

# Revitalising the Craft of Songket Weaving through Innovation in Malaysia

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## Abstract

The art of songket weaving is believed to have come to the Malay Peninsula through trade, migration and political marriages since the fifteenth century. Songket is a piece of breathtaking traditional Malay fabric which belongs to the brocade group of textiles. It is woven in silk or cotton threads and the songket patterns are formed by gold or coloured metallic threads using the supplementary weft technique. This paper focuses on the history of songket in the Malay Peninsula as well as the processes and problems faced by songket weaving cottage industry in Malaysia. Even though the craft of songket weaving has a very long history in the Malay Archipelago, the number of songket weavers has dwindled recently. This could be due to the rather limited usage of songket and reluctance of the younger generation women to participate in the industry as songket weaving is perceived to be time-consuming and boring. Consequently, the craft of songket weaving may one day diminish if our younger generation is no longer interested in the songket weaving profession. Thus in 2008, a special songket project was initiated by the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah's (YTNZ), a Foundation established by the Her Majesty Tuanku Nur Zahirah. YTNZ aims to revive the craft of songket weaving by teaching young women the necessary weaving skills to produce contemporary and high quality songket as well as broadening the usage of songket. Examples of the songket activities and projects carried by YTNZ in producing contemporary songket and application are also highlighted in this paper.

## 1.0 Introduction

Songket is a piece of breathtaking traditional Malay fabric which belongs to the brocade group of textiles. It is woven in silk or cotton threads and the songket patterns are formed by gold or coloured metallic threads using the supplementary weft technique.

According to Abdul Aziz Rashid (1999), the usage of gold thread forming exquisite motifs alone does not determine the beauty of songket. Historically, the value of songket is determined by the creative skills of the weaver in combining the usage of patterns and motifs, and the value of gold perceived within the community.

The origin of songket in the Malay Peninsula is a subject that is difficult to determine due to lack of reliable historic documentation. The art of songket weaving is believed to have come to the Malay Peninsula through trade, migration and political marriages since the fifteenth century.

The ideal and strategic location of the Malay Peninsula in the middle of the trade route between the east and the west made Malacca an important entreport as it is situated along the coastal areas of the Malay Peninsula. During the fifteenth century, the empire of the Malacca Sultanate includes Johore, Selangor, Bruas and Terengganu in the Malay Peninsula, as well as Rokan, Siak, Indargiri and Jambi in Sumatera. According to Wheatley (1961), Tom Pirés had described Malacca as a city made for distribution of goods as illustrated in Figure 1. For example, Malacca became a centre for distribution of spices and textiles to Gujarat, Coromandel, Malabar and Bengal. Textiles from China such as brocades, silk (raw and made-up), satins, taffetas and other textiles were also traded in vast amount in Malacca.

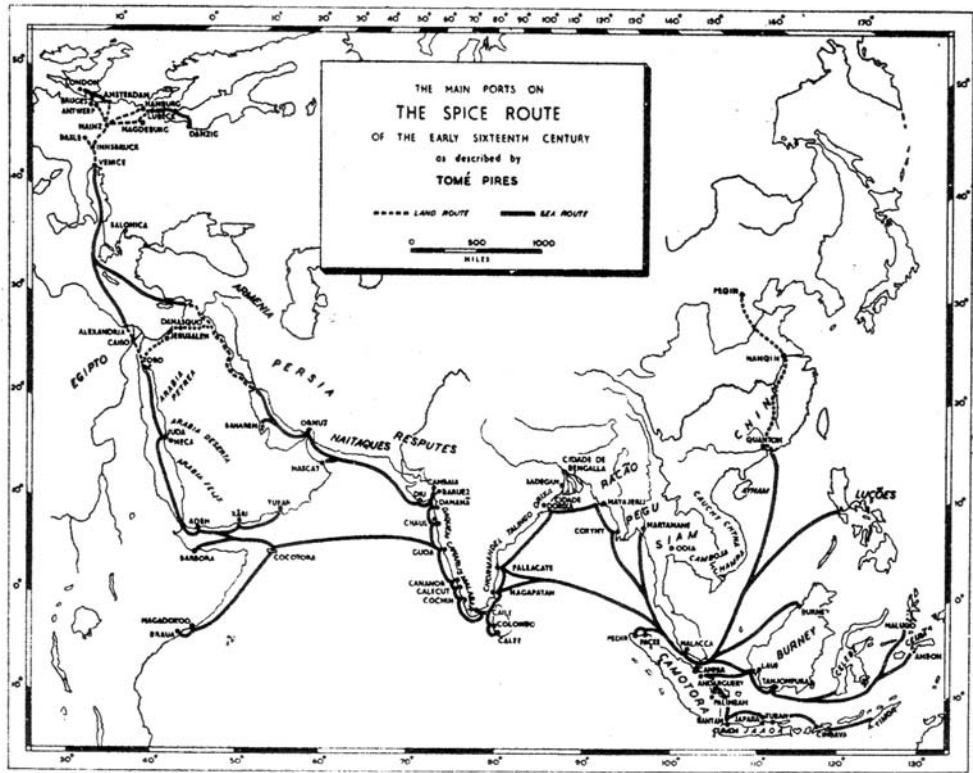


Figure 1. Malacca and the spice route as depicted by Tomé Pires (after Wheatley, 1961, p.314)

However, Winstedt (1923) claimed that the origins of the application of gold and silver thread used in weaving in the Malay Peninsula actually derived from India. On the other hand, Selvanayagam (1990) wrote that the Kelantanese claimed that the songket weaving technique

actually came from Cambodia and then spread southwards to Siam, Patani, Kelantan and finally to Terengganu. But, the people of Terengganu had refuted this claim and argued that the songket weaving technique was first introduced by the Indians via the Sumatran Kingdom of Palembang and Jambi during the period of Srivijaya. Zani Bin Ismail (2004) argued that songket originated from China right through to Indochina (Cambodia and Thailand) by analysing the similarities of the hand weaving looms between those from Cambodia as well as Thailand and those from Terengganu.

There are people who believed that the songket made in Sumatra are quality songket (it is still being produced in Sumatra today). Nevertheless, according to Maznah Mohamed (2001) the East Coast court weavers of the Malay Peninsula were once considered one of the most skilled weavers found in the Malay Archipelago. Under the protection of the Sultan, the weavers lived at the courts and only weaved beautiful songket which were by their Sultans during royal ceremonies. These songket also serves as gifts from the Sultans when they perform official visits to other countries.

As reported by a renowned Malay writer, Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir as cited by Mohd. Yusof Bin Abdullah (1990), the former visited Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang in 1836 and observed that the production of the silk sarongs was then a thriving industry. During that period, silk yarns from China which were used in the weaving industry in the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula, were important imports. Exports then consisted of gold, tin, coffee, pepper, banana, silk fabrics and sarongs. In the nineteenth century, the number of weavers increased tremendously and towns such as Kuala Terengganu (Terengganu) and Kota Bharu (Kelantan) were well-known for their weavers. In 1839, Sultan of Omar of Terengganu (1839 – 1875) was very interested in handicrafts and brought in craftsmen from the Malay Archipelagos to Terengganu. The skilled craftsmen taught the local ones skills to produce quality handicrafts. Subsequently, Terengganu became a well-known state producing quality craft.

According to the 1910 Annual Report of Kelantan as stated by Maznah Mohamed (2001), almost every house in Kota Bharu had a loom. Although weaving was still an important occupation that was only carried out by women mainly in Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bharu, there was a decline in income in 1920 as the weavers had to work very hard to compete against the cheaper imported textiles. Unfortunately in the 1930s, many women gave up weaving as competition against the imported textiles became economically not viable.

As songket weaving is a craft that has more than 600 years in the Malay Peninsula, it would be such a shame if efforts are not taken to stop its decline.

## 2.0 Malaysian Handwoven Songket

In Malaysia, songket is normally made for use during ceremonial functions such as during inaugurations, religious ceremonies, weddings and ceremonies marking circumcision, ear-piercing and shaving the hair of a newborn baby. Today, songket is also worn during formal state functions and dinners. Other current usage of the Malaysian handwoven songket is shown in Figure 2.

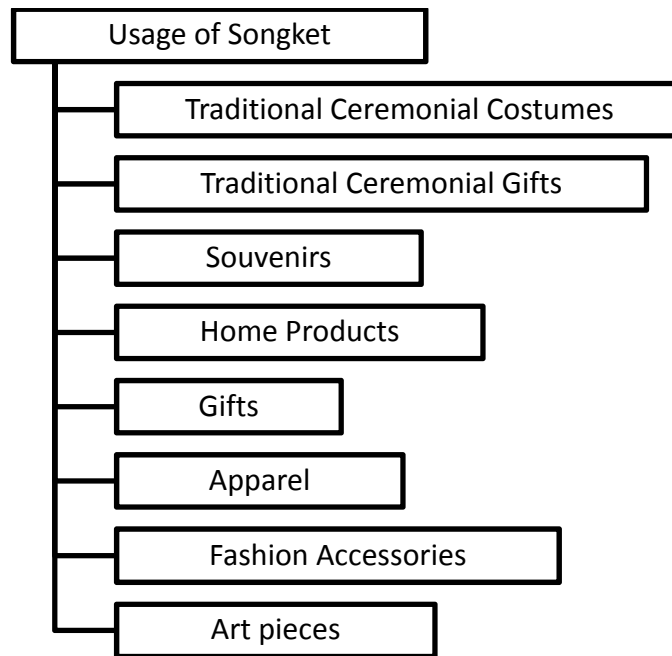


Figure 2. Current usage of songket

As songket weaving requires a high degree of skill, it takes a lot of dedication and practice for a weaver to master the technique. There are a total of eleven processes in songket weaving and these processes have remained unchanged over the centuries. The eleven processes are;

1. Planning the design of the songket pattern (*mereka corak*)
2. Dyeing the cotton or silk yarns (thread) in hanks (*mencelup warna*).
3. Unwinding the hanks and winding the yarns on the bobbins (*menerai*).
4. Warping the yarns on the warping frame (*menganing*).
5. Winding the warp yarns onto a warp board (*menggulung*).
6. Sleying the yarns through the reed (*menyapuk*).
7. Setting up the loom for weaving (*menyediakan kek*).
8. Making the frames for the string heddles and threading the string heddles to form the weaving shed (*mengarat*).
9. Plain weave weaving (*menenun*).
10. Tying the hand string loop leashes following the draft pattern (*mengikat butang*).

## 11. Weaving the songket pattern with the gold metallic yarns (*menyongket*)

Unless new weavers continue to take up the challenge of mastering the skill, Malaysia may lose generations of cultural heritage. Other challenges faced by the songket weaving industry in Malaysia are;

- Limited usage of songket.
- Mass produced songket.
- The inability to compete in price, quantity and fulfilling to the needs of today's trend conscious consumers.
- Younger generation is not interested in the songket weaving profession.
- Need to give the craft of songket weaving a new zest of life.

### **3.0 Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah**

The Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah (YTNZ/ Foundation) was established in 2007 under the Royal Patronage and guidance of Her Majesty, Tuanku Nur Zahirah. The main goal of YTNZ is to preserve and enhance indigenous craft and heritage while improving the livelihood of artisans.

When the YTNZ began its work, a study of the crafts industry of the country was carried out. Overall, there are tens of thousands of artisans working mostly in rural areas but the majority of them earn very low incomes, often well below the poverty line. As a result of this, fewer and fewer young people consider a career in traditional craft. If the situation is not addressed, our craft traditions will die out one by one. Thus, it is very clear from the beginning that in order to preserve our diverse craft traditions, we have to find a way to raise the income level of artisans.

### **4.0 YTNZ Songket Project**

In 2008, the Foundation decided to focus on the songket industry because of its rich history and the dwindling number of songket weavers today. The Foundation's songket project started in April 2008. Presently, two production centres were set up to train young weavers the craft of songket weaving and produce contemporary handwoven songket; one in Kuala Terengganu and one in Kuching under the author's direct supervision (as shown in Figure 3). The Foundation's Head office-cum-showroom is located at Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur.

All YTNZ weavers currently earn a regular salary on top of contributions to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and social security protection (SOCSO) benefits. With regular income, the

weavers are able to focus on perfecting their craft and the Foundation songket project began to attract young weavers to train in this craft.



Figure 3. YTNZ Contemporary Songket Production Centre in Kuching

The Foundation has changed the face of the songket industry by contemporizing the look of songket and today, songket is no longer a textile limited to ceremonial use. YTNZ have retained its luxury and heirloom element but extended its use to include exclusive shawls, scarves, unique gift items, home and interior products. The foundation has marketed and sold songket fabrics, finished and custom made songket to a group of selective customers, designers, institutions and corporations under the brand Royal Terengganu Songket (RTS). Figures 4 and 5 are examples of RTS and customised collaborative pieces with Melinda Looi & Michael Ong, renowned Malaysian fashion designers.



Figure 4. Fashion Accessory (Necklace) designed by Melinda Looi using Royal Terengganu Songket  
(Picture courtesy of Melinda Looi, 2010)



Figure 5. Fashion outfit designed by Michael Ong and fabric by Royal Terengganu Songket  
(Picture courtesy of Michael Ong, 2011)

An example of a collaborative effort is the Songtik project. It is a joint-collaboration project between PINK JAMBU and YTNZ. The PINK JAMBU Songtik was created in 2010 with a debut collection of 42 shawls that fuses songket and batik, which are two traditional Malaysian textile crafts of Malaysia. In this collection, Tengku Marina Ibrahim and the author experimented with different types of silk and metallic threads, colours and motifs to create soft and luxurious shawls. The Songtik 2010 collection is distinctive in that the shawls are reversible to showcase the beauty of wearing batik and songket. In 2011, Songtik Fables 2011 shawls collection was created following the success of the 2010 collection. 12 unique shawls were created for the Songtik Fables 2011 collection. Figure 6 shows a baby pink shawl from the Pink Jambu Songtik Debut 2010 Collection and Figure 7 illustrates 'Anticipation', a shawl from PINK JAMBU Songtik Fables 2011.



Figure 6. A baby pink shawl from the Pink Jambu Songtik Debut 2010 Collection





Figure 7. 'Anticipation' from PINK JAMBU Songtik Fables 2011

## 5.0 Conclusion

The art of songket weaving may one day diminish if the younger generation is no longer interested in the weaving professions. Thus, it is crucial to find ways to preserve the craft of songket weaving and encourage younger generation particularly women to learn the art of songket weaving.

Hence, the YTNZ songket project is a suitable and relevant project as it preserves and promotes songket, making heritage relevant and contemporary through design and innovation, and developing new markets through branding. This project has made songket weaving a viable career for young women. YTNZ hopes not only to give many more weavers the opportunity to make a career in their beloved craft but also to inspire many more to value and cherish our cultural heritage.

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