

# Bouyei Batik Patterns in Correlation to the Oral Culture and Socio-Historical Context of the Bouyei People: Taking the Sawtooth Batik Pattern as an Example

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**Abstract:** The Bouyei ethnic group is a minority ethnic group residing in mostly Guizhou, China, with a unique oral culture -where information is passed down through singing and visual art forms instead of writing-exemplified through Pan songs. This paper will analyze the parallelism and correlation between the Bouyei Batik dye, an art form significant to the Bouyei people, and the Bouyei pan songs. Specifically, how are the Bouyei Pan songs and Batik dye correlated to each other: in terms of recurring motifs and symbolisms, mainly analyzing the “Sawtooth” Batik pattern and Making Grains song, and the animalistic patterns and the Love song, through a lens of formal elements in visual art and lyrical meaning.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Bouyei ethnic group, referred to as Jui or Yoi in the Thai (Bouyei) dialect, is one of the 56 recognized ethnic groups in China. Residing in mostly Guizhou, China. They’ve developed their distinct culture of art and expression, even including language diverging from Chinese, with roots of Buddhism and other Chinese folk religions, tackling their own way of survival in a rather enclosed, mountainous terrain. Despite Bouyei artifactual culture’s uniqueness and complexity evident in multiple aspects, such as embroidery, clothing, and folklores, one especially significant and prevalent would be the Bouyei Batik patterns.

With an inter-cultural relation with the Miao and Yi ethnicity residing also in Guizhou, Batik dye, using wax as a medium of barrier to dye fabric to create patterns, is a form of natural-dye art prevalent in rural areas of Guizhou. Due to the ethnicity’s alienation from other majority ethnic groups in China, the lack of written scripts prompted the Bouyei people their distinct way of communication and passing down of rituals, stories, and scripts through Batik patterns and the motifs within these patterns, with another major pathway of an oral education, differing from the majority Han’s approach of learning through scripted language. Batik patterns has long been protected and cherished by the Bouyei people, dating its origin back to the Song Dynasty, as

in recorded in Songshi, bees wax and Batik fabric is an indigenous, unique product in Nanning State, referring to Guizhou Huishui, the prolonged site of Bouyei people today (Liu & Wei , 2018).

In this paper, Bouyei Batik patterns will be analyzed under the lens of a sociocultural approach with its correlation to the oral culture of Bouyei culture; in terms of why Batik patterns are correlated to the oral culture of the Bouyei ethnicity, and the meaning it conveys grounded to a historical and social context. Specifically, analyzing the shape grammar, use of materials and color, as well as allusions to folklores and recurring motifs of Bouyei Batik patterns.

## 2 ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINS OF THE ORAL CULTURE OF THE BOUYEI PEOPLE

The Bouyei ethnicity conveys ideas, folklores, and information through a unique matter of fact because of living in isolation for centuries due to its mountainous surroundings. Debatably, the Bouyei ethnicity’s origin correlates with Xihan Dynasty’s “Yelang” empire due to it is similarities between pronunciations of words, specifically, how they both pronounced the vegetable bamboo shoot “ranz”, which directly translates to “lang” — having a

repeating character in the name as the “Yelang” Empire; Granted, the Bouyei Ethnicity becoming more distinctive and alienated from the “Yelang” Empire, where during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty, the Bouyei and Zhuang ethnicity were called “vulgar liao”, after five generations, the Bouyei people were being distinctively called “Zhongjia”. Later, due to the long-term separation, they gradually formed the official Bouyei and Zhuang ethnic groups (Bouyei, 2024).

This complexed history of distinctiveness has driven the Bouyei people to drift towards an oral approach of learning. The Bouyei language, being a member of the Tai-Kadai language family, is tonal (Snyder, 2018), meaning that the tone or pitch of a syllable affects its meaning, and has rarely forms of written scripts; Differing from the tradition textbook way of learning, such as standardized tests through calligraphy in ancient China, the Bouyei ethnicity does not own an official form of standardized written script. However, there are modern efforts to standardize the language and create a written form based on the Latin alphabet (Bouyei Ethnic Minority, 2024), particularly in educational and governmental contexts.

Therefore, knowledge is passed down through oral approaches through sang folklores that includes symbolisms and motifs representing indigenous wisdom—through incorporating these symbols within unique forms of art, replacing written scripts, especially evident in fabric art and patterns interwoven within Bouyei’s mundane life- the Batik dye.

### 3 THE PARALLELISM BETWEEN THE BOUYEI “PAN SONGS” AND BOUYEI BATIK PATTERNS

Bouyei Pan songs exemplify the Bouyei oral culture as it is the main method of the passing-down of knowledge generation to generation. Pan songs include numerous aspects, such as labor, government, rituals, love, life, environment, history and legends. It has two forms: indoor singing and outdoor singing. Singing tunes are varied accordingly to love songs, rituals, wedding songs, funeral songs and other Bouyei songs involving academical fields such as politics and economics (Yang, 2022). It vividly describes the unique psychological characteristics and emotional tendencies of the Bouyei people, it is the oral “book” of the Bouyei people.



Figure 1: Bouyei Batik pattern, the “Sawtooth” pattern (Liu & Wei, 2018).

One specific shape grammar is named the “Sawtooth pattern (Fig 1),” or in other words, the “dog teeth pattern”. Its name originates from its shape: where continuous zig-zag lines and triangular shapes merge with patches of negative space creating shapes with round edges on the side and pointy shapes at the bottom, resembling images of teeth and saw teeth. This pattern symbolizes dog’s teeth as first evident in a traditional Bouyei folklore, where a dog sacrificed its own flesh to save a whole Bouyei village in now Huishui, Guizhou from a sudden starvation and disease crisis from a lack of harvest of crops and unexplained viruses (Liu & Wei, 2018).

On the other hand, in the Bouyei Pan Song, the Making Grains song, the lyrics sing (translated to English, “Rich days are good planting fields and cutting fields, small fields and large fields all needs to be trimmed and cut.... (Yang, 2022)” saying how people, on a “rich” and “lucky” day, would cut and trim the paddy fields and harvest grains and rice using a sharp tool. This song solely sings about the complete process of making grains, including how to sharpen bamboos to pilot the flowing water into the paddy fields. The character “Cai”, meaning cut or trim, is repeatedly used in this song, singing how everywhere needs to be trimmed and cut, until all paddy fields are harvested. This song documents all the experiences needed for harvesting paddies, praising sharp tools that have made their effortful work more convenient and meaningful. Deducing from the lyrics, this is how agricultural knowledge is passed down to generations, in an oral way.. Drawing a parallel to the “dog teeth (sawtooth)” pattern, dog teeth not only symbolizes good omens and the hardships, worth of respect in the survival of the Bouyei people derived from it is heroic sacrificial role in the folklore, it is a visualization of the tools used for harvesting— It’s sharp edges and regular pattern, spiritualizes the recurring motif of gratefulness towards these tools for bringing people peace and life in the village.



Figure 2: Bouyei Batik Dye of Shitou Village, Huishui, Guizhou. Batik dye on pure cotton fabric (Liu & Wei, 2018).

Furthermore, the dog teeth pattern is just a segment of a complete Batik design on fabric (Fig 2), which tells a rather complete story with multiple symbolisms parallel to the spirituality conveyed in the Bouyei pan song. In terms of color, it consists of mainly teal and dark blue colors, which are conventional colors in Bouyei people's clothing and art. In the Bouyei people's perspective, teal and blue are essentially the same color with the same pronunciation of "heiou". The utilization of the blue and teal colors is inseparable from the Bouyei people's surroundings, where nature provides Bouyei people with abundant resources of blue grass and East green trees (Li & Gao, 2023). Using strictly pure natural dyes, this symbolizes Bouyei's spirituality of respecting and worshiping the nature's gift of tools and protection; As the natural dye also performs a protective function of preventing diseases, this draws a parallel to the sang folklore of the song of harvest.

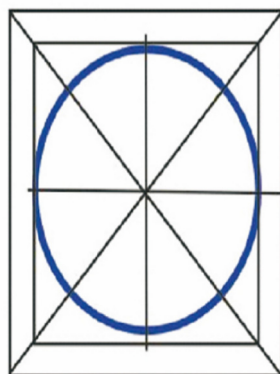


Figure 3: Composition diagram of the Batik dyed fabric in Fig 2 (Liu & Wei, 2018).

Composition wise, the dog tooth pattern is a type of geometrically shaped pattern out of multiple types of shape grammar of Bouyei Batik patterns, where simple, geometrical, and regular shapes are layered to create complexed imagery. Since balance is a common focus in Batik patterns, it is crucial to maintain symmetrical forms of regular shapes even through irregular substances of wax. In this piece of a complete Batik design (Fig 2) where the dog tooth pattern is present, the composition (Fig 3) of this design mainly consists of circles and squares with clear lines of symmetry, symbolizing, again, Bouyei people's respect to the laws existing within nature. The composition also varies in density through the placing of simple geometrical shapes established by variations within negative and positive spaces. Present in many designs of Batik, just like the dog tooth pattern, most shape grammars are layered in a horizontal way— Intertwining, layering, or leaving out negative spaces. Not only to enhance the balance within composition, this mimics the mapping of paddy fields with a sense of movement through creating a direction by grammatical shapes, passing knowledge through recurring symbolisms present in Harvest pan songs that passes a message of agricultural wisdom.

## 4 DISCUSSION

Animals are always symbolisms of the sacredness, the purity and the spirituality of nature, as seen present in all occasions, including ceremonies and rituals of funerals, for instance during funerals the Bouyei people would organize a set up including cedars and chicken, to create a spiritual environment that allows a person's soul to "leave in peace" along with the blessings of nature during the whole pathway towards afterlife (Wu, n.d.); Such as dog teeth as a representation spirituality within harvesting.

In some batik designs, a rather realistic image of animal and bugs are portrayed, distinctive from the abstract patterns such as polka dots and the dog teeth pattern. These patterns are considered recognizable and obvious in its form and serves an emotion-wise expressional function rather than illustrating folklores like the dog teeth pattern does. One specific combination of the utilization of animalistic motifs is the combination of birds and butterflies/moths, and carp fishes (Fig 4).





Figure 4: Bouyei/Miao Batik pattern with the butterfly/moth, bird, and fish (Dzulkifly, 2021).

In the Bouyei pan songs, birds and butterflies/moths are always correlated to love due to its prevalence in love songs, while the carp fish, especially appearing in doubles, or quadruples, are symbolisms of birth and the desire for paternity/maternity. In the Bouyei pan song, Love song 4, a girl is singing to her “lover boy” in a feminine perspective, the girl sings “if you are far far away, I will turn into a bee, call you standing on trees, and I can change into all sorts of animals that can fly... I will turn into a swallow, flying under your roof to call your name.” The girl portrays herself as a little bird or a little flying bee that would follow her beloved one wherever he goes. The lyrics utilized a repetitive structure, even with a sense of humor of teasing him with intense love, turning into any being that can fly so she could see him every day. These animals and bugs mentioned are all living beings in the Bouyei people’s mundane life, and due to the extreme love and affection, they desire the ability to fly and turn into any animals/bugs with a small size and wings so they could follow their lover all the time, just like a butterfly or a bird (Yang, 2022).

In this batik design (Fig 4), the composition is a very significant component of deducing the message of love outside of animalistic motifs. Although this batik design having debatable origins from the Miao and Bouyei (Dzulkifly, 2021), due to the female in the center having Miao-similar silver wear while using Bouyei batik styles of utilizing only white and blue, the batik design has an undebatable message of love. The girl standing in the center wearing traditional Guizhou tribal feminine clothing and a female headpiece, although in the center, is a less dominant subject in the composition, with all fishes, bugs, and birds having a larger area than her, flying near her or

beyond her. This represents an imagery of “dazzled in love”, as portraying her whole thought and mind sunken deep into this idealized thought of love and marriage. Moreover, the symmetrical composition reflects traditions within unity and spirituality within nature, as well as an idealization of marriage and love. This portrays an extremely similar image with the metaphor of the willingness of turning into a “bee” or “swallow” to chase after the singer’s lover, again, conveying intense, dazzling emotions of love. Therefore, this is another recurring motif as organisms with wings are associated with love and the pursuance of love in both the love song and batik design including similar representations.

Moreover, the two carp fish in this batik design has a more specific meaning rather than a generic emotion of love. The carp fish is a specific type of pattern that are gifted and drawn for newly married couples. It is a symbol of fertility, the desire for more children, good wishes for paternity and maternity for passing down of bloodlines, which conveys their admiration and respect for the primitive way of breeding; These standards being considered as idealized lifestyles in the Bouyei people’s tradition culture is grounded to the Bouyei people’s surroundings of an enclosed, mountainous area, having a rather primitive and traditional value of fertility, family, and birth compared to modern values. Being one of the most prevalent patterns in batik designs, carp fishes can be portrayed realistically or abstractly through simple shapes, and its prevalence could be explained by rivers and streams surrounding the Bouyei people with abundant carp fish due to its strong reproduction ability (Bai, n.d.).

The meaning behind the carp fish pattern is supported by fish symbolizing offspring and the “next generation” in funeral songs. In the Sending Souls Away song, to alleviate grief and the overall melancholic atmosphere during funerals, like most Pan songs, this song metaphorically portrays the passing of their own parents as if “a fish leaves the water” (Yang, 2022). Where the offsprings of the passed parents convey their extreme grief through portraying themselves as helpless fishes, which the fish explicitly represents the “bloodline still being passed on” by the presence of offsprings like themselves, revealing the traditional fertility value of the Bouyei people.

In this batik design utilizing carp fish as the main subject (Fig. 5), the coral like pattern surrounding the edged of this Batik dye mimics the shapes of waves and splashing of water. This is a cohesive element that grounds the elements of fish into their

environment, also emphasizing the fact that fishes always need water, just as how a children's primitive existence needs parents. This piece has a unique composition where it creates a swirl-like pattern with organic shapes. It is organized in a radial, circular composition with the two fish at the center forming the focal point with multiple visually leading lines. The balanced and symmetrical arrangement radiates outward in swirling patterns, creating a sense of movement and harmony. The outer rectangular border frames the entire composition, correlating to the Chinese culture of "all is complete" within the natural laws. The circular, swirling composition provides visually leading lines that mimics the natural swirl of water, while the circle symbolizes unity within nature and the admiration of nature of Bouyei people.

Moreover, the difference in density of the object placement creates a harmonic and complex composition, giving the main focal point a dominant position, not only contrasting in size but also detail and delicacy. The fishes gradually decrease in size as all the small fish's direction swims towards the center, creating a visually dazzling composition that symbolizes the complexity and desire for fertility. The two fish in the center lays "head to toe" mimicking the placement of a fetus, correlating to the natural balance law of "Ying and Yang" enhancing the visual focal point.



Figure 5: Carp fish pattern of Bouyei batik design (Dzulkifly, 2021).

## 5 CONCLUSION

These are just some of the many examples of symbolism present in complete Bouyei Batik patterns, yet countless batik designs and Pan songs

remain undisclosed to the world due to communication barriers and a lack of awareness for such minorities like the Bouyei. The Batik patterns grounds itself to the oral culture of Pan songs unique to the minority Bouyei people, where the shape grammar, composition, manipulation of natural elements for colors, and most importantly, symbols that are visualizations for oral information, compliments each other to shape Bouyei's identity and voice. Where as simple as dog teeth and carp fishes, could signify Bouyei people's wisdom in agriculture and values of love, representing spirits and wisdom of often unwritten parallelism.

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