

Visual arts in the vernacular settlements: aesthetic values and significance of beliefs in the Komburongo ritual tool in Sabah, Malaysia

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 fieldbased 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.