

Preserving Native Culture Through Traditional Costumes And Textiles: The Case Of The *Rungus* Community In Sabah, Malaysia

Romzi Ationg, Andreas Totu, Jane Wong Kon Ling, Rose Patsy Tibok & Jualang Gansau
Kadazandusun Chair & Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning
Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage
Universiti Malaysia Sabah
Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Abstract

A significant effect of the advent of the post-modern era is the waning interest among indigenous communities in many aspects of their own culture and traditions. The Rungus in Sabah, a sub-ethnic of the Kadazandusun or the Momogun community, is no exception to such phenomenon. For this reason, many, in particular the government and the Rungus of Sabah themselves should undertake efforts to preserve their traditions and ensure the richness and intricacies of the community's heritage and culture remain relevant, known and promoted. The Rungus culture arguably could be sustained through the promotion of knowledge, awareness and appreciation of its traditional costumes and textiles. The issue however is to ascertain how this approach could be best effected. This qualitative study is aimed at determining how the Rungus culture in Sabah could be preserved and promoted through its traditional costumes and textiles. The findings of the study indicate visibility and consistent promotion as key to this preservation effort.

Keywords: preserving culture; traditional costumes and textiles; Rungus; Kadazandusun;

Introduction

Various theories and efforts have been proposed on the issue of preservation of culture in recent years. Hamilton and Hamilton (1989), Eicher and Sumberg (1995), and Kuma-Kpobee, Power and Otieno (2008) for instance argue that costumes, textiles and native culture are inherently linked with both traditional costumes and textiles potentially able to reveal connections between people and their cultural identity. Chapman (1995), Eicher and Erekosima (1995), Rene (1995), Dogbe (2003), Kuma-Kpobee, Power and Otieno (2008), Durham (1992), and Ngwenya (2002) concur with this assertion and further suggest that different social groups and sub-cultures would have their own traditional costumes and textiles that denote their culture. Other scholars such as Edensor (2002) propose that the traditional costumes and textiles of many social groups serve as markers of cultural identity and are usually used to express cultural identity in various cultural ceremonies or activities.

Despite their importance to culture however, many traditional costumes and textiles have become extinct, as in the case of the traditional costumes and textiles of the Rungus ethnic community domiciled mainly in the northeast regions of Sabah, Malaysia. In the period before the arrival of colonial power in Borneo, the attire of the Rungus people was fashioned with *banat, tapi, sukolob, badu, soval sarabulu', hokos, sandai, inavol, sigal, mogah, pinakol* and *pinokos* constructed with basic materials which were locally produced, handspun, handwoven cotton, indigo-dyed and decorated with off-white floating weft motifs. In addition, the Rungus in the olden days also donned the *sisingal, titimbok, sisik, sad'ang, ganggalung, litai* or *tinggot, sulau, tongkol, pinakol, orot, giring, lungkaki, rampai, satu', batakan* or *kimo, saring, kinumai* or *golisung*, and *angkop* with these costumes and textiles usually denoting social status or in some instances worn during ritual ceremonies. The advent of colonial power in the 19th century however witnessed the widespread use of European made costumes and textiles as the Rungus gradually adopted modern dressing and fabrics that were perceived to be more reflective of their decision to embrace Christianity. This inclusion and adoption of European dressing and textiles led to changes and

transformation over time in the traditional costumes and textiles of the Rungus, and invariably affected the values and norms of their culture.

The growing importance of cultural aspects not only from the socio-economic perspective but also in politics however is now witnessing a renewed interest among the Rungus community to preserve their culture through a revival of traditional costumes and textiles. This study examines the possibility of preserving the Rungus culture through its traditional costumes and textiles, and provides an overview of the meaning and significance of these cultural elements and their relationship with cultural identity.

Approach to the Study

For this study, a qualitative mode that integrated both historical and ethnographic approaches was utilised. This choice, as Ationg (2017) and Ahmad Tarimizi, Romzi and Nurul Ain (2017) argue, is based on the premise that it is important not only to reconstruct the continuous process of cultural preservation but also show how the present day indigenous communities express their attitude towards their own culture. The qualitative study allowed the use of two key approaches in data collection on native culture focusing on the costumes and textiles of the Rungus during fieldwork visits from July 2018 to September 2018 in Kudat, Sabah, Malaysia. The first was mainly historical and comprised researching academics, historiographic and various types of mediated texts such as magazines, newspapers and interviews with key people of the target community (Rungus). Most of the historical information in this paper was obtained during the fieldwork visits. Historical and archival materials on costumes and textiles of the Rungus were derived from local libraries and information supplied from the interviews with key informants. Staying in Kudat as well as being locals and one member off the research team being from the Rungus indigenous community provided the researchers ease of interaction and the insider advantage of meeting and interviewing the key informants. Most importantly, the researchers did not encounter any communication problem with the informants during the interview sessions since they could speak *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) and their mother tongue.

As the paper was also based on the ethnographic approach, its components consisted mostly interviews with the key informants. During the fieldwork visits, the researchers spent between two to five days in the *kampung* where the key informants were based. Any period longer than this was unnecessary since the researchers had often visited these areas prior to the fieldwork visits and therefore had some information about the Rungus culture and their costumes and textiles. The researchers were assisted by friends (aged in their 30s-50s) to identify key informants for the interview sessions during various occasions such as *majlis perkahwinan* (wedding ceremonies) and other social activities. During these occasions, the researchers conducted interviews with twenty key informants comprising village leaders, elders and youngsters who were involved in the making of traditional costumes and textiles. The interview sessions with the key informants were critical as these provided in-depth and relevant information pertaining to the preservation of culture through costumes and textiles.

The methodological approach used in the study was based on the concept of ‘experiment of experience’ put forward by Barlocco (2014), in which he describes the concept as a means of analysing other people’s experiences, views, analogies and emotions regarding issues through the sitting of various observations in the conscious of the researcher, which constitutes the deepest and most meaningful form of knowledge. Such approach is also a way of understanding other people’s experiences through the will and ability to connect with them as someone without the necessary knowledge about the issues under investigation.

Findings

The findings in this study suggests that through traditional costumes and textiles, the Rungus in Sabah were able to express their cultural identity. The findings thus is in agreement with the idea put forward by

Hamilton and Hamilton (1989), Eicher and Sumberg (1995), and Kuma-Kpobee, Power and Otieno (2008) on the existence of a link between costumes, textiles and native culture.

The historical information on this interlink is indicative of the viability of traditional costumes and textiles as tools that could be utilised to help preserve the Rungus culture. Many key facets of Rungus social life had been subjected to a gradual dissolution and eventual non-relevance following the establishment of an external rule in Sabah; one such case was the arrival of Islam in Sabah through Muslim immigrants from Sulawesi, Indonesia towards the later part of the 15th century which led to the establishment of an external rule called the Brunei Sultanate by the early sixteenth century and brought changes to the social life of the Rungus specifically in Matunggong (Ationg, 2017). This establishment of the Islamic Brunei Sultanate pushed for the conversion of the Rungus to the Muslim faith, and began a period whereby the people started to identify themselves as Malays. Nevertheless, the establishment of European power in Sabah in the 1880s and thereafter the formation of Malaysia in 1963 which saw Sabah as founding partners of Malaysia initiated another period with the Rungus then identifying themselves as Kadazandusun. This 'change' in social identity led to a neglect and eventual disregard or ambivalence of their own culture. A key informant who was 50 years of age explained the phenomenon as "when the new culture began to influence Sabah, the Rungus community in Matunggong seemed no longer interested in their own culture. There appeared an attitude of dislike towards their own culture among the Rungus. The decline in Rungus cultural activities and events such as 'magahau' and 'mamapak' as well as dressing themselves in their traditional costumes and textiles were among the signs of this growing dislike of their own culture among the Rungus."

However, the early 1980s saw many modern festivities such as *Pesta Kelapa*, *Pesta Kaamatan*, *Pesta Jagung*, *Pesta Magahau* and *Pesta Gong* being celebrated not only in Matunggong and Kudat but also throughout Sabah. During these occasions Rungus political leaders such as YB Dastuk Matius Majihi, YB Datuk Markus Majihi, YB Atong Mangabis, YB Amil Matinggi and YB Henry Madatang began donning their traditional costumes and textiles as a strategy to ensure that the community identified them as their own sons and thereafter pledged their support to their leadership and political affiliations. This period witnessed a revival of heritage pride and interest among the Rungus to explore further the intricacies of their culture. The result of such move has been a growing awareness, acceptance and will among the community to express their culture through traditional costumes and textiles. Another effect of this surge in heritage pride has been the community beginning to identify themselves once more as Rungus and no longer Kadazandusun, or Rungus Muslim and not Malay, in the case of those who had converted to the Muslim faith. Such decisions, argued a key informant who was among the elders of the Rungus community, have been the result of a fast growing sense of pride in their own culture following (1) the recognition or acknowledgement by local leaders, festival organisers, and participants of ceremonial occasions or festivities held in Sabah of the beauty, intricacies and uniqueness of the Rungus traditional costumes and textiles, and (2) that both these elements of wear are becoming popular and immediately recognisable not only in Sabah but also internationally. According to the informant, "the wearing of traditional costumes and textiles during *Pesta Kaamatan* by local leaders and festival participants in the 1980s encouraged the young generation of Rungus to be more interested in wearing their traditional costumes and textiles. This in return ensured the Rungus culture was preserved because the traditional costumes and textiles were the manifestation of their own cultural identity."

Another informant, a young Rungus lady aged 31, also opined that the wearing of traditional costumes and textiles during historical occasions since 1980s had contributed to the preservation of Rungus culture. She said, "the wearing of our traditional costumes and textiles during historical events was crucial in the consolidation of interest among the Rungus in wearing these costumes and textiles. With such development, the Rungus culture is now preserved as they are the key in our culture. Traditional costumes and textiles are the symbols of Rungus culture." Both assertions point to traditional costumes and textiles

as vital to culture as these have the potential to reveal the solid connections between people and their own cultural identity, or between the individual and a specific cultural group (Chapman, 1995; Eicher & Erekosima, 1995; Rene, 1995; Dogbe, 2003; Kuma-Kpobee, Power, & Otieno, 2008; Durham, 1992; Ngwenya, 2002).

For some of the informants, social appearance and respect were core to the preservation of Rungus culture. They argued that the simplicity and comfortable fittings of traditional costumes and textiles were culturally acceptable characteristics of Rungus culture. The conformity to such expectations, as proposed by Disele, Taylor and Power (2011), is a pre-condition for respect for socio-cultural values; any deviation therefore from such expectations could be described as being culturally unacceptable. The objection to some attires such as the miniskirt made from European countries, and the establishment of a centre for the making of traditional costumes and textiles in many *kampungs* such as Kampong Radtak and Kampong Garib-Mompilis portray their attitude of respect towards their own traditional costumes and textiles. This was best described by a 43-year old key informant when he suggested that “today, the Rungus have become more interested in dressing themselves with their traditional costumes and textiles. There is also an effort among the Rungus to produce modern attire patented or characterised by their traditional costumes and textiles. In addition, the Rungus have begun to understand the importance of dressing themselves with their own traditional dress as compared to the dress of other cultures, in particular cultures that belong to outsiders. These are the signs of the growing interest among the Rungus in any effort to preserve their culture.”

Such views are consistent with the recent development of socio-economic and political activities among the Rungus. In this post-modern era, the traditional costumes and textiles have become among the key products appearing in the ‘*kedai kampung*’ (rural shops) and small business outlets in many towns throughout Malaysia and have in fact become popular attire for tourism activities in Sabah. In addition to this development, there is growing awareness and knowledge among key political figures in the Rungus community who now often don the traditional costumes and textiles during political gatherings and official functions.

It becomes evident here that native culture, in particular the Rungus culture, could be preserved through awareness-raising and continuous promotion and use of traditional costumes and textiles. Consistent with the findings of this study, many local scholars and activists today have begun to hold that the increased usage and visibility of traditional costumes and textiles would in turn instil and enhance cultural values and pride among the indigenous communities, two critical aspects that would motivate preservation efforts.

Conclusion

The paper shows that we are now entering the post-modern era at a time when culture is beginning to assume a significance role not only in socio-economic terms but also in political activities globally. This creates opportunities for efforts in conserving and sustaining traditional culture; the Rungus community in Kudat, Sabah is no exception to this and is now witnessing concerted will and effort by its people to preserve and express their culture through costumes and textiles. Since it is evident that the preservation of native culture could be effected through traditional costumes and culture, support from many sectors and in particular the Rungus community itself is vital to ensure continuity and sustainability.

References

1. Ahmad Tarmizi Abdul Rahman, Romzi Ationg, dan Nurul Ain Zulhaimi. A paradigm shift in understanding mixed method research: A Malaysian perspective. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social and Behavioural Science* 9, no. 1. 2017: 46-5.

2. Ationg, R. (2017). Federal political leaders and the expansion of ethnic politics to the periphery state of Sabah in Malaysia. PhD thesis. The Australian National University, Australia.
3. Barlocco, F. (2014). *Identity and the state in Sabah*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
4. Chapman, M. (1995). Freezing the frame: Dress and ethnicity in Brittany and Gaelic Scotland. J.B., Eicher (ed.), *Dress and ethnicity: Change across space and time*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 7-28.
5. Disele, P.L., Tyler, D.J. & Power, E.J. (2011). Conserving and Sustaining Culture through Traditional Dress. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 26 (1). ISSN 1012-1080
6. Dogbe, E. (2003). Unravelling Yarns: Dress, consumption and women's bodies in Ghanaian culture. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, 7(3-4), 377-395.
7. Durham, D. L. (1992). The image of culture: Being Herero in a liberal democracy (Botswana). PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago.
8. Edensor, T. (2002). *National identity, popular culture and everyday life*. Oxford: Berg.
9. Eicher, J.B. & Erekosima, T.V. (1995). Why do they call it Kalabari? Cultural authentication and demarcation of ethnic identity. In J.B. Eicher (ed.), *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time*. Oxford: Berg.
10. Eicher, J.B & Sumberg, B. (1995). World fashion, ethnicity, and national dress. In J.B. Eicher (ed.), *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time*. Oxford: Berg.
11. Hamilton, J. A. & Hamilton, J. W. (1989). Dress as a reflection and sustainer of social reality: A cross cultural perspective. *Clothing and Textile Research Journal* 7(2), 16-22.
12. Kuma-Kpobee, M., Power, J. & Otieno, R. (2008). *Utilisation of traditional dress: The case of Slit and Kaba in Ghana*. Textile Institute 86th World Conference. Conference Proceedings: Hong Kong.
13. Ngwenya, B.N. (2002). Gender, dress and self-empowerment: Women and Burial societies in Botswana. *African Sociological Review*, 6(2), 1-27.
14. Renne, E. P. (1995). Becoming a Bunu bride: Bunu ethnic identity and traditional marriage dress. In J.B., Eicher (ed.), *Dress and ethnicity: Changes across space and time*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 117-113.