

# Malay Songket Motif: A Design and Acumen of Weavers

Arba'iyah Ab. Aziz

Visual Culture Studies, Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam Malaysia

\*Corresponding Authors Email Address: [arbaiyah@uitm.edu.my](mailto:arbaiyah@uitm.edu.my)

Received: 1 August 2019 / Accepted: 15 December 2019 / Published online: 30 December 2020

---

## Abstract

In the Malay community, songket has already been recognized and labelled as the Queen of Fabrics. The uniqueness of the songket lies within the creative arrangement and beautiful creation of motifs that suit the person who adorns this piece of fabric. For some, the songket symbolises the Malay civilization and values. Thus, this paperwork seeks to identify the weavers' selections of Malay songket motifs in terms of meaning, philosophy, religion, beliefs, customs, norms, values, taboos, and the worldview of the Malays. The motifs are the manifestations of the close bond between the Malays and their surroundings as well as their life experiences. Every identification and classification of this artwork will lead to the development of human resources and the sustainability of art heritage especially to scholars, teachers, weavers, artists, cultural enthusiasts and patrons, art historians, art creators, and the community in general. Besides establishing the recognition of songket weavers' skills and abilities, this paper seeks to elevate the awareness of preservation and appreciation of wearing songket as a long-lasting legacy.

*Keywords* -Songket, motif, symbol, acumen, Malay philosophy

---

## 1. Introduction

Investigating the art and culture of the Malay world leads to a breadth of knowledge and an interesting study considering the height of civilization that the Malay world had achieved. Nevertheless, all the knowledge was mostly passed down orally and thus, facts relating to Malay art and culture may be lost. Due to this concern, the tradition and the symbolism of art culture need to be sustained and documented systematically especially when the current world is moving and developing rapidly.

Even though textile had started originally as a basic human need but it evolved into an art form and a symbol to the Malay culture. The Malay textile is unique because it reflects the culture of the community. The making of the textile is an ongoing activity that is inherited from one generation to the next (Yaacob Harun, 1989). The production of textile, especially weave and songket, is synonym to daily activities carried out by young girls in the rural areas (Azah Aziz, 1990). It is an activity that demands less physical energy but warrants concentration, patience and diligence.

The art of songket weaving is incomplete if it is not adorned with motifs and their arrangements. Songket is artistically designed by the motif arrangement that reflects human tastes and inspiration. However, the question is, there are among us who do not know or understand what songket is and who the weavers are. These questions or perceptions have arisen because of several factors like time evolution, educational background, competitions and demands of technology. The very fact that songket has long existed and still does exist leads to the issue of the reason behind the creation and the production of songket by the weavers. Another issue that arises is the significance of the sustainability of songket in this modern era.

Presently, there is a growing interest in the study of the achievements of past civilizations by investigating to the culture of the community. This is because through artifacts we are able to study and understand the lives of the community. It becomes the catalyst to understanding the differing meanings and significance of the particular culture. In Malaysia, particularly Terengganu, songket is recognized as "Seni Warisan Agung" or "The Most Significant Art Heritage" that symbolizes the people themselves. This means, songket is not merely a product or a tool but it is more of a cultural material that reflects various meanings, thoughts and world view of the community. In this context, the art is not just a manifestation of the artists behind the fabric but also the community that owns the piece of art (Rahmah Bujang and Nor Azlin Hamidon, 2002).

The question lies within the choice of songket motifs that are closely related to the surroundings, beliefs, norms, values, functions and identity that inspire the weavers. The choice of the weavers is vital to be investigated due to its relationship to the way of lives and culture of the Malays which have their own roots and history. Definitely, the weavers have a significant link to way of life in the village that is encircled by flora and fauna, cosmology, objects and culture. For example, in Malay cosmology, the world is filled with mystical and magical beings and elements but, never without the rational concept and wisdom behind each element. Obviously, researchers began to seek the sources of inspirations of past weavers in creating songket motifs based on their past experiences, tastes and thoughts that co- exist harmoniously with their surroundings.

Generally, the Malays lived in the villages or along the coastline which indirectly shaped their beliefs by their close observations of their surroundings. Observations and interpretations of the secrets of nature's beauty and uniqueness had become a daily routine to the Malay weavers. They have the ability to analyse, study, filter and fabricate what they observed and weave it into the songket motifs with values, philosophy and symbols. This is an amazing accomplishment.

Therefore, each feat or effort can illustrate the Malay idealism and art manifestations especially when studying the concept of beauty and the way of thoughts in a more organized and specific nature. The awareness and understanding of the Malay culture will be elevated and appreciated. This means that the art of Malay songket weaving is not just a work that only be viewed by the naked eyes. It is something to be treasured by looking at it intrinsically and thus creates a specific art paradigm. This is due to the fact that each artist actually requires both theoretical knowledge and practical abilities.

## **2. The Acumen of the Weaver in Producing Songket**

Life and surroundings are factors that are embedded within the lives of the Malays which become the basis for the motifs. Nature elements like the traits of plants and vegetation as well as the behaviour of domestic animals become the source of inspiration for the Malays to create motifs. This eventually becomes the symbol or figurative of life. It is clear that the long relationship between nature and the Malays influenced and shaped their inner thoughts and their views of the world (Wan Abdul Kadir, 1993).

Most motifs begin with the search of ideas. Their ability to choose, filter and develop a perception into something tangible, unique and attractive is astounding. The selection of the source of motifs is the manifestations of the maturity and creativity of the weavers which are done through denaturalization, styling and abstraction. A motif of a songket is either evaluated positively or evaluated from an acceptable view of the community. This is because to understand the needs, functions and aesthetics of songket and to fulfil the sociocultural and philosophical demands of the race.

The motifs of songket weaving can be categorized into 7 categories or patterns (Arba'iyah Ab. Aziz, 2010). They are,

- Flora Motif
- Fauna Motif
- Cosmos Motif
- Object Motif
- Geometric Motif
- Food Motif
- Calligraphy Motif

The acumen or wisdom of the weavers brought upon us the various motifs and given us meanings as well as the philosophy of the people around them. In this context, the researcher approaches the subject by exploring the relationship between the motifs and the Malay of socio-cultural community. Among the investigated aspects of the weaver by the researcher in creating the songket motifs are:

- Benefit or Usefulness
- Character or Habit
- Natural Order and Relationship with the Creator
- Uniqueness
- Symbolism or Implied Meaning

#### 2.1 Benefit or Usefulness

The Malays have long been using the natural resources to meet their daily needs. In this context, experience makes them more well-informed about their surroundings. They know which plants are suitable for consumption, for decorations, for rituals and for tools (A. Aziz Bidin dan Aishah Hj. Muhammad, 1998).

Plant resources like mangosteen, 'cermai' and tumeric or food like 'potong ladu' and 'kembang semangkuk' are important for medicinal purposes and properties. Other plants like 'daun sepanggih', betel leaves and henna are not just edible but also known to ward off harmful or evil spirits. Moreover, trees like the coconut, bamboos and areca or 'pinang' are grown to make boundaries or fences around the house in a neighbourhood. The Malays are skilled and specifically knowledgeable in selecting the right elements or ingredients such as to produce fragrances it involves the exploration of herbs and oils to balance harmony, beauty and health.

For example, the Malays knew that 'kembang semangkuk' can be planted by using its seeds. The seedlings can withstand the draught. The seedlings can also be obtained near the mother tree in the jungle. This plant grows and crawls close to the ground in a tropical jungle that usually experiences short draughts.

The seeds when put in water will expand from a small seed into multiple sizes. Usually they are rounded or oval. When in water, the brown tissue expands. The water is consumed to treat asthma, tuberculosis, hemorrhoid, high fever, bloody nose, stomach, intestines or bladder. The seeds are also used to soften the skin and herb tea to treat bronchitis. The tree bark of 'kembang semangkuk' is usually mixed with other ingredients, boiled and consumed to treat dysentery, vagina hemorrhaging and to treat incontinence. The tree itself can be made into wooden boards, furniture, ladder, interior building and matches. 'Sirih' or Betel leaves have a high value in the Malay community. There four types of betel leaves in Malaysia, they are 'sirih Melayu', 'sirih Cina', 'sirih Keling' and 'sirih Udang'. It is a climbing tree that could reach up to ten to fifteen feet high with support. The leaves are oval and elongated with 12cm width and 10-15cm length. It multiplies by cutting the stem of the young plant crawling on the ground, It thrives on soil that is not too wet. It needs tropical climate and adequate water.

Betel leaves are especially important in Malay engagement and wedding ceremonies. The betel leaves are used as one main dowry called 'sirih junjung'. 'Sirih junjung' is a must as the main dowry in weddings. It is usually designed and adorned with betel leaves and flowers like 'bunga melur' (jasmine), 'bunga cempaka', orchids and 'bunga kekwa' (chrysanthimum).

The Malay community in the olden days usually serves betel leaves to guests who visited their homes. Betel leaves are snacks eaten with a bit of limestone paste. Minced areca nut or 'pinang' and 'gambir' are put together into a wrapped betel leave. In traditional medicine, betel leaves are used to ward off diseases caused by evil spirits. Betel leaves have essential oils to remedy diseases like vaginal white discharge, bad breath, body odour, cough, eye infections, trauma, heart palpitations and post-natal fever.



Figure 1. *Kembang semangkuk*

## 2.2 Character or Habit

A study on character or habit requires long and deep thoughts, reasoning and observation. Every element of an animal like the design, colour, status and cosmology, habits are closely scrutinized. The design and colour for example can evoke various emotional and psychological reactions. In addition, the stars, sun, mountains and sea waves may also be used as reference or symbolic of human life.

The experiences of the previous Malay community have an impact on the present Malays. This is a result of the observation and responses towards the nature of animals and the relationship with humans. To produce fauna motifs, weavers prefer land animals like the hen or cock, sea creatures like the shark and unduk-unduk laut or 'sea horse' and air creatures like the butterfly and keluang or 'megabat'. This motif is chosen based on the beauty of the design and colours besides the animals' nature that can be used as a reference on lessons in life. Nonetheless, the choice of design is abstractly woven in two dimensions.

Waves are the ups and downs as well as the rolling movements of sea water. It is the force of sea erosion resulted from strong wind on the surface of the waters that creates a series forward moving rolling waves. The height and strength of the waves depends on the strength of the wind.

In the open sea, the waves are usually 6 meters high and 120 meters long. These measurements increase depending on the speed of the wind and length of time especially during a storm. In shallow waters and coastal areas, the speed of the waves decreases and the waves are deflected along the coastline. The shallow waters decrease the advance of the waves. Thus, the peak of the waves will roll, disperse and disappear into bubbles. The waves can be categorized into two which are the surface waves and internal waves. The surface waves are those which can be observed at sea. One of the factors that create waves is the wind and also the ebb and flow of the sea due to the gravitational pull of the moon and the sun.

The seahorse is classified under motifs of sea creatures that is chosen because of its unique shape. The seahorse is unique since its head resembles the head of a horse. It is a fish that swims horizontally and the body is protected by a hardened outer layer like a shell. The male seahorse will carry its fertilized eggs in his abdominal pouch. After the eggs have hatched, the fry or young ones stay in the pouch for a certain time before they are released. If the fry goes astray from the pouch, the male seahorse will suck the fry into his mouth and placed it again into the pouch.



Figure 2. *undur-undur laut* or 'sea horse'

### 3. Natural Order and the Relationship with the Creator

The realm of God's creation consists of an abundance of knowledge as well as secrets for all to explore. Each analysis focuses on the balance from the aspect of physics and metaphysics or between physical and spiritual. The concept of beauty to the Malays extends to the spiritual dimension and the relationship with religious belief. In this context, every God's creation has its role and meaning to encourage humans to think of the advantage, the appreciation and the natural rules. The Malays express this feeling of gratitude to the Creator by appreciating and indulging in creating the art in the form of beautiful weave writings.

From the religion point of view, the Malays are concerned about the calm and clean surroundings and atmosphere. The fragrant smell from local flower plants exudes calmness and thus the Malays often plant these trees melor (jasmine), 'kemuning', 'cempaka', 'kenanga', 'kesidang', 'tanjung' like in their yard. Obviously, the Malay community regards nature and certain objects with meaning and symbolism. Their appreciation is not limited to the physical manifestation of objects but it goes deeper into the spiritual existence of a being (Hairudin Harun, 2001). This concept entails the specific purpose, characteristics and the role its knowledge, kindness and uniqueness.

'Cempaka' flower is from the Magnoliaceae family. It is a wooden tree that usually grows in the jungle and its height can reach up to 30 meters. It comes in three varieties of colours: white, yellow and red. The leaves can denote whether its white or yellow 'cempaka'. This flower plant produces corn like fruits. The bark and timber of the tree produce fragrances and can be made into furniture. However, they are scarce. Thus, this plant is mainly grown as decoration since it flowers even before 1 meter tall. The flower contains volatile oil. Usually the oil is extracted from the flowers, leaves and barks. It is grown by the seeds and cut branches.

This flower is usually placed in bedrooms since the scent refreshes the surroundings. In Mak Yong plays, the flower is worn by the dancers. It also adorns the ceiling of the stage. The role of this flower is significant during the play besides the medicinal benefits like a remedy for gas and rejuvenating one's spiritual well-being. The art of calligraphy in weaving refers to the calligraphy that is produced during the process of weaving. The calligraphy is sketched first before it is weaved. It is the oldest calligraphy in history of calligraphy writings that is Kufi. Kufi is often used as songket motifs because of its flexibility and suitable for geometric design motif. Another type of calligraphy that is softer in nature is used in songket weaving is called Thuluth.



Figure 3. Wave

#### 4. Uniqueness

Every shape and characteristic is analysed, examined, observed and related to its unique essence. There are definitely rare shapes but exhibit their own uniqueness. Motifs like the seahorse, star fish, peacock, eyes of a fly and elbow of a megabat are regarded as unique. Besides that there are unique characteristics of plants like the tumeric species and 'bunga pecah empat' (four sections of a flower). To add exotic flowers like the orchids can be found in the jungle. The main attraction is the various shapes, colours and measurements. The shape of the orchids for instance can be round, start shaped, curly or horned. The flowers can bloom as one or a bunch. Some orchids can also produce pleasant smell.

'Bebaling' grass is considered a unique plant. It grows along the sandy beaches of the state of Terengganu. 'Bebaling' grass resembles 'sea urchins'. It is a strong and durable plant that can stand extreme sandy wind or sunlight. The colour of this plant is greenish and yellowish and they grow in small bushes. However, under certain strong wind conditions, the 'bebaling' grass can actually fly short distances to another location. This grass possesses aesthetic values. When the grass flies, it beautifully rotates to the new location. This rotation is the unique characteristics of this grass. The children play with the grass in Terengganu.



Figure 4. 'Bebaling' grass

#### 5. Symbolism or Implied Meaning

Each symbol of each songket pattern or motif makes the status and role of the clothes to become more prominent in the Malay customs. The Malay philosophy is inspired by the songket motifs that include aspects like purpose, characteristics and roles that has their importance in terms of knowledge, kindness and speciality. When an analogy about the aspects of their lives is created, the Malays are making interpretations of the events and elements in their lives that can be made as lessons or boundaries. In this context, positive values like being humble, assertive, united and cooperative are ingrained into the community so that the community can live together harmoniously.

In terms of meaning, to illustrate, flowers are beautiful, fragrant and fresh create flower patterns that have values and philosophy like integrity, fine manners, familiarity or peace. Flowers and flower buds also entail love, purity, sanctity, sincerity and fine manners, friendship and kinship. Therefore, flower and flower bud motifs are used in almost all Malay decorative adornments. The existence of meaning and philosophy in each songket design, thus, carries multiple roles like as decor, as a tool to disseminate knowledge or as an element of didactic and doctrine beliefs like to ward off bad luck or to invite good fortune. Hence, each research on the elements will lead to its own unique interpretation, symbolism, appreciation and reasoning.



Figure 4. 'Teratai'

## 6. Conclusion

Generally, the Malays who live in the country side are influenced by their natural surroundings and beliefs. Thus, it makes a weaver in the Malay community more knowledgeable, sensitive and particular about natural resources. This approach of referring to natural resources has become a factor to enhance and enrich the mind, emotions and perception of the Malays. The ability to observe nature and to seek the beauty secrets and uniqueness are the essence of the acumen of the Malay songket weavers.

Exploring the Malay heritage is an endless search. The deeper the search about the Malay world is, the more vital it becomes to the people. Each finding from the search about the legacy or tradition leads to something that is aesthetically valuable, world view and thought provoking. In addition, it also leads to the community's inspirations and aspirations. Thus, this heritage must be preserved by the Malays to ensure its sustainability. The skills, beliefs and thoughts of a songket weaver that are intricately woven with thousands of threads must be not only protected but also upheld by the present generation. It is undeniable that emotions and thoughts can be manifested through art. Art is the essence of humanity, a symbol of culture of a community.

The art of Malay Terengganu songket is long focused on its importance in the Malay traditions and norms. The durability and the beauty of songket are not just because of the technicalities of producing songket, but also because of the intricacies and high quality designs. The designs are rich with implied meanings and philosophies.

The art of Malay textile is a priceless national heritage which has been passed down from one generation to another. This field of study has long been explored and thus, this form of art is an heirloom entrusted by the earlier generation to be preserved. Especially the Malay Terengganu songket is one of the local art crafts that catapult our country and the Malays towards success.

## References

- A. Aziz Bidin dan Aishah Haji Muhammad (1998). Kegunaan Tumbuh Tumbuhan Dalam Nilai Budaya Masyarakat Desa, Kajian Etnografi di Wang Kelian Perlis). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, (hlm 162-198).
- Arba'iyah bt Ab. Aziz (2018). Symbolisme Dalam Motif Songket Melayu Terengganu. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Azah Aziz (1990) Selayang Kenangan. Kuala Lumpur: AMK Interaksi Sdn. Bhd.
- Hairudin Harun (2001). Kosmologi Melayu dalam Era Teknologi Maklumat. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Ong Hean Chooi (2006). Sayuran Khasiat Makanan & Ubatan. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publication & Distributors Sdn Bhd.
- Ong Hean Chooi (2006). Tumbuhan Liar Khasiat Ubatan & Kegunaan Lain. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publication & Distributors Sdn Bhd.
- Rahmah Bujang dan Nor Azlin Hamidon (2002). Kesenian Melayu. Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Pengajian Melayu.
- Wan Abdul Kadir (1993). Perspektif Sosio-Budaya Melayu. Kota Bharu dan Petaling Jaya: Masfami Enterprise.
- Yaacob Harun (2001). Kosmologi Melayu. Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Pengajian Melayu, Universiti Malaya.
- Kadir, W. A. (1993). Beberapa nilai dan world-view orang Melayu. Kota Bharu & Petaling Jaya: Masfami Enterprise.