

Tradigital Mythmaking

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Abstract - The name 'Iban' was coined by the Kayan people of Myanmar and is a modification from the term 'Ivan', meaning immigrant or wanderer. The Iban people were non-Malaysian inhabitants of Borneo and had spread over Sarawak with their different tribes distinguished by the rivers they lived close to (Haddon & Start, 1936).

With the Iban's geographical location, their connection to the rivers and history of piracy in the 19th century, local animals like crocodiles and snakes can be found visualized as motifs in the Iban's culturally significant woven objects such as fabrics and baskets.

The research will investigate the animal motifs of the Iban culture local to Sarawak, Malaysia. This will inform the design decisions in the practical component of my research – a pre-production package of visual development for a graphic novel.

Despite the increasing number of contemporary Southeast Asian comic and animation works, local designs are argued to still retain strong influences from Japanese and Western works (Bendazzi, 2016).

As weaving is a common theme and essential to both the Iban culture and the Japanese folktale of "The Crane Wife", my research on the animal motifs of the Iban culture seeks to develop a design process through the lens of traditional Southeast Asian art.

Therefore, this pre-production package will project the visual reptilian motifs in the woven craft of Iban people on the Japanese folklore "The Crane Wife" to explore a reimagination and retelling of the story in Southeast Asian context.

Keywords - Southeast Asian Art, Iban, Weaving, Anthropomorphism, Pua Kumbu, Basket, Character Design

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Globalization and cartoon imports are argued to have impeded the early development of Southeast Asian and their ability to project their identity in designs for local graphic novels and animations (Bendazzi, 2016). Today, East Asia's media incorporate a mix of locally drawn motifs and languages, but they remain based in American or Japanese formats due to influences from the early imports (Otmazgin, 2005).

Exploring the traditional arts, such as Iban's distinctive woven crafts, could reconnect people to their roots and cultivate a unique Southeast Asian identity in contemporary graphic novel and animation platforms, working as a new well of visual stories to draw inspiration from.

A different system in adapting Southeast Asian motifs into the visual style of future Southeast Asian graphic novel and animation visual design could steer future media away where Japanese and Western designs have hugely influenced our local media, and provide a new methodical genre of creation.

The change of cultural motifs could change perceptions of identity – in this way, a system of translating and projecting Southeast Asian motifs could drastically affect the telling and significance of a folktale from another part of the world.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

The key objective of this project is to create visual development for a contemporary graphic novel platform. The research done on Iban reptilian motifs will be projected on the Japanese folklore "The Crane Wife" to explore a reimagination and retelling of the story in Southeast Asia context.

The Iban's long history of woven fabrics and basketry, and the meanings or narratives of its pre-existing motifs, will be adapted into a visual style that aligns with local significances and be projected onto the characters in the retelling of "The Crane Wife" to create compelling designs. Through this, I aim to provide an entryway for traditional meanings to shift to contemporary platforms and generate interest in traditional Southeast Asian arts.

2 RESEARCH / METHODOLOGY

2.1 IBAN WOVEN CRAFTS

The woven craft is an essential aspect of the Iban identity, and this could be seen in how the woven practices are applied to rituals in their ceremonial cloth, as well as their everyday living in clothes and containers such as baskets.

A critical element in the selection of creatures for the Iban woven fabrics and baskets are the community's animistic beliefs. The Iban practice animistic beliefs where two gods dominate a pantheon – Singalang Burong who rules over the sky, and Pulang Gana, who rules over the earth and rice (Blehaut, 1994). These beliefs and gods are intrinsically connected to the subjects featured as motifs in the woven crafts.

Two types of woven items produced by the Iban to be discussed are the Iban fabrics, pua kumbu in specificity, and the Iban baskets.

2.2 IBAN FABRICS: PUA KUMBU

The oua kumbu, a ceremonial woven cloth of the Iban, is the most well-known type of Iban fabric. The common motifs in pua kumbu include rafters, ferns, birds and the mythical white crocodile, and the common themes incorporated by the weavers are about the everyday life or dreams (Tan, 2006).

Back in days when the Ibans were still active headhunters, pua kumbu was traditionally used for wrapping heads and for burials (Tan, 2006).

The origin story of pua kumbu tells the tale of an Iban hunter named Menggin and Dara Tinchin Temaga – in which Menggin shot a beautiful bird in the forest and found a kain, woven skirt, instead of his kill when he attempted to retrieve the bird. Menggin eventually meets and returns the kain to Dara, the owner of the woven skirt and the eldest daughter of Singalang Burong.

Dara marries Menggin and has a daughter with him, but eventually has them to return to the Iban and don the baju burong and kain on their journey back (Jehom, 2016). These continued to be woven today in the belief that weaving and the cloth would keep them close to the gods.

In Iban and Sea Dayak Fabrics and their patterns, Haddon states that while the men may fashion the tools, the “clothes which are used for garments are usually purely native manufacture and are entirely the work of the women” (Haddon & Start, 1936).

The tale of the pua kumbu contains similar traits to the story of “The Crane Wife”. Woven fabrics, in both “The Crane Wife” and with the Iban people, is represented as one of the most valuable and significant crafts associated with a female figure.

In both “The Crane Wife” and with the Iban people, woven fabrics are represented as one of the most valuable and highly regarded crafts associated with female figure. In “The Crane Wife”, the crane weaves wondrous clothes out of her own feathers (“Bonbon Academy” 2016).

Animals and their relation to woven crafts were a bridging element in the origin story of pua kumbu and “The Crane Wife”. The hunted bird and injured crane in their respective stories were both a sign of the supernatural made aware to the common man.

The introduction of woven crafts from the birds to the masculine figure in the story insinuates a connection between the natural and supernatural, possibly suggesting the tradition of woven craft to be synonymous with encounters and bonds to the spiritual and supernatural.

2.3 THE CROCODILE IN PUA KUMBU

As rivers for the Iban were key to travelling, trade and a source of water supply, encounters with crocodiles were frequent and therefore the crocodiles held a special significance to the Iban (Gavin, 2003).

Multiple gods crucial to the Iban's rice-cult are intrinsically related to the significance of the crocodile. One example is the Pulang Gana, who presides over the rice-culture of the Ibans, and another is Ribai, the river-god who occasionally takes the form of a crocodile. Thus, the lines between man, god and beast is blurred.

Pulang Gana's relationship to the crocodile is symbiotic in nature and through ritual – in which the crocodile's role and meaning is as a guardian. In this ritual, a “life-sized image of a crocodile in lay on the land is chosen for the paddy-farm ... When the rites are duly performed this clay crocodile destroys all the pests which eat the rice” (Haddon & Start, 1936).

Ribai's relationship to the crocodile seems to be more physical – in which Ribai himself occasionally takes the form of a crocodile. The act of physical transformation is not only limited to Ribai, but also applies to the various local beliefs that live crocodiles could be spirits of relatives or that crocodile spirits had the potential to transform into an Iban (Haddon & Start, 1936).

The application of the crocodile motifs could be found on both the woven textiles and baskets. The crocodile motifs are used on war-boats and posts of the longhouse. Fabrics with crocodile designs on them are used as wall decorations and practical purposes. While crocodiles are significant and considered important symbols to the Iban, they are not as frequently portrayed.

“...the crocodile and snake motifs are believed dangerous so the motifs must need to be fed with food (pemakai) motif. This is to ensure that it is not hungry. It is also believed that when the dangerous motifs are fed by food motif, it will not disturb the weaver” (Chelum, Durin, Lim, Muhammad & Mohd, 2018).

The food motif is woven, then followed by the reptile motif (Chelum, Durin, Lim, Muhammad & Mohd, 2018). The need for appeasement conveys the prominence of the theme of balance in the creation of crocodile motifs. While the crocodile is seen as a protective and benign figure that is part of the Iban community, the crocodile also symbolizes ferociousness and danger – in which a price must be paid for dignity and power and an insufficient price would lead to tragedy or retribution.

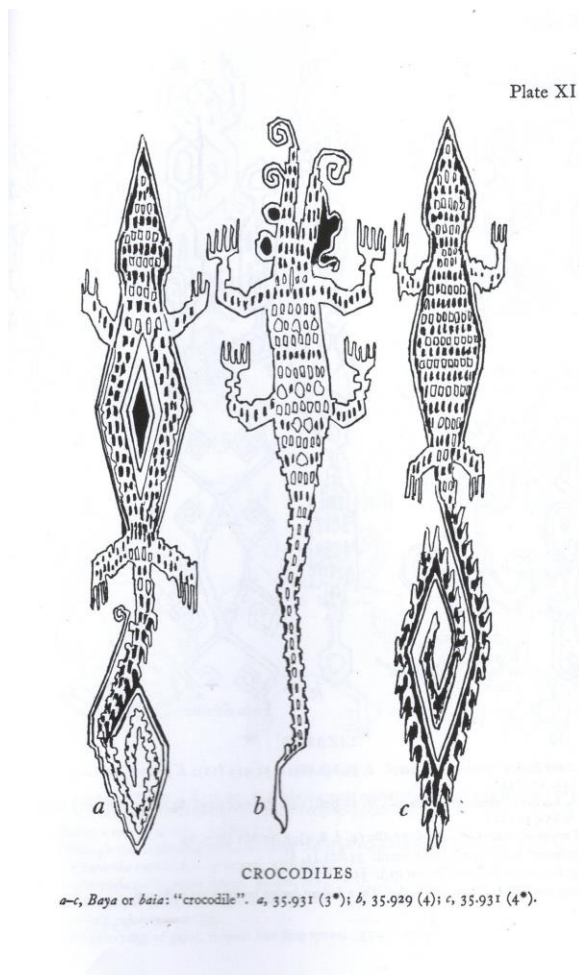


Figure 1: Crocodile motifs on pua kumbu (Haddon & Start, 1936)

The above is a visual extract from Iban and Sea Dayak Fabrics and their patterns, and features sketches of various crocodile motifs found on pua kumbu.

Motifs A and C remain more similar in the use of the more geometric and diamond-shaped

silhouettes, whilst Motif B focused on the facial features of the crocodile more than its overall silhouette. Motif A also featured a more balanced distribution of proportions, while C had an emphasis on the size and details in the tail of the crocodile.

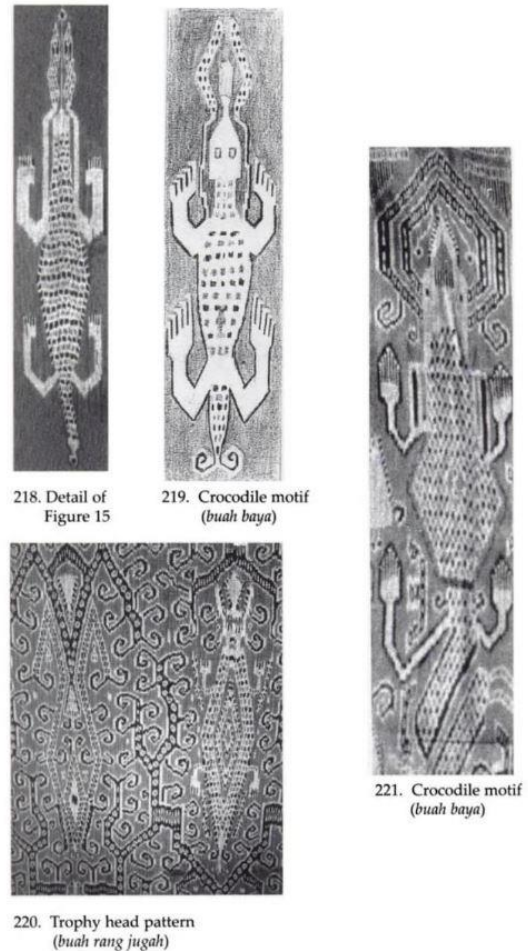


Figure 2: Another set of crocodile motifs on pua kumbu (Gavin, 2003)

In another visual extract from Iban Ritual Textiles, a set of photographs featuring crocodile motifs also present similar views of the motifs. While the motifs initially look rather dissimilar due to difference in distribution of anatomy and edge treatment, there seem to be still a fundamental system of representing crocodiles in pua kumbu.

The use of forked claws, jagged lines, rectangular shapes to generate a scaly texture, and spirals to form geometric shapes is a consistent theme amongst the three motifs. The crocodiles are also portrayed in an almost symmetrical, flat lay angle in which the entirety of the crocodile can be seen.

From this, the most important visual traits represented in the Iban crocodile motifs were likely its claws, scales, tail and overall silhouette.

2.4 THE SNAKE IN PUA KUMBU

Borneo features the richest snake-fauna in Southeast Asia, making these reptiles extremely significant to the Iban community, just like the crocodiles (Milgram & Esterik, 1994).

The snake, or serpent, requires similar rites to the crocodile motifs. They are presented as dangerous guardian motifs, also requiring food motifs for appeasement before woven. Similarly, they are also not common motifs to be woven due to the power held in these motifs. The snake motif is usually associated with the giant serpent spirit and 'King of Serpents', Nabau (Gavin, 2003). However, unlike the crocodile motifs, the snake motifs are not directly represented on the woven fabric. They are usually shown through multiple border stripes, to represent banded snakes (Haddon & Start, 1936).

"Stripes of various colors are termed ara and these particular ones are labelled ara ular kendawant; kendawang is "a snake, *Cylindrophis rufus*, with a red head and a red tip to its tail, body striped black, white and red" (Haddon & Start, 1936).

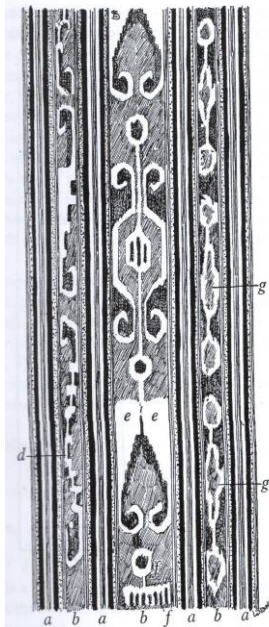


Figure 3: Pattern on back and sleeves of a kalambi, a jacket or coat (Haddon & Start, 1936)

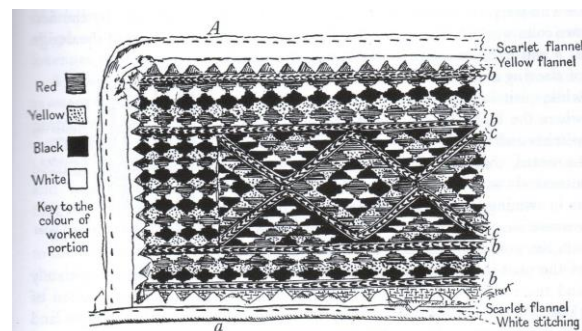


Figure 4: Badge at the bottom of the back of the kalambi (Haddon & Start, 1936)



Figure 5: Snake motif on pua kumbu in British Museum, museum number 407 ("The British Museum", 1905)

Figures 3 and 4 feature the snake motif as presented on a kalambi, and Figure 5 features the snake motif on a pua kumbu. No distinct lines insinuating a strong form of a snake is shown. Instead, the textiles feature a tight tessellation of repetitive patterns.

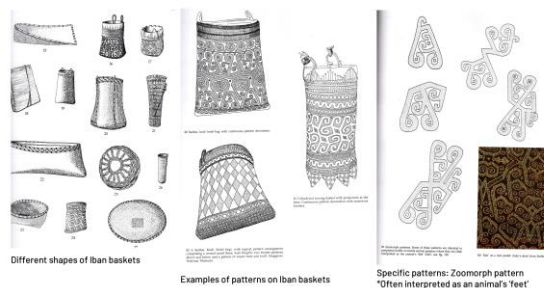
Both fabrics shown used the colour red and the patterns allow for the viewer to track them horizontally – from one shorter end to the other, across the longer side of the cloth. This reflects how an Iban might see a large snake on the ground, as the snake would be horizontally inclined with their body patterns distributed similarly to the patterns on the cloth.

The tones are relatively equally distributed and balanced within the patterns woven on the cloth, and the geometric, diamond shapes or curling shapes seem to resemble the curling and coiling of snakes.

The traits important to representing the snake motif are creating bands with colours, repetition and tessellation.

2.5 IBAN BASKET WEAVING

In Iban basketry, the woven sections of the basket remain a women's role as well – the women weave the baskets and the men create the rims for the baskets (Blehaut, 1994). The baskets, however, differ greatly from the pua kumbu in how they have evolved over time.



Source: Iban Baskets by Jean-Francois Blehaut

Figure 6: Examples of baskets and their weaves

One distinct trait of the Iban baskets are their colours. The colours of the traditional Iban basket aside from the natural colour of the rattan includes the colours red and black. Other colours, such as green and yellow, are not native to Iban basketry and were only introduced later in forms of artificial dyes (Blehaut, 1994).

The anatomy and motifs found on the baskets already vary across their different functions as different types of containers – such as burden, wedding or rice baskets. However, their general use as a travelling container and the impermanent nature of their material kept in the longhouse setting influences key differences in the evolution and adaptation of motifs. Today's Iban baskets likely feature a great variety of motifs from having been greatly influenced by travelling and trade. One example could be seen in hybrid baskets featuring Iban weaves, but with Kayan rims (Blehaut, 1994).

"In Cambodia, bronze objects have been found which present close relationships with other bronzes from Dong Son and Indonesia" (Blehaut, 1994).



Figure 7: Baskets featuring patterns similar to the bronze objects

There are likely quite a number of patterns influenced by external variables/trends such as trade, but I intend to look into the reptilian patterns that were based off their community's animist beliefs and narratives.

2.6 THE SERPENT IN IBAN BASKETRY

"According to Sather, however, "a major source of omens are reptiles, which are associated in this case with spiritual heroes or Orang Panggau. These, who are beneficent, often act through dream revelations or as personal spirit patrons, in the form of snakes" (Blehaut, 1994).

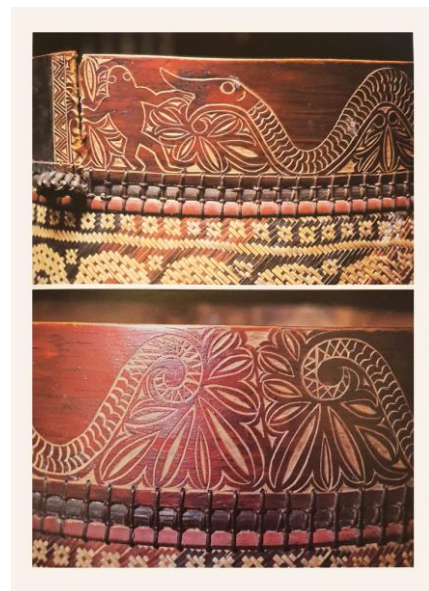


Figure 8: Snake carving on the rim of a small storage or wedding basket (Blehaut, 1994)

In Figure 8, the snake is carved with frog and fish motifs that would act as food motifs to appease the snake. As a figure representative of omens, the snake rim is also chosen for a basket that is more stationary in nature – possibly either a storage or wedding basket without strap loops.

The snake motifs on the Iban basket functions similarly as a guardian patron, when compared to the snake and crocodile motifs on the pua kumbu.

The motifs are represented on the rim of Iban baskets, and like the pua kumbu's representations, comes with a food motif.

On first encounter with the basket, it seems as if the basket features two snakes. However, the snake is shown in a side profile and reflected to complete a circle around the rim shows that symmetry is applied – as if to form a complete profile of the snake. The end of the snake's tail is also coiled slightly, and the facial features of the snake is shown with mouth agape to show the ferocity of the snake swallowing a frog larger than its own head. Patterns on the basket are also notably simpler within the snake motif when compared to its representation in the pua kumbu.

The basket reflects a more physical representation of a snake. This is notably unlike in pua kumbu where the snake is only indicated through insinuating its bands and patterns.

2.6 USAGE OF VISUAL MOTIFS IN OUTCOMES

From the research, the appeasement of ferocity and power is a consistent narrative – in which a being requires both the ferocious and benign to achieve balance. The theme of balance can be derived from the negotiation for power from the guardian patron, the visual clues such as symmetry and geometry.

I intend to apply the research to my outcomes through a further visual study of the motifs and eventually converting this study into a system of design fuelling my visual development.

3 OUTCOME

3.1 RESEARCH SKETCHES

I began the research sketches with general studies of the Iban people – their dance, and a general variety of patterns I found on their fabrics and attire.



Figure 9: Initial study sketches

3.2 TRANSLATION & APPLICATION SYSTEM

The later part of my studies involved narrowing down to specific motifs that I wanted to study – namely the reptilian motifs. I picked out the crocodile and snake motifs and proceeded with a breakdown to translate the forms of the motifs into simple marks.

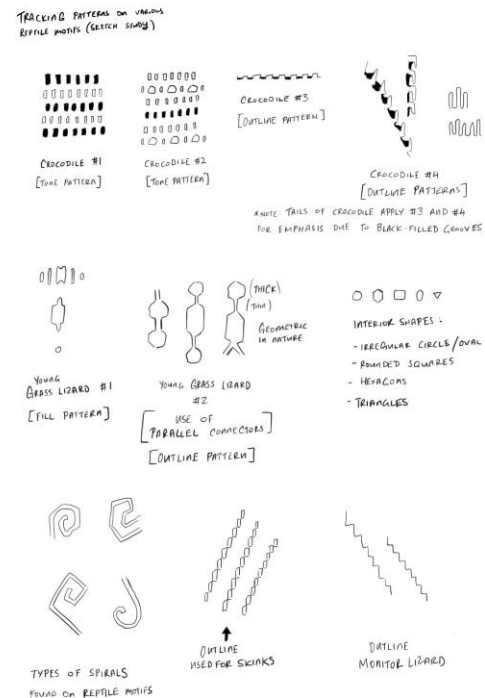


Figure 10: Picking out and collecting patterns from the motifs.

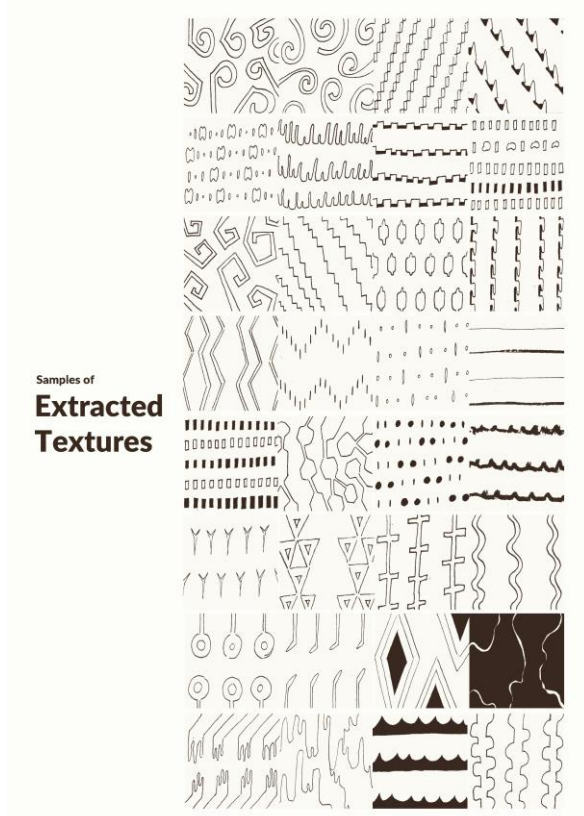


Figure 11: A chart consisting of texture samples extracted from existing pua kumbu and Iban basketry



Figure 12: Using a solitary symbol to form a base for character design

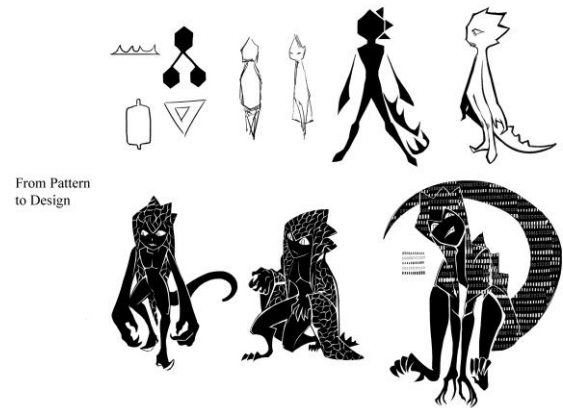


Figure 13: Amalgamating textures to form a base for character design

In Figure 13, I sought inspiration from how the crocodile motifs depend on their silhouette and experimented with forming silhouettes from the texture chart.

From Figure 11, I also made some textures into digital brushes that could be used to draw the image or for toning. This helped in generating unique texture combinations through different line expressions and creating different screen tones for superimpositions.

3.3 DESIGN RATIONALE

After the visual studies, I have decided to investigate a visual style that is more minimal in colours to place an emphasis on the use of patterns, silhouettes, and the important colours of red and black.

Strong linework and silhouettes will also be applied to create juxtaposition and duality to insinuate the theme of balance.

3.4 CROCODILE CHILD: STORY PITCH

The selected narrative for this project is the Japanese folktale, "The Crane Wife", will be backdrop for the character cast and environment design.

This pitch functions as an attempt to reimagine the folktale in Southeast Asian twist and pitch a potential system of deriving motifs for visual development – through repurposing motifs into digital tools to help generate compelling visual content.

The retold story's working title will be Crocodile Child and the story's main plot points are based on "The Crane Wife".

In the proposed Crocodile Child, Baia (meaning 'crocodile') is an anthropomorphic crocodile child who had stripped his crocodile skin to play on the

riverbank with his siblings when they hear a head-hunter. In a panic, Baia leaves his skin on the shores and is dismayed to see that the intimidating head-hunter had found taken his skin and gifted it to the chief head-hunter.

Without his skin, Baia is unable to return to the waters and rejoin his siblings. To retrieve his skin, Baia sneaks into the village to retrieve his skin from the chief head-hunter's house but is mistaken for a petty thief.

He receives mercy from the chief head-hunter's wife and having nowhere to return to, he is taken into the chief's house to be raised with the chief's own children.

3.5 CHARACTER DESIGNS

Based on the application system and story pitch, I generated a few potential character designs for characters that could go in the story – such as the crocodile people and village folks.



Figure 14: Character design sketches

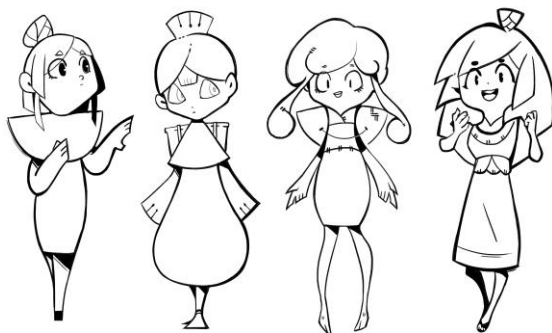


Figure 15: Character design sketches

3.6 ENVIRONMENT DESIGNS

From the extracted textures, I have also generated some items for environment designs for the graphic novel's visual development.



Figure 16: Generating environment design sketches based on the extracted textures

3.9 LETTERING DESIGNS

Like the drawings, the following lettering sketches also utilize traits from the list of textures. I have also imposed some of the patterns to generate subtle differences and retain readability. I produced some sketches to resemble hand lettering or sans-serif typefaces that could complement the character and environment sketches.



Figure 17: Generating header/body text sketches, with superimposed textures



Figure 18: Title lettering sketches

4 CONCLUSION

"A few decades ago, the ikat weaving tradition of the Dayaks, the indigenous people of Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), was considered a disappearing art (Gittinger 1979; Heppell 1994), but through the work of the Dayak Ikat Weaving Project based in Sintang, West Kalimantan, the tradition has been revived" (Kreps, 2012)

There had been past attempts to 'refresh' traditional media and make them more appealing for the contemporary crowd to learn about them. However, they have remained mostly strictly intellectual and factual – such as documentaries, museum exhibitions and cultural tours. Due to site, language or resource limitations, many traditional crafts continue to require efforts to revive interest.

Through this research and visual development, perhaps an alternative method to repurposing traditional arts for contemporary entertainment could be created. An alternative platform and effort to obtain a wider net of audience could eventually cultivate the fire in them to initiate the pursuit the culture's intellectual aspect and deeper meanings instead.

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