

# Exploration on the Decorative Art of Rukai Patterns in Taiwan from the Perspective of Semiotics

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**Abstract**—The human world is a world of symbols, which originates from the natural physiological response of human body and forms the public behavior through common cognition. The use of symbols contributes to the communication mode of consciousness information expression. Decoration is a symbol in the world of colorful symbols, an indispensable and necessary part of life. In addition to keeping warm, protecting the body and beauty, it is also a form of human expression of emotion and self-expression, and also shows the features of all social classes. The Rukai nationality in Taiwan is an ethnic group without written language. The application of pattern implies the social class, customs and cultural context of the ethnic group. Based on the relevant literature records, field records, field interviews and comprehensive analysis, this paper discusses the pattern decoration of Rukai nationality from the perspective of semiotics: the nature, origin and significance of behavior of marks. It is hoped to arouse people's understanding of the traditional pattern decoration of the Rukai people in Taiwan, and to care about their traditional culture and inheritance.

**Keywords**—Rukai; semiotics; pattern

## I. INTRODUCTION

The world is full of "symbols", which are everywhere around the living environment. Nature is a big mark formed by numerous small symbols. The world is a colorful "world of symbols". Symbol is one of the ancient ways of communication that have existed in the world of human beings since the early days. It is a way of expressing information between people. It also has the function of media and visual representation. The presentation of the symbol includes the symbol itself, the relationship between people, people and things, things and things and its internal meaning.

"Symbol" is the product of human behavior, and a concrete object constructed through the consensus of groups in the process of human development. In nature, nature shows its existence by the sun, moon, stars, seasons, sound, light, color, image, etc. People understand the information and meaning of signals from these "natural information and natural symbols". People construct "artificial symbol" by thinking about the cognition of human behavior, and then it becomes a tool for interpersonal communication. In the first place of symbol expression, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the symbol and the meaning and value of its connotation.

There are nobles and civilians in the class society of Rukai nationality. Ornaments and patterns are symbols of ethnic identity. With these symbols, Rukai nationality shows the social class, status, heroic deeds and folk customs of ethnic groups. This paper discusses the origin and meaning of the "pattern decoration symbols" of Rukai nationality from the decorative symbols with the representative characteristics of ethnic group: glazed beads, pottery pots, Chinese moccasin and lilies.

Among the three major ethnic groups of Rukai tribe, the "Wutaishe" tribe in Ailiaoxi Valley maintains the original social features of Rukai tribe. Wutai Township is located at the south of Taiwan's central mountains, 750 meters above sea level. There are many cliffs and green trees within the territory. Also, there is the nickname of the town of clouds and fog. It is the clean place where the culture and customs of Rukai people are the least polluted by civilization, and the key area for research and visit. White, an American cultural anthropologist, mentioned in "the science of culture" that "human behavior is symbolic behavior, and all cultures or civilizations depend on symbols". Each ethnic group is not only a symbol, but also a self-contained symbol system. Susan Langer, an American aesthetician, said that "language is not the only expression tool of human beings, and language can't complete the expression of emotion." People strive to seek other ways of emotional expression besides language, and the decorative art of pattern just satisfies people's emotional expression. All ethnic groups use graphic modeling, color and technology to stimulate people's imagination and emotional experience, and convey their unique culture, values and behavior through metaphor, suggestion, association and other means.<sup>1</sup>

## II. ORNAMENTS AND PATTERNS OF RUKAI NATIONALITY

The application of ornaments is an artistic symbol. As Susan Langer said, "art is created with symbolic forms of human emotion" and also a kind of expression of beauty. Ornaments make people have the consensus of the group and the recognition of the common values, as well as the existence of its artistic beauty and aesthetic value. Rukai people enjoy a good reputation as an "art nation" in Taiwan. From these typical patterns and ornaments, it can understand

<sup>1</sup> Wen Jianhui. "Hometown of Clouded leopard, Wutai", 2001.

the origin and significance of the decoration art symbols of Rukai people.



Fig. 1. Noble and beautiful beads (source: Xu Meizhi).



Fig. 2. Eye beads (source: Xu Meizhi).



Fig. 3. Peacock beads (source: Xu Meizhi).

### A. Glazed Beads

"Glazed beads" are very precious items of the Rukai people. There are three kinds of monochromatic glazed beads, orange, yellow and green, and colorful glazed beads. Some beads have six or seven kinds of colors. They are dazzling, big, small and very beautiful. The "ancient glazed beads" have a long history. In the past, the Rukai people did not have the technology to make glazed beads themselves. Therefore, the Rukai people and experts believed that it was a precious treasure that their ancestors brought with them when they moved to Taiwan. Rukai people's glazed beads have various names, such as "noble and beautiful beads" (Fig. 1) with noble and beautiful meanings, the "tears of the sun", which symbolizes the tears when the sun leaves the ground, the "eyes beads", which symbolizes the pattern of the eyes ("Fig. 2"), peacock beads ("Fig. 3") from the sky, which is the present for peacocks marrying the ringleader's daughter, and the beads of hands and feet, which show the noble status in ancient color. All have their own representative meanings.<sup>2</sup> There are many legendary stories about the glazed beads, which also make these "ancient beads" full of magic and mysteries. Rukai people think that the glazed beads are ornaments with soul, sacred and body protecting meanings. Besides wearing, the glazed beads are also regarded as "gods" to offer the sacrifices as family heirloom from generation to generation.

<sup>2</sup> Xia Xiaochun. "The cultural symbols of the arts of National folk clothing, 2008.

### B. Ancient Pottery Pot



Fig. 4. Noble pottery pot (source: Xu Gongming).



Fig. 5. Aristocratic female pottery pot (source: Gao Yerong 32-34).

"Ancient pottery pot" is precious cultural heritage of Rukai people. They think that pottery pot is a legacy left by their ancestors, and the manufacturing technology has long been lost. The number of ancient pottery pots will only gradually decrease and will not increase. In the Rukai tribe, pottery pot is regarded as a sacred "heirloom" and a soul artifact. Therefore, it is regarded as a God. The ancient pottery pot is not an instrument used in daily life. It is not shown to outsiders at ordinary times. It is used for sacrifice and collection only when it is offered in the good year. The ancient pottery pots are mostly diamond shaped, with ancient and heavy appearance, which has a rough aesthetic feeling.<sup>3</sup> In the early days, it was also used in the dowry of marriage to show the ceremoniousness and family value. Because of the different social classes, the pottery pots ("Fig. 4" and "Fig. 5") of the Rukai nationality also have different patterns. The patterns are divided into nobles and civilians, and also show their gender and status from patterns. At present, there are many antique pottery pots in the market, but it is not difficult to distinguish the old and the new or the true or the false from the texture of the pottery pot.

### C. Chinese Moccasin Pattern

According to the legend, the Chinese moccasin is the incarnation of the leader aristocrat and the soul of ancestors. It is one of the gods worshipped in the ceremony. The pattern of the Chinese moccasin is regarded as the symbol of the ancestor spirit. There are snake shaped carvings on the ancestral pillar, eaves truss, wood carvings or stone plates of the door. For the Chinese moccasin, the people of the clan face it with respect and ritual attitude. In the shaping art of Rukai people, such as pottery pot, fabric, stone carving ("Fig. 6"), wood carving, clothing or ornaments, there are the

<sup>3</sup> Xu Meizhi. "The Glass Beads of Paiwan Tribe", 84.

application of Chinese moccasin shape and triangle snake pattern.



Fig. 6. The snake pattern on Cai Wang's stone carving (source: Xu Gongming).

Chinese moccasin is extremely vicious and poisonous. It's said that people can't walk out of one hundred steps after being bitten, and the poison will make people die. It's awed by the people of Rukai nationality, who respect it as the "elder of snake". At the same time, the people believe that Chinese moccasin is an indigenous people living in this land earlier than them. They believe that Chinese moccasin is the incarnation of the noble ancestors after death, and it becomes a belief. In order to avoid being blasphemous, the clansmen do not call it "Chinese moccasin" directly, but call it "god snake" or Amani (that is it), and call it Palada (my partner).<sup>4</sup> Generally, people are very awed of the snake and treat it as a friend.

#### D. Eagle Feather

The dress of Rukai nationality is in accordance with the norms of social class and represents the status and status. Therefore, his family background, identity, status and achievements in the tribe can be identified from his personal decoration. There are many kinds of headwear of ethnic people. They like to use the horns, teeth, fur of prey as headwear. "Eagle feather" is one of the special accessories, only the offspring of the leader, aristocrat or headhunter hero are eligible to wear it. The Rukai people believed that the aristocrats were related to the Chinese moccasin. The "Chinese moccasin" grew and became fat. They believed that they would eventually become eagles flying up to the sky. The "triangular pattern" on the eagle's feathers was exactly the same as that of the snake.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the eagle feather is regarded as a symbol of nobility and power ("Fig. 7").



Fig. 7. Leader wearing eagle feather (source: Gao Yerong).

#### E. Lily

Lily has always been the symbol of "elegance and holiness" in people's mind. There are many people who love it and sing praises to describe a person's beauty and purity at all times and in all countries. The Rukai people take "Taiwan Lily" as their "ethnic flower". Rukai people have a traditional way of wearing the lilies, and their respect for lilies has spiritual significance and ethics of social order.



Fig. 8. The daughter of the leader of the nobility wearing lilies (source: Wen Jianhui).

Lily is elegant, with the characteristics of purity and constancy. For women, it is a symbol of good women's morality, and for men, it is a symbol of hunting heroes and bravery. In Rukai people's opinion, some specific flowers and plants are endowed with special meanings and established values. Wearing any kind of symbolic ornaments requires considerable qualifications and rights. Rukai people belong to a class society with nobles and civilians. Therefore, the wearing of "lilies" also has obvious "symbolic decoration privilege" ("Fig. 8").<sup>6</sup>

### III. VIEWS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SEMIOTICS AND ITS OVERVIEW

This study takes the semiotic point of view in literature as the research method. Compared with other research methods, semiotics pays more attention to text analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Chen Meiling. "The Song of Rukai tribe", 77-80.

<sup>5</sup> Xu Gongming. "The Culture and Art of the Rukai People 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Gao Yerong. The Art of Taiwan Aboriginal People, p63, p116, 1997.

Semiotics is a method to study the essence of various basic symbolic activities. C.S. Peirce (1839-1914), an American philosopher and pioneer of modern semiotics, is pioneering in his discussion on symbols. It is difficult to have a complete system, but his rich vitality, thinking and application of ideas have opened up a territory for semiotics.

For example, in the early stage, iconicity of signs and unlimited semiosis of modern times made later semioticians continue to work.

For the symbol, Peirce thinks:

A symbol represents something through the idea produced or defined by the symbol. What it represents is object, which conveys the meaning. The concept it generates is an interpretant.

Symbols refer to anything that is associated with second object by means of a certain quality. The third thing (interpretant) is brought into contact with the object. At the same time, the fourth thing is brought out in the same way. Therefore, it is related to the object again, infinitely.

The so-called symbolic interpretation is an activity which affects the operation. It involves the interaction of the three subjects. The three main bodies are symbols, symbolic objects, and interpretant. The structure operation of the three-way interconnection must not be reduced to several bilateral activities.<sup>7</sup>

Peirce divides the symbol system into three components: the representation refers to the symbol representation; the entity / object refer to the symbol object; the interpretation refers to the meaning that can be understood from the symbol. And the symbol system refers to the interaction among the three.<sup>8</sup>

Many other species besides human also use symbols, but human beings are the animals that can create symbols and make the best use of symbols. Every symbol has its meaning. Without connotation, it is not a symbol. The symbolic world of mankind is the place for expressing mind and affection.

In the process of human evolution, symbols have the function of shaping human nature. The use of symbols is conventionalization, vulgarization, objectification and publicity. The publicity of symbols forms the way of human common cognition. The exchange and development of various kinds of knowledge, human civilization and human nature are the product of symbolic behavior and the expression of human nature theory of symbol.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Human beings are symbolic animals. In the early stage of human beings, people have known to use the causal relationship between things to build symbols to indicate or guide another thing. The creation and use of symbols represent the behavior of things marked by sensory experience. Individual experiences or efforts become the

common experience or enjoyment results of human collective due to the relationship of symbolization.

Symbols are loaded with various contents of human consciousness. Human symbolic behavior enriches the world of consciousness.

The "lilies" of the natural symbols of the Rukai people represent the consciousness, purity, constancy and bravery. "Eagle feather" represents the alertness and bravery. "Chinese moccasin" is a symbol of prestige and king, the incarnation of the noble leader's ancestral spirit. It is also more feared because of their wickedness and virulence. Also, compared with the worship of "ancient pottery pot" and "ancient glazed bead" of artificial symbols, it remembers the ancestors, deifies the ancestral spirit and becomes a belief.

"Symbol" promotes people to understand the object, points to the object, and denotes the object. The ornaments and patterns of Rukai nationality have the characteristics of portrait, index and vulgarity of the symbol. Its symbol participates in the character of "object" and has the characteristics of the object. Through the symbol, people can know and understand the object it represents.

The ornaments and patterns of Rukai nationality show the characteristics of ethnic culture, and add color to the colorful symbolic world. People can clearly understand the tribal society, folk customs, past and present of Rukai nationality from the ornaments and patterns, and can also experience and appreciate the beauty of decorative art of different cultural patterns, and care about the continuity and inheritance of their ethnic groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Xu Gongming. "The Culture and Art of the Rukai People", 2001.

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