

# A Preliminary Study on Songket: A Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract**—Songket is a traditional Malaysian woven fabric, opulent, and symbolizes luxurious classical textiles of the old craft in Malaysia. Songket is part of the intangible cultural heritage to this day. However, cultural heritage preservation arises as a critical endeavor, especially for younger generations. There is a growing concern about the disinheritance of cultural heritage to posterity due to disregard for the value of our own heritage. Therefore, this paper aims to explore in-depth insight into the beautiful heritage of songket weaving including the knowledge of art weaving, delve into the techniques and materials used as well as the legacy and time ahead. The research uses observation methods and deep face-to-face interviews for data collection. It was conducted with experienced experts and workers, revealing the origin of Songket and its processing from scratch. The research data findings were gathered and subsequently analyzed as secondary data. This study gives more knowledge about Malay traditional textile art and heritage, indicating a positive future of traditional weaving arts as well.

**Keywords**—Songket; weaving; textiles; aesthetic; intangible cultural heritage; processing songket; cultural; heritage; Terengganu; Malaysia

## I. INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage is one of the pillars of heritage components. According to UNESCO cultural heritage can be distributed into three categories: tangible, intangible, and natural. However, compared to others, intangible cultural heritage is different due to its nature which is unseen with the naked eye and cannot be touched nevertheless, its existence can be felt and impressed [1]. The inheritance of intangible cultural heritage similar to diverse technologies features of some culturally distinct communities from the past generations, sustained this time and carefully gathered and encouraged for the benefit of future generations [9]. Since the early stages of history textiles have become a very conspicuous material culture in the Malay world [2].

There are many examples of intangible cultural heritage including language, customs, lifestyle, music, art, and dance as well as weaving songket in textiles brocade family. Songket is a fine art of traditional weaving and the most opulent, ancient textiles in the Malays' repertoire. It has long been an integral part of Malaysia's cultural heritage [10]. The unique traditional weaving features reflect Malaysian people's identity and creativity. The most exquisite and interpreted as an everlasting fabric worn, the textile is acclaimed as "the cloth of gold" or "the Queen of fabrics" [9]. It is also referred to as "kain benang emas"

(golden threading fabric) and is used to make apparel accessories [14].

Songket is an inseparable part of cultural heritage and a crucial ingredient of identity and society formation. As a symbol of the nation, songket heritage influences shaping perceptions of the country's culture, image, and personality. Songket embodies the intellectual values of past societies, inherited and bridged between generations. Besides representing a multi-racial emblem, songket heritage is very synonymous with tourism-related products that very crucial to drive economic growth [7].

In Malaysia, the government treats heritage issues with the utmost importance including songket weaving industry. As listed in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, his prompt recognition is expected to facilitate bringing other attractive Malaysian artistic traditions to the world stage [12]. Most meaningful yet, the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah (YTNZ) foundation has chosen to direct its endeavor on songket, and reinvigorate the songket industry including empowering the necessary skills.

Gradually as time goes on, the art of weaving songket encounters numerous challenges in remaining relevant. The challenges encompass many factors such as the rapid advancement of contemporary life, technological breakthrough as well as industrial development [5]. Youth nowadays are occupied with gadgets, reluctant to learn and understand basic knowledge of their cultural heritage. Thus, a collaborative effort is indeed in demand to preserve this intangible heritage to remain sustainable for the future.

This paper is divided into five main sections, which are: Section II discusses the related work and background of cultural heritage preservation. Conversely, Section III discusses the method used in this study to gain information. Next, Section IV presents the findings and discussion of the study, and lastly, Section V presents the conclusion.

## II. RELATED WORK

### A. Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is an important constituent of a community's identity, and continuity, fostering a sense of belonging and pride of a nation [8]. Furthermore, it is a valuable asset that has been or is owned by a person or a group of societies or people who altogether share responsibilities for conservation and reservation as well [5]. Besides it is a legacy of the ways of living from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass

on to future generations as well. Heritage ratifies high values in a society while culture contributes to the sustainable development of the society and its economy. Heritage preservation, be it tangible, intangible, or natural had to be listed to be recognized as world heritage resources and were also brought in the World Heritage Convention, which took place in 1972 [1]. UNESCO has been listing some of Malaysia's intangible heritage including Mak Yong theatre, pantun, silat, Dongdang Sayang as well as weaving songket. The cultural heritage information must be gathered in an effort to deliver for next future generations. The expenditure is very important whereby the information from the past can be used to determine the identity of each society nowadays.

### B. Songket

Songket is a Malay word that derives from the process of 'sungkit' [11] which brings meaning to the art of out or pulling a thread from a background cloth or weaving using gold and silver thread as well [6]. The most ancient and opulent textiles in the Malays' repertoire, songket was enlightened under the auspices of the king before the 19th century [14]. The eastern coast of the Malay peninsula has most of the greatest weavers Malay tradition that are centred on Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan [2]. The Songket is equivalent with the Malay community whereby making songket is a legacy from the past that is still widely practiced.

Songket has its own meaning. On this point, Malay weaver does not simply produce fabric and each part of the Songket fabric has a unique name. For instance, the design of Songket consists of a few parts such as a body, head, fabric edge, and clamp. Fig. 1 below shows the detail of songket fabric [3]. The entire motif is taken and inspired by what has existed around them including flora, nature, and abstract pattern.

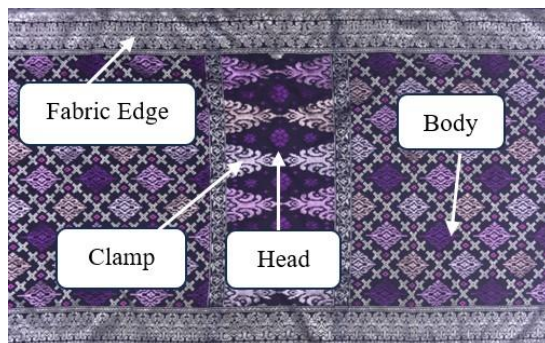


Fig. 1. The detail of songket fabric.

### C. Cultural Heritage Preservation

Cultural heritage preservation is vital to ensure that these elements are conveyed to younger generations, preserved, conversed, and transmittable for sustainable cultural heritage as well as contributing to an appreciation of identity. Intangible cultural heritage is facing an awful situation globally due to rapid modernization and urbanization that is devoted to the idleness of it [4]. Apart from that, intangible cultural heritage holds significant ancestry that needs to be preserved sustainably [13].

Malaysia is well known for its diversity of cultures and valuable heritage. The government addressed the heritage issues

earnestly and in accordance with that proactive steps to preserve the cultural heritage were taken, including the handicraft industry. Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia is an agency under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture established under Act 222, the Malaysian Crafts Development Corporation Act (1979) whereby the preservation was implemented with the intention of commercializing craft products through market, product, and entrepreneur development.

## III. METHOD

Fulfilling the research objectives required a well-structured methodological framework, consisting of three key phases: preparation, data collection, and data analysis. This study employed a qualitative approach through observation and semi-structured interviews to examine the cultural and aesthetic elements of Terengganu Songket. Emphasis was placed on understanding the production process, tools and techniques involved, and efforts in preserving this intangible cultural heritage through expert insights.

During the preparation phase, the study objectives were clearly outlined, and a set of interview questions was developed based on relevant literature. These questions covered aspects such as the history of songket, production methods, equipment used, and the future of the tradition. Data collection took place at the Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, Terengganu branch, a center with more than 25 years of experience in the songket industry. Additional insights were gathered from a traditional songket business in Kampung Bukit Depu, where weaving has been sustained through seven generations, with the third generation currently managing the enterprise.

In the data collection phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses. All sessions were recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify, interpret, and report recurring themes within the qualitative data.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Findings on Songket Knowledge

Based on an interview session conducted with experienced people from Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia Cawangan Terengganu, songket is a "Queen of Fabric" that is produced manually by golden-agers. The making process takes months to complete a piece of songket cloth depending on the material and motif provided. There are some experts that were involved in making a songket according to their respective expertise. The wage rate charged also varies each other depends on the skill available. For instance, the experienced people in dyeing the yarn and each process need to be thoroughly step by step. Also the process of untangling, winding, and rolling the yarn could be the same person but a weaver has the expertise to weave only.

Based on study [2], the eastern coast of the Malay peninsula has many Malay traditional weavers which is Terengganu and Kelantan has become the main center of Malay traditional textile weavers. Songket is the valuable heritage of Malay people especially in Terengganu and the history is started in the palace for Malay royal ceremonial costumes. A wealth of precious

heritage will disappear once in a while if the younger generations are unaware of its importance and immersed with their own heritage.

### B. Findings on Songket Producing

Songket is one of the old valuable traditional Malay crafts which is from a yarn into a beautiful fabric. The opulent Songket employs a weaving method that comprises interweaving gold threads with silk threads on the fabric base. As it identical with the Malay community, making songket is a legacy in Terengganu that is passed down from generation to generation. The process of producing songket involved several steps as elaborated below.

### C. The Process of Making a Songket

There are eight processes in the making of songket. In order to ensure produced high-quality products each process needs to be comprehensive and detailed way. Before all the process begins, it starts with planning the design of the songket pattern.

1) *Dyeing the cotton or silk yarns (thread) in hanks*: Woven yarns consist of cotton yarns, silk yarns, gold yarns, and silver yarns. There is no need to color the gold and silver yarn due to natural ingredients. The cotton or silk yarns (thread) need to be tied neatly, inserted into boiling water in the crater and thoroughly rinsed with water. After that, the yarn dipped into the dye and dried up. Fig. 2. shows the process of dyeing the yarn.



Fig. 2. Process of dyeing the yarn.

2) *For untangling the yarn*: The dried yarn spins with a small bamboo-made spindle or innovation tools designed using a bicycle wheel. This process includes a "Darwin" tool and a convenient spinning tool. Darwin feed and gold Darwin are two types of sharks. Darwin feeds are made of bamboo and ropes or rattan and used only for feed yarns and Darwin gold is made of wood or wire because of the rough and heavy gold thread and used only for the gold thread (see Fig. 3).

3) *Winding the yarn*: The process of stretching and winding the yarn on the bobbins or Terengganu is called "peleting". The length or the number of threads of the fabric to be woven is regulated by "loseng" (loom). The prevalence rolls of feed yarn or sockets measure 26 to 31 meters and can produce twelve to fourteen pieces of fabric. (see Fig. 4).

4) *Rolling the yarn*: This process is to wind the warp yarns onto a warp wooden board. To ensure smooth arrangement during rolling, the yarn position should be checked every three times as Fig. 5.



Fig. 3. Process of untangling the yarn.



Fig. 4. Process of winding the yarn.



Fig. 5. Process of rolling the yarn.

5) *Spooling the yarn*: The next process is spooling the yarns through the reed. The spooling work is implemented after the



warping threads are inserted into the teeth or brush of the machine. Each brush hole is stained with two veins of the lotus thread and hooked through each gap in the machine's teeth. This process is done in the "cake" (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Process of spooling the yarn.

6) *Stretching the yarn:* This process is making the frames for the string heddles and threading the yarns stripped from "karak" to wood by shaking them (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Process of stretching the yarn.

7) *Lifting the yarn:* The process of weaving songket by creating patterns on the warp threads using a skewer tool. Songket weaving is usually woven with three-pointed or five-pointed techniques, tying them later through the button-tying process (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Process of lifting the yarn.

8) *Weaving the yarn:* The weaving process uses a tool called "cake" whereby divided into three parts that are the cake legs, the cake body, and the cake head. Commonly after a thread of gold is ripped, it is beaten (beat) and then followed by two

threads of feed. The shuttle filled with the weft thread or gold thread, is inserted left and right into the gaps between the warp threads, and weavers will convert button threads by rotation and predetermined patterns. This process is repeated until it becomes a piece of songket cloth (see Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Process of weaving the yarn.

#### D. Songket Pattern and Motif

Songket patterns are filled with different motifs that idealize the whole songket fabrics. There are several classifications of patterns of songket including full pattern, scattered pattern, scattered repeated bricks pattern, triangle shape pattern, alternating scattered repetitions pattern, crosswise pattern, stripes pattern, chevron or zigzag pattern as well as checkers pattern [5].

The following motifs are used in dissimilar patterns, depending on where they are placed and reproduced. Songket motif is generally used to demonstrate the Malay community's traditional ways of life that provide a means of exploring the relationship between cultural and national identity. Based on [14], it also represents the most important Malay cultural identity delivered in the creation of its motifs through the practice of oral traditions. Each motif and pattern has its own meaning whereby present the unique identity of Malay itself [3]. Usually, the motif and pattern used in Songket are produced at the customer's request.






Based on a previous study by [3], the overall motif songket is taken and inspired by surroundings such as flora, fauna, nature, and abstract patterns. For instances pucuk rebung, bunga lawi ayam, bunga tanjung, bunga baling, bunga cernai, and tapak kecupu for flora motif. Besides that, motifs based on abstract patterns such as jong sarat, pecah lapan, bunga tiga dara, tapak kacip, bunga kerongsang, kasap, bunga logam, potong wajik, and bunga logam. The motifs of bintang buta, awan larat, air molek, and teluk berantai as nature inspirations. Another motif is inspired by fauna such as sisik kelah, unduk-unduk, bunga lawi ayam, and bunga hati [6].

A preliminary study has been conducted to initiate detailed information regarding the aesthetic of songket. The exploratory of important and valuable information gathered from the insights of experts and entrepreneurs located at Terengganu. This section discussed the results based on the data acquired from the interviews. By conducting a preliminary study, an initial investigation was implemented to identify the direction and narrow down the study.

### E. Tools and Equipment of Songket

Based on observation, there are two categories of tools and equipment in making songket that are weaving equipment and supporting equipment. Among the tools used to create songket are as Table I:

TABLE I. TOOLS EQUIPMENT FOR PRODUCING SONGKET

Tools Equipment	Name
	Weaving Cake or "kei" is a tool used in the weaving process that is divided into three parts that are the cake legs, the cake body, and the cake head and interconnected each other.
	Bobbin also known as "pleting" is a crucial tool used to hold the wraps threads.
	A combination of threads will produce a distinctive and luxurious songket appearance.
	Loseng is the thread that forms the fabrics and refers to threads that extend on the loom.
	Two Belira is a long and thin stick that is used to loosen the thread and make in tense. This process facilitate the process of inserting a cuban.

### F. Legacy and Future of Songket

Based on the interviews with the songket entrepreneurs, the legacy of the songket business in Terengganu is inherited by the 7<sup>th</sup> younger generation. The older generation working in this business for generations ago and will assign their business knowledge to their heirs so that the business remains relevant.

The persistence of the cultural heritage is left by the previous generation reliant on the new generation. The weaving process requires a lot of patience, passion and creativity so that to passing the knowledge is very challenging.

Terengganu tourism is synonymous with the songket industry and making songket is a legacy even more the songket has emerged to become a tourism product. To guarantee that the industry is consistently progressing and growing, entrepreneurs

should always look for opportunities to expand their business, sharing the knowledge all about songket and collaborating with government so that the value of songket is highlighted and this legacy is never lost.

In the modern world, the future of songket weaving can be promising with all-out effort. Therefore, innovation in art weaving is a critical way to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity including providing a digital learning platform. As a global recognition, it is our shared responsibility to protect, preserve, and pass to the next generation.

### V. CONCLUSION

This preliminary survey gives an overview of the current conditions of cultural heritage especially on songket weaving. Its legacy that symbolizes the identity of our community and generation nowadays is responsible for preserving and safeguarding our country's cultural heritage. Furthermore, songket has worldwide cultural potential, and in-depth research is very crucial.

As a conclusion, to ensure that the industry is establishing constantly, evolving, and growing requires further efforts on all fronts. As society moves forward into a progressively global and technologically advanced future, it is essential to appreciate the value of textile culture and his historical heritage. Therefore, to preserve this intangible heritage to remain sustainable the responsible parties must make a concerted effort that includes a mutual support between songket weaver and entrepreneur as well as a collaboration among all parties and promote Malay Songket Weaving internationally.

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