitively to the original values. In the creative industry, innovation involves not only aesthetic changes, but also adaptation to market needs without neglecting cultural identity. However, there are gaps in existing studies, especially related to the evolution of traditional clothing in local contexts such as the Dusun of Tambunan. Most studies focus more on cultural documentation or general analysis without placing an emphasis on contemporary transformation processes in depth. Therefore, this study is important to fill the gap by focusing on how change occurs and its implications for cultural identity and heritage sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach to understand the evolution of the traditional clothing of the Dusun of Tambunan in a real social and cultural context. This approach is ideal because it allows researchers to examine changes not only from the physical aspect, but also the symbolic meaning, social function, and cultural values embodied in traditional clothing. The interpretive qualitative approach involves researchers to be in the field to collect data through observation, interviews and documentation methods. The research aims to unravel the evolution of the production of traditional clothing in Tambunan District.

In this study, the researchers analysed the evolution of traditional clothing as a dynamic process involving the interaction between cultural, social and economic factors. Therefore, the analysis of cultural evolution needs to be based on a sound theoretical framework to explain the process of change occurring, why it occurs, and what its implications are for cultural identity. This approach is in line with the view of Henrich (2016) who states that cultural evolution occurs through the process of social learning, adaptation and transmission between generations. In the context of traditional dress, change is not just the result of individual innovation, but is the result of collective interaction within the community.

Therefore, in this research, the Theory of Modification by O'Connor (2021), is used to identify the evolution or modification that occurs. The term "modification" refers to changes that occur to an existing element without removing the original identity. The changes involve three aspects, namely through the use of modern materials, changes in sewing techniques and design adaptation for comfort. In this study, renovation can be seen as a community strategy to balance between tradition and current needs (see Figure 1).

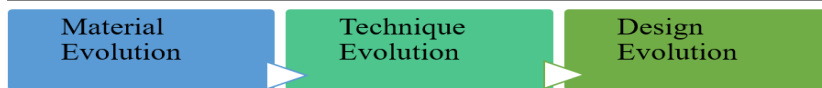


Figure 1: The evolutionary process of traditional clothing production

(Source: Modified from O'Connor, 2021)

Figure 1 shows the evolutionary process of the production of traditional clothing in Tambunan District modified from O'Connor (2019) through three modification processes. The first process, innovation is seen through the traditional use of modern materials, Dusun Tambunan clothes are produced using materials such as hand-woven fabrics and natural fibres which have high cultural and symbolic value. However, the development of textile technology as well as ease of access to the market has led to the use of modern materials such as synthetic fabrics, velvet, satin and commercial yarns.

The second process is seen in terms of the modification of sewing techniques and production from the point of view of production techniques, evolution can be seen through the transition from hand sewing to the use of modern sewing machines. These changes have had a significant impact on time efficiency, quality consistency and production productivity. The third process is seen in terms of design customization for comfort and functionality. The design aspect is the the most obvious dimension showing the evolution of the traditional clothing of the Dusun of Tambunan District. Clothing that was originally heavier, less flexible and limited to a particular ceremonial context has undergone adaptations to meet current needs.

RESULTS

Like other Kadazan Dusun people, the Dusun of Tambunan District also have their own unique traditional clothing. There are two main types of women's traditional clothing in Tambunan known as *sinombiaka rinombituan* and *rasuk pinolongan* (Figures 2, 3 and 4).



Figure 2: Traditional women's clothing of Tambunan *rasuk pinolongon*, worn during a wedding ceremony.

(Source: Joanna Kitingan's collection. Photograph from 21.08.1961)



Figure 3: Tambunan Dusun women wearing the *rasuk pinolongon* during a ritual (Source: Sabah State Museum)



Figure 4: *Sinombiaka rinombituon* and *rasuk Pinolongan* traditional clothing of women in Tambunan worn by a young maidens in the 1970's

(Source: Sabah State Library, Exhibition during the harvest festival)

Costume Structure

The traditional costumes of Tambunan have undergone many changes. In 2016, the Committee for organising the *Unduk Ngadau* or cultural beauty pageant of the *Kaamatan* Festival at the State Level advocated a “Back to Basic” approach to traditional ethnic costumes worn by contestants. This was to ensure that the original structure of traditional costumes are worn by the *Unduk Ngadau* contestants instead of the modern clothing embellished with bling that shines on stage. This “Back to Basic” form of the *sinombiaka* showing the basic hand woven decorative without the *linangkit* needle-woven seams.

Figures 5 and 6, show the *Sinombiaka Tinombunan* clothing structure of the Tambunan Dusun which is worn with various ornaments. The outer shirt is known as *sinombiaka* which is a sleeveless designed for young women made from black cotton black stitched with green, yellow and red embroidery around the neckline. Green represents the colour of nature and yellow is the colour of padi ripening and ready for harvesting.

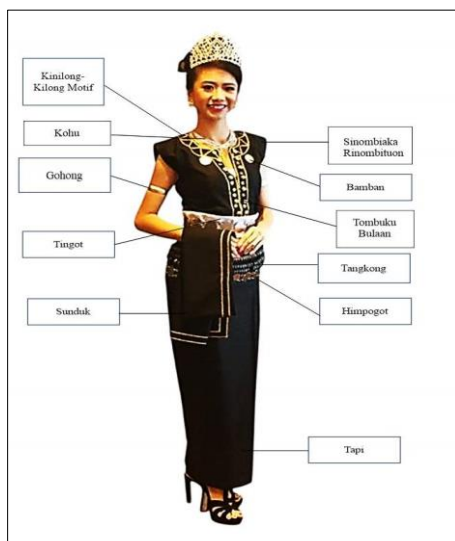


Figure 5: Front view of the *sinombiaka* from Tambunan

(Source: Joanna Kitingan's collection)



Figure 6: Back view of the *sinombiaka* from Tambunan

(Source: Joanna Kitingan's collection)

Table 1 shows the component and accessories in the *sinombiaka* traditional costume, combining functional elements such as belts and buttons with ornamental features like necklaces, bangles, and brooches. Together, they reflect the craftsmanship and cultural identity of the Dusun Tambunan community.

Table 1: Components found in *Sinombiaka* clothing

Components	Description
<i>Sinombiaka Rinombituon</i>	Black sleeveless shirt made of cotton fabric
<i>Tapi</i>	<i>Tapi</i> or sarong is worn with <i>sinombiaka</i>
<i>Himpogot</i>	Belts made from old Straits dollar coins to hold up the long skirt or <i>tapi</i> as well as to embellish the waist
<i>Tangkong</i>	3 layers of <i>tangkong</i> are worn around the waist to hold the long skirt. This is made of rings formed from melted-down old broken gongs threaded with cane
<i>Sunduk</i>	Head covering when performing rituals by <i>bobolian</i> or during weddings
<i>Kohu</i>	Necklace
<i>Gohong</i>	Bangles
<i>Tingot</i>	White fabric belt to cover the gap between the <i>sinombiaka</i> and the <i>tapi</i> and to keep <i>tapi</i> in place
<i>Tombuku Bulaan</i>	Buttons
<i>Bamban</i>	Golden brooch dated in 1905 with the embossed head of a Roman soldier

Anylisis Of Evolution

The analysis of the evolution of the production of traditional women's clothing of the Dusun in Tambunan is seen through three innovation processes, namely, through the traditional use of modern materials, modification of sewing techniques and design modification for comfort and function.



Figure 7: Evolution of traditional women's clothing production techniques on the *sinombiaka*

The evolution of materials from this transition not only improves the durability and quality of clothing, but also simplifies the production process and expands aesthetic potential through variations in textures and finishes. In addition, the use of modern materials allows traditional clothing to be produced on a larger scale, specifically for commercial, tourism and cultural performance purposes. Despite the material changes, important elements such as symbolic colours like black which resembles the traditional dyed threads and represents the identity of the community as well as traditional motifs, are still maintained. This shows that the modification of materials takes place in a controlled manner and does not affect the cultural meaning, but rather reinforces the usability and relevance of the garment in the current context.

It is thought that prior to the invention of textiles-based clothing, indigenous Austronesian people in Borneo may have used bark and leaf weaving as clothing to protect themselves from the weather and climate. Even today, soft bark clothing is still worn by men in some societies. Textile weaving in Sabah has probably been practiced for millennia. Austronesian peoples in Borneo started producing textiles when they developed the method of producing yarn from plant fibres such as *acapela* banana leaves. Back-strap looms were developed and used to weave fabrics with unbroken warp threads.

There are several types of yarn woven by the traditional Sabahan societies such as coarse yarn processed from *banana nuts* (*Musa textilis*) and *lamba* leaves (*Curculigo latifolia*). Fine cotton yarn is produced through self-spinning and there is also yarn produced from the bark of the *Tangkapon* tree (*Colona serratifolia*). These plants are shown in Figures 8 and 9.



Figure 8: Coarse yarn processed from banana nuts (*Musa textilis*)

Figure 8 shows the part of the process of producing coarse threads processed from banana plants, that is used by the Tindal Dusun of Kota Belud District. Fabrics woven from this yarn are used for scarves or sashes and headgear for women.

Figure 9, shows an image of *lamba* leaves used to produce coarse threads. The cloth produced from the thread of the *lamba* leaves is used as a head covering that is usually worn by Dusun women from Kiulu.



Figure 9: *Lamba* leaves (*Curculigo latifolia*)

Figure 10, shows images of cotton grown by the Rungus, the main Dusunic people of Kudat and parts of Pitas Districts, as well as the Bookan Murut from Sook in Keningau District, the Lanas Lobou a Paitanic group from Sook, Keningau and various other interior groups.



Figure 10: Cotton (*Gossypium herbaceum*)

Figure 11, shows an image of the flowers of a *tangkapon* tree. The fibre threads obtained from the bark of this tree are woven into a piece of cloth called *binidang*. This cloth is used to make the *gonob* a knee-level tubular skirt and *sunduk* which is a type of cloth used as the woman's head covering.



Figure 11: Flowers of the *tangkapon* tree (*Kolona serrafolia*)

Figure 12, illustrates the evolution of production techniques in traditional women's clothing of the Dusun of Tambunan. The transformation is evident in the shift from hand sewing to the adoption of modern sewing machines, reflecting broader changes in textile production. Decorative practices such as embroidery around the neck, *linangkit* needle-weaving for seams, and accessory detailing have also evolved, incorporating commercial decorative materials and more diverse modern embroidery techniques.

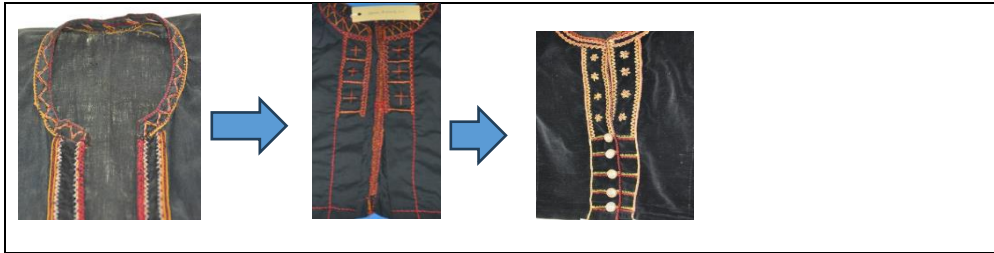


Figure 12: Evolution of traditional women's clothing production materials in Tambunan, *sinombiaka*

Despite these innovations, certain traditional methods remain preserved, particularly in garments intended for customary ceremonies and rituals. This selective retention highlights the community's conscious distinction between attire for everyday or commercial use and clothing imbued with sacred and cultural significance. Such an approach aligns with the theoretical concept of modification, which emphasizes adaptation and innovation while safeguarding the fundamental elements of tradition.

Figure 13, illustrates the evolution of design in the production of traditional women's clothing among the Dusun community in Tambunan District. Over time, the design has shifted toward garments that are more practical, lightweight, and comfortable, making them suitable for a variety of contexts such as stage performances, official events, and everyday use.



Figure 13: Evolution of the design and production of traditional women's clothing in Tambunan

Notable changes include the simplification of garment cuts, adjustments in size to fit modern body shapes, and the expansion of function from attire used solely in rituals to garments that also serve as expressions of fashion and visual identity. Nevertheless, the fundamental structure, including the silhouette and arrangement of key components, continues to preserve traditional characteristics.

This indicates that the process of design adaptation has taken place in a balanced manner, ensuring the preservation of visual identity and cultural continuity while enhancing functionality and comfort within the context of contemporary life.

Evolutionary Implications For Traditional Clothing Identity

The transformation that took place in the fashion motifs and designs of Dusun women's clothing from Tambunan was not a loss of identity but rather a process of visual adaptation that allowed the community to retain the original symbol in a new form that suited the current medium, technique and context. *Stylisation* is an effort to preserve cultural meaning through forms reinforced by contemporaries. *Stylisation* is also a method of conveying cultural symbols in order to remain relevant in modern aesthetics (Schapiro, 1994; Khan & Alghamdi, 2019; Widiyanto, 2020). The transformation process occurs because of several factors such as the influence of external cultures, i.e. the interaction of other communities, prompting style adaptation. Modern commodification with Tambunan Dusun fashion is now also presented in the context of contemporary cultural,

tourism and fashion festivals. Therefore, these garments require a visual transformation to make them more attractive and universal.

Traditional fashion transformation is an adaptation process that occurs due to the clash between cultural heritage and the current of modernity. A balanced transformation can maintain the value of originality while allowing traditional clothing to remain relevant and accepted in the modern context. However, if the transformation is carried out without control, the risk of erosion of cultural meaning is inevitable. Therefore, the preservation of original values and the public's awareness of symbolic motives must be given attention in every traditional innovation process.

CONCLUSION

This research describes the process of transferring production in techniques, materials and design of the Dusun women's traditional costumes *sinombiaka rinombituon* and *rasuk pinolongan* from Tambunan which has gone through three stages namely figurative, abstract and stylised to adapt the visual heritage to modern techniques and contexts. The three main changes from nature-based forms to larger, subtle, creative and contemporary designs as a result of the development of materials and embroidery techniques. This transformation is not a loss of identity, but a form of adaptation to maintain cultural significance while ensuring that traditional clothing remains relevant, even if it still requires control so that the original symbols are not eroded.

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