



Clockwise from left: A *pua kumbu*; Ong's many awards; his fashion line. — ANDRE OLIVEIRO/The Star

"It expresses the highest level of quality and skill, while retaining tradition. It has become so versatile. You can wear it as a fashion piece or hang it up like tapestry," Ong says.

The *pua kumbu* is a ritual blanket used for important rituals like planting padi, the harvest festival and Gawai Burung, which is a ceremony to honour brave warriors or headhunters. It is passed down as an heirloom or when children get married.

The awareness on an international level has made the art a lucrative form of income, encouraging more weavers to take it up.

"The pieces are priced according to the man-hours required to produce it. Each piece can take up to six months to make and cost between RM2,000 and RM10,000," says Ong who guides the weavers as to the sizes required and ensures quality (weave tightness) is maintained.

Pua kumbu is traditionally woven with cotton, but in keeping with the times, luxurious silk is now used.

"One of the reasons we started using silk is because the government introduced a silk project here. The weavers are able to create finer patterns with silk, elevating their work

to new heights of style and sophistication, thus increasing the value of the piece," he points out.

Ong reveals that the people who are interested in the pieces are discerning collectors: some are Malaysian, but the majority are American and European.

"It's a pity that the locals do not appreciate the art as much as the foreigners. There used to be a good market in Japan until the economy took a turn. The Japanese used to order a lot of the luxurious silk pieces to make their kimonos, with each kimono needing at least 5m."

These days, Ong is busy working as a consultant for Unesco to promote Unesco awards of excellence in crafts. He was involved in a felt design project in Mongolia and as an advisor in India to set up an NGO textile art and forum.

"These projects give a platform for traditional textiles and arts to flourish. Who says you can't make fashion statements with tradition?" smiles Ong.

□ Visit www.edricong.com for more on Edric Ong.



Dream inspiration

There's more to the *pua kumbu* than meets the eye. The patterns are considered Iban poetry and regarded with the same respect the Chinese reserve for calligraphy.

Each carefully crafted piece tells a story inspired by the weaver's dreams.

"Not just anyone can become a weaver. They need to be spiritually ordained by the weaving goddess, Kumang, who will come to them in their dreams. She will give these women inspiration and empower them to weave," says Sarawakian designer Edric Ong.

Each cloth is special because it tells a different story. One of Ong's favourites is the *Pua Kahwin* or the *Wedding of Two Textiles*, a heritage piece weaved by a master weaver named Chungkei.

Chungkei wove two *pua kumbu*, one with a leopard motif and the other with a *ngabau* dragon or serpent motif. One night, she dreamt that the two cloths told her that they wanted to get married. According to Iban myth, the leopard is representative of the male and the serpent, female.

Chungkei dismissed the dream but when it kept recurring, she consulted the shaman and members of her longhouse and decided to grant the cloths their wish. The two cloths were "married" in a ceremony in which she unstitched and joined the two pieces together to form a large piece.

Ong says that he has exhibited *Pua Kahwin* in Australia and Japan. The piece is now kept at *Rumah Garie*, a longhouse in Ulu Kapit, by Chungkei's granddaughter *Bangi Embol* who is herself a master weaver.

Another favourite of Ong's is master weaver *Nancy Ngali's* who dreamt of a black dog. Nancy didn't weave it straighta-

way as she thought the motif was too difficult. A year later, Nancy went to Gothenburg, Sweden for a textile exhibition where the curator there had a big black Newfoundland dog. Nancy recognised it as the dog in her dreams, and thus wove a *pua kumbu* to honour it.

Ong tells of another piece, also woven by Nancy, called *Buah Bulan* that was featured on the cover of a brochure for London's textile exhibition last year.

"This is my favourite piece. It has different configurations of a crescent moon. During an eclipse back in the day, shamans would use the cloth in ceremonies to create a powerful wind to chase away the evil spirits that were devouring the moon," he says.

More and more young weavers are now interested in continuing the art as it brings in a lucrative income. Most of the weavers are women in their 20s or 30s whose husbands are working at oil rigs or logging camps, so they have time to learn and take up weaving.

The oldest weaver in *Rumah Garie* is 70, while the youngest is 22. Weavers are traditionally women except for one young man, *Inggie anak Langgong*, 23.

"If Kumang, the weaving Goddess, visits you in your dreams, you are encouraged to heed her call," explains Ong.

He says that it is interesting to see the evolution of the pieces as they are different from the ones woven by their ancestors.

"The rituals and ceremonies have changed. They do not have the same dreams as their grandmothers. Their dreams are modern dreams and because of that, they produce pieces that are more relevant to the times while still staying true to tradition."