Puariti Font: Visual Literacy and Ideology in the Cultural Identity of Iban Tribe, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the meaning embedded in the Puariti font and explore the visual literacy and ideological content in the Puariti font and its relevance in social practice. This study is a textual analysis using a cultural study approach especially on ideological theory in examining the Puariti font due to the solid cultural characteristics of the font and its long process of cultural transformation. According to the results, the Puariti font represents Pua Kumbu in the form of metamorphic letters. This font is composed of Engkaramba and anthropomorphic motifs belonging to the upper-class motifs of the Iban society. Further, Puariti can serve as a symbol of Iban culture amid globalization. This font embeds an essential meaning that connects the Iban people with the eternal meaning of their life and cosmology, history, and their relationship to the physical environment. That, taking part in maintaining the boundaries and construction of the Iban identity can help distinguish the Ibans from others. The cultural identity and expression of Iban religiosity are represented through Puariti font. Despite changing from the sacred Pua Kumbu cloth to the digital version of the Puariti font, the condition shows the same physical and metaphysical reality as the embodiment of reality and an ideology. The existence of the Puari-ti font can function as a visual literacy medium in art education inheritance practice, assisting the younger generation as agents of cultural production to revive traditional and cultural values.

Keywords: Typography, font, visual literacy, ideology, pua kumbu

Introduction

As part of cultural products, fonts undergo continuous development and transformation along with civilization. Fonts cannot be separated from typography. Etymologically, typography comes from two words: *typos* (forms) and *graphein* (to write). Typography also refers to the art of choosing fonts with a specific purpose in arranging letters to help the reader understand the text (Bringhurst, 2005; Setiasih, 2018). Typography has indeed experienced a shift due to civilization and technology so it seems as if letters become something trivial in everyday life. Shifts in needs and challenges are common in today's situation, encouraging cultural changes. Similarly, writing or fonts are constantly changing along with the development of communication systems (Sihombing, 2001). The existence of a font type depends on the challenges of communication culture in each era. The presence of a font type can be maintained and developed if the font offers a practical solution in communication culture, otherwise, the font will be abandoned and replaced with another form of writing (Mintargo, 1993). Advances in science and technology lead to a change in human life, including a shift in cultural values. Rahmanita (2013) opines that intercultural communication has resulted in the absorption of cultural elements; it affects the development of forms, patterns, and font styles as a work of art.

Letters, culture, and civilization are inseparable units (Sutrisno & Putranto, 2005). Delviatma (2013) points out that Puariti font is a product of cultural development and cannot be separated from the ideology of its creator. Fonts are also one of the elements that compose a piece of writing. This notion further emphasizes that writing is a technology that changes world civilization, so there will be no development of science in this world without letters and writing. According to Althusser (2007), ideology is a picture of the imaginary relationship between individuals and their actual conditions of existence. O'neil (2001) further adds that ideology refers to a belief system that is accepted as fact or truth by a group, which describes the general character of the social environment and its correlation with the nature of moral and evaluative behavior. Art is subject to ideologies in power. In other words, art is the best way for ideology to be communicated to the people (Maulana, 2015). The era of digitization has led to the development of various types of fonts from different countries worldwide. One example of a font with prominent cultural characteristics is the Puariti font. The exploration of the Puariti font set comes from a long process of cultural transformation. Letters cannot be created instantly; the process goes through long stages. The basic idea of creating this letter comes from the traditional cloth of the Iban tribe, Sarawak, Malaysia, which is described in Samsudin (2021), i.e., Pua Kumbu. The shape, color, and pattern of the Puaritian font are adopted from one of the traditional Pua Kumbu fabric motifs, namely the Engkaramba motif (Kiyai & Tugang, 2021).

There are several studies discussing typography, one of which is the research by Cristina and Indrajaya (2023) on the role of experimental typography in the visualization of songs in the Synesthesia album. The study explores the role of experimental typography as a dramatic and expressive visual medium in redesigning the Synesthesia album, where typography serves not only as an informative instrument but also engages in a dialogue with the songs as content, creating visualizations beyond the traditional typography paradigm. This exploratory approach follows Robin Landa's design method to challenge conventional views of typography as instrumental and functional. In addition, Iluz et al. (2023), in their research on word as image as semantic typography, propose a method to automatically create word illustrations as images by leveraging the capabilities of large-scale language-visualization models to visually represent text concepts. This approach focuses on simple and concise black-and-white design without altering the color or texture of the letters, optimizing letter outlines to convey the desired concepts. Furthermore, Jury (2023) also investigates the history of typography, discussing the evolution of print letter forms over 550 years, starting from the influence of 15th-century handwriting styles in Germany and Northern Italy. These changes occurred in conjunction with the development of typeface manufacturing technology, printing processes, and changes in reading habits resulting from media opportunities. This study aims because of the need to explore the Puariti font, given the lack of research on typography from an ideological perspective and its relationship with socio-culturalism. This research aims to identify the meaning embedded in the Puariti font and explore the ideological content in the Puariti font and its relevance in social practice. This case study employed a qualitative approach.

Material and Methods

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach on the puariti font. Qualitative methods are an approach that attempts to collect descriptive, subjective data and provide an intensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen et al., 2007). This study was conducted from July to December 2021. According to Mulyana (2018), a case study is a comprehensive overview and explanation of aspects related to an individual, group, organization, or community within a program or social situation. Case studies aim to answer questions of how or why (Creswell, 2006). The Puariti font was chosen as a study in this research due to its philosophical and traditional values related to the Iban motifs found on the Pua Kumbu cloth.
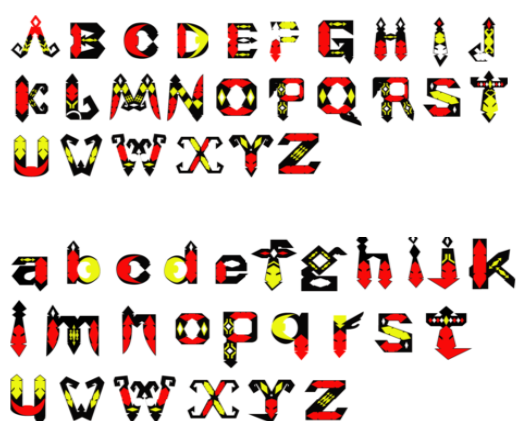
Figure 1. Puariti font set

The meaning of puariti font

The Puariti font, consisting of letters A to Z, represents Pua Kumbu in metamorphic form. Transmutation of a character can be understood as a process of integration of one or more objects in the structure of a character. Pua Kumbu is a single unit of letters of the alphabet without compromising the readability features of the Puariti font. Although fonts have various stylizations and anatomical variations, the integrity of the letters is not affected by this process. The Puariti font represents the identity of the Iban culture in globalization, where most of the younger generation is unaware of the symbols representing traditional motifs and their meanings. The Iban identity is expressed through the Puariti script, independent of the transition from the sacred Pua Kumbu cloth to writing. This emphasizes the same physical and metaphysical reality as the conceptualization of reality and ideology (Wahed et al., 2019). The name Puariti font derives its significance from three distinct elements: Pua Kumbu, traditional dance, and costume. Pua Kumbu, originally a sacred textile made of cotton, holds deep cultural importance among the Iban people in Sarawak. Traditionally, it served as a sacred natural site and played a central role in traditional Ngajat dances and ceremonies. Over time, Pua Kumbu has transcended its sacred origins and found contemporary utility in clothing, such as blouses, T-shirts, and shirts, symbolizing a fusion of cultural heritage and modern expression. The Pua Kumbu textile, renowned for its craftsmanship among the Iban people in Sarawak (Wahed, 2023), remains a vital cultural artifact, now further manifested in the innovative design of the Puariti font. When arranging a series of letters, the structure of the letters plays an important role. Font anatomy refers to the structure and parts of the writing so that it remains legible as is (Sriherlambang et al., 2021).
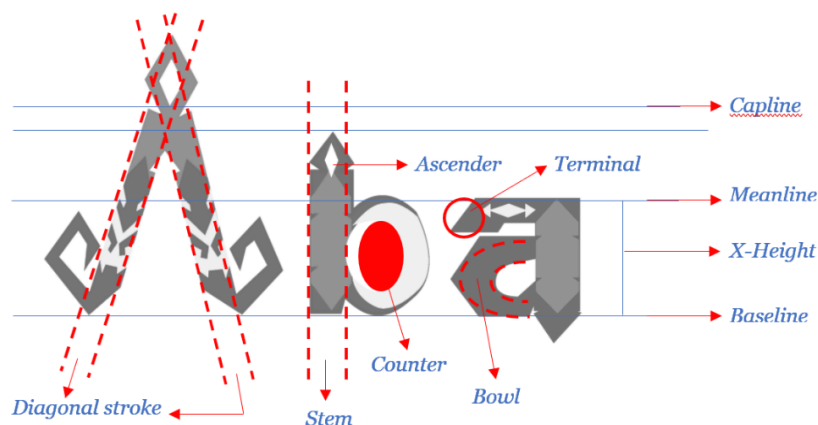

Figure 2. Puariti Font Anatomy

Figure 3. Etymology of the word Puariti

Provided in the following Table 1 are the elements of font anatomy.

Table 1. Description of the element of font anatomy (Sihombing, 2001)

No.	Element	Description
1	Baseline	Lower limit of uppercase
2	Capeline	Upper limit of uppercase
3	Meanline	Upper limit of lowercase
4	X-Height	Lowercase height, distance between meanline and baseline
5	Ascender	The upper part of the lowercase font above the meanline
6	Descender	The lower part of the lowercase font that lies below the baseline
7	Stem	The main vertical line in the font
8	Diagonal Stroke	Main diagonal stroke in the font
9	Bowl	Curved lines that create enclosed spaces within a font
10	Counter	The inside formed by curves that can be closed or opened

The importance of the Puariti font lies in its deformed representation of the Pua Kumbu motif, a concept rooted in the transformative process of altering the original shape while preserving its essence (Widadijo, 2020). Specifically, the Engkaramba (doll) motif (Figure 4), showcased incompletely in the Puariti font, comprises elements such as the crown and weapons, symbolizing protection for the Iban people against natural disasters and malevolent forces affecting their rice fields, plantations, and longhouses. This motif, revered for its profound meaning in Pua Kumbu textiles, stands as a powerful symbol of safeguarding the community. In addition to the Engkaramba motif, various anthropomorphic motifs depicting spirits, gods, and goddesses are integrated into the Puariti font, all classified as high-class motifs. Despite the belief that these motifs offer protection, there's an acknowledgment of their potential dangers. The exclusive role of selected women in weaving these motifs underscores their significance, requiring them to engage in special rituals to seek blessings and protection from deities like Kumang or Indai Abang, as well as from the spirits of their ancestors (Magiman, 2018). Brown's observation (2019) about the contemporary art market adds a valuable perspective, noting that more textile works by women dominate the market compared to those by male artists. This observation prompts reflection on historical gender biases within art, where textile art emerged as a medium that women were permitted and encouraged to embrace, especially during overtly sexist periods. This historical context enriches our understanding of the significance of women's roles in textile art and provides a backdrop for appreciating the cultural and artistic contributions embedded in the Puariti font's representation of the Pua Kumbu motif.

The ideology of puariti font

Learning is essential to promoting visual literacy. Visual literacy helps students communicate using visual grammar, enabling them to contribute to a more global level of dialogue, such as in the Metaverse era (Lundy & Stephens, 2015). The challenge of 21st century education is to create an education that can produce thinkers who, like 21st century individuals, can participate in building a knowledge-conscious social and economic order (Wijaya et al., 2016).

The creation of a font as a work of art is undoubtedly inseparable from the ideology of its creator and is also related to the capacity for visual literacy. Ideology is a complex, integrated, and coherent system of beliefs that justifies the exercise of power. It explains and evaluates historical events, identifies political right and wrong, and establishes (causal and moral) connections between politics and other fields of activity (McClosky, 1964). Converse (1964) also adds that ideology is a belief system that includes a variety of opinions, highly consistent attitudes, and abstract conceptualizations.

This mind map is a process of exploring ideas in the exploratory design of Puariti fonts. The basic idea comes from the traditional fabric of Kumbu, an Iban tribe from Sarawak, often used in traditional Ngajat dance. The dance is performed by women holding Pua Kumbu cloths. The cloth is considered sacred. Pua Kumbu fabric contains natural dyes that change the pattern of the fabric and the color of the fabric.

The engkaramba (doll) is an example of a motif with deep meaning in the Pua Kumbu textile. Many believe that this motif protects the Iban people from natural disasters and evil entities that harm the inhabitants of their rice fields, plantations, and longhouses. Usually, only the wife or daughter of the longhouse chief can weave enkaramba motifs. Red, yellow, black and white were taken from the colors of Pua's Kumbu fabric. These colors reflect the identity of Malaysia and Sarawak according to the colors of the national flag.
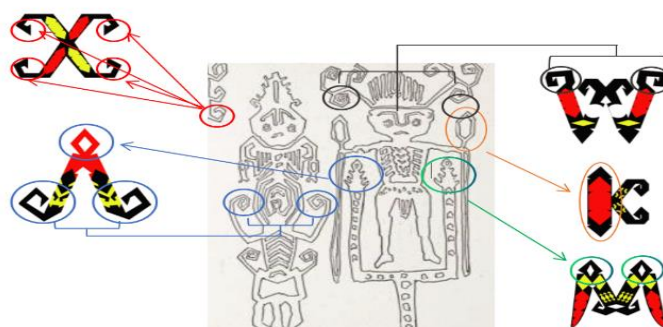

Figure 4. Engkaramba motif

Figure 5. Puariti font ideology

Puariti font in social practice

Art is inseparable from social practices in the community, both from a definitive perspective and the design and production process (Triatmodjo, 2014). This paper discusses the ideology of the Puariti font and its relationship to social practices.

Puariti Font as the Cultural Identity of Iban Tribe, Malaysia

The Puariti font consists of letters A to Z and represents Pua Kumbu in metamorphic form. Transmutation of a character can be understood as a process of integration of one or more objects in the structure of a character. Pua Kumbu is a single unit of letters of the alphabet without compromising the readability features of the Puariti font. Although there are some stylizations and anatomical variations in the engkaramba motif, such processes are not important to the principle of scriptural integrity. The Iban believe that this motif protects the people. The Puariti script contains a philosophy that connects the Iban people with the eternal meaning of life, cosmology, history, and relationship with the physical environment and plays an important role in the daily life of the Iban people. As a result, maintaining boundaries and participating in the construction of Iban identity serves to distinguish Iban from others.

Despite the change from the sacred cloth Pua Kumbu to the Puariti font, the Iban identity is expressed in this font type. This idea affirms the same physical and metaphysical reality as the conceptualization of reality and ideology. Pua His Kumbu depicting Puariti is a man-made work of art that reflects the Iban culture. Elements of the Puariti script include motifs from the sacred cloth and the highly revered Iban ritual, Pua Kumbu. Culture is the overall system of ideas, actions, and results of human work in society that is acquired through learning (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Art is essentially an artifact, a form of culture that embodies art. An object created by humans rather than an idea or activity. The Iban people are known for their wooden tenements, but this cultural custom is in decline. Therefore, Pua Kumbu is prioritized as a medium of identity construction. The existence of the Puariti font is a symbol of cultural identity and civilization. Pua Kumbu has changed its function from what was originally a ritual to art as the society continues to develop. Puariti font represents the identity of Iban culture amid globalization.

Puariti Fonts as an Inherited Practice of Art Education

The Puariti font represents the Iban cultural identity amidst the crisis caused by globalization where many young people do not have a deep understanding of their culture. As the community enjoys her Puariti font, both functionally and aesthetically, the cultural values embedded in the font can be passed on to younger generations. In other words, unless the motifs of Pua Kumbu cloth and Enka Lamba are transformed into Puariti script, the inheritance of artistic education in society will not occur. Art education can be interpreted as an effort to consciously prepare students to acquire artistic skills according to their desired roles through guidance, education, and training (Soehardjo, 2012). In this context, her dual role is to teach artistic skills and perform the functions of artistic education. Plato points out the importance of art in education in his famous essay, "*Art should be the basis of education,*" In this context, art is seen as a medium for achieving educational goals. This concept is known as "Education through the Arts." Reed believes that art should not only serve the purpose of a work of art but also be a tool to achieve educational goals. Community recognition of Puariti fonts as works of art fosters appreciation and stimulates creative thinking in the innovation process. Habits are defined as values that permeate a person's thoughts, feelings, and aesthetics and influence his or her habits (Bourdieu, 1984). This practice consists of an artistic thought process and a continuous attempt to preserve cultural and historical values through art.

Puariti Font as the Religious Expression of Iban Tribe, Malaysia

The Puariti font incorporates the engkaramba (doll) motif, drawn from the Pua Kumbu motifs in terms of shape, structure, and style. These motifs hold profound significance for the Iban people,

who believe that they serve as protective elements guarding against disasters and negative omens. However, it is emphasized that the impact of these motifs can turn negative if not accorded the due respect. The Iban people approach the motifs with reverence through rituals and actions, a sentiment reflected in the tradition of allowing only selected women to weave these motifs into fabrics. The chosen women undertake special rituals to seek blessings and protection from deities such as Kuman, Indai, and the spirits of their ancestors, who were early weavers. The rituals conducted by the Iban community serve as a dual expression of gratitude to God (petara) and warding off misfortune and evil spirits (antu). The enkaramba motif in the Pualiti script is perceived by the Iban people as a representation of a god protecting them from negativity, and the primary intent of the rituals is to express gratitude to God. In the broader context, these design motifs draw inspiration from ancient forms intertwined with ceremonial rites and animistic values (Truna et al., 2021), establishing a profound connection between cultural symbolism, religious expression, and artistic creation within the framework of the Puariti font.

Conclusion

The Puariti font serves as a distinctive representation of the Iban tribe's identity, transforming Pua Kumbu into stylized letters while preserving legibility. Despite the shift from sacred cloth to font, its physical and metaphysical essence remains, symbolizing the resilience of Iban cultural heritage. Rooted in the traditional Pua Kumbu cloth and Ngajat dances, the font's ideology is a vital cultural thread. The engkaramba motif reflects ancestral beliefs, providing protective symbolism. The font, showcasing red, yellow, black, and white colors, pays homage to Sarawak and Malaysia. Socially, it manifests as a cultural identity symbol and educational inheritance, bridging tradition with contemporary forms. Beyond visuals, it becomes a religious expression through the engkaramba motif, embodying a guardian god. In essence, the Puariti font encapsulates the Iban tribe's cultural narrative, emphasizing the enduring impact of visual literacy and ideology on cultural preservation.

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