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CULTURAL URBAN MOTIF: KIMARAGANG SYMBOLISM IN URBAN PLANNING

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Abstract

This study discusses issues related to preserving the cultural elements of the Kimaragang ethnic group (indigenous people) in urban areas and urban expansion in Sabah. The Kimaragang community lives in Kota Marudu and Pitas and has great potential to showcase their unique cultural identity in public spaces such as open areas, wall murals, architectural decorations, and sculptures. Although urban planning has focused on preserving historical monuments and buildings, intangible cultural elements like ethnic motifs are becoming sidelined due to modernization and lack of recognition in development plans. This research uses a qualitative approach through field studies, participatory design analysis, and demographic and urban planning analysis. The findings show that visual elements, especially cultural motifs, have great potential to inspire urban development and landscape planning. Cultural continuity should be creatively expressed and felt by the local community, which could also boost cultural tourism. The article proposes several strategic recommendations for inclusive and culturally sensitive urban planning. It emphasizes the importance of preserving both tangible and intangible heritage of ethnic communities in urban development. This study aims to contribute to shaping local urban identity, increasing awareness about cultural heritage, and supporting sustainable development based on local culture.

Keywords: Kimaragang, cultural heritage, Indigenous planning, cultural attire., urban identity

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural urban motif refers to the cultural elements in city or urban area. Symbolism representation from architectural styles and ornamentation and reflecting the unique traditions and history of a place. The purpose of this study is to explore the cultural motifs (Figure 1 and 2) of the Kimaragang ethnic (Shim, 2007; Damilan, 2015; Kroger, 2015; Pugh-Kitingan, 2015; Pangayan, 2016; Denis et al., 2019; Ginsari, 2022; Lee et al., 2022) live in Kota Marudu and Pitas district (Map 1) that have the potential to be developed into urban planning and sprawl. This study also focuses on the motifs and patterns of traditional elements in highlighting their unique cultural features. The expressive elements of the Kimaragang ethnic community are based on the natural surroundings in their environment. Each motif chosen as a cultural symbol is an element that has a significant influence on their daily lives. Every motif carries its own meaning and function, not only possessing aesthetic value but also reflecting the life values, philosophy, and belief practices of past generations (Ismail et al., 1990; Mahfar & Jusilin, 2017; Pagayan et al., 2016).

- Wusak do Gosing*
- 1. (Bunga Senduduk)
- Lingkong*
- 2. (Pokok Ribu-ribu)
- 3. *Kulubung*
- (Rumput)
- 4. *Tolutu*
- (Kembang Semangkuk)



Figure 1: Floral Motifs of the Kimaragang Ethnic
Source: Author (2025)

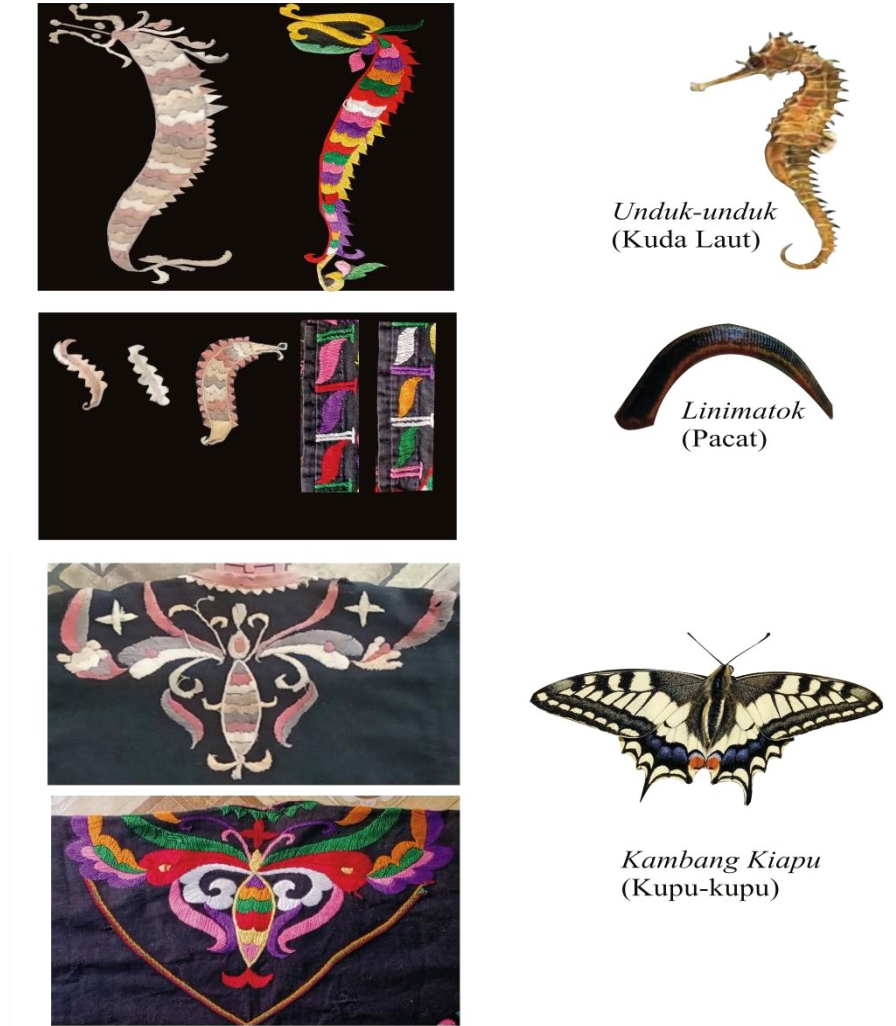


Figure 2: Faunal Motifs of the Kimaragang Ethnic
Source: Author (2025)

Now, urban planning is increasingly recognizing the importance of cultural heritage (Nursanty, Rusmiatmoko, & Husni, 2023) as part of the sustainable development agenda in Malaysia. However, developers tend to focus more on preserving physical heritage or tangible heritage culture such as historical buildings and monuments, like colonial-era shophouses in Penang and Melaka (Zubir et al., 2018; Isa, 2021). In contrast, there is still a lack of emphasis on intangible cultural heritage, such as cultural motifs, which are not yet fully integrated into urban development and spatial planning frameworks.



Map 1: Maps of Study area
Source: Author (2023)

LITERATURE REVIEW

In urban planning theory, the concept of placemaking (Afify, 2024) emphasises the connection to the identity of the community within a particular area. Therefore, a proactive step to maintain harmony is to preserve sentimental elements that are familiar and meaningful to the community. Cultural symbolism in urban spaces can take many forms, such as architectural design, murals, landscape design, and symbolism in shapes and colours. Architectural design includes elements such as monuments and traditional house structures.

Several countries, such as Japan (Morokuma, 2016), Russia, Vietnam, and Indonesia, have long integrated cultural elements into their urban landscapes and development planning (Nursahanty, et.al, 2023; Nordin & Amir Nordin, 2020; Zawawi, 2010). Indonesia and New Zealand have successfully incorporated ethnic motifs into urban design through murals, directional signage, and architectural ornamentation. This demonstrates that cultural motifs can serve as both visual and spatial representations of cultural identity and help strengthen the sense of place within a community.

In Sabah, motifs from the Rungus (Mahfar, 2017; Appell, 1976) and Murut ethnic groups (Ismail, 2012) are commonly used as decorative elements during both formal and informal events. Additionally, *linangkit* motifs (Figure 3) from the Dusun Tindal and Dusun Lotud communities (Jusilin et.al, 2015) frequently used as stage backdrops or wall decorations in schools (Figure 4). These elements not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the surroundings but also foster a deeper connection to heritage and tradition among residents. By incorporating these motifs into public spaces, communities in Sabah are able to celebrate their unique identities while simultaneously promoting cultural awareness and pride. However, these landscape designs and uses of cultural motifs often lack of identity (Figure 5) or unoriginality design and are typically created based on temporary needs or trends (Jukim, 2020; Duxbury et.al, 2016). Although murals are found on school walls, their application has not significantly extended into public or urban spaces. This oversight limits the potential for these artistic expressions to foster a sense of belonging and continuity within the community. To truly honour and preserve local heritage, it is essential for urban planners and artists to collaborate on more permanent installations that reflect the rich narratives and histories of Sabah's diverse populations. This suggests that the potential of ethnic cultural motifs remains underutilised in the visual and spatial development of Sabah's urban context.

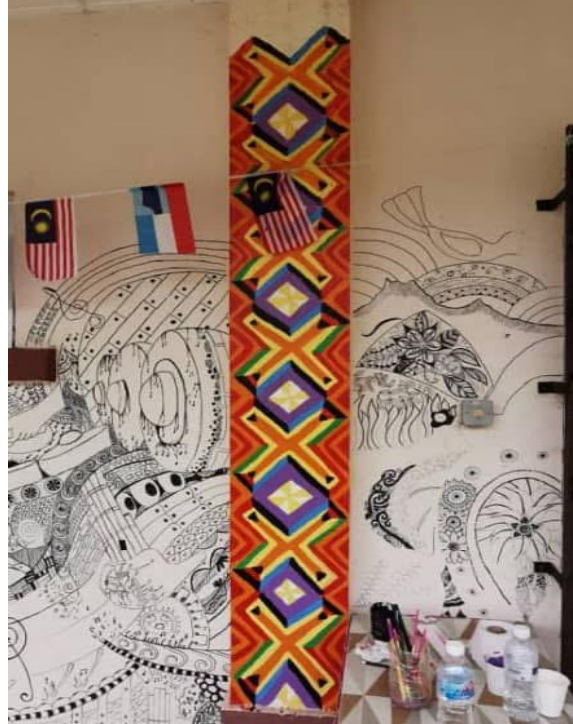


Figure 3: *Lotud Linangkit motifs*
Source: Author (2025)

Challenges and Obstacles

The integration of cultural motifs in urban planning faces challenges due to limited cultural documentation. Most symbolic elements of ethnic cultures have not yet been studied in a scholarly or systematic manner. This lack of comprehensive research hinders the ability to effectively incorporate these motifs into urban designs, as planners may struggle to understand their significance and context. Furthermore, there is often a disconnect between traditional practices and modern urban development, which can lead to the dilution of cultural identities in the face of rapid urbanisation. Awareness of the importance of cultural documentation has only emerged in recent years. As a result, access to knowledge about cultural elements and symbolism remains limited and restricted.



Figure 4: Linangkit at St. Mary Limbahau, Papar
Source: Author (2025)



Figure 5: Motifs without Cultural Identity
Source: Author (2025)

The lack of understanding and insight into cultural elements carries the risk of shallow representation and may be perceived as disrespectful toward certain cultural symbols. This is a sensitive matter that could potentially disrupt

social harmony and unity. In addition, financial constraints and limited capacity also pose challenges to the implementation of ethnic symbolism in landscape projects and urban development plans. Local authorities often lack the cultural expertise required to represent the intended heritage effectively.

In many cases, ethnic motifs displayed in public areas do not align with the dominant ethnic composition of those locations, often due to insufficient research. For example, *linangkit* motifs traditionally associated with the Lotud community primarily lived in Kota Belud and Tuaran are frequently featured in districts such as Papar and Penampang, where Kadazan communities form the majority. This misplacement can lead to cultural misinterpretation about the symbolic of motif among the local community and tourists.

This highlights the clear need to bridge the gap between urban planning and cultural sustainability through the integration of intangible heritage, such as ethnic motif elements, into development strategies. By doing so, we can foster a sense of identity and belonging among communities, ensuring that development is not only economically viable but also socially enriching. Moreover, this approach encourages the preservation of local traditions and practices, contributing to a more inclusive urban landscape. This approach not only empowers communities through inclusive spatial and visual representation but also strengthens the visibility of minority cultures within the urban and expanding city landscape. In doing so, urban development becomes not only a physical transformation but also a reflection of enduring local identity and heritage.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an ethnographic approach and combining several research methods such as field observation, interviews with community leader, motifs analysis and document analysis about Kimaragang ethnic and policy documents. Each of these research methods provides different views on Kimaragang symbolisme as well as its potential in cultural urban planning motifs. These methods include:

1. Field observation. The researcher visited the Kota Marudu, Pitas and Kg. Salimpodon Pitas where the Kimaragang cultural attire (*sabung sinudaan* - male cloth and *sabung Kinaling* - female cloth) making.
2. Interviews were conducted with 12 informants, including community members, traditional chiefs, and cultural leaders who possess in-depth knowledge of Kimaragang cultural attire and symbolism.
3. Motifs analysis. The study involved analyzing every motifs from old *sabung sinudaan*.
4. Document analysis. The study analyzing and understanding the history background about Kimaragang ethnic, urban policy, enactment and landscape in Sabah.

DISCUSSION

Urban development and expansion in Sabah, especially along the coast and in areas that are not yet urban, have been moving quickly. Nonetheless, cultural aspects, including ethnic motifs from the Kimaragang community, are predominantly neglected in development planning. There are two key policies that form the foundation for preserving cultural identity within urban landscape design in Sabah: the Sabah State Cultural Heritage Conservation Enactment 2017 and the Sabah State Landscape Policy 2022.

The 2017 Cultural Heritage Conservation Enactment provides legal provisions to identify, protect, and conserve Sabah's cultural heritage in both tangible and intangible forms. This enactment could make traditional Kimaragang designs like *Unduk-unduk*, *Kambang Kiapu*, *Linimatok*, *wusak dogosing*, *Tolutu*, and *Kulubung* stand out as important design elements in urban areas like Kota Marudu and Pitas (Figures 6 and 7). These motifs can be incorporated into architecture, street furniture, building murals, sculptures, gateway arches, and visual signage. Moreover, the enactment allows these ethnic motifs and cultural expressions to be officially registered as part of the state's cultural heritage, making it possible for them to be integrated into the local or state structure plans and used as guidelines for physical planning (Sabah State Government, 2017).

Meanwhile, the Sabah State Landscape Policy 2022 highlights the importance of creating landscapes that are sustainable, driven by a sense of identity, and inclusive. One of its key pillars is the preservation of cultural elements and greenery in every public space developed. Under this policy, the use of ethnic motifs in the design of urban parks, pedestrian walkways, and public spaces is encouraged, provided it does not compromise the ecological balance of the area. The policy adopts a place-based approach to landscape development, focusing on the preservation and promotion of local community identity. As a result, it puts a high value on protecting both tangible and intangible heritage through landscape designs that are in harmony with and reflect the local character (Urwasi, 2015; Morokuma, 2016).



Figure 6: One of the Roundabout located in Kota Marudu Town
Source: Author, 2025

Several progressive steps can be undertaken to preserve and conserve cultural elements within urban development plans in areas inhabited by the Kimaragang ethnic community, particularly in districts such as Pitas and Kota Marudu. These steps include:



Figure 7: One of the Landmarks in Pitas district
Source: Author, 2025

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Several progressive steps can be undertaken to preserve and conserve cultural elements within urban development plans in areas inhabited by the Kimaragang ethnic community, particularly in districts such as Pitas and Kota Marudu. These steps include:

1. Cultural Integration in Urban Development. Urban planning in Kimaragang areas should incorporate local cultural elements, particularly in physical design and social structures. The symbolic motifs of the Kimaragang ethnic community should be displayed in public spaces by transforming them into

crafts, street furniture (Figure 8), mural art, sculptures, or using them as inspiration for architectural forms. For instance, establishing cultural centres that showcase traditional attire, such as *Sabung Sinudaan*, *Sabung Kinaling*, and accessories, and organising regular events such as the Kaamatan Festival, can serve as platforms to preserve and promote local culture.



Figure 8: Example of street furniture using Rungus cultural motifs
Source: Nordin et.al (2020)

2. Culture-Based Economic Development. Cultural preservation can also stimulate local economic growth, particularly through the development of creative industries, including the production of traditional clothing, sublimation apparel, handicrafts, and other cultural products. The Kimaragang ethnic community can generate income by creatively adapting cultural motifs into crafts, which have the potential to become attractions in the tourism sector. Pugh-Kitingan (2015) notes that cultural tourism is a significant source of income for rural communities. Therefore, developing creative industries centred around Kimaragang attire, such as *Sabung Sinudaan*, can create employment opportunities and attract both domestic and international tourists.

3. Community Involvement in Planning Processes. It is crucial to involve the Kimaragang community actively in urban planning processes to ensure that development does not marginalise or compromise their cultural heritage. Engagement programmes such as dialogues between local authorities and cultural practitioners can help identify the most appropriate ways to balance development

with cultural preservation. Miller et al. (2019) emphasise that community participation is essential in culturally-based urban planning.

4. Preservation of Open Spaces for Cultural Activities. Designating open public spaces with identical elemen motifs for cultural activities and traditional ceremonies, such as Kaamatan, *moginakan*, weddings, or local performances, is essential. These areas can also be used for craft exhibitions, performing arts, and community workshops, which not only revive cultural practices but also support the growth of the tourism sector. According to Pangayan (2016), such spaces provide communities with opportunities to maintain and practise their traditions in an inclusive and supportive environment.

5. Infrastructure Planning Based on Cultural Identity. Urban infrastructure (Figure 7 and 8) such as roads, public buildings, and parks should reflect the cultural identity of the Kimaragang community by incorporating symbolism motifs in architecture and landscape design. This approach not only creates a unique visual identity for the area but also enhances community awareness of the importance of cultural preservation in a modern development context. like the Kaamatan Festival. Such programs not only aid in preserving customs but also raise public knowledge of their cultural history..



Figure 7: Pinakol Steps at UMS using Rungus cultural motifs
Source: UMS website (2019)



Figure 8: Pinakol Steps at UMS using Rungus cultural motifs

Source: Author (2025)

CONCLUSION

Cultural motifs and symbolism should be seen as strategic assets in urban planning, not simply as decorative additions. In Sabah, adopting an urban development model that respects, enhances, and revitalises local cultural heritage is an essential step towards creating cities that are sustainable, rooted in identity, and inclusive.

This study emphasises the importance of documenting and promoting traditional attire within the context of cultural tourism and heritage education to ensure its preservation and continued appreciation by future generations. Sabah's rich ethnic diversity encompassing the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Rungus, and Kimaragang communities provides a solid foundation for incorporating cultural motifs into urban spaces as expressions of historical stories, shared values, and ethnic identity. However, such efforts must be approached with care and sensitivity to local demographics to prevent the marginalisation of minority groups and to promote social fairness and unity.

Among the key recommendations are the creation of official and comprehensive records of Kimaragang motifs and traditional clothing; encouraging youth involvement through both formal education and informal activities such as school programmes and community workshops; and

strengthening collaboration between cultural practitioners, local authorities, and tourism organisations. These initiatives aim to position Kimaragang traditional attire as a proud cultural symbol of Sabah. Through such efforts, cultural heritage can be safeguarded while also serving as a driver for socioeconomic growth and helping to reinforce the cultural identity and branding of both Sabah and Malaysia overall.

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