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SUSTAINING THE MAGNIFICENT CRAFT OF SONGKET WEAVING IN MALAYSIA

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1.0 Introduction

Songket is a magnificent piece of traditional Malay fabric handwoven in silk or cotton threads, using colourful metallic threads to form the songket motifs. The songket motifs are created using the supplementary weft technique known as *menyongket* (a Malay word meaning to embroider) where metallic threads are inserted and woven into the cloth. Songket weaving is a painstaking laborious and tedious process that requires a great deal of concentration from the weaver. It takes approximately 2-3 months to complete a piece of traditional songket sarong. Thus, a beautifully woven songket fabric would exhibit master craftsmanship and skills of the weaver.



Figure 1. Traditional Malay Costume using Songket. Image by author.

Today, it is mostly worn as traditional Malay ceremonial costumes during royal installations, weddings, birth of a child and circumcision ceremonies, Malay festive occasions and formal state functions. Figure 1 illustrates a traditional Malay costume using songket. Unlike the old days, songket is only worn by royalty and their families. It is only recently that songket has been transformed into apparel, fashion

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accessories such as handbags as well as home products such as place mats, cushions, table runners and gift items.

In the past, silk and cotton were popular threads used in songket weaving. However today, polyester cotton blend and spun silk threads are very popular in the songket industry today. Polyester threads have gained popularity because they are far cheaper compared to silk and cotton, easily obtainable and available in many colours and shades. Apart from the traditional gold and silver yarns used for songket weaving, colourful metallic threads such as red, blue and green, amongst others have been gaining popularity in recent years.

2.0 Issues and Challenges Faced by the Songket Weaving Cottage Industry

Although songket weaving is still being practised in Malaysia today, the numbers of songket weavers have dwindled over recent years. Most songket weavers are women who have learnt their weaving skills from their more experienced elders. Most songket weavers can be found in Malaysia, namely the states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang in Peninsula Malaysia as well as Sarawak in East Malaysia. The weaving is mainly done in Malay villages (kampongs) or at handicraft centres. In Terengganu, if the weavers weave from their own homes, the loom is usually placed either on the verandah, in their homes or under their houses as most Malay houses are built on stilts.

In addition, the traditional handwoven textiles are not suitable for today's market in terms of their design and function. As a result, the traditional Malaysian hand-crafted textiles are not in demand today. Stiff competition from the mass-produced songket has also caused the traditional Malaysian songket unable to compete in price, quantity, and consumer-satisfaction.

Moreover, the recent move to invest in modern jacquard weaving looms in Malaysia to produce brocade fabrics imitating the style of songket is only beneficial for major textile producers because of their financial strength. The rate of mass production of mechanised weaving is much faster and cheaper. Consequently, this may threaten the livelihood of the traditional songket weavers. Moreover, it is beyond the financial means of the traditional handloom weavers to acquire the jacquard looms. The jacquard looms are difficult to operate as formal training is needed and it is also expensive to maintain these looms. Thus, the introduction of jacquard loom is neither suitable nor viable for use in the cottage industry.

According to Selvanayagam (1990), songket weaving is very labour intensive craft. As such, it is not surprising that there is a scarcity of weavers today. Furthermore young women, whose predecessors weave songket for a living, are no longer interested in songket weaving as it is thought to be time-consuming and boring. Besides that, some weavers have stopped weaving after marriage while some have moved to the city hoping to land a better job. The rise of songket production costs due to price increment of silk and cotton yarns, dyes and the metallic threads have affected the demand of songket as well. The art of weaving songket may one day diminish if our younger generation is no longer interested in the weaving songket profession. It is crucial to find ways of educating the younger generation and to innovate the process of songket weaving from traditional songket to contemporary songket weaving so that more interesting songket products can be produced to cater for today's market. There is a need for new dedicated songket weavers to give the craft of songket weaving a new zest of life.

Hence, in order to be able to address and solve the issues and challenges faced by the current Malaysian songket industry, it is important to think of various approaches to value-add and innovate the Malaysian songket to broaden its usage to cater for today's local and international market demand. In view of the problems faced by the songket industry, Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah is the first organization in Malaysia that has decided to focus on producing contemporary handwoven songket to cater for a broader market.

3.0 Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah

Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah (YTNZ) is a newly established charitable foundation with the aim of assisting the

under-privileged communities in Malaysia to gain a reasonable and sustainable income from the production of local handicrafts. The Yayasan (Foundation) is founded under the royal patronage of her Majesty Tuanku Nur Zahirah, the reigning Raja Permaisuri Agong of Malaysia. A key differentiator between YTNZ and other foundations is that it believes in empowering people through trade, not aid.

4.0 Initiatives and Activities Carried out by YTNZ to Improve Lives and Craft Heritage

Since YTNZ's inception in 2007, the foundation has chosen to direct its efforts on songket as its first Malaysian heritage to preserve and promote as 1) there were many highly-skilled songket weavers were living in abject poverty especially in Kuala Terengganu and 2) the weavers were working in uncomfortable conditions.

To address these key problems, YTNZ created several initiatives to improve the livelihood of songket weavers.

i) Songket weaving as a viable career

YTNZ has set up two songket production centers in the Malaysian States of Terengganu and Sarawak that employ and train approximately 60 full-time songket weavers. This initiative directly improves income and living standards of Malaysian handicraft workers by providing them a fixed monthly income including Employment Provident Fund (EPF) and Social Security Organization (SOCSO) benefits. They now have the opportunity to increase their earning potential through overtime pay, performance based bonuses as well as skill and knowledge building capacity programmes.

ii) Improving working conditions at home

Although employment opportunities are available at the production centers, some women prefer to stay close to their children at home. However, many of these women were previously working on rickety looms tucked under their houses. While chickens clucked around their toiling feet, the sand under them would splatter their weaves when it rained. Their eyes would strain in the dim light and the heat would stifle production.

YTNZ took the initiative to improve their working conditions. Floors were cemented and light fixtures and fans were installed. Now these skillful artisans can work productively without jeopardizing the eye sight or the quality of their product.

iii) Heaven lies at a mother's feet

YTNZ found that many of the weavers who decided to stay home were single mothers. To provide them with a stream of income, YTNZ began designing and marketing a line of quality songket products made only by single mothers. Corporations in Malaysia have begun to support this effort by purchasing these products as corporate gifts as part of their Corporate Responsibility ("CR").

iv) Preserving and promoting Malaysian culture and heritage

YTNZ also believes in the importance of preserving and promoting Malaysian culture and heritage through improving the livelihoods of artisans, raising awareness on Malaysian heritage and its artisans, making heritage relevant and contemporary through design and innovation, and developing new markets via new ways of branding and marketing Malaysian heritage products.

Songket is the first YTNZ heritage project, after which YTNZ will pursue other Malaysian heritage, learning from its experience with songket. While songket-weaving still exists today in some parts of Malaysia, particularly in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak, the lack of innovation and new markets have led to a marked decline in the number of songket-weavers. Once a culture stops evolving, it dies. As such, YTNZ aims to stimulate creativity and industry within its multiple initiatives on heritage.

For this reason, YTNZ has set up 'Royal Terengganu Songket', its first brand for a viable social business that develops, produces and markets fine quality hand-woven songket products. Contemporary songket for apparel, home-furnishing and premium gifts are produced under the 'Royal Terengganu Songket' brand.

Presently, the foundation is training both skilled and unskilled young weavers to weave songket with

contemporary design using various types of yarns for broader usage. YTNZ hopes to facilitate the successful commercialization of songket in new and non-traditional market in order to ensure sustainability of the dying craft. In order to penetrate new and non-traditional markets, the foundation believes that it is necessary to invest in the production of contemporary songket which is envisaged to capture the interest and demand of such markets. Currently, two contemporary songket production facilities have been set-up; one in Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu and the other in Kuching, Sarawak as shown in figure 2 and figure 3 respectively. An office in Kuala Lumpur was also set up to co-ordinate and manages YTNZ's overall activities, including media relations, marketing, sales and branding of Royal Terengganu Songket.



Figure 2, left. Songket weavers at the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah Contemporary Songket Weaving Centre at Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia. Image by author.

Figure 3, right. Songket weavers at the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah Contemporary Songket Weaving Centre at Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. Image by author.

Unfortunately, many single mothers find leaving home and working at YTNZ's production centres are not a viable option. As such, YTNZ also has a collection of products from single mothers that are mainly traditional, quite different from the new creations coming out of the contemporary songket production centres.

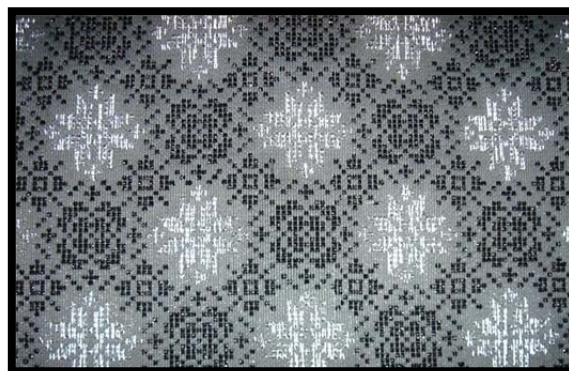


Figure 4. Royal Terengganu Songket: Reflective Songket using Traditional Malay Motifs (*Teluk Berantai Bunga Pecah Lapan*) 2009. Image by author.

4.1 Royal Terengganu Songket

The Malaysian songket market in the past was small and restrictive. This luxury textile was only used as clothing during formal occasions. Traditionally quite a stiff textile, it was difficult to diversify its use. YTNZ started research and development on songket weaving, weaving techniques and looms which has successfully produced new contemporary songket fabrics under the Royal Terengganu Songket brand including "Lightweight Songket" and "Reflective Songket". Figure 4 shows a reflective songket.

YTNZ also introduced the innovative use of Royal Terengganu Songket on a range of applications through engaging local and international designers to create innovative songket products such as premium gifts, interior decorations, soft furnishings and fashion related products.

To date, the foundation has presented the Royal Terengganu Songket products at key events, including:

- a) Malaysian Rulers' Conference in October 2008 held at Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.
- b) World Endurance Championship Gala Dinner in November 2008 held at Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.
- c) Malaysian Handicrafts Promotion from February to July 2009 held in Harrods of London, United Kingdom.
- d) The inaugural Songket Ball in July 2009 held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- e) Malaysian Craft Festival in February till March 2010 held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- f) 6th World Islamic Economic Forum in May 2010 held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- g) Rainforest World Music Festival in July 2010 held in Kuching, Sarawak, East Malaysia.
- h) World Eco- Fiber Textiles Forum in September 2010 held in Kuching, Sarawak, East Malaysia.
- i) Bimp-Eaga Conference Expo in September 2010 held in Kuching, Sarawak, East Malaysia.



Figure 5, left. Royal Terengganu Songket: Songket Wall-panel for the Presentation Room (Level 36) at CIMB Bank Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur 2010. Image by author.



Figure 6, right. Royal Terengganu Songket: Songket Wall-panel for the Reception Area (Level 19) at CIMB Bank Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur 2010. Image by author.

The foundation has marketed and sold songket fabrics, finished and custom made songket to selective customers, designers, institutions and corporations. Recently, it has completed the first corporate project where YTNZ designed, produced and supplied large contemporary songket wall panels for CIMB Bank's new headquarters in Kuala Lumpur as shown in figure 5 and figure 6.



Figure 7, left. An evening bag by Anya Hindmarch exclusively for the Malaysian Queen, her Majesty Tuanku Nur Zahirah using the Royal Terengganu Songket, 2009. Image by author.



Figure 8, right. Inside detail of Figure 7, 2009. Image by author.

These results and also the superior quality of the hand-woven songket have attracted the attention of other brands. To date, YTNZ have customised collaborative pieces with Annick Goutal, Anya Hindmarch and a local couture designer called Pink Jambu. Figure 7 and figure 8 present an evening bag designed and made by Anya Hindmarch exclusively for the Malaysian Queen, her Majesty Tuanku Nur Zahirah using the Royal Terengganu Songket. It is the first for Anya, the renowned British designer to embark on such project. Figure 9 illustrates the ‘Songtik’ shawls, an outcome of a collaboration project between YTNZ and Pink Jambu. The foundation continues to reach out for collaborations to spread out treasured craft internationally and also to give more people the opportunity to improve the lives of disenfranchised women through the preservation of Malaysian heritage.



Figure 9. ‘Songtik’ shawls, an outcome of a collaboration project between YTNZ and Pink Jambu. Image from the Edge(pp. 10-12)2010.

4.2 The Publication of “Songket Revolution”

YTNZ has also produced and launched a coffee table book on songket called “Songket Revolution” in March 2009 to raise awareness on songket, its history and evolution, nation-wide and internationally as shown in figure 10 and figure 11.



Figure 10, left. Contemporary Handwoven Songket designed by Dr. June Ngo with Dato Tom Abang Saufi. Figure. 11, right. Contemporary Handwoven Songket designed by Dr. June Ngo with Tangoo- Eric Yeong and Moses Law Both designs were produced by Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah for Royal Terengganu Songket. Images from Songket Revolution (left: pp. 88-89, right: pp. 76-77), Noor Azlina Yunus, 2009, Kuala Lumpur: Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah.

4.3 Future Plans of YTNZ

Moving forward, YTNZ's plans for the next five years include:

- i. Building a sustainable business model that will allow Royal Terengganu Songket to be a viable social business that can sustain and create employment for weavers as well as eventually export songket into international markets.
- ii. Explore setting up a co-operative to allow our employees to share income or profit generated from the sales of songket or craft products through Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah's projects.
- iii. Expand the production centres to include a gallery and retail space, preferably in heritage or heritage inspired buildings which will provide a conducive environment for the foundation's weavers as well as for cultural tourism.
- iv. Replicate the current success of the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah's songket project by applying the model to other heritage crafts in Malaysia.
- v. Create programs for corporations and individuals to support that will focus on creative, heritage and design education for young Malaysians and local communities.
- vi. Create the "Royal Weaver Award" and other incentives and forms of recognition for craft workers to excel in their crafts.
- vii. Facilitate the transfer of skills and technology through training and development to our craft workers thereby improving our creative and other talents.
- viii. Create meaningful and productive collaborations, joint ventures and partnerships to bring songket and other Malaysian heritage crafts global.
- ix. Raise awareness on songket and other Malaysian heritage crafts through high impact projects, programmes and exhibitions including the continuous documentation of dying Malaysian heritage crafts.

5.0 Conclusion

The YTNZ production centers in Kuala Terengganu and Kuching have created full time jobs and stability which made songket weaving an attractive and viable career for young women in Terengganu and Sarawak. This initiative has attracted a wave of young women who now want to make songket weaving their life-long career and ensure that the tradition of hand-weaving was being handed down to the young generation, keeping it alive.

Through developing and marketing the Royal Terengganu Songket brand in Malaysia and elsewhere, and focusing on trade, not aid, YTNZ hopes to place the power of opportunity into the hands of the weavers, providing not only income, but also the chance to make the leap from informal cottage industry trading to international commerce.

The foundation is currently working on securing songket projects from both local and overseas markets. It is hoped that in the near future, the foundation would be successful in penetrating the international market. By then, the Royal Terengganu Songket brand would be renowned for producing contemporary handwoven songket fabrics suitable for fashion, gifts, furnishing and interior designs.

With so much under its belt after three short years, the future looks very promising for YTNZ. Many plans are in view and under way. The vision is to become self-sustaining and create a social business where the weavers can reap the benefits of their hard-earned profits. YTNZ can look forward to making this social business completely sustainable and letting the hard-earned profits of our weavers go back into their homes, their children and their bright futures. Leveraging on the knowledge gathered from developing and the achievements of Royal Terengganu Songket, YTNZ intends to apply this model to other Malaysian heritage to create a wider impact on its continuous work on improving lives through heritage.

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