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## **Meranao in the Changing World: A Cultural Study on the Language of the Tarpaulin**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The coming of the digital world has not only paved way to motion pictures and a quantity of printed materials for information distribution, but has also largely contributed to the field of advertisement, propaganda and promotions that has been either politically fabricated or culturally influenced. The big screens of billboards and tarpaulins are not only public signs but semiotic landscapes that stand for something more significant than themselves. These are semiotic landscapes that describe the entity of a culture and the place of its origin. These landscapes have become a part of our everyday life which unconsciously been affecting our personal views and perceptions towards life in general. In Marawi City, tarpaulins are everywhere. These products of the digital world have dubbed this city as the “City of Tarpaulins.” This study is conducted through a selection of tarpaulins posted around the city in the whole month of April 2015. The analyses of the study were supported by Landry and Bhouris’ (1997) contribution to the social psychology of language, Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic analysis, Pierce’s classification of signs in visual culture, Robert Barthe’s semiotic theory. The study showed the power of language in describing cultural identity. It showed how tarpaulins have become an instrument to understand culture as form of visual symbols and representations. It also showed the contrasting view of culture and religion and how the people of the city seemingly embrace the changing world. The study has paved way to an understanding of the Meranao (People of Lake Lanao) present cultural status as influenced by outside factors such as religion and the popular culture.

*Keywords:* Language and Culture, Cross-Cultural Communication, Communication

### **Introduction**

The coming of the digital world has not only paved way to motion pictures and a quantity of printed materials for information distribution but has also largely contributed to the field of communication, advertisement, propaganda and promotions that has been either politically fabricated or culturally influenced. The big screens of advertisements we see on billboards and tarpaulins have become a part of our everyday life which unconsciously been affecting our personal views and perceptions towards life in general.

The tarpaulin like all other forms of media had revolutionized the communication and entertainment media. Seeing tarpaulins everywhere in the city takes a very vital role in making people learn the trend and be influenced by this. It is changing the world in which texts and images are read and created. The popular culture had become more powerful in influencing people. Through the tarpaulins people, especially the less educated ones, get to see, praise and imitate what they see. In turn, people are misled and

their culture had become fragmented. They had created a new and altered culture brought by the popular culture. This will then be pictured in the tarpaulins and same thing goes with it, till the original culture could no longer be traced.

In Marawi City, tarpaulins are everywhere. These products of the digital world have made this city cleped as the “City of Tarpaulins.”

In sociolinguistics, publications such as billboards and tarpaulins are labeled ‘linguistic landscapes’, the term attributed to Landry and Bourhis (1997), accompanied by the following definition that is still used by many:

‘The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration’ (p. 25).

Landry and Bourhis’ work is primarily concerned with the presence (or not) of specific languages (language codes) as indices of ethnolinguistic vitality. The tarpaulins we see along the streets are not only manifestations of the digital world but rather a representation of the human psychology, philosophy, history and language. Hence, these material objects are best seen as representations of individual and cultural identity. The interpretation and evaluation of this representations are mainly influenced by ones cultural background which includes his belief, values, norms, religion and his own worldview. Culturally, a thing may mean significant to a particular culture but may also mean insignificant to others.

This paper analyzes five (5) tarpaulins posted along Marawi City. Aside from that of Landry and Bourhis’, this paper will also be guided by Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic analysis, Pierce’s classification of signs in visual culture, Robert Barthe’s semiotic theory.

Participant-observation qualitative technique was used in the study. Random personal interviews to people living around the city were conducted to collect quality data.

This papers aims to unveil the cultural implications of the tarpaulins posted around Marawi City. This aims to uncover the Meranao Culture behind the city’s tag name “City of Tarpaulins.”

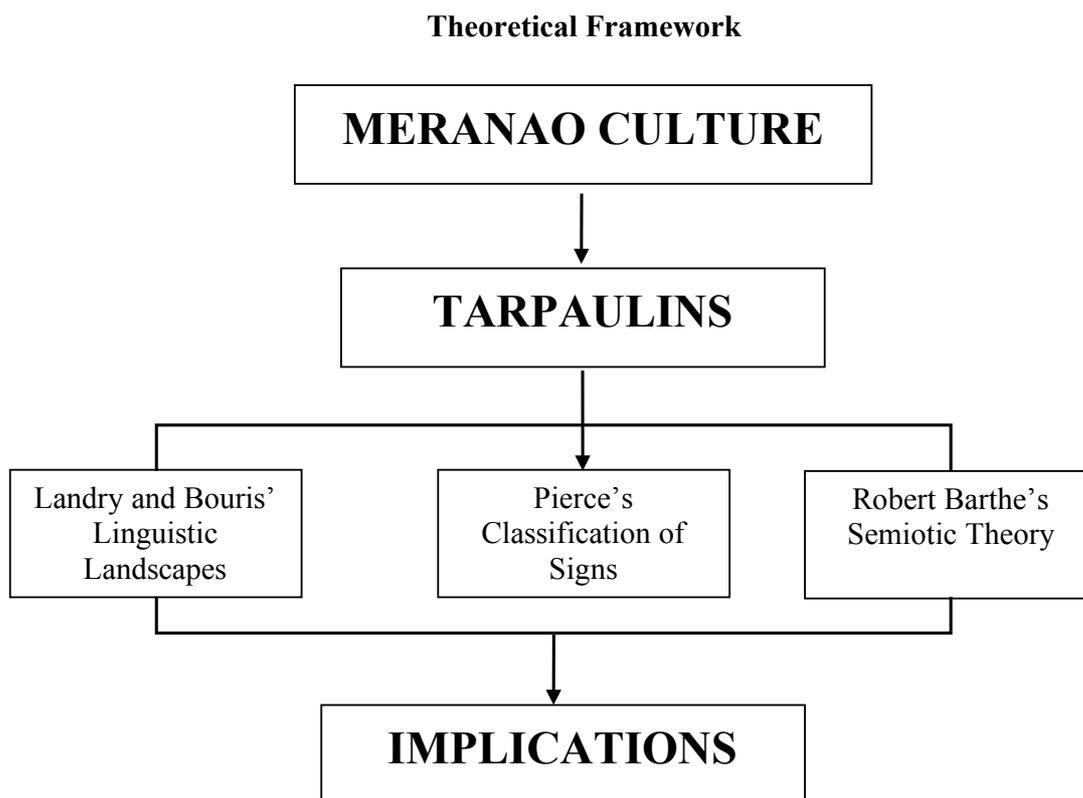


Figure 1. Schematic Presentation of the Conceptual Framework of the Study

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study draw its concepts from Landry and Bouris' Linguistic Landscapes, Pierce's classification of Signs and Robert Barthe's Semiotic Theory. Through these concepts several implications on the status of the Meranao Culture were extracted from Tarpaulins used in this study.

### **Related Studies and Literature**

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

A culture is a way of life of a group of people that includes their behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbol 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).

The coming of the digital age had educated the world with the variety of cultural characteristics and differences. It paved way to various media as outlets for cultural exchange and understanding. The tarpaulin as one of this media forms has been popularly used by people to communicate and express their identity.

Much as the advantages of media in the promotion of a culture, it also plays a vital role in the transformation of this culture recreating a more bold and newer culture altering the authentic form. Raymond Williams new approach to the study of media, culture, and society had also noted that the processes of globalization, commercialization, and mediatization have changed not only the media landscape but also the culture of everyday life and the cultures of creative and intellectual endeavor.

### Notes on Semiotics

In Sociolinguistics, tarpaulins and billboards posted along the streets are called ‘linguistic landscapes’, a term attributed to Landry and Bourhis (1997), accompanied by the following definition:

‘The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration’ (p. 25).

Landry and Bourhis’ work emerged from the tradition of the Social Psychology of Language and was primarily concerned with the presence (or not) of specific languages (language codes) as indices of ethnolinguistic vitality (Adam Jaworski & David Machin, 2013).

In semiotics, the interpretations of linguistic landscapes and images such as those billboards and tarpaulins, takes its root in the study of semiology by the Swiss Scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure. A red flag along the street does not only stand as flag but could mean some other thing like a call for love or death depending on the interpreter’s cultural and personal background. The Red flag (Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology) is a signifier (that which carries or produces meaning) and “a call for love” is the the signified (the meaning itself).

Taking into account the contributions of Landry and Bourhis’ “linguistic landscape and that of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology, the term “semiotic landscape” can be used to label the approach in the interpretation and analysis of the tarpaulins in this study. Tarpaulins are not only ordinary public images but meaningful public images that describes the cultural identity of the involved.

Moreover, Robert Barthes’ semiotic theory also posits that semiotic communication is a process involving three separate messages contained within an “image.” These messages include an image’s text (“linguistic” messages), raw pictorial elements (“denoted” messages), and insinuations (“connoted” messages). Identifying these messages separately helps illuminate how divergent interpretations of the tarpaulins could be reached—an important step for this study. Barthes acknowledges the subjectivity of interpretation and the reality that “all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others” (Barthes 38-39). It is the linguistic message’s responsibility to manage this potential variance and to anchor and, in some cases, relay a specific message. In synchronic situations, text serves as “an anchorage of all the possible (denoted) meanings of the object” so that the audience might correctly associate ideas with the (potentially vague or misleading) corresponding picture.

### Semiotics and Visual Culture

Brian Curtin, PhD in his paper “Semiotic and Visual Representations” explains that Peirce’s classification of signs in terms of icon, index and symbol are useful, though these are not the only classifications he created. An icon, simply put, is a sign that is linked to a signifier through similarity in appearance. Examples here include portraits or abstract paintings where color is, for example, black; the painting is black, refers to the color black and can then be interpreted differently. A symbol links the signifier and the signified in a purely arbitrary or conventional way; unlike the icon or index, the link is not physical or logical.

### Findings and Analysis

The study of the sign (be it a single word, idiom, image, geographic feature, tune, or entire billboard) holds a significant place in communication scholarship because it is, as Augustine explains, the means by which all “things are learnt” (Augustine I.2.4). To understand how a billboard might be interpreted (how it might “teach”) one must study it as not signage but a “sign.” As Kvelson explains, “All communication is a process of exchange of meaningful signs” . Moreover, these signs and sign systems, which all societies have developed, “are not static but . . . evolve continuously to correspond with and to represent changing social norms and the evolving, growing social consciousness of any given community” (Catherine Riley. *Obscene or Clean?: A Semiotic Analysis of “Awful Billboard Blight*).

The City of Marawi is the haven and the capital of of the Meranao people living around Lake Lanao. This city is also considered as the Islamic City of the Philippines, since, this is the only city in the country which is dominantly occupied by Muslims. Aside from their religion as facade of their identity, this city is also very rich in culture in fact, the longest world epic “Darangen” originated from the place.

This paper will analyze five tarpaulins which are believed to be a carrier in understanding the Meranao people of today’s generation, their culture and the status of Islam as their religion.

The tarpaulins are posted publicly so the researcher considered this images as public property which entitles anyone to use it for research purposes.



Figure 2

Ranao, the lake, is a Royal State. The Meranao people are said to be governed by a Sultan (King) and a Bai a Labi (Queen) who are both descendants of their Royal ancestors. Meranao people who were given titles in the state are considered members of the royal blood. Thus, they are entitled to preside, call for gatherings and meetings, and negotiate state problems of its people and their socio-economic stability.

This tarpaulin, says a lot about the Meranao people. You can see a lot more tarpaulins of Sultans and Bais from the different parts of the lake hang around the city. It tells us the importance of lineage in gaining dignity and integrity. Is is observed that in this photo, the name “ABDULLAH” is highlighted in red as an emphasis that it is that side of their parents who has the royal blood. This may imply that the other names are not and therefore should be written in ordinary size and color. Thus, getting the best name is not how beautiful the meaning the name may be but how heavy the name is in terms of blood

and royalty. The pride of becoming or being a member of a royal family thus, give importance to the social status of a Meranao.

In the pre-Islamic period as described in Meranao tales and stories, the Meranao wealth is symbolized by the golden ornaments used as house accessories, decorative elements, and body and clothing accessories. In fact, old people use to brace their teeth with gold. In the picture, the gigantic golden bangles of the two Bais (queens) are very obvious. It shows wealth and desire to golden accessories displaying their royalty. This tells us that our ancestors' love in gold is still alive in this generation where "colorful fashion accessories" are trending. In the tarpaulin, it is also transparent that the third Bai has very few golden bangles compared to the other two. According to the interviewed respondents,

“Naba nda tatnto malai perak a isawn oto ka kawto a da makalotang sa isanoto kala a bolawan (The other Bai may not be as rich as the other one since she was not able to wear similar bangle).

The third bai gives us an image of either simplicity or a low economic status. This implies that accessories among Meranao ladies could be enough to classify somebody as rich or not. However, another interviewee said:

“kapaki ilay ilayn pman a rekiranon anan. Di anan kaphakay sa Islam.(That is a manner of boasting. It is unIslamic”).

This implies two things. 1) Islamic City is not really an Islamic one. The display of wealth shown in the public for the purpose of name and pride is un-islamic. 2) Meranao displays wealth in the images as a way of showing to people how above they are to others. Thus, being wealthy means being powerful.

Another interesting issue in this picture is the use of veil which symbolizes the Islamic Religion. This manifests that Marawi City is indeed a Islamic State seeing women in veil. But the question is, “does Islam allow women to display their wealth and beauty in public other than their Mahram?” The veil tells us that the persons in the pictures are Muslims. But the display of the women images in public is unIslamic. This implies that though people see Islam as the religion of the Meranaos, their cultural pride contradicts their religious beliefs, which means, Marawi which is considered an Islamic City is more culturally bound than religiously.

Lastly, we say Meranao people are best identified through its fashion (garments and accessories). In this picture, the Meranao fashion is not visible except for the other Bai who uses “Landap” (a hand-woven garment used as skirt in this picture) as part of her clothing. The other persons including the Male Sultan wears more Malaysian than Meranao. In the ancient years intermarriages existed during the years when trade is remarkably interesting to people and had become the outlet for the ASEAN countries to influence each other. This pictures tells as that certain influence where people get acculturated to others and dress, speak and act like them. Having no Meranao in their clothing tells us how Meranaos are influenced by other culture. Like other cultures where pop culture is very powerful, Meranao culture is also a shaken influenced by other culture.

Hence, the tarpaulins displayed around the city communicate a distorted culture and thus influence other people specially the young minds. The tarpaulins partly take a vital role in the cultural and religious misconceptions and negative impressions perceived by others towards the culture. It is necessary that communication through visual representations should be filtered accordingly to avoid biases.

Thus, not all that we perceive on the tarpaulins are reliable. Communication through this can be failure.



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2

How significant is a name? A name is your identification tag. It is what makes you different from others. What we see in a name are not only letters of the alphabet but the entirety of oneself covered with his cultural background, family, attitudes, perceptions, views, physical, mental, and spiritual upbringing.

How sound is a name in the Meranao community? Legally, a person carries her first name, her middle name or the family name of his/her mother and her surname which is either the name of the father or the inherited family name of the father. In most western influenced places, your name has nothing to do with your father's or mother's achievements. Each individual is responsible in creating his/her name that can be fragrantly perceivable in his/her community. However, among Meranao communities, your name is your passport to easier living. If you have the surname of the powerful people in the community, you have the same power as this people. A name tells people the

degree of wealth your family have, the royalty of your blood, your popularity and the degree of your power in the community. In the tarpaulins shown above, it is observable how each of the subjects had acquired longer names. Figure 3.1 has 9 other names aside from her first name, middle and last name. Figure 3.2 on the other hand has 16 more names in his name including his first name, middle and last name. These names must have been the longest in the world.

What do these tarpaulins of longest named people say? It tells us about the known Filipino values--close family ties. Each name in their names represents one big clan. The more names you have, the more clans you are with. The more powerful these clans the more powerful you are. The longest the name you have, the bigger family you have. The tarpaulins are a manifestation of how the two subjects are connected to their families and how important having all the names of your relatives in your name. In Meranao, they call it “Kambangsa”. The best people are those from good “family” reputations, bigger, powerful and royal. Having other names within your name would also imply the degree of respect and honor you should get from others and the degree of fear they must face if they will harm you. One does not just exist alone. The more names one has the more persons they are.



Figure 4

The convergence theory was brought to light to refer to the integration of technologies with cultural forms. This theory rooted from the Canadian communication theorist, Marshall McLuhan who claimed that mass communication technologies, media content, and cultural evolution are interconnected spheres. McLuhan’s approach to media analysis can be characterized as ‘proto-semiotic’, since it was based on two essentially semiotic notions, even though he never directly used the term semiotics (or even alluded to it) in his work:

1. The notion that mass communications technologies allow humans to extend themselves cognitively and socially; and
2. The notion that the dominant media used to communicate in a society in a specific historical epoch affect the content of the messages communicated (mediation).

The picture above shows a Grade 8 student who won 2<sup>nd</sup> runner up in a local academic competition. This tarpaulin is posted outside the subject’s school.

With the tarpaulins of Ph.D Graduates, successful CPA’s, Engineers, Lawyers, Medical doctors, Sultans and Bai a Labis, the winning in a local competition as 2<sup>nd</sup> runner up is quite different in degree. This means that all achievements, whether it be

big or small, local or national is still an achievement. And other people should know about it. As McLuhan puts it, mass communication such as tarpaulins allow people to share and reach others socially and cognitively. Apparently, this photo tells us how the school administration who congratulates their student through this image, tries to reach people's ear and calls their attention by an announcement of their achievement. This thus, reflects not only the student's greatness but all other people who are connected to this school. The school was able to use print media to reach the locals. This pride however, suggests the importance of education to the Meranao community.



Figure 5

While we have beautiful and handsome faces of successful lawyers and medical doctors on their tarpaulins around the city, some prefer not to put their faces on their tarpaulins. This implies three things: 1. They are physically shy to show off their faces to the public; or 2. The family are conservative enough not to allow a public display of their kin's physical appearance. This may mean, some families recognize the Islamic belief that women should be covered from public. Images of human beings should not be displayed or created or you will have to give life to these images in the hereafter; 3. It is the boosting of name and an announcement of one's particular achievement that matters most.

### Conclusion and Implications

Language is an instrument for humans' communications. The honing and development of human talents, causing creativity, innovation, and novelty, exchanging and transferring their experiences, and on the whole, for formation of society is realized through communication in various forms. To effectively communicate with others, one must consider his culture and others' culture which include their way of life, perceptions, values, religion attitudes and world view.

Today, communication is made easy and accessible with the different outlets provided by media such as printed ads, television, newspapers, billboards, radio and the tarpaulins. We are taught by all this medium. They became our source of information, our source of knowledge and our way of sharing ourselves, knowing, and understanding other cultures.

The use of the tarpaulins as the subject of this study, has given the researcher a broader understanding of her culture, of the people around her, and the social status of her community as perceived through this media form. The researcher has extracted the following implications from the study:

1. Tarpaulins have become the best form of announcement among Meranaos. It has become the source of information on the current whereabouts of people. Also, the tarpaulins have become one of the best ways of Meranao society to show their support to their relatives and family members. It has become a trending and a way of exchanging helps between families or the what we call “katatabanga (helping each other)” as seen in the “complimentary names.

2. Out of the considered tarpaulins in this research study, the tarpaulins have been seen as the Meranao way of showing their pride. It has become another way of telling people about the families’ achievements and power in the royal state. The tarpaulins have also become a manifestation of the Meranao value of “Kambangsa” where some people show to others their family background such as wealth, power, and number of members. However, this “kambangsa” in some extent become extreme that the gesture has become “kapaki-ilay ilayn” or boasting already.

3. As shown in the tarpaulin, simplicity which is encouraged in Islam is no longer visible and that there is no way to trace it in the extravagance and luxurious clothing, accessories and artistry seen in the images. Thus, it is an irony to see this fact despite the city being dubbed as the Islamic City of the Philippines.

4. Meranao people even before Islam are conservative. They used to have “Lamin” or rooms where ladies of royal blood stay so other people especially men will not have a glimpse of them physically. Before, Meranao royal blooded women are reserved and are not allowed to expose themselves to public. In Islam, this too is prohibited. It is haram for women to display themselves in public to avoid becoming the source of “fitna” among men. In the tarpaulins, it is very clear how women are displayed with all their garments, excessive make-up and accessories which are all contradictory to the teachings of Islam and the values passed on by their Meranao ancestors.

5. Honor and pride of families should be known by the public. This is the message behind big tarpaulins and multiple copies of it hang all over the city. Honor and pride is very important to the lives of the Meranaos.

6. The Meranao communities are trapped in dilemma. They are in weigh of their life’s transition to whether fully abandon their cultural values which are contradictory to their religious beliefs and follow the teachings of the holy Qur’an. The tarpaulins in general show a weakness in *Yakin* or Islamic faith among Meranaos.

7. The Meranao root is a very strong culture. It got its strength from the very close family relationship of its people. They stand together as one just like the Sultan who stand firm and confident with the longest name his ancestors had passed on to him.

### **Recommendations**

1. Support and enhance the K-12 Program of the Department of Education in the integration of the National culture to the curriculum. This will educate the young in the preservation of their culture to counterpart the powerful influence of modernity and the popular culture.

2. Cultural orientations and programs should be implemented throughout the country for local’s awareness. This will help in the preservation of the National culture.

3. Other programs on the promotion of the Philippine culture should be done all throughout the country through arts and performances.

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