Women’s War. An Update of the Literature on Iban Textiles

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By Michael Heppell*


With three books in as many years, Iban textiles are clearly of note.¹ Their range is without equal in island South-East Asia; their beauty undeniable. They are purposely made to be beautiful. As such, they attract the gods. The gods then pay attention when being supplicated. The major cloths – the *puas’* – are inextricably linked with headhunting. Part of the process of creating them is called “Women’s War”. They are used by women to incite men to take heads. Many cloths have an intrinsic force or

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¹ Michael Heppell, an honorary fellow at Monash University (Melbourne), studied Iban social control, including the socialization of children, in the Batang Ai region of Sarawak (1972-74), leading to a PhD (1975). Later, he spent one year (1981) doing an ethnographic study of the Jakug Bidayuh in West Kalimantan, three months with the Buket on the Balui in Sarawak, and many years doing various kinds of consultancies in Borneo, from which stemmed an interest in Dayak art. His knowledge of Iban weaving was stimulated by Enyan anak Usen, a Delok Iban, who spent several months in 1982 in Australia talking about and demonstrating weaving to the Heppell household. Michael Heppell’s recent publications include *Iban Art: Sexual Selection and Severed Heads* (with Limbang anak Melaka and Enyan anak Usen), which sets Iban weaving in a broader art and evolutionary context (Leiden: C. Zwartenkot Art Books & Amsterdam: KIT, 2005), 180 p., 223 color plates, photography of John Gollings).
power, sufficient, at least, to kill a woman not experienced enough to weave them. The power comes from the extraterrestrial phenomenon captured and pictured in the cloth. The main design is surrounded by borders to contain the power. Particular spirits like crocodiles are given pictorial food to eat so they do not become hungry and break out of their barriers and feast upon their makers. At least that was an understanding prior to Gavin’s book, which reduces all this to decorative aesthetics.

There are a number of Ibanic groups who weave. Among the Iban, there are two quite distinctive styles, which Gavin calls the Saribas and the Baleh/Batang Ai. Not only are the styles distinctive, but so also are all but a small core of designs. Across the border in West Kalimantan, live Ibanic speaking weavers like the Kantu’, Ketungau, Desa, and Mualang. Their styles are also quite distinctive, though there is a small core of ‘motifs’ that are common to all including the Iban. Little, however, is known about these weaving traditions. They are not ignored by our authors, with Gavin tantalizingly including one Kantu’ skirt (p. 94) among her eight colour plates and a second (p. 181, no. 100) as an illustration of a particular Iban skirt ‘pattern’, and Ong (EO1, p. 79) showing a pair of Mualang loincloth ends. Hopefully, a proposed project involving the Kobus Center in Sintang and the Tropenmuseum (Museum voor de Tropen) in Amsterdam might lead to more information about these Kalimantan traditions, so that a fuller understanding of the iconography of all the groups can be achieved.

All three books devote a considerable amount of space to photographs of Iban textiles, though only the Linggi and Ong books set out to represent their beauty with good quality plates. Linggi’s book exhibits a broad variety of outstanding cloths from various Sarawak collections. That range is unmatched in the published literature. Gavin’s work is more focused on naming individual designs, and less attention has been paid to producing quality illustrations. For clarity of detail, however, Gavin’s earlier work, *The Women’s Warpath* (1996), published by the UCLA Fowler Museum, remains the benchmark.

Perhaps slightly disappointing is that no book sets out to give at least one example of the full range of textile products and techniques. Of the products, Ong is the most complete, giving illustrations of the four main items, namely *pua*’ blankets, skirts, jackets, and loincloths (omitted are the rare seat mat and the Malay inspired *selendang*). In contrast, Linggi concentrates only on *pua*’ and Gavin on *pua*’ and skirts. Of the techniques, there are no examples of beadwork (Ong shows a skirt with a Maloh beaded overlay), cowry shell embroidery, the technique known as *songket* (a supplementary embroidery method using floating spools of gold or silver metallic threads), and the wrapping or slit tapestry technique known as *silat* (though it is present on the jackets illustrated by Ong). It could justifiably be argued that none of these techniques are central, though a complete weaver should be able to demonstrate a mastery of most of them. More surprising is the relative omission of examples of *pilih*, a continuous weft supplementary embroidery method, which is common on jackets, skirts, and loincloths, and certainly not uncommon on *pua* among all Ibanic groups. Ong is the most complete, presenting examples of *pilih* jackets, skirts, and loincloths. Only Linggi presents an example of a *pua*’ cloth in *pilih*, but that clearly indicates why
pilih needs some attention. Iban cloths are famous for their deep red *Morinda citrifolia* backgrounds. Pilih, in contrast, has a white background, but like its resist tie-and-dye ikat and weft wrapping sungkit cousins, it depicts many powerful designs, particularly those of the crocodile and the water serpent. The question of whether or not the technique affects the power of a cloth is addressed obliquely by Gavin. Her conclusion is far from convincing. She states categorically (p. 38) that one of the distinguishing marks of powerful cloths is that they are red in color – though she later seems to contradict this assertion (p. 154) by stating equally categorically that pua’ cloths with a blue background are high ranking. White cloths, in contrast, are not powerful. Gavin raises an apparent paradox without attempting to resolve it at all. A red based cloth of crocodile or water serpent is powerful because crocodile (*Ribai*) and water serpent (*Nabau*) are powerful extraterrestrial figures. The counterpart cloth in pilih depicting exactly the same powerful figures is not powerful because of its white background. The paradox is even more apparent when considering jackets. Iban warriors often depict ‘helping spirits’ on the back of their jackets. Crocodile and water serpent are two such spirits. If we follow Gavin, warriors with a sungkit figure of a crocodile on their jacket possess a powerful helping spirit, while those with a pilih figure do not.

One of the most interesting questions about Iban weaving is whether or not many designs are pictorial narratives. Linggi does not address this question, while Ong leaps in feet first with the statement that “the symbolic aspect of the Iban *Pua Kumbu* is a whole language by itself,” without explaining quite what he means, nor presenting any evidence to support this statement. The central purpose of Gavin’s book is to examine what, if any, meaning there is in Iban motifs and designs. Her conclusion is that Iban cloths are basically decorative (p. 239). Their main concern is the “decoration of a flat surface without leaving empty spaces rather than representational depiction” (p. 242).

Important to an assessment of Gavin’s argument is an information trail of named motifs in Iban textiles. It goes back about a century when Charles Hose collected a number of Iban textiles that were destined for the British Museum and the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Possibly informed by the Iban woman who tended his needs in remote Sarawak, Hose tagged the cloths with the names of individual motifs appearing in the overall design. Most of the names represented natural phenomena. A possible test of Hose’s thoroughness came when he asked the name of what to all intents and purposes resembled a human figure. His informant simply said “figure” or “model” (*engkeramba*). Another informant might have said “Iban” in the sense of a human figure. *Engkeramba*, however, was given and *engkeramba* has stuck. Hose was satisfied with the ascription. He does not seem to have asked the pertinent question if any such figures might have represented humans, heroes, or gods. Had he done so, he would eventually have received an affirmative when a figure representing some mythical hero was recognized. We can be sure of that, because Gavin herself has to acknowledge that some figures have names when she names one design the ‘demon figure pattern’ (pp. 110-111). The demon figure is called Nising and is the perennial victim of the Iban Mars, Singalang Burong, prior to his participation in a headhunting festival in the mortal world. Another figured cloth
is called the ‘Kumang waking up pattern’ (p. 136). Kumang is a ‘hero,’ patroness of weaving, and epitomizes desirable womanhood for the Iban. On this cloth, there are female and male figures testifying to Kumang’s attractiveness to the opposite sex. It would be surprising if these figures did not represent Kumang and her husband and lover, Keling. Kumang and Keling live in a non-terrestrial place called Panggau, in longhouses peopled by numerous named heroes, whose exploits epitomize Iban ambition. It needs to be understood, a fact omitted by Gavin, that, historically, dream-inspired cloth designs originated in Panggau, usually revealed by Kumang. Consequently, scenes from Panggau are often represented on cloths.

Hose’s annotated cloths formed the basis of Haddon and Start’s (1936) attempt to explain Iban iconography in textile design. The task proved impossible. Without access to Iban informants, Haddon was totally disorientated by the flattened and splayed out split representational designs that confronted him, acknowledging that many bore absolutely no resemblance to what they were said to represent.

The paper trail was taken up again in the years 1948-50. Derek and Monica Freeman spent two years living with Iban in the Baleh. In their time there, Monica became a technically accomplished weaver. She was also a gifted artist and did many line drawings of cloths. These drawings were annotated by Derek in much the same way that Hose had done some decades before. Only Freeman’s notes were based on interviews with the particular weaver who had woven a cloth. The time was auspicious. Head taking had received a recent injection with Japanese officially being declared fair game (and Iban taking a liberal interpretation of who looked like a Japanese). Head taking Baleh culture was intact. As far as Freeman was concerned, his notes were sufficient for him to write a book on Iban weaving, because he told me he intended to do so before I spent two years with the Iban in 1971-73.

The Freemans’ drawings and notes are freely accessible in the Tun Jugah Foundation in Kuching, Sarawak. Gavin accessed these notes and one of the mysteries of her book is that she barely used them. Among the many drawings by Monica was a design that had a female on the top, snakes dividing the top from the bottom, and males and headless corpses below. Essentially, the design represented Kumang weaving a design inspired by Meni (the patron of dyeing), while below, Keling was ranging through the heavens taking heads. Every motif in this design had relevance to the pictorial narrative of the cloth and its title about thunder and lightning, according to Freeman, described the location of Panggau in the sky and was a metaphor for what happened there. The design captured the central reality of the great Iban cloths – women weave cloths to incite men to take heads, which in turn enhances their own fertility and the fertility of life-securing rice. I mention this cloth and the trail because Gavin’s central thesis that there is no pictorial narrative in Iban cloths needs to address such examples and demonstrate why they do not invalidate her thesis.

This trail was picked up by an American art researcher in the 1960s, Sarah Gill. She tried to make sense of Hose’s annotated motifs. She found that quite different phenomena, like shrews, tiger cats, and spiders, were represented in much the same way and concluded that, because they were virtually indistinguishable and did not look
like what they represented, they acted as *ad hoc* labels. She also observed that in the figured cloths, the figures were usually stark naked with exaggerated genitalia, leading to the conclusion that these were some priapic tribal version of a Playboy centerfold.

The trail provides us with a mass of named motifs, confusing to Haddon and enlightening to the Freemans, whose annotated drawings show a number of cloths telling a story. An Iban love song takes up this theme when a young girl tries to persuade her inamorato that she has qualified for matchmaking by weaving a superb cloth:

> The design on the surface was of a python truly a meter in length, and a young tigress who could almost be heard roaring with strength from the peak of Spirit Mountain, And something wondrous looking like the tongue of a giant cobra, Coiled at rest inside its nest within a rocky chamber. (My translation from Donald, 1992).

In the epic poems, bards refer to a cloth:

> Your cloth was finished, my dear, I must admit, Spectral looking, colored an intense scarlet, A design of a hanging hibiscus flower. Its knotted line ensured not a thread out of place, Complete perfection, its central theme of great grace – Of two groups of elephants, eyeballs to eyeballs. The uppermost border of your design recalls, A portrayal of sea gypsies on the move, One sided, all bow and stern, you’ll not improve. (My translation from Sandin, 1977).

Another Iban talking to the then Curator of Textiles at the Sarawak Museum, Joseph Inggai, said: “Absolutely every motif in a cloth has a meaning.”

Gavin’s book relies much on Haddon’s confusion and not at all on the Freemans’ descriptions.

Powerful cloths quite rightly excite Gavin’s interest. They can result in the deaths of women not experienced enough to weave them. This leads to the question as to why the Iban need to weave powerful cloths. For Gavin, the reasons are twofold. The most powerful cloths were needed to receive trophy heads and in major festivals. It is essential for a cloth’s potency to be appropriate to the purpose (p. 26). If this explanation is complete, one wonders why individual Iban made so many powerful cloths, generation after generation. Even allowing for the many that are buried with a deceased, any self-respecting household can show a veritable trove of powerful cloths where one or two would do. There must be other reasons not related to the women’s prestige system for women continually to risk their lives on powerful cloths, just as there is a requirement that men not rest content with just one head.

Gavin conceives powerful cloths in the context of rank. Iban festivals are ranked in importance and, in the Sarribas, there is a corresponding cloth design representing...
each of the major festivals. The most powerful of them all, *Gerasi Papa* (the Giant Ogre), is usually represented, according to Joseph Inggai, by seven rows of figures with slightly pointed heads and gaping toothy mouths.

The Iban have titles for various aptitudes, such as being a war leader (*tau serang*) or, more modestly, a raid leader (*tau kayau*). They have a terminology for what might be called ranked achievement. They do not have a terminology denoting rank in cloths – if they did, presumably Gavin would have given it. They undoubtedly do attribute importance and power to cloths, but more on a continuum than within bounded divisions or classes. Gavin mentions *rang jugah* as the most powerful Baleh cloth, and there can be no disagreement with that. Below that, the league table remains unclear. Gavin does not ascribe a rank to each cloth she discusses. Linggi does try in an earlier work (1998), but the only rank she nominates is ‘ceremonial.’ In the book under review, she gives up the attempt.

So, if the power of a cloth is not related to the spirit it captures, what is the source of that power? For Gavin (p. 80), the weaver gives a powerful cloth a ‘title,’ to reflect its power. In fact, the Iban usually give it a praise name – *julok*. For example, a title like “drifting clouds pattern” provides little indication about the power of that design. According to Gavin, if a ‘pattern’ is copied, it acquires significance. If some weavers die as a result of copying it, its power is confirmed. An important aspect of this power is that pattern and title are passed down in an unbroken line, so that there is a known pedigree. Consequently, according to this argument, a design like Nabau, the water serpent grandfather of Keling and King of the Lower World, is powerful not because it represents a powerful, extraterrestrial being, but because the ‘pattern’ has a traceable genealogy of weavers who have woven it, including some who have died weaving it.

What actually happens with the Iban is that a weaver creates a new design. She will be able to provide a reason for every motif included. The cloth is given a praise name which, if there is interest in the design, might be abbreviated into a title when repeated or copied. With copying, the original weaver does not explain to the copier each element making up the original design. She merely gives the copier the cloth to be copied. Given such a sequence, one can agree with Gavin that what passes as a copy is a pattern. In terms of meaning, the original cloth is of a different order. Gavin seems to acknowledge this. An Iban weaver, asked to identify cloths in the Sarawak Museum, exclaims that she would not know the names of cloths woven by others (p. 21); Baleh weavers asked to identify a motif similar to *rang jugah* on a Saribas cloth reply that “only the people who made [the cloth] know the name” (p. 235). The problem for Gavin, and for everyone else, is that the original weavers have been dead for some time. Consequently, it is not possible to ascertain how individual elements in a design contributed to the whole and the relationship between design and praise name, if the latter is remembered. That is why the records of the Freemans become so important, because they recorded cloths being created by old-style Iban. Some, like the lightning metaphor for Keling raiding, were a pictorial narrative. Another, showing headless figures, was a historical marker commemorating a battle at Nanga Pila, in which numerous Baleh Iban were ambushed and slaughtered by government forces. Pictorial narratives and historical reminders are the grist of Iban textile design.
Gavin distinguishes two categories of cloth. There are those for which the name acts as a title. Most *pua’* comprise this category. There are those for which the name is merely a label, and the bulk of these are skirts. Jackets, which often represent spirits helping a warrior, are not considered. There are crossovers like, presumably, the water leech (*lintah*) and the brahminy kite (*lang*), which feature on both skirts and *pua’*. Because they are ‘non-powerful,’ they are labels. Gill’s observation that motifs, because they bore little resemblance to what they represented, were simply labels had the merit of consistency. With Gavin, tiger, for example, which shows “no graphic representation of the tiger’s body or head,” is high status and a title because of its age and association with a powerful spirit (p. 143). Leech designs, on the other hand, which resemble “the wriggling shapes of leeches” (p. 174), are not powerful and are labels. The Iban make no such distinctions. That some cloths have praise names is important. Most cloths do not, because they are copied, and copied cloths do not have praise names. The Iban make this distinction, and it is an important one in terms of the power of a cloth.

Iban men, when they have done something notable, are given a praise name. Kedu, for example, is a man’s name. There was one Kedu who became a noted warrior, leading the Skrang Iban. His feats resulted in his being called Lang Ngindang, ‘Soaring Kite,’ and thereafter he was known by that name. He became known by his title. Original *pua’* also receive praise names. Gavin gives a number of examples, such as Mata Hari’s skull basket brightening the edge of the sky (p. 151) and she glosses the design as Mata Hari’s skull basket. One cannot but agree with Gavin that this name acts as a title. But what happens with other motifs? For example, Iban say that there are seven different representations of the dragon, *naga*. Gavin has but one and calls it ‘dragon,’ not something else raising its status. There are numerous praise names for crocodile patterned cloths, suggesting many titles. Gavin allows but one. There are many Saribas representations of the tree of life (*tiang ranyai, mulong merangau*, etc.), for example, which give their names to levels in a series of headhunting festivals (*gawai burong*). For Gavin, all these different designs and multiplicity of praise names have but one title, ‘ritual pole pattern.’ I am doubtful that the owners of these cloths would agree that this title is an acceptable representation of their cloth.

Praise names are a graveyard for anyone trying to produce an orderly and consistent typology of Iban designs. The Iban have the irritating habit of producing what they say is an original cloth and giving it a praise name. Sometimes this original cloth is a mirror image of an unacknowledged older design that the weaver must have seen. So, the person searching for consistency is confronted with a plethora of titles for what appears to be the same design. The fun is that the titles show different ways in which a particular design might be interpreted. They support Gavin’s observation that individual motifs making up a design do not constitute a kind of shared language or lexicon of motifs. The meaning of many motifs is particular to the woman employing them. Gavin is quite right for repeating that you need to talk to the woman who conceived a design to understand it.

One praise name causes serious disagreement. Gavin’s ‘fruiting palm pattern’ (p. 149) has a praise name: *kandong nibong berayah, tangkai ranyai besembah*.
'the nibong palm, leaping up and down, fruit stalk of the shrine that bows down, straining to the house, now to the ground – that supports as a pillar and watches over the singing of the chant.' Linggi’s rang jugah pattern (p. 107) has a praise name: kandong nibong berayah, tangkai ranyai besem bah; Bujang Berani Kempang, berapa kali’ iya udah matah ka dilah nukang ka rang atas bedilang, the last verse being translated by me as ‘Bold and Courageous Youth, how many times has he already severed heavy tongues from jaws hanging above the hearth?’ This title spurred Gavin to write (p. 150): “Despite the variations of the praise names, they all are attached to very recent and easily identifiable graphic patterns. It is therefore puzzling how the praise name of kandong nibong came to be attached to an example of the rang jugah pattern in Linggi’s catalogue. Due to this and other similar mix-ups, I have omitted any further references to the identifications of patterns in Linggi’s catalogue.”

Gavin’s informants told her that there is no praise name for rang jugah or, perhaps, that they did not know it. What Gavin does not seem prepared to acknowledge, however, is that some weaver, when revealing a newly woven and dream inspired rang jugah, might give that cloth a praise name. The weaver breaks no convention by so doing. The facts of the cloth causing the “mix up” suggest that Gavin needs to do a lot more than simply dismiss the praise name because it does not accord with her typology. The cloth was actually woven by Linggi’s husband’s great grandmother (Linggi 1998: 178). The people who would know the praise name, if there was one, would be her heirs, of which Linggi’s husband is one. If Gavin could produce testimony from the great grandmother’s household that Linggi is wrong, she would have a case, but she does not. Further, quite why Linggi, herself an Iban, who has devoted a great number of years to learning about weaving and documenting designs, particularly those in her large collection, would be so wrong about many designs, deserves more than a peremptory dismissal. At least, Gavin owes every reader an identification of which attributions of Linggi’s she considers wrong and why. Linggi would be able to make her own defense and others would be able to make up their own minds.

Ong throws a further unintended spanner into this particular debate. His book illustrates pieces of a group of weavers from the Kain River, a tributary of the Gaat in the Baleh. Gavin’s fruiting palm is one design woven by at least two of them. Its praise name (e.g., p. 81 and p. 108) is Keliku gajai antu, nyawa iya rengu rengu minta seru ka Raja Natu empurong bulu ke telu manah di kayam. Kelikut gajai langit minta tumbit ka Raja Tindit bukit ke sejarit nyadi emperan, which Ong translates as “the roaring lion nags Raja Natu to search for the hairy coconut shells. The roaring lion urges Raja Tindit to flatten the land.” Whether or not one agrees with Ong’s translation, there is nothing in this praise name about fruiting palms. These weavers regard this design quite differently from Gavin’s informants. Again we return to the adage that only the weaver who has created a particular cloth can tell you what it is.

There are a number of small differences between our authors. For example, Ong places a pua’ belantan among his illustrations of loincloths (EO5, p. 80), while Gavin illustrates and discusses a belantan’s seemingly surprising role (pp. 38-40). Ong shows a skirt with edges dipped in indigo (EO9, p. 66) and correctly states that the overdye
is related to mourning. Gavin (p. 289), in contrast, states that skirts are dipped in blue dye “to keep them from showing dirt easily.” If this is the case, one wonders why, after all these years, the Iban go to the trouble of spending money on border yarns and time on patterning borders when they will overdye them to stop them showing the dirt.

The Iban do, to some extent, classify cloths. Gavin starts her chapter on ‘Names as Titles’ (pp. 84-86) as if she were going to reveal the classification. She discusses two ‘titles,’ lebur api, meaning flaming red and referring to a cloth of a deep red color, and menyeti, which is ‘an intriguing pattern name’ but refers to cloths with the finest patterns. She does not, however, seem sure whether menyeti is a pattern or is a panegyric for a great cloth. There is an illustration (p. 299) of a cloth that Gavin calls (p. 320) the ‘menyeti pattern with firetong motifs.’ As she doesn't distinguish between motif and pattern anywhere in her book, she leaves the reader a little confused about whether another firetong not deserving the menyeti encomium would be a pattern.

There are other classes of cloth that in Gavin's typology become ‘patterns.’ Kelikut, for example, she calls ‘striped pattern’ despite the fact that some kelikut have small circles and a praise name that starts: “Dots that rot the guts...” Bali belum pong is another class and described as a ‘pattern that is divided ... into equal lengths.’ In Saribas belum pong, the center is unpatterned. An examination of such cloths shows a myriad of designs, the most distinctive feature of which is that neither end repeats the other. To suggest that they are all the same ‘pattern’ challenges the mind, as they can include anything in the Iban design lexicon.

A third class of cloths has a blue background and in the Saribas is called pua’ jugam. Gavin calls it ‘honey bear pattern.’ In Iban, jugam means both dark or blue and honey bear. Gavin builds on a rare inaccuracy in Richards’ (1981) dictionary – that killing a honey bear is equivalent to taking a head. Honey bears are valuable to remote Iban communities because their bezoar stones command high prices from the Chinese. In the longhouse I lived in, honey bears were eagerly sought and frequently killed. The stones were removed and the corpse usually left where it lay. There was never any suggestion that the hunter had taken a head. In this case, it would be interesting if Gavin got confirmation from Iban that blue-based cloths were metaphors for taking a head, regardless of the design on them. She does not mention any such confirmation. In neighboring Krian, she would not, because there the cloths are called pua’ tarom, which simply means a blue dyed cloth, tarom being a source of indigo. A further confusion is that there are many designs done in blue – the ‘ritual pole,’ rows of figures, and many others. In Gavin's typology, it appears that if they are in blue, they are all one pattern and, if they are in red, a distinctively named pattern.

Something must also be said about cloths with human figures. Gavin calls them the ‘anthropomorphic figure pattern’ and ‘cartoon’ characters. They are not a ‘name as title,’ which is not surprising as engkeramba could not be a title. Nor are they a ‘name as label,’ which is also not surprising because figures are not woven onto skirts. As Derek Freeman told me, such patterns are too powerful for a woman's skirt. Gavin states that the pattern is not accorded high rank such as bali belum pong (p. 282), despite the fact that many belum pong cloths have rows of human figures on them,
including her illustration (p. 156). She also states that the pattern is not accorded high rank in the Saribas, where it is most common, despite the fact that the most powerful of all Saribas patterns, gerasi papa, contains rows of human-like figures.

According to her, Baleh weavers shown these cloths generally were contemptuous of them. Iban weavers are usually very wary of pouring scorn on a design, partly out of respect, but partly also because a powerful design might react unpleasantly. Apparently, according to Gavin, in the Baleh, there are “no known examples of repetitive rows of small figures,” and yet, in her UCLA Fowler exhibition, she shows (1996: 44) one sungkit cloth with one row of figures, which on many other such cloths come in repetitive rows. The figure is called Bong Midang, a hero of Panggau, who, like many other heroes, such as Keling, Pungga’, Bulan Menyimbang, Tutong, Bungei Nuing, Laja, and others, do find their images gracing cloths. Linggi (p. 119) shows a 1950s Batang Ai sungkit with two rows of war planes, five rows of soldiers, and one row of Queen Elizabeth II taking the salute on horseback. Like the heroes of Panggau, despite recent difficulties, Queen Elizabeth certainly was not a cartoon character when Britain ruled Sarawak. Iban have been introducing named figures into their cloths for a long time to remind their menfolk of the exploits of their heroes in Panggau. The trouble with Gavin’s ‘all for one and one for all’ approach is that it reduces male and female heroes of Panggau, among others, to nothing more than cartoon dolls.

Gavin’s argument is too heavily reliant on other writers and theorists who have no familiarity with the Iban material. She largely ignores the field notes of the acknowledged authority on the Iban, Freeman. Despite my criticisms, her work on identifying Iban cloths is very useful because of her thoroughness and the fact that no one else has done so. That it does not allow for other names is a weakness. Linggi’s book is important because it presents the best compendium of Iban pu’a’ available, and her naming of these cloths should be of interest to anyone wanting to try to understand Iban design. For visual images of the greater part of the breadth of Iban weaving, one must turn to Ong.

Linggi’s and Ong’s books both do convey a little bit of the excitement in Iban weaving through their many handsome illustrations. Gavin’s description tends to leave them lifeless, like an illustrated entry in a museum catalogue. Gavin stresses that weaving is ‘women’s war.’ As such, one imagines the adrenalin rushing, the pulse quickening, which is exactly how a traditional weaver describes her weaving. She is taming the extraterrestrial to get it to work for her – crocodiles, dragons, serpents, giant ogres, and other mythical creatures. She is portraying the heroes of Panggau and using her weaving to participate vicariously in their exploits. She is recording events (the Nanga Pila massacre, for example), which have messages at least for the members in her household. She is competing in a very real sense with every other woman in her longhouse and in the general area to be seen as the best or, if not, a weaver of distinction. She is putting the acid on her menfolk by challenging them, through her cloths, to go out and demonstrate that they are worthy of her.
Weaving was part of every notable Iban woman's soul. These are the phenomena which Gavin needs to tell. Only then will the non-Iban reader get some idea of what cloth designs and their praise names represent.

Notes
1 Gavin's book has 356 pages and 221 figures, of which eight are color and 85 black and white of pua’ cloths and skirts. Linggi's has 170 pages and 134 color plates, of which 70 are of pua’ cloths. Ong's has 111 pages and 159 plates, of which 137 are of pua’ cloths, skirts, and jackets.
2 I use the word 'design' to refer to the sum of motifs that make up the overall 'picture' of the cloth. A 'motif' is an individually named representation or form, which Iban use in combination in a 'design.' Gavin uses the word 'pattern' more in the sense of the predominant motif in a design.

References