

Understanding the Roles of Signs in Malay Fabric – A Semiotic Approach to the Fabric Design Studies

Nani Hartina Ahmad^{1,2}, Nazlina Shaari¹, Noor Azizi Mohd Ali¹ and Muhammad Pauzi Abd Latif³

¹Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

²Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan (UiTM), Bukit Ilmu, 18500 Machang, Kelantan, Malaysia.

³International Institute of Islamic Civilization and Malay World (ISTAC), 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

It is essential to comprehend how each creation comes with creativity enriched with meanings related to the making of an object of art. Understanding of signs used as subject matters to collect ideas that are subsequently manifested by cloth surface design. The beauty of composition and motif arrangement in the form of objects illustrated by a sign or symbol of a work intended to appreciate the meanings behind its creation. It is consequently interpreted through a semiotic approach in the fabric design study. The importance of sign comprehension in our daily lives is pivotal. Semiotics is a sign phenomenon study describable in the form of distinct meaningful symbols or signs of a matter. However, today's society lacks knowledge and insight regarding the presence of distinct symbols or signs in creation or design by designers. Thus, this study aims to understand each sign or symbol creation involved in the making of the Malay weaved cloth that is Kain Punca Potong (KPP). In this analysis, the qualitative approach was used by field observation and interviews with several informants. This strategy provided an advantage by providing awareness of the meanings expressed by signs and symbols in each Kain Punca Potong (KPP) pattern design formation.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of context and culture, Malay textile art is rich. Each artistic work of creativity brings definitive meaning that defines its type of pattern design and artwork form which in turn elaborates its creator or artist. According to [1], artwork creation is the result of its artist's creativity, who indirectly or directly incorporates life values in each of his or her creation. The study's textile art production is a Malay woven cloth popular in Kelantan, generally known as *Kain Punca Potong* (KPP), a long cloth with two structures called cloth body and cloth end. It is a widely worn cloth in the East Coast state of Kelantan. The uniqueness and speciality of this cloth lie in its pattern design, where KPP showcases checkered, stripes, and *ikat limar* technique. *Ikat limar* can be found on its body or its ends. KPP is mostly worn by men as *samping*.

The principal identity that relates to culture and needs during the growth of a society is handicraft art. Aspects of development, such as internal and external elements, the masses and their reception, art appreciation, aesthetics, and critics, are evaluated in art. As stated by [2], the definition of art concept encompasses the creation and creativity of traditional Malay society, where art is a handiwork skill process inherited through generations. This study describes how a consumer could interpret the explicit and implicit meanings behind signs and symbols of each motif and pattern designs. Sadly, today's society is incapable of understanding the meanings represented by these two elements. Members of society would buy and wear them, not thinking about the meanings being conveyed. In contrast, past societies accorded special attention to this matter, to safeguard the speciality of each work of art. Consequently, to ensure its protection from

obsoleteness, the processes of recognition, identification, understanding, and interpretation need to be done today.

That said, long-existed textile art creations should be conserved and elevated to prevent its loss and it fell on the society's shoulder perform it so art culture can persevere in the current world of globalization, apart from ensuring its existence, conservation, and elevation [3]. To turn them into a local speciality and advantage, the society needs to learn and understand each sign and symbols, to transform the creation into a speciality worthy of appreciation which negates the need to consume foreign products. This in turn would further elevate our nation's economy. The emphasis of this study is the use of semiotic theory to interpret its design significance in the investigation of meaning and symbolism present in the pattern and motif of KPP. The semiotic theory is also defined in this study as a branch of knowledge that focuses on examining different signs and symbols that occur in the lives of society and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semiotic Approach

In understanding each sign and symbol generated in KPP, this study opted for a semiotic approach. Semiotic is an investigation of phenomena study on the understanding of sign and sign theory. The semiotic theory originates from the West, whereas the term semiotic was derived from a Greek term "*semeion*", meaning sign. It also means sign knowledge, a branch of knowledge linked with sign studies and everything related to sign, such as sign system and sign use process.

Semiotic approach was used in this study to interpret motifs used as a sign in KPP design. It is crucial to explore the past thinking process of Malay society during the development of their art. This approach is in line with Malay traditional creation; from the context of understanding creation in work. This is because creation in a traditional society is a reaction to understanding the necessity of need. An event brings along its cause and effect, together with intangible answers.

A study by [4] stated that semiotics is vague, open to interpretation and thus acceptable since there is no right or wrong, leading to no detrimental effects on social acceptance. Semiotics is not exclusively used for expression. It is also applicable for assessment and the following processes, thus making it an alternative for technology-aided interaction. Evaluation in the context of implicit criteria for technology assistance design and development, comparable to mastering analytics. The symbols of art and design acted as information vector for art and design, with design culture being its direct messenger. Despite this, it was constantly improved to be a better guide or a new design, since designers tirelessly worked on design research and semiotics application, a form of evaluation analysis, and the investigation on correlations between form and shape meaning [5].

Fabric Studies

KPP is a type of Malay woven cloth also known as *kain lepas* or long cloth that was originally worn unstitched and wrapped around the body. Its *punca* or end was left to flow freely downwards, with its end tie kept securely in place by a *pending* belt. Traditionally, this cloth exhibits checkered, horizontal stripes, and vertical stripes design. However, several motifs were also used as the cloth's adornment, in addition to *ikat limar* technique [6],[7],[8].

In its processing, fabric appearance is a critical structure. This is because the structure was developed based on designs asserting basic characteristics of culture and society. Its creation is inseparable from the aspects of appearance, function, use, and meaning, as described by [9]. Some motifs and patterns used will be worn by specific individuals like nobilities and royals. This is the

case since there are signs or symbols especially crafted for specific individuals and are not intended for the public. According to [10], since long ago fabrics used was a method to show someone's wealth, by making it a part of his or her identity and personality. There are locations where it represents rank and status, with other places parading it to show group affiliation or clan membership.

Nowadays, fabric and patterns are means to differentiate garments and highlight their unique aesthetics, transforming into identity-forging elements not only for both sole products and a collection but also for brands. The fabric system implies prospects for unique technological success and good artistic endeavours because of these application possibilities. The main goal is to establish new knowledge that encompasses new meanings and narrations. That said, knowledge transfer is also among the best-suited technique to create new knowledge in an industrial chain, in addition to propagation or knowledge sharing [11].

Study on Design

Designing aesthetically embraced fabric is a creative work that immensely depends on the pattern designer's capabilities. Guidelines and education may exist to facilitate the process, however, it is still largely dependent on creative artistic work [12]. Among the aspect of the design process in fabric design involves designers or weavers are conscious of the designs to be drawn on the surface of the cloth. Each sign, emblem, or motif that is to be used to embellish the fabric should be known intimately. The designer's talent and capabilities greatly influence at this stage.

Based on the motifs created, it was found that most designers who use motifs to create signs possess exceptional imagination in addition to the ability of to manipulate motifs creatively. This also showed them as being equipped with high aesthetical values [13]. In this KPP study, checkered pattern with flower adornment was observed to be the predominant pattern arrangement. Combined with this pattern is a distinct arrangement or a combination of motif forms in certain styles like vertical, horizontal, and oblique.

Symbolic elements with special meaning that was created in a fabric design are the closest medium showcasing the designer's idea and emotions. According to the semiotic theory presented by early American semiotic tradition explorer Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), semiotics are signs identified through the process of semiosis, which can be divided into three, namely representamen object, and interpretant. In fabric, it relates to the understanding of pattern design through semiotics knowledge in KPP. To gain an understanding of the fabric design types, a semiotic approach was used. This can also be described as the social identity, where designers express the meaning of their design visualization. [14] performed a study on the importance of the fact that nowadays only a fraction of the symbols in the designer's artwork and its messages were understood by the society, leading to the necessity to elaborate this scenario further.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study comprises field observations and interviews with several informants. First step involves the observation of several Malay woven cloth, *the Kain Punca Potong*. This is done by visiting museums, galleries, and private collector residences. Observations were done on its motif pattern design, motifs arrangement, and signs. The second method was interviews with several informants to gather in-depth details of Malay woven cloth symbolism. The unstructured interviews were carried out with museum curators, fabric collectors, culturist, and several textile experts. These methods were done to ensure a naturalistic, qualitative approach to data collection, with an inductive method employed to analyze the data [15].

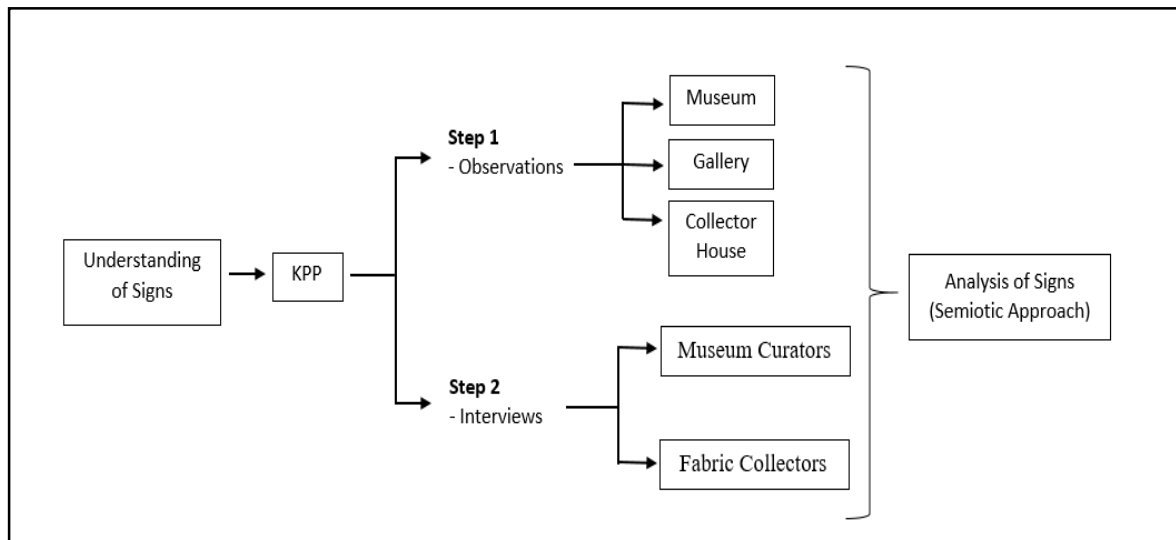


Figure 1. Research design on the understanding of signs in Kain Punca Potong (KPP).

The research design diagram (Figure 1) elaborates the methods used in this study to gather KPP sign study understanding, where step 1 involves observation and step 2 involves informant interview. The findings were then analyzed through a semiotic approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study result elaborates how understanding signs are crucial in interpreting a fabric. This is because formation has its unique significance. Apart from that, understanding also helps in recognizing specific sign representing its intended wearer. The intensity of each fabric design observation will reveal the sign used to form the significant object and subject. It can be understood and accepted through convention where the fabric's motifs will function as symbols. Most KPP motifs were derived from natural inspirations, like the motifs of flower, bamboo shoot, geometric, and more. Motif design on fabric functions as a sign or signifier that imparted information to observers. Below is the workflow to understand sign identification through an analysis process:

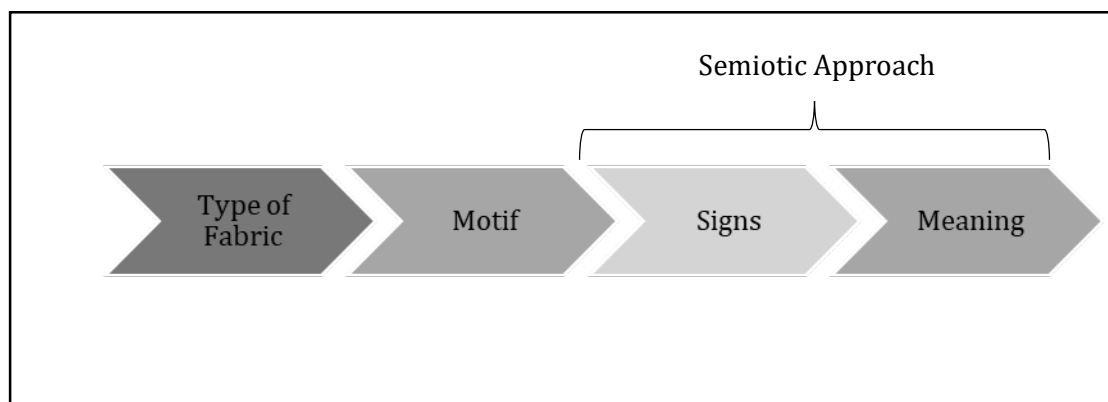


Figure 2. Analysis process of sign understanding in *Kain Punca Potong* (KPP).

Figure 2 depicts the analysis process performed to identify existing types of fabrics. It is then followed by observation on KPP motifs that will decide relevant signs. Lastly, the meanings or implications existing in KPP sign symbol or motifs can be interpreted. This study also shows how

the previous generation created motifs as the sign used to classify cloths meant for public daily wear and royals or upper-class use.

Table 1 Description of sign understandings in *Kain Punca Potong* (KPP)



Fabric Type	Description		
	Motif	Sign	Meaning
Fabric 1 	Sun Ray Flower	Flower/ Plants (flora)	-The light in life and authority of a leader.
	Bamboo Shoots	Plants (flora)	-Sturdiness or strength, a symbol of the world. - Strong and sure position. - Fertility and life.
Fabric 2 	Marching Ants	Animals (fauna)	- Always cooperating to build a big nest, able to carry objects with sizes exceeding its bodies, always greeting whenever crosses path with each other

Table 1 shows how motif creation as a sign in KPP understanding is an interpretation angle that necessitates comprehension. For example, Fabric 1 demonstrates how it is usually worn by the nobles or the upper class. This is because it possesses signs or motifs that depicts the power of a leader or a leader with power in society. In contrast, Fabric 2 showcases its animal characteristic inspired sign, which is the ant. This sign implies the ability to work together in all aspects of nurturing public unity. Hence, antique clothes were usually especially crafted according to the status of its intended wearer to signify their position in society. The symbolism and meanings of the semantic approach that is hidden in art objects as motifs and design which function according to their context. It is believed that each motif and design created bears a unique meaning in KPP decoration [16].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study greatly aided in shedding light upon how previous generations create something beneficial that have its own explicit or implied meanings. Malay art is rich in subtle meanings and culture that encompasses flora and fauna subjects inspired by their surroundings. It also portrays deeper thinking and way of life. Malay textile art is capable of describing the ethical system hold dear by Malay society, where it was established according to the suitability of time, place, ceremony, culture, and event. Apart from that, one will be enlightened of the Malay life culture by understanding and observing types of Malay fabric and attire.

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