

## Kambilangatao: A Study of the Visual Grammar of Tarpaulins

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### ABSTRACT

The overwhelming number of tarpaulins posted in strategic places around the Meranaw communities in Marawi City, Philippines, have tagged the City as the "City of Tarpaulins". For years, tarpaulins have been invading streets and walls. This multimedia landscape is not only a powerful product of the digitalized world but is also a strong representation of the modernizing Meranaw culture. This study ventured into analyzing the texts and photographs presented in the tarpaulins to better understand the contemporary concept of Kambilangatao or the Meranaw values of becoming a good person. Through the analysis, the study shows that the Meranaw in the contemporary era has evolved into a new identity. The study has brought out the 5k concepts of Meranaw values that make up Kambilangatao or the art of becoming a good person in thoughts, deeds, and actions, such as *kapamagogopa* or helping one another, *kapamagawida* or mutual support, *kapamagadata* or respect for one another, *kaseselai* or honoring one another, and *kambangsa* or pride in the family lineage. Through the tarpaulins a visage of the contemporary Meranaw is revealed. The visual grammar of the tarpaulins reveals that the contemporary *bilangatao* or an ideal person is described as a degree holder, achiever, confident, religious, honorable, and a good leader.

### 1. Introduction

The "People of the Lake", commonly known as the "Meranaw", are by far one of the larger groups in the Philippines who have a historically strong, rich and vibrant culture. The Meranaw core values are known to be patterned after the teachings of the famous *Darangen*, the world known cultural heritage which crystallizes the underlying ideology that guides the Meranaw behavior. The Meranaw are also known for their 5K concepts of *Kambilangatao* or the art of becoming a good person in thoughts, deeds, and actions, such as *kapamagogopa* or helping one another, *kapamagawida* or mutual support, *kapamagadata* or respect for one another, *kaseselai* or honoring one another, and *kambangsa* or pride in the family lineage.

The Meranaw culture has a stronghold on Meranaw consciousness but is undeniably being shaken by the vicissitudes of time, by transitions and chasings by the numerous innovations brought about by education, technology and media, and the spread and ascendancy of the popular culture. The 5k concepts of its core values are now dimly observed in Meranaw day to day living; the characters of the *Darangen* are all but completely consigned to Limbo or oblivion. The *kambayok* and the *kandarangen* have been superseded by *rina-rinaw* and contemporary songs depicting contemporary values; and the ideal Meranaw woman once modelled on the characters of *Paganai a Bai* or *Paramata Gandingan* from the famous *Darangen*, is now gradually morphing into a modern character. This is manifested in the gigantic and colorful tarpaulins posted around the province of Lanao del Sur. The glut of such information medium has earned for Marawi the title "City of Tarpaulins". These tarpaulins seen along the streets are not only manifestations of the digital world but a strong representation of the modernizing Meranaw culture (Ibrahim, 2014).

This study attempts to probe the meanings or cultural messages of the tarpaulins in the Meranaw context. As carriers of visual grammar and cultural representatives (Ibrahim, 2014), these tarpaulins have their own powerful language. Thus, they should be

critically scrutinized for the viewers to better understand Meranaw culture and society in the throes of adjusting to the changes of time.

This study aims to analyze the representation of the Meranaw *Kambilangatao* in the tarpaulins based on the texts and photographs. It also aims to interpret the meanings of how the contemporary Meranaw values are represented and examine how these representations contribute to the Visual Grammar of the Tarpaulins.

For strong foundations on which to base the analysis and comprehension on the bearings of this academic endeavor, this study is anchored on Kress and Van Leeuwen Social Semiotic framework of Visual Communication Grammar, the Cultural Identity Theory.

The Kress and van Leeuwen Framework for reading visual images (1996) was used as the main investigative tool. By applying the framework to the texts and images contained within the corpus which is the tarpaulin, it is hoped that the study will demonstrate how images and texts, created by motivated rhetors (Kress, 2010), or sign makers, may be used to convey certain social, political, cultural and aspirational messages about Meranaw values particularly on *Kambilangatao*.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Media and Cultural Transformations**

A culture is a way of life of a group of people that includes their behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Culture can also be defined in various contexts. In the context of semiotics, culture can be viewed as the sum of rule-governed, shared, learned and learnable, transmittable, symbolic activity used by a group in any given place and time (faculty.georgetown.edu).

One study that has a significant contribution to the role of the media in setting the image of a woman is the study of Stephanie Nicholl Berberick entitled "The Objectification of Women in Mass Media: Female Self-Image in Misogynist Culture". This paper argues that the objectification of women in the American mass media has a long sorted history. Critics, however, argue is that such an analysis is an exaggeration, which they dismiss along with most feminist critiques of society. Despite the physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual obstacles in the quest to achieve idealized beauty, women continue to chase it. While any woman stuck in the spider's web has different reasoning for prescribing to these "ideals," it seems quite consistent that the failure to obtain American beauty standards often leads to great body dissatisfaction and a probable inability to find peace. To combat sexism and objectification, society must reshape its patriarchal framework and move towards more egalitarian standards. However, with the media consistently flashing the "ideal" around every corner, the likelihood of self-acceptance and a less judgmental society seems near impossible. Therefore, working towards a society where women can walk safely down the street without fear of assault or look in the mirror without negative mental and physical consequences begins internally and hopefully affects the external environment.

In the study of Dr. Loreta Fajardo (2017) entitled "Discoursing the Tarpaulins: Towards a Reconstruction of a New Identity, she concluded that there is a subconscious negotiation between the ones who display the tarpaulins and the ones who view them. No matter how concise the texts are and how numerous the symbols are, a common understanding is arrived at and communication is always taking place because something is encoded and decoded. In her study, she has raised the notion that the Meranaw people have proved that tarpaulins are not only used for advertisements but also have a distinct function like the practice of announcement and its use in conveying the Meranaw Pride, self-esteem and power. The study has also proved a novel way of seeing and interpreting a particular practice that is considered unique among Meranaw. Through the study, it is discovered that certain myths can be extracted from the practice of displaying tarpaulins and from the tarpaulin itself as a sign. Power is seen to have manifest from those who have the resources, from those who belong to the prominent/royal clans and families, and for the younger Meranaw to advance their postmodern thoughts. The tarpaulins have also become a vehicle for those who have been marginalized and have been mainstreamed—as they have proven that they can also be at Meranaw. Gender is different from sex in that it refers to the social characteristics whereby women and men exist in a dynamic structural relation to each other. Although biologically designated, sex has a significant part to play in the way human experience is defined (Hollway,1989).

### **2.2 Social Semiotics and Visual Grammar**

The world people inhabit is filled with visual images. They are central to how humans represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around. In many ways, culture which is man-made, -acquired or -learned, is an increasingly visual one, particularly for this visually fixated generation.

Halliday holds that language is a semiotic mode and any semiotic mode has to represent three broad communicative metafunctions, namely the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction and the textual metafunction, which has a decisive influence on Kress and Van Leeuwen's social semiotic framework of visual communication grammar. In Kress and Van Leeuwen's opinion, the three metafunctions of linguistics can be extended to visual communication. In Reading Images, they see

the image as a resource for representation and display culturally produced regularities. The meanings expressed by people are the first and foremost social meanings, so Halliday's three metafunctions for language can also be used as a starting point for their account of images because they assume the three metafunctions model which works well as a source for thinking about all modes of representation (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) assume that image, color, music, typography and other visual modes are similar to language and they can simultaneously fulfill and realize the three broad communicative metafunctions as language does. In their view, image and other visual modes can represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system, so there are many ideational choices available for visual sign-making in visual communication. They also think that image and other visual modes can form texts, complexes of signs that internally cohere with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced. Besides, image and other visual modes are able to represent a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented. And all semiotic systems are social semiotic systems which allow us to negotiate social and power relationships. They see images of whatever kinds as means for the articulation of ideological position (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006). That's why in their *Reading Images*, they draw examples from many domains, such as text books, websites, advertisements, magazine articles and so on, to express their meaning-making in their social practices. The key notion in any semiotics is the —sign||, or —sign making||, so Kress and Van Leeuwen discuss forms (signifier) such as vector, modality, gaze, composition, perspective, line and color, as well as the way in which these forms are used to realize meanings (signified) in the making of signs.

### 3. Methodology

This study is a qualitative-analytical research which investigates the images presented in the tarpaulins posted along the National Highway covering four (4) municipalities of the 1st district of the province of Lanao del Sur. This study was conducted on the national highway cutting through the 4 municipalities of the 1st district of the province of Lanao del Sur which provide travelers from other regions and other municipalities and locals a good view of the huge tarpaulins of the Meranaw.

This study involved the Visual Grammar Communication Analysis as the investigative tool for data analysis. In this method, the researcher isolated and identified the language and images presented in the tarpaulins for analysis. To specifically analyze the language, texts in the tarpaulin were examined including Naming, Titles, Colors, Fonts size, Headings and Compliments Lines. On images, photographs of were examined including the narratives, angling, and physical appearance of the subject, clothing and accessories. From these texts and images, meanings were derived. These meanings were examined to extract aspirational messages of the tarpaulins about Meranaw values. From these meanings, the study hoped to examine its contribution to the visual grammar of the tarpaulins.

### 4. Results and discussions

To understand how this study contributes to the Visual Grammar of Communication, a skinning concept was applied as has been manifested in the analysis of the tarpaulins to reveal the identity of the Meranaw as represented through the texts and photographs in the tarpaulins. Skinning concept is the skinning back of the layers of thoughts to reach understanding. These layers like letters and images lead us to see insights that influences change and optimal function. These are the building blocks that create a new face of a Meranaw.

In visual grammar, structure of visual language is equated with linguistics almost similarly. Grammar in linguistics describes combining words into clauses, sentences, and texts. Likewise, visual grammar explains the procedure to combine visual elements -people, places, and objects- in visual statement in a certain complexity and extension. Just as the structure of linguistic, visual structure refers to the specific interpretation of the experience of form and social interaction. Furthermore Kress and Leeuwen stated that:

‘What is our visual grammar a grammar of?’ First of all we would say that it describes a social resource of a particular group, its explicit and implicit knowledge about this resource, and its uses in the practices of that group. Then, second, we would say that it is a quite general grammar, because we need a term that can encompass oil painting as well as magazine layout, the comic strip as well as the scientific diagram. It is an account of the explicit and implicit knowledge and practices around a resource, consisting of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication (p. 3) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006: 3).

Kress and Leeuwen stated that the approach of visual grammar starts from the social aspect. Its structure is not a simple reproduction of the structure of reality, but instead, producing a reality picture bonded to the interests of the social community that produces an image, circulate, and read it, so it becomes ideological. Meaning expressed by printmakers, photographers, designers, painters and sculptors in first and foremost are the social meanings. To explore these meanings, there are aspects and

rules of visual grammar that have to be analysed: elements and structure, position of the participants, modality, composition, and materiality.

In this study, the skinning concept is based on the analysis and examination of the textual and photographed elements presented in the tarpaulins as the corpus of the study. First, we skin out the texts that are presented in the tarpaulins. Second, we skin out the photographs of women in the tarpaulins. Lastly, are the revelation of the Meranaw cultural values, *Kambilangatao*.

On textual aspects, the tarpaulins used the textual characters like fonts, style, size, and colors contributing factors in the visual narratives of the tarpaulins. Larger fonts, colored texts and italicized, bold and or underlined texts are message carriers that are emphasized to convey meanings on educational achievements, titles, pride, honor, recognition, love and support. The placement and location of these texts in the tarpaulin which is explained in the Information value of Kress and van Leeuwen also conveys multiple meanings on which is significant and which is not.

From the texts, Meranaw are represented as achievers, bread winners, responsible community leaders; family oriented. Meranaw values such as the 5 K concepts of *Kambilangatao* or the art of becoming a good person in thoughts, deeds, and actions, such as *kapamagogopa* or helping one another, *kapamagawida* or mutual support, *kapamagadata* or respect for one another, *kaseselai* or honouring one another, and *kambangsa* or pride in the family lineage (Ibrahim, 2012) are very reflective in the tarpaulins.

On photographs, multiple meanings on the clothing and accessories can be extracted. The photographs like texts speak a thousand words. It reflects the Meranaw way of carrying themselves in public, which conveys strength and power to go beyond the borders in order to speak and be recognized. From the photographs, Meranaw are represented as leaders, culturally oriented, religious, and achievers in the field of education and profession. From the photographs Meranaw values like *maratabat* (pride), *kambangsa* (clanship), and the importance of education has been reflective.

The Visual Grammar of the Tarpaulin has conveyed a powerful representation of the Meranaw. The transition of the Meranaw such as the Meranaw women from the narrations of the Darangen to the present era can be traced through the tarpaulins. As has been stated by Fajardo (2015), the tarpaulin has shown a new identity of the Meranaw. This identity has evolved from the influence of the changes in the society such as the coming of the technology which has given the Meranaw women to pattern their fashion and other values from what they hear from the radios and or seen from the television and magazines. The coming of the cyber age where Meranaw women has an easy and fast access to internet has paved way to the influence of the popular culture. As also been stated by del Mundo (2010), with the proliferation of the of computers, the internet, and the digital media, the younger generation, those who are born as early as 1980's has gained almost unlimited access to information and the power to reach out to a global audience in in real time. Sites that are substantial, covering a gamut of topics from politics to religion, economics to philosophy, and the arts to the various aspects of human culture. This virtual landscape and community have influenced cultures and has contributed to forming a new identity as has also been seen in the representation of the Meranaw women through the grammar of tarpaulins.

Moreover, the tarpaulins like all other medium such as magazines, television, films, photographs and billboards containing images and texts contribute to the Visual Grammar of Communication. It agrees with Moerdesuroso (online pdf) account entitled Social Semiotics and Visual Grammar: A Contemporary Approach to Visual Text Research. In his study, he concluded that the social semiotics provide the visual text with a vital role, as one of the material forms of ideology, which is produced circulated, consumed, and contested, both on large and small scale, or formal and informal environments in certain communities. This role allows researcher to place the term of ideology not only as a product in the political practices, but also as the semiotic resources that is moving dynamically in the market of meaning-making in all aspects of culture. As Dyer (1982:13) also says "The advertiser employs language, image, ideas and values drawn from the culture, and assembles a message which is fed back into the culture. Both communicator and receiver are products of the culture, they share its meaning". On the grounds that, given Dyer's point, advertisements are cultural products and so are tarpaulins. Fowles also points out a tendency of contemporary advertisements namely that they make frequent use of the "solitary human": the depiction of a lone man or a woman in advertisements, in relation to its cultural value: The solitary human is the most prevalent image in American advertising, one that addresses these times' most insistent personal concern: the development of a sure self-identity (200).

In the case of this study, the tarpaulins have conveyed multiple meanings that define and redefine the Meranaw. As has been stated by one of the locals:

"Mapiyadn a gya kyakaparorodan o tarpaulin sa inged a ranao ka kyatokawan o bala sabala inged a so mga bae sa ranao na knaba siibo mauuyan ko pat a rogo a walay, odi na ko kapakasosowa ko wata odi na so katata ayon o kodn kara. So mga bae tano na misambi sa paras ka so bagr o pamikiran iran ago so bagr o ngaran iran na aya pagompiya ko kauunos o ranao"

To translate:

It is good that we have tarpaulins all around lake Lanao so people from other places neighboring the lake would know that the Meranaw woman does not only take motion in the four corners of the house, breastfeeding their babies, or managing the pots and pans in the kitchen but the Meranaw woman has the name and the strength of the mind that will fill in the emptiness of the lake, its people.

The visual grammar of the tarpaulins has created another meaning to the grammar of visual communication. In this study, the concept of *bilangatao* or a good person in deeds, action and thought, to define the Meranaw *Kambilangatao* is conceptualized like a flower which blooms despite being turned upside down. The image of the concept describes the contemporary Meranaw as empowered despite the challenges of the society. This is shown in figure 1.

*Kambilangatao* is the act of becoming a good person in thoughts, deeds, and actions. In the present days, with the prevalent appearance of the tarpaulins, the Meranaw society has visually shown their ideal image of a Meranaw in the contemporary era.

Through the visual grammar of the tarpaulins, we have perceived that the Meranaw *kambilangatao* is composed of the Meranaw values such as *kapamagogopa* or helping one another, *kapamagawida* or mutual support, *kapamagadata* or respect for one another, *kaseselai* or honouring one another, and *kambangsa* or pride in the family lineage. Through these 5K concepts of *Kambilangatao*, the "*bilangatao*" image of a contemporary Meranaw is revealed. The grammar of the tarpaulins, states that this woman is described as a degree holder, an achiever, religious, confident, honorable and a good leader.

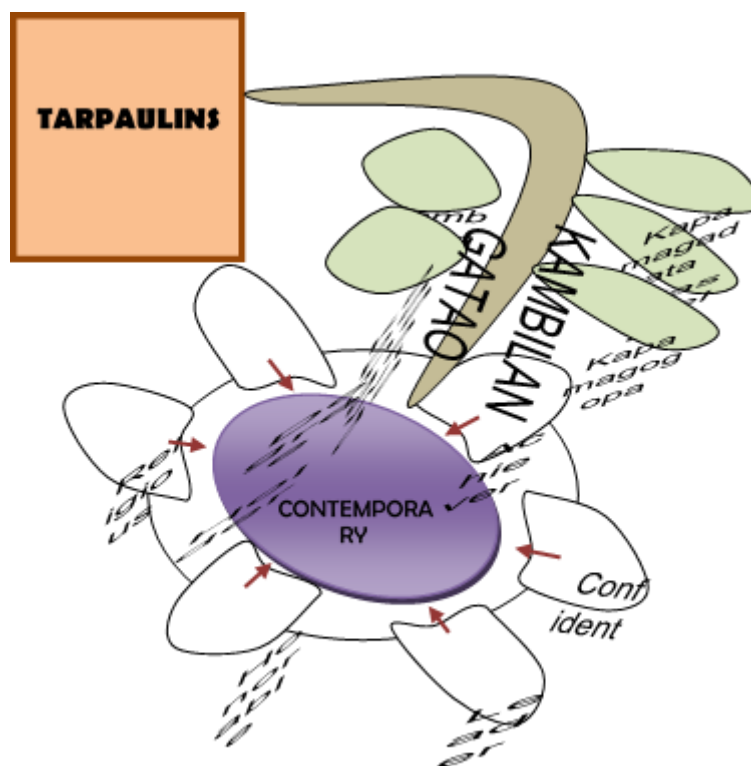


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the 5K Concepts of Kambilangatao Creating the Visage of a Contemporary Meranaw Woman.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the findings and analysis of the corpus of the study, it can be concluded that tarpaulins are indeed visual representations of the Meranaw culture. Like grammar of a language that has rules and meanings, the elements presented which are purposely arranged in the canvass in form of a text or photograph has multiple meanings which is reflective of the Meranaw identity—culture, education, values, norms and beliefs, political agenda, economic status, and the influences in the modern era.

The multiple meanings layered behind these representations conclude that despite the observable change to a new character because of the influence of modernization, the Meranaw 5K concepts of *Kambilangatao* or the act of becoming a good person in thoughts, deeds, and actions, such as *Kapamagogopa* or helping one another, *Kapamagawida* or mutual support, *Kapamagadata* or respect for one another, *Kaseselai* or honouring one another, and *Kambangsa* or adherence to family lineage is alive in the Meranaw society of this new era and the tarpaulin is one of its evidences and The contemporary Meranaw is described as *Bilangatao* with the following characters: a degree Holder; an achiever; confident; honourable; religious; and a good leader.

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