

# The Symbolic Meaning of Upuh Ulen-Ulen Cloth in the Socio-Cultural Context of Central Aceh Society

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## ABSTRACT

*Upuh ulen-ulen cloth is traditional clothing of the Gayonese people which has a karawang gayo motif in it. The Karawang Gayo motif is philosophical and has various functions that are adapted to the lives of local people. The aims of this research are to 1) reveal the meaning of the upuh ulen ulen cloth in traditional marriages, 2) reveal the symbolic meaning of the upuh ulen ulen clothing, 3) reveal the cultural value of upuh ulen ulen in everyday life. The approach used in this research is descriptive qualitative. Data collection techniques are carried out through observation, interviews and documentation. The subjects in this research were 6 people consisting of Gayo cultural figures and artists, MAG commissioners, teachers, entrepreneurs (farmers), and tailors. From the results of data analysis, it was found that the use of upuh ulen ulen cloth in marriage means a change in status, starting from becoming a husband and wife, and also the parents' expectations for their child's household life. Apart from that, the symbolic meaning of the upuh ulen ulen cloth is related to each symbol which has a philosophical meaning in the life of the Gayo community. Meanwhile, the cultural values contained in the upuh ulen ulen cloth include customs and also values found in social life.*

## KEYWORDS

Symbolic Meaning  
Upuh Ulen-Ulen Cloth  
Social Culture

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture is our identity as human beings. It reflects the history, values, and local wisdom that have been passed down from previous generations. Culture is defined as the whole of human ideas and works that must be accustomed to learning, along with the whole of the results of their minds and works (Koentjaraningrat, 2015). Culture essentially has a soul that will continue to live because culture continues to flow in humans in their lives. It will continue to be created, from place to place, from individual to individual, and from time to time. Moreover, culture is also known as a symbol that explains the feelings and values built by humans. Culture is a concept that is inherited in the form of symbols, which is a way for humans to communicate, preserve, and develop their knowledge of life and their own attitudes towards life. This opinion is in line with the goals of education in Indonesia; the goal of education is to preserve, strengthen, and maintain, and cultural education can continue to develop. Culture is necessary to preserve as a symbol of wisdom and noble humanity. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ki Hajar Dewantara once initiated the concept of character education to accustom students to doing good by incorporating cultural values. This is why culture is something that needs to be taught to students on an ongoing basis.

Culture also plays a very important role in the social life of society. In social society, it also has a function to provide a group identity, as a source of customary norms and also as a unifier in its group. In social society, there is a gap that will cause a conflict if there are no

norms, rules, and unifiers; this is where the role of culture is needed. According to Bambang Tejkusumo (2007), humans always have a sense of living in groups due to environmental conditions that are always changing or dynamic. Scientists in the social field agree that human life is not static but will always change (dynamic); this condition is called social change. According to More (Narwoko, 2007: 362) social change is interpreted as an important change in social structure, behavioral patterns, and social interaction systems, including changes in values, norms, and cultural phenomena. A change will always be present in the journey of human life, which is the dynamics of his life. The only difference is that the change occurs quickly or slowly; even a person or group of people who live in remote areas will definitely experience the dynamics of life.

In the era of globalization, information has become a powerful force in influencing human thought patterns. To overcome this, Hildigardis M. I. Nahak (2019) said that awareness of the importance of local culture as the nation's identity is needed. It is an obligation for every level of society to maintain it, where the role of the younger generation is highly expected to continue to try to inherit local culture and will be a strength for the existence of local culture itself even though it is hit by the current of globalization.

Indonesia has a wide variety of cultures that can be a treasure trove of national wealth because the variety of cultures in Indonesia is magnificent and diverse and has moral values that can be used as norms in the social order. Culture in Indonesia is also a special attraction for foreign tourists to visit Indonesia. Every region in Indonesia has a different culture and becomes a distinctive characteristic but also a unifier. Through the culture in each region, we will know the characteristics of a region. Culture in Indonesia is also a special attraction for foreign tourists to visit Indonesia. Every region in Indonesia has a different culture and becomes a distinctive characteristic but also a unifier. Through the culture in each region we will know the characteristics of a region, and through cultural differences in each region the unity and unity of the nation was born, which became the motto of the Indonesian nation in "Bhineka Tunggal Ika."

Mahara and Misgiya (2020) stated that Aceh is a region that is part of the Indonesian region, which consists of several tribes such as the Acehnese, Gayo, Alas, and Jame tribes. The characteristics of Acehnese people's lives are regulated by customary law based on Islamic legal principles. One of the cultures in Aceh is Gayo culture. According to Bakti, Harinawati, and Ikramatoun (2021:3) culture as part of the product of modernity is always in dialectic with the values of the Gayo people. Framed by social change, the meeting of the two poles of culture has been felt in many aspects of life. Fitri (2020) also argues that, the Gayo tribe has a cultural heritage that is the character of the people in the area, namely Kerawang Gayo. Kerawang Gayo is part of the culture of the Gayo people, which is still preserved by them. Kerawang Gayo is a cloth that is given traditional Gayo motifs. Each motif has a philosophical basis according to its shape and carvings; the philosophical content can be in the form of moral messages, advice, and ancestral mandates to future generations to live according to the values that apply in Gayo culture. According to (Rezeqi & Misgiya, 2021) the application of the Kerawang Gayo motif depicts the thoughts of the Gayo people in their relationship with humans and with their creator. As one of the regions that is still thick with its culture, namely the Kerawang Gayo Culture located in Central Aceh Regency, this culture is a distinctive feature of this region. The local Kerawang Gayo culture has been designated as a cultural heritage through the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 270/P/2014 concerning the Determination of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Indonesia. in 2014.

The Gayo kerawang pattern itself is widely used on fabrics, so it is not surprising that Gayo kerawang is identical to traditional cloth or the grand cloth of the Gayo people (Upuh Ulen-ulen). Although the Gayo kerawang pattern actually exists on other cultural objects. These motifs are also found in traditional houses of the Gayo tribe, most of the carved motifs of which are taken from the surrounding nature as well as the influence of daily life patterns. Almost all the patterns that are painted or chosen are patterns that are carved based on observations of the universe. The Gayo Kerawang motif is philosophical and has various functions that are adapted to the lives of the local community. In addition to traditional cloth and houses, Gayo openwork motifs are also found on other cultural objects such as pottery and weaving. Research on openwork cloth has been conducted by Supandi Iswanto et al. (2020) Sulam Kerawang Gayo: Local Culture, Character Value and as National Identity concluded that Gayo openwork is an original culture of the Gayo people, Gayo openwork has grown and developed since thousands of years ago within the scope of Gayo society, which was initially only a term for motifs found on cultural objects of the Gayo people, such as pottery, weaving, and wood carvings in traditional houses. However, since the Gayo people became familiar with textiles and the art of embroidery, Gayo openwork motifs have been more synonymous with traditional embroidery cloth. Similar research conducted by Rosdiani and Ibrahim Chalid (2020) found that the existence of Gayo openwork is preserved by modifying motifs, both on functional products of traditional clothing and other functional products, by utilizing cultural values to attract buyers. Meanwhile, Sakinah U, Dewi R and Irsanti I (2016) wrote, The Gayo Kerawang sewing skill technique on upuh ulen ulen is classified as the art of decorating cloth with distinctive motifs and colors.

The cultural values and meanings contained in each kerawang motif on this cloth, from the 13 motifs and 18 characters in Kerawang Gayo have been very much reflected in the lives of the people of Central Aceh so far, for example, the community prioritizes religious education for their sons and daughters starting from religious education at home and in the surau, for mutual cooperation and unity of the people of Central Aceh are also very well maintained, if a neighbor is hit by a disaster, the neighbors around him will flock to bring basic necessities to help ease the burden of those affected by this disaster is done voluntarily and without coordination from any party, which means that the cultural values and characters of each motif on Kerawang Gayo are actually ingrained, have become an unwritten rule that is passed down from generation to generation, but some people do not understand that all these customs and customary rules come from ancestral heritage which is reflected in each kerawang motif with the values and meanings in it. However, the cultural value of Kerawang Gayo on the upuh ulen ulen cloth is still not deeply understood by some people, especially the younger generation.

In this study, the Kerawang Gayo analyzed is the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, which plays a role as a traditional instrument at certain events that are considered sacred. The custom that is closely related to the symbolic meaning of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is the wedding custom. In the wedding custom, the upuh ulen-ulen cloth is used as a symbol of the change in status of the bride and groom from single to husband/wife, when the bride is dressed in the upuh ulen-ulen cloth by the imem/parents, then from that moment she is ready to step into becoming a wife/husband. This custom is called "Beguru" which is led by the elder edet/imem witnessed by the family and local community, this beguru event is a series of events held on the night/morning before the marriage contract. Along with the development of the times and the blending of local culture with immigrant culture, the use of Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth in wedding customs is increasingly rarely used, either because of a lack of understanding of the meaning contained in this cloth or because the procession of wearing

Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, which requires a slightly complicated sequence of processions, also has fewer penatue edet/traditional leaders to carry it out, which is why only a portion of the community still uses Upuh Ulen-Ulen as a symbol of customs.

This needs to be studied because it can be one step to preserve the cultural heritage of ancestors for the younger generation. There are many benefits to be gained by providing a deep understanding of philosophical values, and this is in accordance with the author's observations in the field that there are still many people who use this upuh ulen ulen cloth, but not all people understand in depth the value of each symbol contained in the cloth so that it will provide knowledge and ensure the preservation of this cultural value, as the government has done by conducting training in making Gayo kerawang embroidery for the younger generation. Thus, understanding the cultural values and characters contained in Gayo kerawang will continue to be preserved as a proud cloth of the Central Aceh community. Understanding the cultural values in each Gayo kerawang motif will help the community in continuing this tradition for future generations. Based on the description above, this Kerawang Gayo art has a very deep meaning for all Gayo people in particular and Indonesia in general, to be preserved and developed in accordance with the meaning and cultural values of Gayo kerawang so that the younger generation can love and understand the meaning and local cultural values of this Gayo kerawang. Hence, the purpose of this research is to analyze in depth the symbolic meaning of Upuh Ulen Ulen in the socio-culture of the Central Aceh community.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, aiming to provide an in-depth exploration of the cultural values embedded within the **kerawang Gayo** motifs, particularly in the socio-cultural context of the Aceh Tengah community. The focus of the study is on the intricate symbolism and cultural significance of **Upuh Ulen-Ulen**, a traditional woven cloth that reflects the identity and heritage of the Gayo ethnic group. The qualitative-descriptive method is especially suitable for capturing the nuances of cultural practices, meanings, and values that are deeply rooted in the community's traditions.

The study was conducted in the Atu Lintang sub-district of Central Aceh Regency, an area recognized for its strong adherence to traditional Gayo customs and values. Additional data was collected from other locations deemed relevant for enriching the research findings. The selection of Atu Lintang as the primary research site was strategic, as it represents an ethnic community that continues to preserve the cultural values of **kerawang Gayo**, making it an ideal setting for this investigation. The availability of knowledgeable community members further supported the objectives of this research.

The sampling method employed was purposive sampling, ensuring that informants were specifically chosen based on their knowledge and engagement with **kerawang Gayo** and its cultural significance. The informants comprised six individuals, including two cultural figures who are custodians of traditional practices, two respected community leaders with deep insights into local customs, and two members of the MAG (Majelis Adat Gayo), an organization that actively preserves and promotes Gayo traditions. These informants were instrumental in providing valuable perspectives on the symbolic meanings and socio-cultural relevance of the **Upuh Ulen-Ulen** motifs.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with the six informants. These interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts of the motifs, their meanings, and their roles within the social fabric of the community. Additional data sources included documentation of **kerawang Gayo** motifs and related cultural artifacts, along with

supporting materials such as photographs and written records of local traditions. The data analysis process followed a structured approach consisting of four key components: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This systematic methodology ensured a comprehensive understanding of the cultural values represented in **Upuh Ulen-Ulen**, providing a robust foundation for interpreting the findings and drawing meaningful conclusions about their significance within the Gayo community.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Language, artifacts, colors, and sounds are powerful media for transmitting cultural symbols, serving as the foundation of any culture. Symbols operate as carriers of meaning, bridging the past, present, and future. They encapsulate shared values and societal principles, guiding communities in understanding their roles and relationships with the world around them. A 2022 report from a local cultural organization found that, although traditional textiles like Upuh Ulen-Ulen are still in demand for specific cultural ceremonies, their use has decreased dramatically in daily life. The study showed that only 10% of the younger Gayo population regularly wear traditional clothes, compared to 40% of their parents' generation. This trend is attributed to the influence of modern clothing styles, availability of ready-made garments, and the increasing integration of global fashion trends. As a stated by Local Cultural Leader, Atu Lintang District, 2024:

“The tradition of weaving is still alive in some places, but the reality is that Upuh Ulen-Ulen is no longer as central to everyday life as it once was. We used to see it in almost every home, in every ceremony, but now it's mainly reserved for big, formal events. Globalization has brought in cheaper clothes, and the younger generation is not as connected to our roots as before. It's a challenge to keep the tradition relevant in modern times.”

Hence, analysing the Ulen-Ulen Cloth cloth is crucial for preserving the rich cultural traditions of the Gayo people, promoting sustainable economic development, and contributing to Indonesia's national identity and cultural diversity. According to Wahyuningsih (2021), the object symbols found in kerawang Gayo—a distinct traditional art form of the Gayo people—serve multiple purposes. These symbols are not merely decorative; they offer practical benefits and function as reminders of the community's guiding principles. Ezza (2014) further emphasizes that symbols, in their various manifestations as objects, shapes, or images, have the unique ability to capture abstract ideas, offering a tangible representation of a community's worldview.

In the context of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, a traditional woven fabric integral to the Gayo culture, the embedded motifs and patterns are profoundly symbolic. These motifs are not arbitrary; each carries specific meanings, representing values and ideals deeply rooted in the Gayo community's traditions and belief systems. Based on interviews conducted during the study, several key motifs were identified, each holding distinct significance and philosophical weight.

### Key Motifs and Their Symbolic Meanings

According to one informant (Informant 1), the mata ni lo motif, or the "eye of nilo," symbolizes the greatness and omnipotence of God. It reflects the community's strong spiritual orientation and their emphasis on maintaining closeness with God. The motif serves as a reminder for individuals to stay true to religious teachings and uphold the moral values passed down by their ancestors. The mata ni lo motif also underscores the importance of

respecting fellow human beings and fostering harmony with nature. It encapsulates the spiritual foundation that anchors the Gayo people's way of life.

The emun beriring motif, on the other hand, represents collaboration and mutual support among siblings, whether they are related by blood, clan, or shared values. This motif illustrates the importance of unity and collective effort, values that are essential for navigating life's challenges and fostering strong family and community bonds.

Another prominent motif is the pucuk rebung, which signifies the prioritization of education for the next generation. This motif conveys the idea of nurturing children from infancy to adulthood, ensuring they are equipped with knowledge and wisdom to face the future. It also highlights the enduring responsibility of parents to fulfill their duties even after their children establish their own families. Education, particularly religious education, is emphasized as the foundation for building character and ensuring the younger generation upholds moral and spiritual values.

The peger motif symbolizes protection and refuge, reflecting the Gayo community's emphasis on mutual care and responsibility. Whether it involves supporting siblings, neighbors, or fellow citizens, this motif embodies the idea of safeguarding others while ensuring their welfare and safety. It also reinforces adherence to social norms and traditions, which are viewed as protective boundaries that maintain social harmony.

The saraq opat motif holds a particularly significant place in the Gayo cultural framework. It represents leadership, defined by four components: the community, the ulama (religious scholars), the elders, and the king (or governing authority). These components work together to uphold societal laws, traditions, and religious principles, creating a safe and just society. This motif highlights the importance of collaboration among these pillars of leadership, ensuring that decisions are made wisely and with the community's best interests in mind.

Other motifs, such as the tapak sleman (or "Solomon's footprint") and the tekukur (a type of bird), further illustrate the depth of symbolic meaning in kerawang Gayo. The tapak sleman motif emphasizes justice, wisdom, and compassion, traits that are essential for leaders and community members alike. Meanwhile, the tekukur motif symbolizes knowledge and fairness, urging individuals to act with consideration and prudence in their decision-making processes.

### **The Role of Motifs in Social and Religious Life**

The words encapsulated in these motifs reflect the core values and principles of the Gayo community, which are deeply intertwined with both religious and traditional practices. These symbols do not merely serve aesthetic purposes but play an active role in maintaining the social fabric of the community. For example, the mata ni lo motif is a constant reminder of the spiritual connection between individuals and their Creator, which influences their daily actions and decisions. Similarly, the bud shoot motif underscores the importance of education, reinforcing the community's commitment to raising generations who are morally upright and spiritually grounded.

In communal contexts, motifs like emun beriring and peger help reinforce the values of unity and mutual assistance. These values are vital in maintaining harmony within the community, especially in times of difficulty or conflict. The saraq opat motif further illustrates how leadership within the Gayo community is not a solitary endeavor but a collaborative effort involving various stakeholders. This collaborative approach to leadership ensures that societal rules are not only implemented but also respected and upheld across generations.

## Cultural Preservation Through Symbolism

The Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, adorned with these intricate motifs, serves as a repository of the Gayo people's cultural heritage. Each motif acts as a visual narrative, encapsulating stories, values, and teachings that have been passed down through generations. However, as the research findings reveal, the significance of these motives is not always fully understood by the younger generation. This lack of understanding poses a threat to the preservation of Gayo cultural identity, particularly in an era where globalization and modern influences often overshadow local traditions.

To address this, the Gayo Customary Council has approved and standardized seven key motifs on the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth: mata ni lo, bud bamboo shoots, peger, saraq opat, emun beriring, tekukur, and tapak sleman. This effort not only preserves the motifs but also ensures their meanings remain relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences. Additionally, community-based initiatives, such as workshops and educational programs, play a crucial role in fostering awareness and appreciation for these cultural symbols.

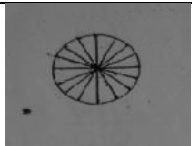
## The Broader Implications of Cultural Symbols

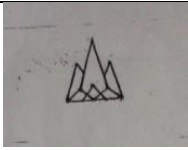
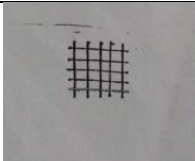
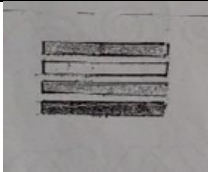
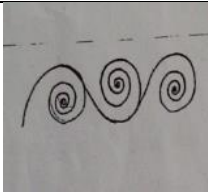
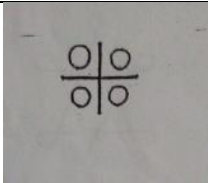
The motifs on the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth are more than just decorative elements; they are powerful tools for social cohesion and cultural preservation. By embedding their values and beliefs into tangible objects, the Gayo people ensure that their cultural identity remains resilient in the face of external changes. These motifs also serve as educational tools, teaching future generations about the principles that have sustained their community for centuries.

However, the research highlights the need for continuous efforts to ensure the sustainability of these traditions. This includes engaging the younger generation in conversations about the significance of Gayo kerawang, integrating traditional motifs into modern designs to appeal to broader audiences, and incorporating cultural education into formal and informal learning settings. Such initiatives not only preserve the motifs but also reinforce the values they represent, ensuring that the Gayo people's heritage remains vibrant and meaningful.

The Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, with its rich array of motifs, stands as a testament to the depth and resilience of Gayo culture. Each motif encapsulates a unique aspect of the community's identity, from spiritual beliefs and leadership principles to values of unity and education. By preserving and promoting these motifs, the Gayo people maintain a connection to their past while navigating the challenges of the present. As a cultural artifact, the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth not only enriches the lives of the Gayo community but also offers valuable insights into the power of symbolism in shaping and sustaining cultural identity.

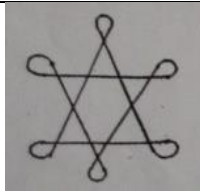
**Table 1.** Upuh Ulen-Ulen Motifs

No.	Motifs	Meaning
1.		The Mata Ni Lo motif demonstrates our thankfulness for God's favours, which represent the source of life for all living things, and our patience in the face of adversity. The message of this motif's marital rituals is that the bride and groom must be prepared to navigate the household ship, which will undoubtedly be filled with many hardships, hurdles, and problems that they must be able to calmly confront together.

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2.  The Pucuk Rebung motif symbolizes how parents pay attention to and prioritize the education of their sons and daughters as the next generation so that they have a stock of knowledge. For the bride and groom, this means the responsibility as parents in the future who must prioritize education (especially Religion) for their sons and daughters, not prioritizing happiness or worldly pleasures without thinking about the future of their successors. The stock of knowledge in question is not only from formal education but also starts from the household, how parents as the first madrasah for their sons and daughters are able to educate with good character as a basis for them to grow in all environmental conditions that will later change following modernization.
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3.  The Pager motif represents the protection of Islamic law and custom for those members of society who continue to follow the rules of the community. Those who break the rules will no longer be protected by custom and will be ejected from the village or even their area. This motif's value is that, as members of society protected by customary law, they have a duty to abide by all laws that apply in society. If one of the citizens or groups violates customary law, or violates it seriously, they lose their protection from custom; typically, for serious violations, they face punishments like having their cattle slaughtered or being kicked out of the customary protection area (not out of town, but just out of the local customary protection area/village), but they may also be expelled from the area. Islamic law also serves as the foundation for this customary law.
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4.  The sarak opat motif represents a leader who must be Imem/Imam (as a role model in implementing Islamic law, both obligatory and sunnah), Petue/elder (who is accompanying and paying attention to the rules in society), Rakyat/Society (obliged to obey all results of deliberations based on the unanimous will of the people, from the people for the people), and fair, wise, and full of calculation for the decisions taken).  
The value contained in the sarak opat motif is that as a Reje/leader, one must have a fair, honest, and wise attitude. As an elder or someone who is respected, one must have an attitude of guiding and providing a good example for the community, especially the younger generation, and continue to oversee the customary law policies that apply in society, so that the law can apply and be obeyed by all elements of society. Then for the Imam/Imem, it is obligatory to provide religious guidance for the community and the younger generation as provisions in socializing and as a moral basis so that they are not easily influenced by negative things later, especially for the younger generation who then study or settle in other areas.
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5.  The Emun Beriring Motif (clouds in procession) offers suggestions for how we should behave in our various roles, abiding by state law and custom. In order to preserve social order, prevent conflict with other communities, and be able to position themselves in accordance with their position (community leaders/Reje, Imem, Petue, and society at large), the Indigenous People/Residents must adhere to all customary regulations, both written and unwritten, and apply them in their daily lives.
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6.  The Tekukur (measurable) motif represents the idea that the result, whether favourable or unfavourable, must be taken into account when making a decision. The value portrayed in this motif is that leaders, particularly those who are trusted by the community, must be genuinely fair and wise in order to avoid doing harm to the community. Each and every choice is made with both fairness and policy in mind.
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7.



A wise and responsible communal life is symbolised by Solomon's footprint motif, which implies that every issue must be handled sensibly and prudently. Under the protection of current customary law, the values in this motif—particularly Reje, Imem, and Penatue—may be characterised as a fundamental attitude in society that can make it better, more developed, prosperous, and peaceful.

It can be concluded that the motifs contained in the upuh upen ulen cloth are symbols that symbolize the guidelines and guidance of the Gayo community's life in all aspects. These life guidelines are poured into every motif contained in the Karawang Gayo cloth. And these guidelines are also in line with religious teachings and applicable laws in the Republic of Indonesia, so that society can create a conducive environment and be protected by government law and customary law. There are many benefits to be gained from the meaning contained in each motif on the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth if we truly carry out and practice it in our daily lives, our ancestors left a noble culture that is very useful for maintaining the peace of the next generation and also providing beautiful cultural heritage.

### **The Cultural Value of Upuh Ulen-Ulen in Central Aceh Community Society**

The cultural values of Gayo Karawang cloth are deeply intertwined with the significance of its motifs, serving as both artistic expressions and reflections of the Gayo community's social structure. Beyond their visual appeal, these motifs encapsulate the community's way of life, embodying values, norms, and traditions that have been upheld for generations. As a vital component of Gayo identity, the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, with its intricate filigree Gayo motifs, remains a symbol of cultural pride and continuity.

According to interviews with informants, Upuh Ulen-Ulen is not an everyday garment but one reserved for special traditional events. It holds a sacred status within the Gayo community and is closely associated with rituals that underscore its cultural and spiritual significance. Informant 1 highlighted that the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is worn exclusively during important occasions, such as wedding ceremonies, *nik ni reje* (the inauguration of officials), welcoming honored guests, and performances of traditional dances. These events are seen as sacred moments where the cloth becomes a medium of connection between the past, present, and future, symbolizing continuity and respect for tradition.

Although modern tourism has introduced the kerawang Gayo motifs to broader audiences, its usage in this context remains carefully controlled. Informant 1 noted that while the motifs might appear in staged performances or exhibitions, they are never exploited for frivolous purposes like casual photography or fashion styling. Such practices could dilute the cultural meaning and sacredness of the cloth.

Informant 2 stressed that the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is a source of immense pride for the people of Central Aceh, embodying their collective values of wisdom, cooperation, respect, and appreciation. This pride is not merely symbolic but manifests in daily acts of solidarity and mutual aid. For example, when a member of the community suffers from a fire or other calamities, gifts and support pour in from villages and districts, often uncoordinated yet deeply felt. This spontaneous spirit of generosity reflects the core values symbolized by the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth, particularly the motifs that represent mutual support and unity.

The ceremonial role of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is further elaborated by Informant 3, who explained its use during pivotal life events such as weddings, welcoming high-ranking guests, and inaugurating regional leaders such as kings, sub-district heads, or regents. These

occasions are often accompanied by the peusejuk ritual, a ceremonial act of blessing and purification that underscores the sacredness of the cloth. In these moments, the cloth serves as both a physical object and a spiritual medium, embodying prayers, blessings, and the aspirations of the community.

Informant 5 provided additional insights into the selective use of the cloth, noting that it is seen less frequently today. As a result, younger generations might not be fully aware of its appearance or significance. This decline in familiarity underscores the need for intentional efforts to preserve and promote the cloth's cultural and spiritual importance.

The restricted use of Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is a testament to its value within the Gayo community. It is not an item to be worn casually or arbitrarily; doing so would be seen as disrespectful to its cultural legacy. Instead, the cloth is reserved for rituals that align with its sacred meaning, reinforcing its status as a symbol of tradition, respect, and unity. Traditional ceremonies such as weddings, the inauguration of leaders, and the reception of important guests are all occasions that demand the careful and respectful use of the cloth, ensuring its significance is honored and preserved.

The Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth encapsulates values that are intrinsic to Gayo society. Each motif woven into the cloth tells a story, representing ideals such as mutual support, leadership, spirituality, and education. For example, motifs like emun beriring (symbolizing unity and collective effort) and bud bamboo shoots (emphasizing the importance of nurturing the younger generation through education) reflect core principles of communal life. These motifs serve as visual reminders of the community's shared responsibilities and aspirations, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

Moreover, the saraq opat motif, which represents the four pillars of leadership—community, ulama (religious scholars), elders, and governing authorities—highlights the interconnectedness of social roles. This motif underscores the importance of collaboration and balance in maintaining social harmony and justice. Leaders are expected to act with wisdom and compassion, while community members are encouraged to contribute to the collective well-being.

The mata ni lo motif, representing the greatness of God and the need for spiritual alignment, further illustrates the spiritual foundation of Gayo society. It reminds individuals to live with humility, gratitude, and a sense of responsibility toward both the Creator and their fellow humans. These values are not abstract concepts but are woven into the fabric of daily life, guiding interactions and decisions within the community.

### **Challenges in Preservation**

Despite its profound significance, the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth faces challenges in its preservation. Modernization, urbanization, and globalization have introduced new cultural influences that often overshadow traditional practices. Informants noted that younger generations, in particular, are becoming less familiar with the cloth's meanings and proper usage. This lack of awareness threatens the continuity of the cultural values represented by the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth.

Additionally, the commercialization of traditional motifs poses a double-edged sword. While incorporating filigree Gayo motifs into modern products can raise awareness and generate economic opportunities, there is a risk of cultural dilution if the motifs are used without proper understanding or respect for their meanings. This concern underscores the need for careful regulation and education to ensure that the cultural integrity of kerawang Gayo is maintained.

To address these challenges, the Gayo community and its leaders have taken proactive

steps to preserve the significance of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth. The Gayo Customary Council has standardized the motifs and their meanings, ensuring that their symbolic value is documented and safeguarded for future generations. Community-based workshops and educational initiatives have been introduced to teach the younger generation about the history, craftsmanship, and cultural importance of the cloth.

Furthermore, integrating filigree Gayo motifs into contemporary designs—such as clothing, accessories, and home decor—can help bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. By making the motifs accessible to a broader audience, these efforts can foster a renewed appreciation for the cultural heritage of the Gayo people. However, it is crucial to approach such initiatives with cultural sensitivity, ensuring that the sacred aspects of the motifs are respected and preserved.

The Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is more than a piece of fabric; it is a living testament to the values, beliefs, and traditions of the Gayo community. Its motifs encapsulate the essence of Gayo identity, representing principles of unity, leadership, spirituality, and education. While its use is restricted to sacred and ceremonial occasions, the meanings embedded in the cloth extend far beyond these events, influencing the daily lives and interactions of the Gayo people. However, the challenges posed by modernization and globalization highlight the urgency of preservation efforts. By fostering awareness, promoting education, and integrating traditional motifs into modern contexts, the Gayo community can ensure that the cultural legacy of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth continues to thrive. In doing so, they not only honor their ancestors but also enrich the cultural diversity of Indonesia as a whole.

## CONCLUSIONS

The motifs featured in the Upuh Ulen-Ulen ceremonial cloth are deeply intertwined with its symbolic meanings and the cultural heritage of the Gayo community. Among the seven key motifs—mata ni lo, shoot bamboo shoots, peger, saraq opat, emun beriring, tekukur, and tapak sulaiman—each carries profound philosophical and social significance. These motifs collectively represent the values, traditions, and communal life of the Gayo people, particularly in Central Aceh. They are not merely decorative elements but serve as visual narratives of the Gayo community's identity and way of life.

In traditional marriage ceremonies, the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth plays a sacred role. When draped over the bride and groom, it symbolizes their transition from individuals to a united couple, bound by the sacred institution of marriage. This act signifies more than a change in status—it represents the couple's readiness to build a household grounded in mutual respect, cooperation, and spiritual values. For the bride and groom, the Upuh Ulen-Ulen is imbued with profound meaning, embodying the prayers and hopes of their parents for a harmonious and prosperous married life. If challenges arise within their household, the cloth serves as a symbolic reminder of the wisdom and resilience needed to resolve such issues.

The motifs embedded in the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth reinforce its symbolic value. For example, mata ni lo emphasizes the greatness of God and the importance of spirituality, while bud shoots highlights the responsibility of nurturing the younger generation through education and moral guidance. Similarly, peger represents protection and communal care, and saraq opat embodies the principles of leadership and collaboration within the community. Each motif contributes to the cloth's overall significance, linking it to the spiritual, social, and cultural fabric of the Gayo people.

The cultural value of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth is inseparable from the customs and communal life of the Gayo community. It stands as a proud symbol of Central Aceh's cultural heritage, holding the highest esteem in the hearts of its people. Preserving the Upuh Ulen-

Ulen cloth is not merely an act of maintaining tradition; it is an essential effort to safeguard the wealth of a nation. The cloth embodies values that transcend time, offering a blueprint for harmonious living that is as relevant today as it was for previous generations.

Future researchers can build upon this study to explore further the preservation efforts surrounding the Upuh Ulen-Ulen cloth. They could examine initiatives by the Central Aceh community and government to sustain its cultural significance, including training programs for artisans to innovate new designs that balance traditional values with modern market appeal. Such efforts will ensure that the cultural legacy of the Upuh Ulen-Ulen continues to inspire and thrive for generations to come.

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