



Sacred Textile, Social Fabric: Aesthetic Formation and Cohesion in Iban Pua Kumbu

(Tekstil Sakral, Fabrik Sosial: Pembentukan Estetik dan Kohesi dalam Pua Kumbu Iban)

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous textiles function not merely as utilitarian or decorative objects but as material expressions of cultural knowledge, social order, and spiritual belief. Among indigenous communities in Southeast Asia, the Pua Kumbu of the Iban in Sarawak, Malaysia, stands as a highly symbolic ritual textile. This study examines the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu and its role in sustaining social cohesion, framing indigenous aesthetics as an active social system rather than a purely visual domain. Guided by Material Culture Theory, Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, and Social Cohesion Theory, the research employs qualitative ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with weavers and ritual specialists, visual motif analysis, and archival research. Findings indicate that Pua Kumbu aesthetics—expressed through motif structure, colour symbolism, weaving techniques, and ritual protocols—are governed by cosmological beliefs, ancestral authority, and communal regulation. Iban aesthetics prioritise moral responsibility, relational legitimacy, and collective validation over individual artistic autonomy. The study further shows that Pua Kumbu reinforces shared identity, transmits cultural knowledge, regulates social relationships, and mediates connections between human and spiritual realms. By reconceptualising indigenous aesthetics as social praxis and cultural governance, this research challenges universalist aesthetic models and highlights the importance of safeguarding textile artefacts and their underlying knowledge systems.

Keywords: Iban; Pua Kumbu; cultural values; communal interrelationship; indigenous aesthetics



ABSTRAK

Tekstil pribumi bukan sekadar berfungsi sebagai objek utilitarian atau hiasan, tetapi merupakan manifestasi material kepada pengetahuan budaya, susunan sosial, dan kepercayaan spiritual. Dalam kalangan komuniti pribumi di Asia Tenggara, Pua Kumbu masyarakat Iban di Sarawak, Malaysia, merupakan tekstil ritual yang sarat dengan simbolisme dan makna budaya. Kajian ini meneliti pembentukan estetika Pua Kumbu serta peranannya dalam mengekalkan kohesi sosial, dengan meletakkan estetika pribumi sebagai suatu sistem sosial yang aktif dan bukan sekadar domain visual semata-mata. Berpandukan Teori Budaya Material, Teori Estetika Pribumi, dan Teori Kohesi Sosial, penyelidikan ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif, termasuk pemerhatian lapangan, temu bual separa berstruktur dengan penenun dan pakar ritual, analisis visual motif, serta kajian arkib. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa estetika Pua Kumbu—yang dizahirkan melalui struktur motif, simbolisme warna, teknik tenunan, dan protokol ritual—dikawal oleh kepercayaan kosmologi, autoriti leluhur, dan peraturan komuniti. Estetika Iban mengutamakan tanggungjawab moral, legitimasi hubungan sosial, dan pengiktirafan kolektif berbanding autonomi artistik individu. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa Pua Kumbu memperkukuh identiti bersama, memindahkan pengetahuan budaya, mengatur hubungan sosial, serta menjadi perantara antara alam manusia dan alam spiritual. Dengan mentakrifkan semula estetika pribumi sebagai praksis sosial dan mekanisme tadbir urus budaya, kajian ini mencabar model estetika universal dan menegaskan kepentingan memelihara artifak tekstil serta sistem pengetahuan yang menyokongnya.

Kata kunci: Iban; Pua Kumbu; Nilai budaya; Hubungan sosial komuniti; Estetika pribumi

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous textiles have historically transcended their utilitarian and decorative functions, operating as complex repositories of cultural knowledge, social organisation, and spiritual belief. Across Southeast Asia, these textile traditions function as sophisticated visual languages through which communities articulate identity, social hierarchy, cosmology, and ethical norms. Among such traditions, the Pua Kumbu of the Iban people in Sarawak, Malaysia, represents one of the most symbolically intricate and culturally significant ritual textiles (Truna et al., 2021). Beyond its craftsmanship, Pua Kumbu constitutes a material manifestation of Iban epistemology, encoding cultural values that underpin both aesthetic practices and social cohesion within the community. The Iban, one of the largest indigenous groups in Sarawak, traditionally inhabit communal longhouses (rumah panjai), which epitomise collective living, shared moral responsibility, and intergenerational continuity (Jehom, 2017). Within this socio-cultural framework, Pua Kumbu occupies a central position in ritual performance, healing ceremonies, agricultural festivals, and mortuary rites. Its production, possession, and utilisation are regulated by strict cultural protocols and spiritual sanctioning, conferring upon the textile



not merely an ornamental function but also a ritual authority that reinforces social hierarchies. The aesthetic dimensions of Pua Kumbu—manifested through motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, and weaving techniques—are therefore inextricably linked to the Iban worldview, which privileges equilibrium between humans, ancestors, spirits, and the natural environment (Low, 2008).

Although prior scholarship has meticulously documented the technical processes, motif typologies, and ethnographic significance of Pua Kumbu, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how its aesthetic formation contributes to the sustenance of social cohesion. Traditional approaches to aesthetics frequently emphasise visual harmony, innovation, and individual creativity, frameworks largely derived from Western art historical paradigms. In contrast, within Iban society, aesthetics are fundamentally relational, rooted in cultural legitimacy, spiritual efficacy, and communal recognition rather than autonomous artistic expression. Accordingly, the beauty of Pua Kumbu is not determined solely by visual appeal but by its capacity to affirm cultural continuity, regulate social interactions, and mediate between the tangible and spiritual realms. This study contends that Iban cultural values, including ancestral reverence, spiritual authority, gendered knowledge transmission, and collective identity, profoundly shape the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu (Low, 2008). These values are materially and visually encoded within the textile, transforming it into a form of cultural infrastructure that sustains social cohesion. Through shared participation in weaving practices, ritual utilisation, and interpretative engagement with motifs, Pua Kumbu functions as a medium through which communal interrelationships are constructed, reinforced, and perpetuated across generations (Islam & Abdullah, 2016). By approaching Pua Kumbu through the lens of aesthetic formation and social cohesion, this research seeks to move beyond descriptive ethnography toward a critical understanding of indigenous aesthetics as a form of social praxis. It demonstrates that within Iban society, aesthetics constitutes not merely an artistic concern but a foundational mechanism for cultural sustainability and communal integrity. In this regard, the study addresses two principal objectives: first, to examine how Iban cultural values shape the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu, with particular focus on motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, and weaving techniques; second, to analyse and elucidate how the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu functions in fostering social cohesion, including its role in sustaining communal identity, intergenerational relations, and cultural continuity.

Despite the substantial scholarship on Iban culture, ritual textiles, and indigenous aesthetics, several critical gaps persist. First, while Pua Kumbu has been extensively documented as a ritual and symbolic artefact, its role in fostering social cohesion through aesthetic formation has not been systematically theorised (Emeih Wahed et al., 2023). Second, indigenous aesthetics are seldom examined as active social mechanisms rather than passive cultural expressions (Low, 2008). Third, material culture studies have yet to adequately integrate aesthetic formation into analyses of social agency (Truna et al., 2021). This study hence, addresses these gaps by positioning the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu as a culturally regulated process that actively contributes to the production and maintenance of social cohesion within Iban society. By synthesising perspectives from indigenous aesthetics,



material culture, and social cohesion theory, this research provides a holistic framework for understanding how visual culture operates as social infrastructure in traditional communities. In doing so, it contributes to broader discourses on material culture, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-based cultural development, challenging universalist conceptions of aesthetics and foregrounding the socio-cultural dimensions of visual expression. The following section examines the origins and cultural significance of Pua Kumbu as an emblematic indigenous textile that embodies both aesthetic and social meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INDIGENOUS TEXTILES AS SOCIAL ARTEFACTS AND THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PUA KUMBU

Indigenous textiles have long been recognised as complex cultural artefacts that embody systems of belief, social organisation, identity construction, and historical continuity (Maxwell, 2012). In many traditional societies, textiles function not merely as utilitarian or decorative objects but as carriers of symbolic meaning and social relations. Across Southeast Asia, textile traditions such as Batak *ulos*, Toraja *ikat*, Javanese batik, and Malay songket are deeply embedded in ritual life, social stratification, and cultural identity (Maxwell, 2012). These textiles are used to mark life-cycle events, affirm kinship relations, and express cosmological understandings, demonstrating that aesthetics in indigenous textiles are inseparable from social and spiritual functions. Within this broader regional context, the Iban *Pua Kumbu* occupies a particularly significant position due to its sacred status and its integration into nearly all major ritual activities. Unlike many commercialised textiles, *Pua Kumbu* remains largely governed by ritual prescriptions and cultural authority, making it a valuable case for examining how aesthetic formation is regulated by cultural values and contributes to social cohesion. Scholars increasingly argue that indigenous textiles should be understood not only as material culture but also as social instruments through which communal values are expressed and maintained (Chantamool et al., 2024).

Early anthropological studies on the Iban, particularly those by scholars, provide foundational insights into Iban social organisation, ritual life, and cosmology. These works situate Iban material culture within a worldview that emphasises balance between the human, spiritual, and natural realms. Within this cosmological framework, *Pua Kumbu* emerges not merely as a textile but as a ritual medium capable of mediating between these realms. Many scholars' seminal work on Iban ritual textiles offers comprehensive accounts of *Pua Kumbu*, detailing its weaving techniques, motif classifications, and ceremonial functions (Islam & Abdullah, 2016). Scholars demonstrate that certain motifs are spiritually potent and can only be woven by experienced women who have received spiritual sanction through dreams or ritual instruction (Jehom, 2017). This highlights that aesthetic production in *Pua Kumbu* is tightly regulated by spiritual and cultural authority rather than by individual artistic preference. Similarly, other scholars also emphasise that *Pua Kumbu* serves as both a ritual object and a



symbol of social prestige(Gavin, 2004). Ownership of certain textiles reflects lineage, ritual achievement, and social standing, thus embedding aesthetic artefacts within broader systems of social differentiation(Gavin, 2004). These studies collectively establish *Pua Kumbu* as a central element of Iban cultural life, yet they tend to focus more on its ritual and symbolic dimensions than on its role in fostering social cohesion through aesthetic formation.

PUA KUMBU MOTIFS, SYMBOLISM, AND VISUAL LANGUAGE AS INDIGENOUS AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF BEAUTY

A substantial body of literature has explored the symbolic dimensions of *Pua Kumbu* motifs. Motifs such as *naga* (dragon), *antu gerasi* (giant spirit), and *buah andu* (fertility symbol) are interpreted as visual narrations of Iban cosmology and mythology(Kiyai, 2022). These motifs are not merely decorative but serve as encoded narratives that communicate moral values, ancestral memory, and spiritual power(Sultan & Jusilin, 2018).

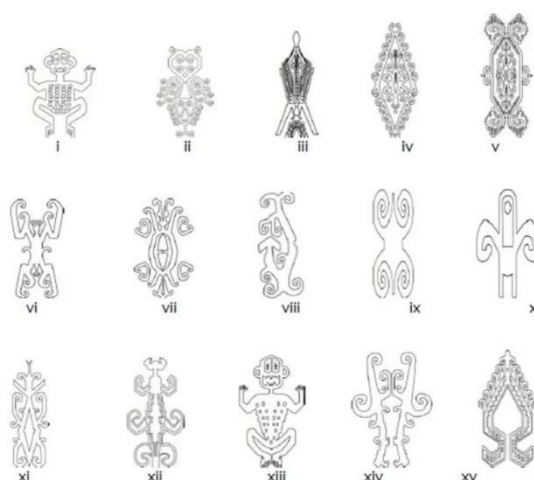


Figure 1: Motifs of Pua Kumbu: Source (Sultan & Jusilin, 2018)

However, most existing analyses treat motifs primarily as symbolic representations rather than as active agents in social life. While scholars acknowledge that motifs reflect Iban beliefs, fewer studies examine how the collective recognition, interpretation, and ritual use of these motifs actively reinforce communal identity and interrelationships(Gavin, 2004; Sultan & Jusilin, 2018). In this respect, the visual language of *Pua Kumbu* can be understood as a shared semiotic system through which communal meaning is constructed and negotiated, a perspective that remains underexplored in current scholarship(Wahed et al., 2022). Conventional Western aesthetic theory, rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, prioritises concepts such as visual harmony, proportion, originality, and individual creativity(Wang et al., 2024). These



frameworks, however, are increasingly critiqued for their limited applicability to non-Western art traditions. In indigenous contexts, aesthetics are often inseparable from cultural legitimacy, ritual efficacy, and social recognition. Western scholars argue that indigenous art cannot be evaluated purely on visual criteria but must be understood within its cultural and epistemological context. Beauty, in this sense, is not autonomous but relational, emerging from the alignment between form, belief, and social acceptance. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Pua Kumbu*, where the “rightness” of a design is judged not by innovation or novelty but by its conformity to ancestral authority, spiritual sanction, and communal norms (Wang et al., 2024). Despite these theoretical advances, relatively few studies apply indigenous aesthetic theory specifically to Southeast Asian textiles, and even fewer examine how aesthetic formation itself contributes to social cohesion. Most scholarship continues to treat aesthetics as a secondary outcome of belief rather than as a constitutive element of social life. To understand this, the next section will elucidate on how textiles can become a social agent of providing meaning-making for the community values.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE SOCIAL AGENCY OF TEXTILES FOR SOCIAL COHESION, RITUAL, AND VISUAL CULTURE

Material culture studies have significantly reshaped understandings of how objects participate in social life. Scholars' concept of “the social life of things” and argument that objects are active in shaping social relations rather than merely reflecting them have opened new analytical possibilities for examining artefacts such as textiles (Dant, 1999). In this view, objects are not passive carriers of meaning but dynamic participants in social processes. By applying this perspective to indigenous textiles suggests that *Pua Kumbu* should be analysed not merely as a representation of Iban culture but as an agent in constructing and maintaining social relationships. Through its circulation in rituals, inheritance across generations, and display during communal events, *Pua Kumbu* actively structures interactions among individuals and groups (Breu & Marchese, 2008). Yet, existing material culture studies have largely overlooked the specific role of aesthetic formation—rather than mere object presence—in shaping these interactions. Social cohesion, as conceptualised by scholars, refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community (Marr, 2018). In traditional societies, cohesion is often produced and reproduced through shared rituals, symbols, and collective practices. Visual culture, including textiles, plays a crucial role in this process by providing tangible forms through which collective identity is articulated and experienced. In Southeast Asian contexts, textiles frequently serve as focal points of communal interaction, whether in weddings, funerals, harvest festivals, or initiation rites. However, most studies on social cohesion in indigenous societies focus on ritual practice or kinship systems, paying relatively little attention to how aesthetic systems themselves function as mechanisms of social integration. In the case of *Pua Kumbu*, the communal participation in weaving, interpreting motifs, and ritual use of textiles suggests that aesthetic formation is deeply intertwined with the production of social cohesion (Gavin, 2004). Recent scholarship on heritage and cultural sustainability has raised concerns about the commodification and



decontextualisation of indigenous textiles. When *Pua Kumbu* is removed from its ritual and communal context and redefined as a market commodity or museum artefact, its role in sustaining social cohesion is significantly diminished. Scholars argue that safeguarding such cultural practices must prioritise the transmission of knowledge, ritual continuity, and community authority rather than merely preserving physical artefacts. This perspective underscores the urgency of understanding *Pua Kumbu* not only as heritage or art but as a living social practice. Without recognising the social functions embedded in its aesthetic formation, conservation efforts risk reducing a dynamic cultural system into a static visual product. In realising the importance of *Pua Kumbu* and in theorising how the aesthetic formation of *Pua Kumbu* operates as a mechanism of social cohesion within Iban society. This study seeks to address this gap by integrating aesthetic theory, material culture, and indigenous knowledge perspectives into a coherent analytical framework from the perspective of material culture theory, indigenous aesthetic theory and social cohesion theory. This framework is vital to examine how Iban cultural values shape the aesthetic formation of *Pua Kumbu*, with particular focus on motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, and weaving techniques and help to analyse how the aesthetic formation of *Pua Kumbu* functions in fostering social cohesion. These three complementary perspectives of theories, as explained in turn below, will enable a holistic understanding of *Pua Kumbu* as both an aesthetic artefact and a social instrument.

MATERIAL CULTURE THEORY

Material Culture Theory, particularly as articulated by scholars who emphasise that objects are not passive reflections of culture but active agents in social life (Berger, 2016). In the context of *Pua Kumbu*, this perspective encourages the researcher to treat the textile as a dynamic participant in communal relationships rather than merely as an artefact to be described. By framing *Pua Kumbu* as a socially active object, Material Culture Theory ensures that methodological attention extends beyond visual documentation to include interactions, practices, and communal contexts in which the textile operates.

INDIGENOUS AESTHETIC THEORY

Indigenous Aesthetic Theory is informed by scholars who position beauty, form, and creativity within culturally specific epistemologies rather than universal or Western-centric criteria. In this study, it frames aesthetics as culturally sanctioned and relational, privileging community recognition, spiritual efficacy, and adherence to tradition over individual artistic innovation (Robertson, 2016). Indigenous Aesthetic Theory ensures that the methodology respects cultural epistemologies, allowing the researcher to interpret aesthetic choices through the eyes of the community rather than imposing external criteria.



SOCIAL COHESION THEORY

Social Cohesion Theory, drawing on scholars' views, conceptualises social cohesion as the strength of relationships, solidarity, and shared values within a community (Taylor & Davis, 2018). Applied to Pua Kumbu, this framework highlights the textile as a medium through which interrelationships are constructed, reinforced, and transmitted. By integrating Social Cohesion Theory, the methodology explicitly links aesthetic formation to social outcomes, enabling examination not just of what Pua Kumbu looks like but also of how it functions as a vehicle for social integration. By synthesising these three theories, this study conceptualises *Pua Kumbu* as a form of cultural-aesthetic infrastructure, where aesthetic formation is not an outcome of culture alone but a generative force in shaping social cohesion. This model enables the analysis of *Pua Kumbu* beyond representation toward understanding its role in actively constructing communal interrelationships. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, as above, also provide both conceptual and practical guidance for the methodology. Each framework contributes in complementary ways, shaping the research design, data collection, and analytical strategies. Together, the three theoretical frameworks provide a coherent rationale for a qualitative, ethnographic methodology that includes: i) Artefact Documentation: Systematic recording of motifs, colour schemes, and weaving techniques informed by Material Culture Theory; ii) Participant Observation: Immersive engagement in weaving, ritual use, and community events, guided by Indigenous Aesthetic Theory and Social Cohesion Theory; iii) Interviews and Oral Histories: Capturing culturally embedded knowledge about aesthetics, spiritual protocols, and social functions; iv) Interpretive Analysis: Synthesising visual, social, and ritual data to understand how aesthetics, cultural values, and social cohesion intersect. This integrative methodology ensures that the study does not treat Pua Kumbu as merely an artistic object, but as a culturally embedded social instrument whose aesthetic formation is inseparable from its role in sustaining communal relationships. This will be explained in detail in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing ethnographic and interpretive approaches to investigate the intersection of aesthetic formation, cultural values, and social cohesion in Iban Pua Kumbu. The methodology is informed by three theoretical frameworks: Material Culture Theory, Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, and Social Cohesion Theory. Together, these frameworks provide conceptual and practical guidance for examining how Pua Kumbu functions as a culturally embedded artefact that mediates social relationships and embodies communal values. Ethnography allows the researcher to engage with the textile within its socio-cultural context, observing both production processes and ritual practices in situ. This approach is complemented by an interpretive analysis of symbolic and aesthetic elements, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how cultural values are materially and visually encoded to foster communal interrelationships. Given the socially and spiritually embedded



nature of Pua Kumbu, rigorous ethical protocols were established to ensure profound respect for the Iban community and their indigenous knowledge systems. The ethical framework was guided by the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Before commencing ethnographic observations, the study's purpose and potential impact were transparently communicated. Consent was negotiated as an ongoing, relational process, ensuring participants retained the agency to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, because Pua Kumbu weaving is historically intertwined with dream-received inspiration and spiritual taboos (*pemali*), the researcher strictly adhered to Iban customary laws (*adat*). Care was taken to ensure that in situ observations did not intrude upon sacred activities. Certain spiritual meanings or highly restricted motifs, if requested by the weavers to remain private, were intentionally excluded from public documentation to prevent cultural commodification. The study actively recognizes that the aesthetic and technical knowledge embedded in Pua Kumbu constitutes the intellectual and cultural property of Iban weavers. Participants chose between anonymity or formal acknowledgment, ensuring master weavers received proper attribution to elevate indigenous authorship rather than obscure it. Finally, prioritizing reciprocity to mitigate extractive research practices, the findings will be shared with the participating communities to contribute to the local archiving of Pua Kumbu heritage. By grounding the methodology in these ethical commitments, this investigation ensures it honors the lived realities and spiritual boundaries of the Iban people.

STUDY SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

Fieldwork was conducted in Iban longhouse communities in Sarawak, Malaysia, with a focus on regions recognised for traditional weaving practices. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with deep knowledge of *Pua Kumbu*. Key participants included:

- Master weavers (*indu takar*) responsible for producing ritual textiles (2 experts)
- Elders and community leaders with knowledge of ceremonial protocols (8 people)
- Female artisans and family members engaged in the transmission of weaving skills (10 people)
- Cultural custodians and ritual specialists who oversee textile usage in festivals and ceremonies (5 people)

A total of 25 participants were interviewed, with efforts made to capture a range of perspectives across gender, age, and social roles within the longhouse community.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data collection employed multiple complementary methods to capture the material, aesthetic, and social dimensions of *Pua Kumbu*:



1. **Participant Observation:** The researcher observed and participated in weaving sessions, ritual use of *Pua Kumbu*, and communal events such as festivals and mortuary rites. This enabled first-hand insight into the procedural, aesthetic, and social protocols governing the textile.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with weavers, elders, and ritual specialists to document their knowledge of motifs, colour symbolism, spiritual significance, and social functions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to articulate culturally embedded notions of aesthetic “rightness” and social cohesion.
3. **Visual Documentation:** High-resolution photography and sketching were employed to record motifs, patterns, and colour schemes. Visual analysis was conducted not merely to describe design features but to interpret their symbolic meanings and relational significance within communal contexts.
4. **Document Analysis:** Archival materials, including previous ethnographic studies, ritual manuals, and museum collections of *Pua Kumbu*, were analysed to triangulate field data and provide historical and cultural context.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using thematic and interpretive methods. Observational notes, interview transcripts, and visual records were coded iteratively to identify recurring motifs, aesthetic principles, and social functions. The analysis focused on three dimensions:

1. **Material and Aesthetic Dimension:** Motifs, spatial composition, and colour schemes were analysed to understand how aesthetic decisions are culturally regulated.
2. **Symbolic and Cultural Dimension:** The spiritual and ancestral significance of textiles was interpreted within the framework of Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, emphasising relational and communal criteria of beauty.
3. **Social and Communal Dimension:** Drawing on Social Cohesion Theory, the study examined how participation in weaving, ritual use, and textile circulation reinforces social bonds, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and collective identity.

Triangulation across observation, interviews, visual documentation, and archival analysis enhanced the reliability of findings and this is supported by having focus group discussion with five cultural and heritage experts to further validate the findings to established a string justification in elucidating how the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu functions in fostering

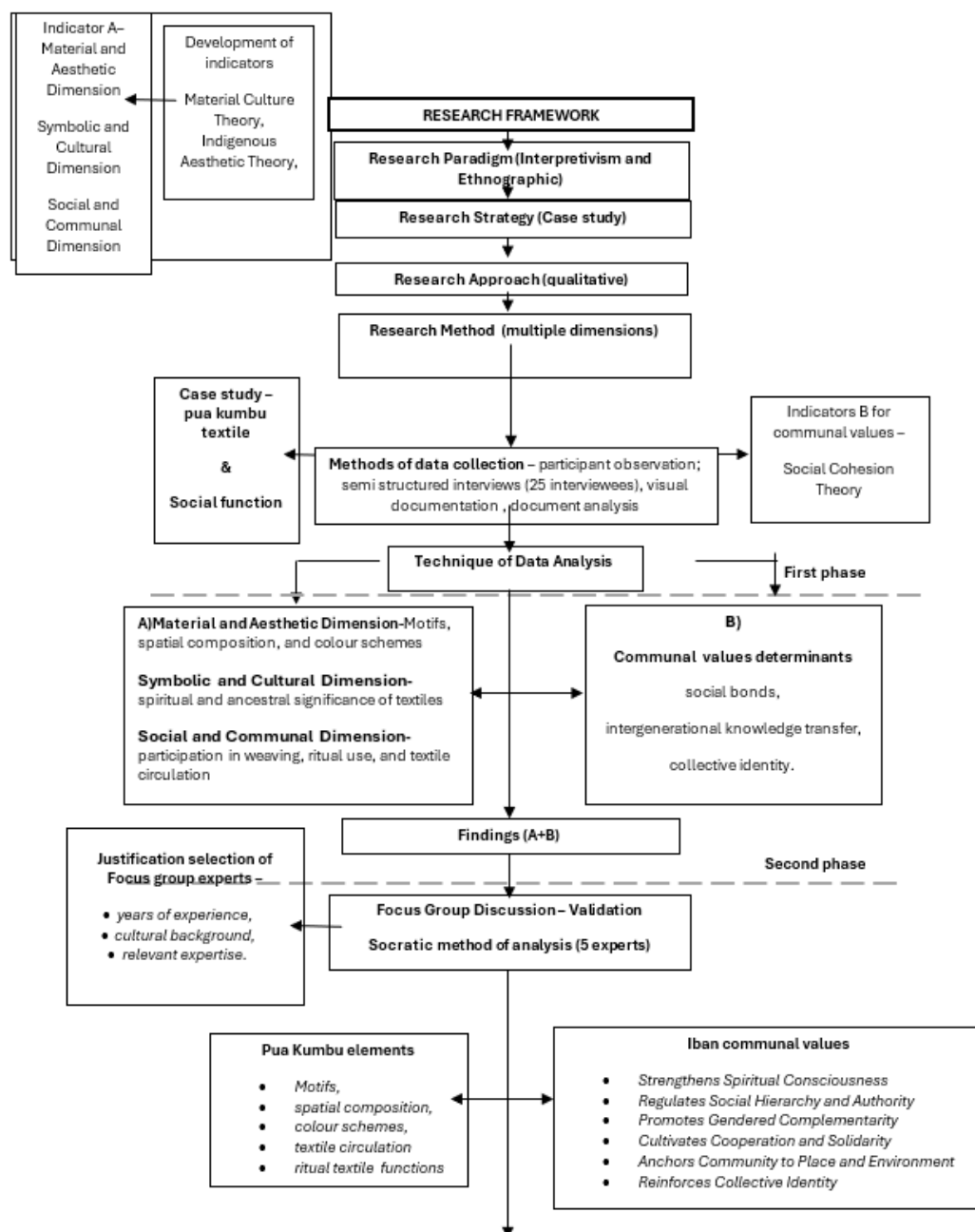


Diagram 1: Research Framework: Source (Author :2026)



social cohesion, including its role in sustaining communal identity, intergenerational relations, and cultural continuity (**Refer to Diagram 1**).

RESULTS

This section presents findings derived from ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, visual documentation, and archival sources. The analysis is organised around three analytically interrelated dimensions: aesthetic formation as materialised cultural values, indigenous aesthetics as relational and spiritual praxis, and aesthetic formation as a mechanism of social cohesion. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that Pua Kumbu operates not merely as a textile artefact but as a culturally embedded form of social infrastructure within Iban society. The findings indicate that the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu is governed by culturally prescribed principles rather than individual artistic autonomy. Motifs, chromatic choices, spatial organisation, and weaving techniques are shaped by Iban cosmology, ancestral authority, and social hierarchy. In line with Material Culture Theory, Pua Kumbu emerges as an active mediator of social meaning rather than a passive object of representation. Its visual form materialises social relations, spiritual beliefs, and moral order, rendering aesthetic practice inseparable from social structure. A central dimension of this materialisation lies in the motifs (*buah*), which informants consistently described as visual narratives encoding ancestral knowledge, mythological episodes, and cosmological relationships. Motifs such as *buah engkaramba* (spirit figures), *buah nabau* (serpent-dragon), and *buah antu pala* (spirit heads) are not ornamental but index specific metaphysical entities and ritual functions. Their transmission through dreams (*nampî*) and spiritual calling underscores their sacralised origins and legitimises their reproduction. The capacity to weave complex motifs confers social distinction and ritual authority, indicating that visual complexity operates as a marker of moral status and cultural legitimacy. Aesthetic formation thus constitutes a visible articulation of stratified social relations.

Colour symbolism and spatial hierarchy further consolidate this articulation. The dominance of red, black, and white reflects symbolic associations with vitality, ancestral power, and spiritual clarity, respectively. The spatial ordering of motifs privileges sacred elements through centrality and elevation, producing a hierarchical visual grammar that parallels Iban social organisation. In this sense, aesthetic formation functions as a semiotic analogue of social order, translating cosmological and ethical principles into material form. Beyond its material dimension, the findings demonstrate that Iban aesthetics are fundamentally relational, communal, and spiritually constituted, diverging from Western aesthetic paradigms that prioritise originality and individual expression. Consistent with Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, beauty (*manah*) is evaluated through adherence to ancestral protocols and spiritual sanction rather than subjective visual pleasure. Informants emphasised that a visually appealing textile lacking ritual legitimacy may be considered dangerous rather than beautiful, revealing



that aesthetic value is contingent upon ethical and cosmological conformity. Beauty thus emerges as a moral-spiritual achievement rather than an autonomous artistic category.

Aesthetic knowledge is transmitted through gendered and relational pedagogies. Weaving Pua Kumbu is predominantly a female domain, with knowledge circulating intergenerationally through matrilineal lines. This process entails not only technical skill acquisition but also the cultivation of moral discipline, patience, and spiritual responsibility. Aesthetic formation thereby operates as embodied pedagogy, through which social values are internalised via practice rather than discursive instruction. Indigenous aesthetics, in this context, function as a mode of cultural reproduction embedded in everyday ritualised labour.

The study further reveals that Pua Kumbu plays a constitutive role in generating and sustaining social cohesion. Drawing on Social Cohesion Theory, the findings show that shared aesthetic practices actively structure social relations and collective identity. Weaving is embedded within communal settings characterised by narrative exchange, interpretive collaboration, and affective bonding, rendering aesthetic production a socially integrative process. Moreover, Pua Kumbu assumes a central role in ritual contexts such as Gawai, healing ceremonies, and mortuary rites, where it symbolically unites participants through shared cosmological references and embodied memory. The collective recognition of motifs consolidates a sense of belonging rooted in common ancestry and worldview. The circulation and display of Pua Kumbu are subject to culturally codified restrictions, which further regulate social relations. Certain textiles are reserved for individuals with specific ritual statuses, reinforcing moral hierarchies and ethical accountability. These regulatory mechanisms operate through aesthetic means, embedding governance within visual culture and mediating authority, responsibility, and respect. Aesthetic formation thus functions not only as a symbolic expression but also as a modality of social regulation.

Intergenerational continuity constitutes a further dimension of aesthetic cohesion. Despite minor stylistic variation, core motifs and compositional principles exhibit marked stability across generations. This continuity results from deliberate cultural discipline rather than passive inheritance. By incorporating younger generations into weaving practices, Iban society ensures the transmission of technical knowledge, ethical orientations, and cosmological understandings. Aesthetic formation thereby becomes a principal mechanism of cultural sustainability and temporal cohesion. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the structural interdependence of material, aesthetic, and social dimensions in Pua Kumbu. Material Culture Theory elucidates the textile's agency in shaping social relations; Indigenous Aesthetic Theory reveals the culturally regulated and spiritually grounded nature of beauty; and Social Cohesion Theory explains how aesthetic practices actively produce solidarity and regulate hierarchy. Together, these perspectives establish aesthetic formation as a central modality through which Iban society maintains coherence, continuity, and moral order. These findings challenge conventional art-historical paradigms that isolate visual form from social function. In the Iban



context, aesthetic formation is inseparable from cultural legitimacy, spiritual authority, and communal integrity. Pua Kumbu exemplifies indigenous visual culture as social infrastructure rather than decorative artefact. More broadly, this study contributes to a reconceptualisation of indigenous aesthetics as epistemologically distinct systems of knowledge and value, necessitating theoretical frameworks that recognise their material agency and social efficacy. Ultimately, the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu emerges as a culturally regulated practice integrating visual expression, spiritual authority, and social organisation into a coherent system of communal life. Far from constituting a passive artefact, Pua Kumbu actively constructs and legitimises social relationships within Iban society. Through its motifs, chromatic codes, spatial order, and ritual functions, it embodies a visual grammar of social cohesion and cultural continuity, positioning aesthetics as a foundational mechanism in the reproduction of Iban collective identity.

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

The study of Pua Kumbu within the framework of ethnic studies offers important insights into how aesthetic systems function as mechanisms for cultural continuity, identity formation, and social cohesion among the Iban community in Sarawak, Malaysia. Ethnic studies emphasise the lived experiences, symbolic systems, and cultural agency of indigenous communities, and Pua Kumbu serves as a powerful material expression of these dimensions. Its aesthetic formation cannot be separated from its social, cosmological, and ethical meanings, as the textile embodies the interrelationship between individual creativity and collective cultural knowledge. First, Pua Kumbu demonstrates how aesthetic knowledge functions as an intergenerational cultural transmission system. The weaving process involves not only technical skill but also the internalisation of mythological narratives, ritual taboos (pemali), and symbolic motifs revealed through dreams or inherited tradition. In ethnic studies, such processes illustrate how cultural knowledge is preserved and reproduced through embodied practices rather than written texts. The weaver, traditionally an Iban woman, assumes the role of cultural bearer, ensuring continuity of ancestral values and reinforcing ethnic identity through artistic production. Thus, aesthetic formation becomes a form of cultural pedagogy that sustains ethnic consciousness across generations. Second, the communal dimension of Pua Kumbu production and use highlights its role in strengthening social cohesion. The textile is not merely a personal artistic expression but a communal cultural object embedded in collective rituals such as Gawai, healing ceremonies, and rites of passage. Its presence signifies shared belief systems and mutual recognition of social roles within the longhouse community. From an ethnic studies perspective, this reflects how material culture contributes to social integration by reinforcing shared meanings and collective memory. The textile becomes a medium through which community members affirm their belonging, cultural continuity, and spiritual interconnectedness. Third, Pua Kumbu reflects the relationship between aesthetics and indigenous epistemology. The motifs woven into the textile—often representing spirits, ancestors, and cosmological beings—encode knowledge about the Iban worldview and their



relationship with the spiritual and natural realms. Ethnic studies recognizes such artistic systems as legitimate knowledge frameworks rather than mere decorative traditions. This challenges dominant Eurocentric definitions of art that prioritize visual form over symbolic and social function. By situating Pua Kumbu within its cultural and ritual context, ethnic studies affirms the intellectual and philosophical depth of indigenous aesthetic systems. Furthermore, the study of Pua Kumbu has broader implications for understanding ethnic resilience in the context of modernization and globalization. As indigenous communities face pressures of cultural assimilation, commodification, and cultural erosion, traditional textiles such as Pua Kumbu become important markers of ethnic survival and cultural resistance. The continued practice of weaving and ritual use reinforces ethnic identity and strengthens collective pride. Ethnic studies highlights how such cultural expressions serve as tools of cultural empowerment, enabling indigenous communities to assert their presence and maintain cultural sovereignty. Finally, Pua Kumbu contributes to contemporary discussions on cultural sustainability and decolonizing knowledge. Recognizing indigenous aesthetic systems as complex cultural texts encourages more inclusive academic frameworks that value indigenous perspectives. It underscores the importance of protecting intangible cultural heritage not only as artistic tradition but as a living system of social knowledge and identity. In brief, the ethnic studies implications of Pua Kumbu extend beyond its aesthetic value to encompass its role as a cultural archive, social integrator, and symbol of ethnic continuity. Its aesthetic formation reflects a deeply embedded cultural logic that reinforces social cohesion, preserves indigenous knowledge, and affirms Iban identity. Through this lens, Pua Kumbu emerges not merely as a textile, but as a vital cultural institution that sustains the social and cultural fabric of the Iban community.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Pua Kumbu is not merely a traditional textile or an object of visual refinement, but a culturally embedded aesthetic infrastructure that actively sustains communal values and social cohesion within Iban society. By examining Pua Kumbu through the integrated lenses of material culture theory, indigenous aesthetic theory, and social cohesion theory, the research advances a holistic understanding of indigenous aesthetics as a socially operative system rather than a passive cultural expression. In doing so, it challenges conventional art historical and aesthetic paradigms that isolate form from function and visibility from social life. The findings reveal that the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu—manifested through its motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, weaving practices, and ritual protocols—constitutes a culturally regulated process through which Iban cultural values are materially encoded, socially reproduced, and intergenerationally transmitted. Aesthetic legitimacy within this context is determined not by individual creativity or innovation but by cultural authority, spiritual sanctioning, and communal recognition. This positions indigenous aesthetics as fundamentally relational, ethical, and collective. The study further establishes that Pua Kumbu plays a critical role in fostering social cohesion by structuring communal identity, regulating social hierarchy, reinforcing spiritual consciousness, and facilitating intergenerational integration. Through its ritual deployment and everyday cultural circulation,



the textile serves as a symbolic and practical mechanism that maintains harmony, solidarity, and moral order within Iban longhouse communities. In this respect, Pua Kumbu exemplifies how visual culture operates as social infrastructure, actively shaping relationships and sustaining cultural continuity.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research carries important implications for cultural policy and heritage conservation. Current heritage frameworks often prioritise the preservation of physical artefacts while neglecting the cultural processes, knowledge systems, and social relations that give these artefacts meaning. This study underscores the necessity of adopting process-oriented heritage policies that safeguard not only the material object of Pua Kumbu but also the cultural protocols, weaving practices, ritual knowledge, and aesthetic principles that sustain its social significance. Without protecting these intangible dimensions, conservation efforts risk reducing Pua Kumbu to a decontextualised museum object rather than a living cultural practice. In terms of cultural sustainability, this research highlights the vital role of community-based cultural transmission in ensuring the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems. Supporting master weavers, facilitating intergenerational learning, and recognising women's cultural authority are crucial strategies for sustaining the aesthetic and social vitality of Pua Kumbu. Policy initiatives should therefore move beyond commodification-driven craft promotion and instead invest in culturally grounded educational programmes, ethical heritage tourism, and local cultural institutions that empower Iban communities as custodians of their own heritage. Furthermore, this study contributes to broader discourses on indigenous knowledge and community development by demonstrating that aesthetic practices are not peripheral cultural expressions but central mechanisms for social governance, moral education, and communal integrity. Recognising indigenous aesthetics as a form of epistemological and social infrastructure invites a rethinking of how cultural development, heritage management, and social cohesion are conceptualised in plural societies. In conclusion, Pua Kumbu stands as a powerful testament to the inseparability of aesthetics, culture, and social life in indigenous contexts. By foregrounding its role in shaping communal values and sustaining social cohesion, this study affirms the necessity of integrating indigenous visual culture into contemporary debates on heritage, sustainability, and cultural policy. In doing so, it advocates for a more culturally responsive and socially grounded approach to heritage conservation—one that respects not only what is preserved, but how and why it continues to live.

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