





# Representation of guardian spirits through dayak motifs: a visual language analysis of rumah betang murals in West Kalimantan



Utin Della Maharani <sup>a,1\*</sup> , Basnendar Herry Prilosadoso <sup>a,2</sup> 

<sup>a</sup> Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> [utindellamaharani@gmail.com](mailto:utindellamaharani@gmail.com); <sup>2</sup> [basnendar@isi-ska.ac.id](mailto:basnendar@isi-ska.ac.id)

\* Corresponding Author

## ABSTRACT

This research explores the symbolic visual language of guardian spirit motifs depicted in the mural of Rumah Betang, located in Jalan Sutoyo, Pontianak, West Kalimantan. The mural features visual representations of ancestral guardian spirits, the hornbill (*enggang*), and the serpent (*Nabau*), which are central to Dayak cosmology and spiritual beliefs. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and visual language theory by Primadi Tabrani, the study analyzes the content (*wimba*), visual strategy (*way of wimba*), and expression structure of the mural. Field observation and interviews with Dayak cultural actors support the interpretation of visual elements and their symbolic functions. The guardian spirit is positioned at the top to signify spiritual authority; the hornbill at the center represents a divine messenger; and the *Nabau* at the base reflects foundational protection. Tendrils and spirals serve to connect these figures, symbolizing the cycle of life and balance between natural and spiritual realms. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual art encodes cultural narratives, spiritual structures, and protective symbolism within the Dayak community.



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## 1. Introduction

Dayak community in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, has a system of life that tightly connected with social, spiritual and communal values [1]. Socially, the structure of Dayak society is based on kinship and mutual cooperation, which is reflected in various collective activities, both in daily life and in traditional ceremonies. In the spiritual aspect, Dayak people believe in the existence of ancestral spirits and supernatural beings as part of the universe that is interconnected with human life [2]. This belief is manifested through various local religious practices, such as respect rituals, offerings, and the use of sacred symbols. Communal life is also highly valued, evident in the system of working together, preserving customs, and gathering in cultural and spiritual activities [3]. These values are not only maintained through oral or ceremonial means, but are also manifested visually, one of which is through traditional motifs spread across various cultural media [4]. A motif is a pattern or design that combines line, shape and design, forming a unity that manifests as a complete work [5]. As Ferdinan said in Personal Interview on May 2025, In Dayak culture, motifs are not only a visual element, but also a means of conveying meaning related to spiritual values and beliefs. Motifs are used to represent invisible entities such as ancestral spirits and guardian spirits, which are believed to have a role in protecting individuals, homes, and communities [6]. Motifs are not only used for aesthetics, but also as symbols of protection, courage, and respect [7]. These beliefs are rooted in the Dayak belief system that divides the universe into two main dimensions: the upper world inhabited by celestial guardian beings, and the lower world guarded by water and land beings [8]. Symbolically in art, motifs function to maintain the balance between these two worlds and are an integral part of their belief system.

Belief in the two worlds is often represented in the form of guardian spirits who are believed to be present to maintain harmony between the human realm and the spirit realm [9]. In Dayak belief, guardian spirits are supernatural entities believed to play a role in maintaining the safety of individuals, families, and communities from physical and spiritual disturbances [8]. Visual representations of these guardian spirits are usually realized through human, animal, and plant figures [10]. These forms are used as symbols of the connection between humans and the supernatural forces believed to be present in their lives [11]. Motifs representing guardian spirits are often found in various cultural objects such as shields (talawang) and traditional tattoos as a form of personal protection as well as a symbol of spiritual and social achievement within the community [12]. Through these uses, it can be seen that motifs are not only a visual medium, but are also directly involved in the Dayak people's daily cultural practices. One form of visualization of Dayak beliefs can be found in the murals painted on the inside of Betang Houses in Pontianak, West Kalimantan. Rumah Betang, as a traditional house that becomes the center of social life, often becomes an important place to convey cultural values [13]. In a personal interview with Yohanes in May 2025, the motifs in the mural are not made randomly, but are chosen consciously to represent a narrative that lives in the community, namely, legends. Legends are not just stories of the past, but a form of belief system that functions to maintain the spiritual values of the community through narratives that are believed to be true by the community [14]. In this mural, the values in the legend are presented visually through the representation of guardian spirits, which are believed to have protective powers and symbolize the balance between humans and the spirit world in the Dayak community's belief system through visual language [2].

In general, visual language can be understood as a visual-based communication system used to convey information through shapes, colors, and symbols [15]. The visual language approach used in this research refers to Primadi Tabrani's concept of visual language. The Theory of Visual Language is the result of the thoughts of Primadi Tabrani, a lecturer at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology [16]. This theory is the result of a comparative study of various works of children's drawings, prehistoric art, and modern visual art. He explained that "wimba" consists of the Content of Wimba and the Method of Wimba [17]. The Content of Wimba refers to the visual object, while the Method of Wimba describes how that object is depicted. This Method of Wimba is an approach to illustrating an object in an image, which includes aspects such as its size, perspective, scale (large or small), drawing techniques (such as the use of color, fields, lines, silhouettes, and so on), as well as the audience's perspective on the depicted object. Furthermore, the Expression Structure is the way to arrange the wimba; this expression structure indicates how an image has a storyline [18]. In Rumah Betang murals in Pontianak, this approach allows a reading of how spiritual values, such as belief in the guardian spirit, are represented through the composition of traditional motifs [19]. Thus, this research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the means of cultural and spiritual expression of the Dayak people through motif art, which is visually analyzed through a visual language approach.

## 2. Method

The research method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive method. The qualitative approach in this research is used because it relates to experiences or appreciation in art [5]. This method allows the researcher to interpret symbolic meanings embedded in visual forms within the cultural context of the Dayak community in West Kalimantan [20]. The focus of the study is to analyze guardian spirit motifs in the mural of the Rumah Betang as cultural expressions that convey protective and spiritual values through visual representation. Data were collected through direct observation, semi-structured interviews, literature review, and documentation [21]. Field observation was conducted at the Rumah Betang located on Jalan Sutoyo, Pontianak, to examine the mural's composition, symbolic elements, and spatial layout. Interviews were conducted in 2025 with three key informants: Ferdinan (Mbah Dinan), a composer and independent researcher of Dayak culture; Kristianus, an artist and cultural worker at the West Kalimantan Cultural Center; and Yohanes, a senior artist who took part in creating the mural. Visual documentation in the form of photographs was also used to support the analysis and interpretation of the artwork. In addition to field data, this study used literature

sources as supporting material, especially those that explore the symbolic meaning of traditional motifs, the belief systems of the Dayak people, and their cultural practices in West Kalimantan.

To ensure credibility and reliability, data validation was carried out through triangulation of sources, techniques, and data [21]. Source triangulation involved comparing different perspectives from informants with varying roles in Dayak art and culture. Technical triangulation was conducted by integrating observation, interviews, and photographic documentation. Data triangulation included cross-referencing field findings with relevant literature and confirming interpretations with the informants to maintain accuracy and avoid bias [22]. Data analysis followed Primadi Tabrani's visual language framework, focusing on three core components: wimba (visual content), cara wimba (the way visual elements are composed and expressed), and form of expression (the overall visual structure and narrative) [17]. The process began by identifying key visual figures, such as the guardian spirits. Its positioning at the top center of the mural was analyzed as part of the way of wimba [17], indicating spiritual elevation and centrality in Dayak belief. This placement, along with the balanced repetition of other symbolic elements, formed a coherent visual structure that reflected the form of expression, conveying a narrative of harmony, protection, and spiritual order [23]. Through this method, the mural was interpreted not just as an artistic composition but as a visual narrative deeply rooted in the Dayak community's cultural and spiritual worldview, Fig 1.

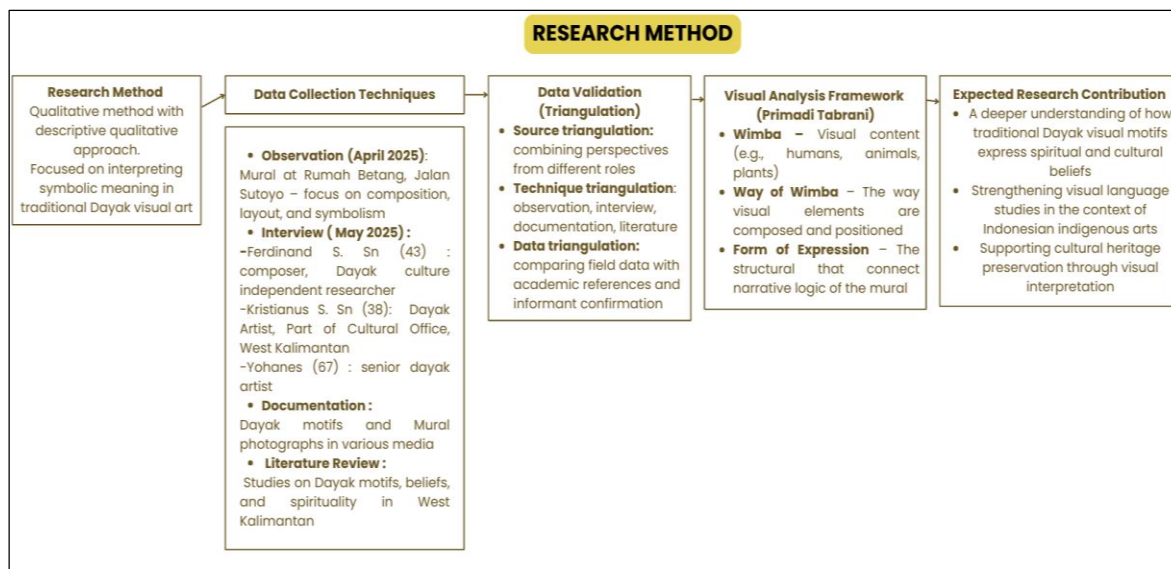


Fig 1. Research Method Diagram Flow

### 3. Results and Discussion

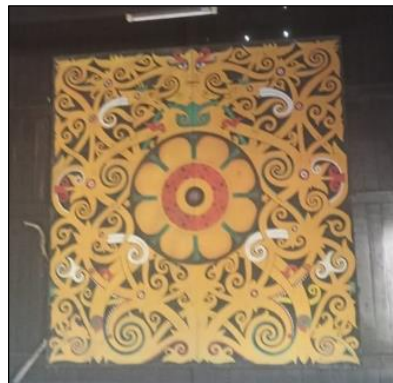
#### 3.1. Dayak Motifs Murals in Rumah Betang, West Kalimantan

Batang Traditional House is located at Jl. Lieutenant General Sutoyo No.6, Parit Tokaya, South Pontianak District, Pontianak City, West Kalimantan, Fig. 2, is a traditional building of the Dayak community that, although old and looking empty, is still actively used today. The lower area of the house is often used for dance rehearsals and cultural activities by children and local communities. The building is dominated by black wooden materials, and a wide terrace that was historically used for drying food [13]. Visually, the exterior of the house is decorated with Dayak tendrils ornaments in repetitive patterns on the columns and wall trim. Kristianus said in a personal interview in May 2025 that in this lower area, these motifs function as decorative elements.



**Fig 2.** Personal Documentation on April 2025 of Rumah Betang's Lower Area

Entering the staircase to the upper floor, the visual decoration is more complex on the wall plane and the ornaments around it, [Fig. 3](#). One large panel features a composition of bright colors against a yellow background, filled with protective figures such as a guardian spirit, a hornbill's beak pointing outwards, the dynamically curved body of a snake, and spiral tendrils filling the space between elements. This visual arrangement is symmetrically arranged with the main pattern in the form of a large petaled flower in the center of the composition. The colors used here are red, yellow, black, and white. This color is characteristic of the Dayak tribe [\[24\]](#).



**Fig 3.** Personal Documentation on April 2025 of Rumah Betang's Staircase Area

On the upper floor, the corridor of Rumah Betang functions as an official activity space that is the center of various Dayak community organizations. Several doors along the wall are used as offices for Dayak producer cooperatives, Dayak youth secretariats, and community council rooms. This space retains the typical Dayak decorative elements that are integrated into the architecture of the building. Above the doors are red tendrils ornaments that curve repetitively. In addition, the corridor walls are decorated with shields and carved panels featuring hornbill figures and snake bodies, [Fig. 4](#).



**Fig 4.** Personal Documentation on April 2025 of Rumah Betang's Corridor Area



In the living room of the second floor of Rumah Betang, Fig. 5, there are two large-scale murals attached to the main inner wall. Both murals are symmetrically arranged in a rectangular field, each featuring a vertical composition consisting of three main elements: a guardian spirit figure at the top, a hornbill in the middle, and a large snake at the bottom. These three figures are surrounded by tendrils and ornaments that fill the mural evenly. The colors used are dominated by yellow, black, red, and white. On the right and left sides of the main mural, there are two additional mural fields with similar compositions, but in the middle, it displays a picture of a jug as the main element. This space is a central part of the Rumah Betang structure and is used for various important community activities, such as traditional deliberations, Dayak organization meetings, and other cultural activities [13].








Fig 5. Personal Documentation on April 2025 of Rumah Betang’s Living Room Area

### 3.2. Wimba and Way of Wimba Guardian Spirit Motif

Wimba is defined as an object that can be in the form of a human, animal or other object that becomes the focal point of a work and is not abstract. Wimba depiction, which is also known as Cara Wimba, consists of five different types, namely Size of Taking, Angle of Taking, Scale, Way of Drawing, and Way of Viewing [18]. In general, the guardian spirit motifs found in various decorative elements of the Rumah Betang exhibit similar visual patterns. However, this discussion focuses on the guardian spirit motifs in the main mural, as they present the most complex and complete visual structure. Table 1 presents the visual content (*wimba*) of the guardian spirit motifs in the mural.



Tabel 1. Wimba Analysis of Guardian Spirit Motifs

Wimba	Name of Wimba	Content of Wimba
	Guardian Spirit	Guardian Spirit is the ancestral spirit of the Dayak people[4]. He is dressed in traditional clothing and a head cloth. As a figure of power, Guardian Spirit is honorable, highly resilient, firm, and solidarity-minded [25] Honorable, highly resilient, determined, and with a spirit of solidarity [26]
	Hornbill Bird	The Hornbill bird is considered a <i>Nek Nage</i> or <i>Jubata</i> , who is a protector or warner of danger to humans [27]. When going on a trip, they consider the hornbill bird a bad omen. If they hear the hornbill bird chirping, they will cancel the trip.

Wimba	Name of Wimba	Content of Wimba
	Nabau	Nabau for the Dayak people, also called the king python, is a legendary animal that is highly respected. Nabau is considered a helper figure when facing enemies. Usually, they appear in a snake-like form from the water, although sometimes they can change shape, so they are also called water dragons. Nabau has the power of a dragon that controls the underwater world and its creatures [28]
	Rope of Life	This circular spiral shape is also referred to as a rope of life, meaning as a marker of maturity [6]. This spiral is inspired by the shape of the vortex in the intestines of tadpoles, so it is also called the Rope of Life [26].
	Tendrills	In Dayak motifs, spirals and tendrils become a balance in the unity of the motif. These spirals or tendrils can be the connection or stem of each object's body. The tendrils are based on the fern motif, which is also a common motif in Dayak art [29].

Next is the way of Wimba, which is how an object is depicted. According to Primadi Tabrani's theory of visual language, the *way of wimba* refers to the visual approach taken by the creator in shaping the figures through angle, scale, posture, and viewing direction [18]. These visual decisions influence how the audience perceives and interprets the depicted subjects. *Way of wimba* will be observed in the guardian spirit mural, highlighting how compositional choices reflect cultural conventions and visual priorities in representing spiritual entities [17]. Table 2 is way of wimba analysis of guardian spirit motifs.

Tabel 2. Way of Wimba Analysis of Guardian Spirit Motifs

Way of Wimba	Explanation
From Head to toe	
Retrieval Size	 <p>In this mural, all the figures are taken from head to toe. In Guardian Spirit, although it is not explicitly seen, the Guardian Spirit in this mural is taken from the top of the head to the feet. With a frontal and symmetrical position like the Guardian Spirit in general. Similarly, the Hornbill and Nabau birds are taken from top to bottom, even though they are wrapped in various tendrils and spirals.</p>
From the Front	
	 <p>For Guardian Spirit, the tendrils and the lifeline, the angle used is the front view. The angle from the front can clarify Guardian Spirit's expression as well as the details of the tendrils and lifeline.</p>
From the Side	
Take-up Angle	 <p>The Hornbill and Nabau birds are taken from the side. The side position is the most optimal position for depicting the image of an animal because it can be recognized more easily and more clearly, as all parts of the body can be seen clearly.</p>

Way of Wimba		Explanation
Retrieval Scale	Scaled up 	As the main object, Guardian Spirit will naturally be enlarged from its original size to give a sense of emphasis. Guardian Spirit is also enlarged as a visualization of the ancestral spirits that are respected by all Dayak people. The tendrils and lifelines are enlarged according to their function in Dayak motifs, namely balancing and filling in the gaps. Although they have various sizes, the size of the tendrils and lifelines in the mural is clearly enlarged from the original size.
	Scaled Down 	As basic animal-shaped objects, the Hornbill and <i>Nabau</i> birds are scaled down from their original size. This also shows the hierarchy of living beings below their ancestors. The two figures are also scaled down to clearly show the overall shape of their bodies.
Characteristic Depiction	Retrieved	Despite using the same colors, all objects are depicted according to their respective characteristics. The position of the Guardian Spirit that appears in front, sitting cross-legged and symmetrical, and wearing a headband and loincloth. Then the Hornbill and <i>Nabau</i> birds, as well as the tendrils and the rope of life. All objects are depicted according to people's understanding so that they are easily recognizable.
Way of Viewing	Top center-Wide 	In this mural, the object is seen from the top, namely the Guardian Spirit. Then it spreads to the right and left, where the object is made symmetrical so that the Hornbill and <i>Nabau</i> birds are each on 2 sides.

### 3.3. Guardian Spirit Motif Expression System

One of the other concepts in Visual Language is Expressiveness, which is divided into Inner Expressiveness and Outer Expressiveness [19]. Inner expression refers to the way in which motif elements are comprehensively arranged in a single drawing. In Internal Grammar, the use of various pictorial methods in drawing is used to convey certain messages and meanings. This includes the arrangement of space, motion, and time in the drawing [22]. Fig. 6 is the Guardian Spirit Motifs whose analysis will be shown in Table 3.



Fig 6. The Guardian Spirit Motifs



**Tabel 3.** Analysis of Expressions in Guardian Spirit Motifs

Way of expression		Explanation
Declare Space	Without Land Lines	All the figures are depicted in one unit where there are no land lines.
Declare Motion	Static	Almost all the figures look static because they are depicted without any movement. Like the Hornbill Bird whose wings are made to close indicating that it is stationary.
	Dinamic	<i>Nabau</i> is made dynamic to make it clear that this animal is a snake that moves in a slithering manner.
State Space and Time	Various Spaces and Times	In the picture, there are no clear images or scenes about time. This is also in accordance with the depiction that belongs to the Flat Time Space depiction system or RWD.
Stating the Importance	Enlarged and Distinctive Looks	In Guardian Spirit motifs, the main image is Guardian Spirit itself, so it is depicted enlarged and supported by other images that characterize it.

3.4. Results of Fine Language Exploration

From the various analyses above, the Guardian Spirit motif is able to describe the legends that have been hereditary in the community. The mural at Rumah Betang presents a structured visual representation of protective forces in Dayak cosmology, composed of three primary figures: the guardian spirit, the hornbill, and the *Nabau*. These figures are positioned vertically in the composition to reflect cosmological hierarchy, each occupying a distinct symbolic domain within the Dayak spiritual system [8]. At the top, the guardian spirit appears in a frontal, symmetrical pose, signifying centrality and authority. As explained by Ferdinan, this figure embodies ancestral presence and serves as a spiritual protector whose influence extends over the collective. Its elevated placement conveys surveillance and leadership within the spiritual structure of the community. Hornbill (Fig. 7) itself is a all bird found in the jungles of West Kalimantan [27]. The Dayak Kanayatn tribe believes that Hornbill provides signs of danger in their journey or steps. To this day, the Dayak Kanayatn tribe still believe Hornbill to be a sign of danger [30]. In the legend, Guardian Spirit heard the sound of the Hornbill bird saying “hornbill ...hornbill ...”, which is interpreted as a sign of danger, signaling the arrival of enemies or other tribes who want to approach him. According to Kristianus, the hornbill is traditionally regarded as a bearer of omens, particularly in contexts of movement or ritual transition. Its lateral orientation in the mural optimizes visual recognition and emphasizes its role as a communicator of spiritual signs.

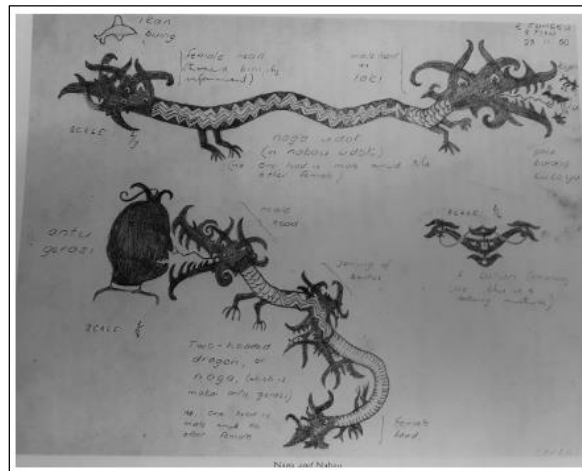


**Fig 7.** Hornbill’s Figure [30]

At the lower level, the *Nabau* anchors the composition. The serpent’s dynamic, coiled form extends horizontally across the mural base, referencing protective power from the earth and water domains often associated with unseen forces, Fig. 8. This position supports the Dayak conception of cosmological balance, where power flows both from above and below [28]. The whole picture tells how people expect protection from 3 protective figures, namely the Guardian Spirit, the Hornbill Bird, and *Nabau*. The tendrils and spirals symbolize the cycles of life, growth, and change that occur in the universe, connecting humans to nature as well as to their spiritual



protectors.. They serve as symbolic media through which the Dayak community places its hope for protection and cosmological balance. Although these images are rooted in intangible ancestral traditions and beliefs, they are manifested visually in concrete forms that bind space and meaning, making ancestral protection both present and unseen.



**Fig 8.** Nabau Sketches [28]

#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Dayak motifs found in the murals of Rumah Betang in Pontianak are not merely ornamental but constitute significant visual representations of the community's spiritual beliefs and cultural identity. The guardian spirit motifs, along with symbolic figures such as the hornbill and nabau (king python), encapsulate the Dayak cosmology, emphasizing a harmonious relationship between the human and spiritual realms. Applying Primadi Tabrani's visual language framework, the research interprets these motifs as a complex semiotic system conveying messages of protection, social values, and the continuity of tradition. The research methodology, combining qualitative approaches including direct field observation, expert interviews, and comprehensive literature review, ensures an in-depth understanding of the motifs within their cultural and historical context. The triangulation of data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, highlighting the crucial role of guardian spirits as ancestral protectors and the symbolic significance of decorative elements such as tendrils and spirals representing life, connection, and growth. In conclusion, the Dayak mural motifs in Rumah Betang function as a potent medium for cultural expression, enabling storytelling, spiritual communication, and heritage preservation. This study contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous visual culture by providing a culturally sensitive interpretation framework that respects and reveals the depth of meaning embedded in Dayak artistic traditions. Future research should explore a broader range of Dayak communities to compare variations in mural motifs and deepen the understanding of regional artistic expressions. Expanding the study to include other traditional art forms such as textiles and carvings could provide a more comprehensive view of Dayak visual culture. Additionally, incorporating digital documentation and preservation techniques is recommended to safeguard these cultural assets from deterioration. Collaborative efforts with local communities and cultural institutions will be essential to ensure sustainable cultural heritage management and support the transmission of traditional knowledge to younger generations.

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