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Hwei-Fe'n Cheah

Australian National University, cheahhf@gmail.com

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**Embroidering the Golden Chersonese:
Metallic Thread Needlework in the Malay Peninsula**

Hwei-Fe'n Cheah
cheahhf@gmail.com

Historians emphasize the diversity and fluidity of Malay world identity and culture, questioning the very meaning of “Malayness.”¹ A summary glance at early twentieth century examples of metallic thread needlework reveals the “mixed and many” Malay embroidery styles.² While these styles have been associated with different regions,³ the relationships between them have not been examined closely. This paper assesses examples of late 19th and early 20th century embroideries from four regions in the Malay peninsula. Although not comprehensive, it highlights two particular features of peninsular Malay embroideries – the use of glass and the ways in which plant forms are crystallized – as flexible means through which embroiderers and their patrons articulated a broader shared history alongside local interpretations.

Historical context

The Malay peninsula, a claimant to Ptolemy’s appellation of the Golden Chersonese,⁴ represents only a fraction of the Malay world. Malay populations lived in riverine settlements and coastal trading hubs of island Southeast Asia. Waterways were arteries of commerce, with the Straits of Melaka connecting Palembang in Sumatra and Melaka on the Malay peninsula, two areas that remain key reference points for Malay culture and identity.

In traditional Malay polities, lineage (particularly the connection to a Melaka-Palembang ancestry) played a crucial role in supporting prestige and claims to legitimacy.⁵ Incorporating royal genealogies, later Malay court chronicles took pains to emphasize rulers’ “link to a continuum of Malay history.”⁶ At the same time, given the existence of competing lines of descent, pressure from non-Malay rivals, and tensions within the courts themselves, Malay rulers constantly negotiated the changing balance of power through the allegiances they formed.

The shifting nature of political and marital alliances across regional courts makes it difficult to decipher the precise relationships between the *variations* in regional embroidery styles and the patterns of political patronage. On the other hand, the widespread nature of certain types of embroidery as ceremonial furnishing and their *common* characteristics speak of a shared embroidery history and provides a visible manifestation of cultural ties when Malay identities were fluid and local.

¹ Timothy Barnard, ed., *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2004).

² R.O. Winstedt, “Embroidery,” *Malay Industries Part I: Arts and Crafts* (Kuala Lumpur: Government of the Federated Malaya States, 1925), 73.

³ Siti Zainon Ismail, “Sulaman Benang Emas: Satu Kajian Seni Hias Melayu,” *Akademika* 46 (1995); and Siti Zainon Ismail, “The Art of Embroidery,” in Shamira Bhanu (ed.), *The Crafts of Malaysia* (Singapore: Didier Millet, 1994), 139-147.

⁴ Its location has also been linked to southern Burma.

⁵ Leonard Y. Andaya and Barbara Watson Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 64.

⁶ Barbara Andaya Watson, *Perak, Abode of Grace* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 21.

Metallic Thread Embroidery and Adat

Across the Malay-speaking world, cloths embellished with gold contributed to the pomp and visual spectacles that announced a ruler's might. The 15th century Melaka sultanate is said to have instituted sumptuary laws governing the types of ornaments and colour of cloth "for curtain fringes, for bolster ends, for mattresses or for any kind of wrapping."⁷ Whereas there is little to indicate if these textiles were embroidered, later Malay court chronicles (*hikayat*) and ballads (*syair*) incorporated the imagery of soft furnishings as a generic descriptor of royal splendour, setting the stage for their narratives. While not necessarily factual, references in literature reinforced the conventional nature of such embroideries. The *Syair Siti Zubaidah* mentions embroidered mattresses and bolsters ("tikar bersuji bantal bersulam," 93:2d) and yellow embroidered mosquito curtains ("kelambu kuning bersulam," 127:1d); the *Syair Kerajaan Bima* describes a canopy embroidered with meandering dragons ("langit-langit disulam awan bernaga," 120b) and a green rug mat with metallic thread embroidery ("hamparannya istub [?] hijau ditekat," 122c).⁸

The use of gold embellished cloths for hangings, mattresses and pillows was not confined to Malay courts. Edmund Scott, a 17th century English trader, observed a processional bed with "twelve boulders and pillows of silk, embroidered with gold at the end" at a Javanese court.⁹ The description by Scott, a bystander, confirms only the use of gold decorated cloths, but a more concrete indication of the wide currency of embroidered furnishings comes from a later observation in the southern Philippines that Malay women of "the better sort are much given to embroidery ... with gold thread, on the ends of such pillows as we have seen adorning their beds."¹⁰

Across the Malay world, the number of bolsters, layers of a sitting mat, and tiers of the dias were associated with hierarchy, although exact requirements probably varied across regions. However, soft furnishings did not carry the same significance as betel bowls and heirlooms as emblems of a ruler's legitimacy. The *Adat Raja-Raja Melayu (Customs of Malay Kings)* contains repeated references to betel bowls but mentions needlework – "an embroidered cushion" – only once.¹¹

Metallic thread embroideries were dazzling, conveyed grandeur and involved heavy expenditures. As an indication, embroideries for the wedding of "a raja of standing" cost as much as 500 Straits dollars (approximately US\$20,000 in current prices).¹² Yet, perhaps because they were already so integral a part of court furnishings, very little information on the style of decorations and motifs is recorded. More likely, their patterning had a minimal impact on the

⁷ *Sejarah Melayu*, trans. C.C. Brown (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), 44.

⁸ The *Syair Siti Zubaidah* is thought to date from around 1800. The *Syair Kerajaan Bima* of Sumbawa is dated to around 1830. See Malay Concordance Project, available online from <http://mcp.anu.edu.au>, accessed 13 September 2008.

⁹ Edmund Scott, *An Exact Discourse of the Subtleties, Fashions, Policies, Religions, and Ceremonies of the East Indians, as well Chynese as Javans* (London: Walter Burre, 1606), M.

¹⁰ Thomas Forrest, *A Voyage to New Guinea, and the Moluccas* (Edinburgh: G. Scott, 1779).

¹¹ Panuti H. M. Sudjiman, *Adat Raja-Raja Melayu* (Jakarta: Penerbit Universitas Indonesia, 1982), 75, 234. *Adat* was composed in 1779 by an official of a Malaccan mosque as a record of ceremonial procedures at the request of Dutch officials.

¹² Winstedt, 72.

effectiveness of the furnishings as symbols of royalty or hierarchy. If this was the case, the styles and designs, the techniques and motifs of metallic thread needlework could easily respond to regional preferences, access to materials, and locally-determined fashions.

Four Peninsular Embroidery Styles

Melaka

Raised metallic thread couching from Melaka can be distinguished by the way individual parts of a motif form a whole (fig. 1). Metallic ribbon (*kelingan*) and wrapped metallic thread are couched over cardboard templates, with each motif composed of small, disconnected elements in a stencil-like formation. Details and outlines are often represented with gold purl (*gim*). The resulting designs appear stiff and formal.



Figure 1. (Left) Valance [*bi-katil*], Malacca, probably early 20th century. Collection of Syarikat Abdul, Melaka.

Figure 2.(Right) Embroidered slipper top, Peranakan Chinese, Penang, c. 1910.
Collection of Grace Saw, Singapore.

Whereas the designs based on the lotus are pre-Islamic,¹³ ornamentation is dominated by motifs of magnolia and phoenixes. Such imagery may have become familiar through the gifts of cloth from the Chinese emperor to local rulers and access to imported textiles such as the Chinese “[e]mbroidered hangings” traded at 17th century Bantam in Java.¹⁴

This Melaka-Malay style may, however, have emerged independently of imported Chinese cloths and perhaps after the fall of the Melaka sultanate. Most Chinese metallic thread embroidery is not worked over cardboard templates. The use of interlocking coloured velvet appliqué borders and the motifs of flowering vases, long-tailed birds and insects in Melaka-Malay work has closer affinities with the embroidery style of the acculturated Peranakan Chinese communities in island Southeast Asia (fig. 2). In the Malay peninsula, these communities were not well established until the 18th century.

Embroideries with similar designs have also come from Selangor, Johor, Negri Sembilan, and the south-eastern coast of Sumatra. Few examples of this style are from Perak, even though Perak genealogies connect their rulers to a Melakan royal lineage.

¹³ Irmawati Marwoto-Johan, “Ritual Heirlooms in the Islamic Kingdoms of Indonesia,” in *Crescent Moon: Islamic Art and Civilisation in Southeast Asia*, ed. James Bennett (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2006), 152.

¹⁴ John Saris, “Occurrences at Bantam,” in Donald Maclaine Campbell, *From Java – Past and Present*, v. 1 (London: Heinemann, 1915), 592. Saris, an English trader, was in Bantam between 1605 and 1609.

Perak

Perak has acquired a reputation as a producer of distinctive *tekat timbul*, embroideries where wrapped metallic threads are couched over a cardboard template to create a relief effect (fig. 3). *Tekatek gubah*, where metallic thread is laid flat on the surface of the fabric and couched, is also associated with Perak (fig. 4).



Figure 3. (Left) Detail of ceremonial mat, probably Perak, early 20th century. Collection of the Department of Museums Malaysia.

Figure 4. (Right) Ceremonial cloth for wiping the mouth [*sapu mulut*], Kota Lama Kiri, Perak, probably late 19th century. Collection of the Department of Museums Malaysia.

Perak-style *tekat timbul* is distinguished by its continuous meandering foliage from which stylized floral blossoms emerge. Because of the way in which the underlying templates are cut through folded paper, designs are generally symmetrical. Researchers have suggested an Acehnese source for the *tekat timbul* from Perak.¹⁵ Historically, the Acehnese sultanate maintained a political relationship with the Ottomans from the mid 16th century and it was to them that Aceh appealed for military assistance against the Portuguese. It is perhaps no coincidence that a technical similarity between *tekat timbul* and Turkish *dival* embroidery exists.

However, it is difficult to posit firm origins for Perak *tekat timbul* in the absence of early dated examples and because of the widespread application of metallic thread for embroidery.¹⁶ Trade with Gujarat may also have spurred artistic exchange, for details such as the basketweave-patterned borders (fig. 4) formed by couching over several strips of cane in Perak examples appear similar to northern Indian *zardozi*.¹⁷

Tin-rich Perak was the first Malay sultanate to be taken under British “protection” in 1874. The incorporation of heavily embellished European-style garments with gold-thread embroidered designs of swirling acanthus leaves by local rulers provided a possible source through which

¹⁵ J. E. Jasper and Mas Pirngadie, *De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indie*, vol II: *De Weefkunst* (The Hague: Mouton, 1912), 304. They differentiate between *tekat timbul* (raised embroidery) and *tekat tanam* (“buried” embroidery), the latter of which they explain as *gewoon borduursel* (common embroidery). On a possible Acehnese influence, see Barbara Leigh, *The Changing Face of Malaysian Crafts* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

¹⁶ See, for example, European examples in Donald King and Santina Levy, *The Victoria and Albert Museum’s Textile Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200 – 1750* (London: V&A Museum, 1993).

¹⁷ See Charu Smita Gupta, *Zardozi: Glittering Gold Embroidery* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1996), 51-55 and plates 24, 29.

more representational floral designs may have been disseminated. Embroidered valances also borrowed motifs of floral sprigs and acorns from European sources (fig. 5). These sprigs emerge not from vases and pots as in Chinese prototypes or from the stylized rocky mounds of earlier trade cloths but as cut flowering stems.



Figure 5. Valance, Kedah, probably early 20th century. Collection of the Department of Museums Malaysia.

Tekat gubah designs of delicate scrolling foliage range from the relatively simple to densely packed compositions. Some of these designs are likely to have been based on metalwork which was occasionally used to adorn textiles, sharing motifs of magnolias and three-leaf clover shapes that are elaborated into lotus blooms.¹⁸

In Perak, a noticeable stylistic difference between *tekat gubah*, which Malay scholar Richard Winstedt referred to as “the old flat surface embroidery,” and *tekat timbul* may have developed partly from the influence of late 19th century European embroideries, although the techniques were probably already well established by this time.¹⁹ In contrast to the repeated, small-scale stylized flowers on meandering stems of *tekat gubah*, *tekat timbul* designs from the early 20th century onwards are generally more exuberant, with larger, naturalistic bouquets and foliage. However, the new naturalistic style tends to have been interpreted through already familiar imagery of the chrysanthemum and lotus motifs, with Chinese or Indian antecedents (fig. 6). The clove flower was another popular motif.

¹⁸ Compare figure 4 with the patterns on the belt buckles in Ling Roth, *Oriental Silverwork: Malay and Chinese* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), 186-189.

¹⁹ Winstedt, 73.



Figure 6. (Left) Pillow for the Perak throne used at the sultan's investiture in 1918.
Collection of the Perak Museum, Department of Museums Malaysia.

Figure 7. (Right) Cover for rice container [tutup pinggang nasi], Selangor, probably 1930s.
Collection of the Department of Museums Malaysia.

As with metallic thread needlework from Sumatra, couching stitches in *tekat gubah* form secondary patterns on the surface and motifs are delineated with red or black “cord” made of plant fibres (often the *ijuk* (sugar) palm) wrapped with coloured thread. The spatial organization of designs is echoed in the diamond-within-a-square. The symmetrical arrangements of abstracted plant forms are modified, enlarged and repeated, providing a visual parallel with embroideries from Palembang.

Early 20th century examples of *tekat gubah* from Selangor draw on the same basic motifs and compositional formula as Perak examples (fig. 7). It is interesting to note that when the Bugis in Selangor decided to break away from Johor suzerainty, they sought the *nobat* (drums of office) from Perak and requested Perak representation at ceremonial events. A set of “wedding ornaments” was sent by Perak for a Selangor royal matrimony in 1768.²⁰ While we do not know if embroideries were included, the remit suggests that material culture played a part in marking Perak’s endorsement and its guidance of Selangor *adat* and court ceremonial.

The geometric couched patterning of Selangor embroideries also resembles east coast Sumatran embroidery.²¹ Again, design formats are based on a lozenge-within-a-square, dominated by large abstract floral shapes with movement supplied by scrolling stems and leaves. Although we have little information about their source, such embroideries may also have been imported. Batu Bahara on the northeast coast of Sumatra exported silk and gold cloths” as well as “a variety of ornamental borders for mattresses and pillows of couches or mats, and elegantly wrought covers for seree-boxes.”²²

²⁰ Andaya, 276.

²¹ See, for instance, Robyn Maxwell, *Sari to Sarong* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2003), 98, 108.

²² John Anderson, *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra in 1823* (first publ. 1826, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971), 312-312.

Small lead-backed coloured-glass pieces are fastened above the fabric surface with stitching on many examples of *tekat gubah* embroideries (fig. 4). However, instead of a set of criss-crossing straight stitches held with a blanket-stitch or similar as with Indian *shisha* embroidery, in Perak, a few coils of metallic thread or plant fibre are fastened with blanket stitch to secure the glass pieces. The use of glass may have been a deliberate attempt to imitate the surfaces of gem studded metalwork. Indeed, the visual effect was probably coveted by the courts and the *Misa Melayu*, an 18th-century court history of Perak, describes a royal pavilion with a fringe of pendants in the shape of pipal leaves with coloured gemstones.²³ On the other hand, glass pieces are seldom found, if at all, on *tekat timbul* – instead, European seed beads are used to fill in spaces and provide colour.

East Coast (Kelantan and Terengganu)

One similarity between Perak and East Coast embroideries is the use of glass. However, in the latter, the fabric is cut through and the lead-backed glass segments are attached with a series of criss-crossing stitches that hold the glass from the back. This technical difference suggests that the East Coast embroiderers may have attempted to mimic the effect of west coast prototypes using techniques developed locally (fig. 8).



Figure 8. Pillow end, Kelantan or Terengganu, c. 1930.
Collection of the Muzium Seni Asia, University of Malaya.

The most dominant feature of the early 20th century East Coast style is the gold paper (*perada* or *perada emas*), a fairly sturdy, brown-hued paper with a layer of gold colour or pigment. Abstract foliate patterns cut from paper are applied to a fabric surface with couched gold thread outlines. The practice of cutting patterns in paper may have emerged from local experiments with materials available for kite-making, in which lightweight, coloured foil or paper is cut with stencil-like designs for decoration.²⁴ Kite-flying was a popular sport in the East Coast and southern Thailand. *Tekat perada* are recorded from the late 19th century, although most extant examples of East Coast embroidery probably date to the late 1920s and 1930s.²⁵

²³ Raja Chulan ibni Raja Hamid, *Misa Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1962), 87. I am grateful to Ian Proudfoot for the translation. The fringes recall the connection of the *tirai* (valances) and Indian *toran*. See Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia* (Hongkong: Periplus, 2003), 317.

²⁴ I am indebted to Raimy Ché Ross for this suggestion. Comparison of the materials of *tekat perada* with that used for royal kites could potentially yield useful information, but still remains to be carried out.

²⁵ Late 19th century examples are published in Walter Skeat, *Malay Magic* (London: Macmillan, 1900), plates 9, 10 and figure 2.

Johor families also own 20th century examples of needlework in a similar style.²⁶ While it is difficult to trace their origin, it is interesting to note that an alternative court in Terengganu was established in the early 18th century by a refugee Johor ruler. Gilt paper embroidery can also be attributed to Indonesian Borneo (most likely the west coast) with which Terengganu maintained trading ties and religious exchanges.²⁷

One of the most basic motifs in *tekat perada* is the flowering bud equivalent to present day representations of the magnolia or clove flower.²⁸ The pattern also resembles a lotus bud in half bloom. Split into two, the flower becomes a leaf form, resembling a pattern most recently interpreted as the “Langkasuka” motif of East Coast Malaysia.²⁹ Perhaps when earlier pre-Islamic associations with the lotus were no longer relevant, other connections – with the bifurcated leaf forms of Persian ornament and with Islamic designs – could be revealed, providing a convenient yet adaptable archetype for embroidery.

Negri Sembilan

Couched metallic thread embroidery from Negri Sembilan, a *rantau* (migration) area for the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, provides the clearest example of continuity of Minangkabau prototypes in Malaysia. This betel bag (*bujam epok bertundan*) is a form rarely found in collections of peninsular Malay textiles (fig. 9).³⁰ Probably the best documented work from the



Figure 9. Betel bag, Negri Sembilan, c. 1885. Collection of the Department of Museums Malaysia.

²⁶ See Azah Aziz, *Rupa dan Gaya: Busana Melayu* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), 48, 304.

²⁷ Virginia M. Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003); Raimy Ché Ross, pers comm., 2008.

²⁸ *Glosari Budaya Malaysia: Corak dan Motif*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Kuala Lumpur, 1995), 72; Bahagian Dayacipta (Yunit Rekacorak), *Motif-motif Etnik Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Kraftangan Malaysia, 1986).

²⁹ Farish Noor and Eddin Khoo, *Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving* (Hongkong: Periplus, 2003). The ascription is taken as a convenient reference rather than for any art historical implications as the latter are not yet established.

³⁰ Mubin Sheppard, “Bujam Epok Bertundan: A Wedding Ceremony Recalled,” *Federation Museums Journal* IX (1964), 31-36.

area, the *bujam epok* was collected two generations after the creation of the bag itself. The names recorded for the motifs occurred at a time when such items were no longer a key element of ceremony and may not therefore fully reflect their earlier significance. Nevertheless, the generic labels (for example, “flower,” “wave,” “bamboo shoot,” “thunderly weather”) convey the continuity of interpretations of the stylized plant forms and natural phenomena in Malay world art.

The Flowering of Regional Styles

Minangkabau-style embroidery in Negri Sembilan is undeniably associated with the *rantau* and local leaders' close identification with West Sumatra. On the other hand, for Melaka, Perak and East Coast embroideries, it is far more difficult to ascertain whether particular political relationships between the courts were privileged through variations in needlework styles. Looking across the peninsular embroideries as a group, however, it becomes apparent that localization of embroidery occurred through the variations of detail and techniques rather than the overall structure of designs. Motifs were organized according to spatial principles that emphasized symmetry, replication in varying scales, and by transposing designs within a set format. Dynamism of patterning was achieved through the use of scrolling stems and coiling leaves rather than through modifications in composition, and it perhaps because of this that the *awan larat* (meandering cloud) and *sulur bayong* (scrolling foliage) occupied a key place in Malay design as a unifying element.

The repetition of motifs suggests that a stock of conventionalized designs provided a common source of visual inspiration across the Malay world. Their stylized representations rendered them more effective as decorative patterning than as carriers of particular meanings. Abstracted floral and foliate forms, rationalized in contemporary terms as clove, magnolia, and chrysanthemum, formed part of a set of shared and mutually comprehensible designs, as did the bamboo shoot motif. Like Malay mirror work, a relatively narrow visual vocabulary and conventional compositional formats efficiently provided the common ground for Malay courts to envision themselves as part of a ‘historical continuum,’ informing Malay visual culture(s) in the Golden Chersonese.

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