Preface

When I first became aware of Iban textiles in the 1970s, the main study on the subject was Alfred Haddon’s and Laura Start’s *Iban or Sea Dayak fabrics and their patterns*, first published in 1936, with a second edition in 1982. Based on theories prevalent in the late nineteenth century and written in the style of that period, it left a lot of unanswered questions. One of the problems was that Haddon focused almost exclusively on the names of individual design motifs. During a brief visit to Iban communities in Sarawak in 1986, it became apparent to me that Iban weavers were far more concerned with the names assigned to the entire main pattern, rather than to its components. It was with this important piece of information that I conceived my initial objective to collect sufficient material for a catalogue of Iban fabrics, listing the major traditional patterns and their names. However, early on it became apparent that this was not going to be an easy task. After documenting some hundred cloths, it seemed that the naming of patterns was largely an individual affair. In order to arrive at a comprehensive overview, what was needed was a systematic recording of a large number of cloths from different Iban regions.

Field research comprised short periods of a few weeks to several months at a time from 1986 until 1991, with return visits in 1993, 1995, 1998, and 1999, amounting to a total of almost three years spent in Sarawak. One advantage of these sporadic encounters with the Iban was that I returned to Sarawak on many separate occasions, with time for reflection in the intervening periods. In other words, I was able to check and confirm my conclusions as my understanding of the material grew over the years. In these intermittent excursions into the field, there was one constant element and that was my main informant, Iba anak Temenggong Koh. Today, it is very rare to find Iban women with an in-depth knowledge regarding the naming of cloth patterns, and even fewer can articulate such matters in detail. During my research, I was fortunate to meet several such women. Yet none of them equalled Iba’s grasp and ability to explain, and many findings presented in this study are at least in part derived from discussions with her. Sadly, Iba passed away in 1993.

In 1991, I was accepted as a postgraduate student at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hull, partly on the strength...
of my report on an Iban dye process, documented in Sarawak in 1988 and published in the *Sarawak Museum Journal* in 1991. I had also presented a brief summary of my findings at the Indonesian Textile Symposium, held in Basel, Switzerland, in the summer of 1991 (published in 1993). In May of 1993 I visited Derek and Monica Freeman in Canberra. Access to their notes on weaving which they had collected during field research from 1949 to 1951 provided much valuable detail and added an important dimension of understanding to my own material gathered almost forty years later. In my final year of writing up, I had occasion to give a brief synopsis of my findings to an art historian scholar. This conversation encouraged me to read further in art history and to place my findings within the context of art historical and theoretical discourse. When I submitted my thesis in April 1995, I did not foresee that almost five years would pass before I could produce a revised text. One reason for the delay was the offer to act as guest-curator for an exhibition of Iban textiles at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles in 1996 and to write the accompanying catalogue.

The main part of the present study is true to the original thesis with only minor editing. In this respect, the critical comments and suggestions made by my two examiners, Lewis Hill and Dr Ruth Barnes, have been most helpful. Their constructive criticism also inspired me to take a closer look at the technical aspects of the morinda dye process, resulting in the analysis included in Chapter III. Additions have also been made to Chapters VI and VII. The conclusion is the only part that has been almost entirely rewritten, with reference to material on New Guinea that had not been published at the time of submitting my thesis.