

Conserving and Sustaining Culture through Sarawak Traditional Malay Woman Headscarves

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Received: 2 February 2020

Accepted: 30 April 2020

Published: 30 June 2020

ABSTRACT

The traditionally Sarawak Malay woman headscarf is known as Tudong Selayah Keringkam. It is a hand-made identical embroidery headscarf, produced with articulate skills, creativity, and imagination and worn as a social identity among the Malay women in Sarawak. This paper argues that the Selayah and the Keringkam are two different pieces of headscarves artwork. This paper also foresees the reasons behind the depletion of interest and skills of producing this artifact among the younger generation, to a large extent, making the cultural sustainability of the traditional headscarves in Sarawak to become less significant. Hence, the objectives of this paper are to explore the distinction between Selayah and Keringkam. In this transcendental phenomenological paper, the 'framing approach' is used in the in-depth interviews conducted with Selayah Keringkam weavers and Malay elders. This paper apparently has found the little provision to the distinction between Selayah and Keringkam. However, there are five elements posited which have contributed to the depletion of interest among the young generation in the production of Selayah Keringkam. Those elements are labelled as Price, Realism, Technology, Proficient and Insight. Nonetheless, this paper is significant in highlighting the Selayah Keringkam as one of the key material cultures in sustaining Sarawak Malay heritage. Preserving and sustaining the social identity is crucial which potentially becomes central

to the tourism products and commercially plated onto the international arena of fashion, art, and design.

Keywords: *headscarf, social identity, ethnicity, heritage, tangible culture, conservation, sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

The Malay women in Malaysia are synonymous with *Baju Kurung*, *Kebaya*, *Kebarung* and headscarf or *hijab*. Wearing *hijab* professes an obligation to Islam while wearing a headscarf is considered giving respect or fashion to others. Headscarves among the women in Sarawak are sufficiently adapted to show religious respect as well as become a part of the cultural material. Respect is an essential service to others. In the past, refined design and embroidery on the traditional clothing, especially the headscarves, stood out as a stylish appearance of the home-made artwork (Abang Josmani, Kibat, Halamy & Valerie, 2012). These traditional crafts have gradually disappeared due to modernisation and simplification of today's living. The scarcity of resources and complicated process of making such crafts led to the depletion of knowledge in the making of the *Selayah Keringkam*, which used to be part of Sarawak Malay women's identity. The *Selayah Keringkam* is one of the unique traditional crafts among Malay women in Sarawak. It is codified as part of the material culture of their everyday life. However, there is a lack of documented record to show its origin. Additionally, public appearances of *Selayah Keringkam* in printed form can be found in the writing of Ranee Margaret Brooke, the Second Rajah's¹ lady. In her book 'My Life in Sarawak' (Brooke, 1913), a picture of Ranee wearing a complete set of Sarawak Malay women costume was included (see Figure 1).

¹ The second White Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Anthony Johnson Brooke (also known as Charles Brooke), head of state of Sarawak 3rd August 1868 – 17th May 1917.



Figure 1. Ranee Margaret Brooke (second from right) wearing the Sarawak Malay women costume (Brooke, 1913, pp. 156)

Renee described how, “...*A gauzy scarf of white and gold, obtained from Mecca, covered my head, and a wide wrap of green silk and gold brocade was flung over the left shoulder ready to cover my head and face when wearing the dress in my walks abroad.*” (Brooke, 1913, pp. 27). The stories of the Rajah’s lady and royal ladies of the Brunei Sultanate wearing golden ornaments mixed with *Selayah* have lifted up the image, status and luxurious values of *Keringkam* (Abang Josmani et al., 2012). The *Selayah Keringkam* brings a priceless sentimental value which is regarded as a family’s heirloom inherited to the next generation. Basically, the *Selayah Keringkam* is a part of traditional Sarawak’s Malay woman suit worn with the embroidered *Baju Kurung Songket* and the additional piece of *Songket* (embroidery skirt) hang cross over the shoulder to the side of the body like a jacket, shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. A complete traditional Sarawak Malay woman suit. (Source: Authors)

Besides, it is believed that the arrival of Islam in Sarawak, which was recorded in the 1470s, is also linked to the expansion of Islam in Brunei. Hence, the norm of wearing the headscarf is reflected by the Islamic influence among women in Sarawak (Baerveldt, 2015). According to Sarkawi and Rahman (2016), there are different forms of traditional headscarves known as *Selayah* (Malaysia) and *Melayah* (Indonesia). Specifically, *Selayah Keringkam* in Sarawak is also found comparable to other weaved art in Peninsular Malaysia (*Tekat*) and *Tudong Mento* of Riau Island in Indonesia (Sarkawi & Rahman, 2016). There are some similarities observed in the making/producing techniques of *Selayah Keringkam* and *Tudong Mento*. However, the differences are identified on the embroidery motives, possibly due to the different cultural variations (Rozaimie, 2018) and socio-ecocultural influences (Berry, 2002, 2010) between Malaysia and Indonesia. Nevertheless, the originality of the *Selayah Keringkam* and when it started in Sarawak has remained unknown. Thus, it becomes necessary for local historians to unfold the mastery for future references. This paper particularly brings attention to classify the differences between *Selayah* and *Keringkam* and clarify the influences on the interest of the *Selayah Keringkam* among the young generation today.

The Traditional Sarawak Malay Woman Headscarves

There are two types of traditional headscarves generally identified among Sarawak Malays (recognized through the headscarf's length). The long shawl is known as *Selayah* and a shorter veil is identified as *Keringkam*. Both, the *Selayah* and *Keringkam* are the hand-made headscarves which are weaved using gold or silver threads; skillfully produced with creativity, and imagination; to be worn as part of accessories when attending weddings or official events. On the other hand, Salem (2006) stated that the three forms of *Keringkam* include shawl (*selendang*), scarf (*tudung*) and veil (*selayah*). In the old days, a shawl was a long piece to cover the head and shoulder and dangled at the side to one's waist. A scarf was widely worn by Muslim women to cover their head and dangled at the side to the chest level. Meanwhile, the veil was a shorter version of the scarf. It is square in shape and was worn to cover the head but dangled at the side to just above the shoulders. The embroidery motives of the *Keringkam* are influenced by the natural environment, that includes bamboo shoots, beans, clove, creeping roses, orchids, and jasmine. Aside from that, there

are other simpler motives like canal and light. Producing a piece of *Selayah Keringkam* may take approximately three to five months depending on the weaver's expertise, the size of *Keringkam*, the materials used, and the motives. The details on the making of *Selayah Keringkam* has been documented and discussed by scholars such as Salem (2006) and Abang Josmani *et al.* (2012).

Notably, this paper argues that the *Selayah* and *Keringkam* are two different forms of headscarves unlike the identification of *Selayah Keringkam* as discussed earlier. The *Selayah* is weaved heavily with embroidery threads, and the *Keringkam* is weaved using silver or gold threads. Particularly, the literature and media writings are mostly highlighting the luxurious identity of *Keringkam*. Selling price, a piece of *Keringkam* would reach MYR 10,000.00 (USD 2,300.00) depending on how elaborate the gold/silver embroidery is. The financial value of *Keringkam* has literally overshadowed *Selayah* from the women's choice of a garment with the *Keringkam*'s high perceived social status (Salem, 2006; Abang Josmani *et al.*, 2012). As a result, the *Selayah* has identically lost its popularity among the public. Besides, the scholars' (example, Salem, 2006; Sarkawi & Rahman, 2016) definition of the exact form of *Selayah Keringkam* is found inconsistent with the general public's perception. In addition, this paper strongly believes that the initial concept of *Selayah* is adapted into the identified *Selayah Keringkam*. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical evidence or historical documents that show the distinction between *Selayah* and *Keringkam* as argued in this paper.

Over time, the skills of producing these types of traditional headscarves are diminishing. The younger generation is no longer interested in using them, and, in a way, this action contributes to the reduced significance of the cultural identity of the Malay women in Sarawak. The number of active experienced and skilful *Selayah Keringkam* weavers especially in Kuching is stated to be incrementally decreasing (Salem, 2006; Abang Josmani *et al.*, 2012). It is hard to see *Selayah Keringkam* being exhibited in the open shelf on the apparel store. The *Selayah Keringkam* nowadays is exclusively custom-made, ordered directly from the weaver. The disappearance of the *Selayah Keringkam* would endanger the sustainability of the sacred social identity among Malay women in Sarawak. A thoughtful exertion is required to re-brand the *Selayah Keringkam* to be commercially intact like *Batik* and *Songket*.

Delineate from the above arguments, there are two premises posited in this paper: (1) there is a need to differentiate distinctive features between those two types of headscarves as different forms of identity icons amongst the Malay women in Sarawak, (2) it is important to solicit the essential requirements in sustaining the interest among young generations to commercially produce the *Selayah Keringkam*. Moreover, this paper is intentionally reviving the interest in the production and use of *Selayah Keringkam* as modern ladies' wear. The following section discusses the concept of cultural identity; literally represented by the *Selayah Keringkam* amongst the Sarawak Malay women. The study's methodology and discussion on the posited premises are next to be discussed. The future of *Selayah Keringkam* and the conclusion end the writing.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

Basically, the identity is conceptualised as "... *relational, context-dependent, fluid and always in a process of becoming ...*" rather than fixed or established ways-of-being or appearances (Hall, 1992; Hall & Du Gay, 1996). The interaction between individual and social influence processes collectively creates value and norm of identity. Beliefs, events, creations, and histories create the identity and inheritance into a certain form of constant revolution (Hall, 1990). Meanwhile, a group is collectively sharing notions of normative group behaviour which established specific social (cultural) identity through inter-subjective cultural representation (Chang & Jetten, 2015). The dynamic of normative behaviour through interactions, perceptions, attitudes, and norms will define or modify the inherent social perception.

Social (cultural) identity is established through a relational process which formed, reformed and transformed (Hall, 1992; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) according to the surrounding cultural discourses. The evolution of material culture intricates the effect of norms, discourse or socialisation among the members of the culture. The characters that represent the identity of the group are used to describe the sense of belonging and distinction from the rest of the society. The cultural identity is evolved as a result of socialisation and customs acculturation with the current socio-cultural demands (Berry, 2002; Berry, 2010). In the

multiracial society of Malaysia, the preservation and restoration of social identity are vital to cultural awareness over the root of origin, especially among the young generation. Diversification of culture enhances the uniqueness of national identity and demonstrate the harmonisation of intercultural relations in this country (Rozaimie & Ali, 2014). Apparently, the modernisation and globalisation of communication channels and mass media have simplified today's living, particularly in terms of cost-effective and time-saving. The changes impact on cultural identity substituted with newly formed of material culture, value, and behaviour (Hall, 1990, 1992). Thus, the tradition has changed to which the initial social identity is conserved as honouring the past.

Sustaining the social (cultural) identity is getting depleted due to the preservation cost, usability and its applicability in modern living (Siivonen 2007). According to Nurse (2006) “*...protection of cultural identities and the promotion of cultural industries as valid transition goals towards sustainable development because of the ways in which cultural content shapes and communicates the identity, values and hopes of a society*”. Hence, reassessment of social identity in the light of new situations or experiences requires innovative inventions reckoning with the inherited values and perceptions. Significant cultural differences and distinctions among members is a fundamental issue of recognition to the social identity (McNay, 2008). It is a crucial feature of social life and the actual need for cultural materials revolving. Certain subjects on the form of capital, respect, honour of reputation and prestige need to become the basis of being acknowledged. Maintaining and reproducing culture is subjected to judgements at a spectrum of social levels, from individual to family, the community, and religious group concerned.

The social (cultural) identity is not seen to sustain itself for generations without proper preservation of texts, rites, monuments and other material culture at the cultural heritage location (Nurse, 2006; Siivonen, 2007). The initial institutional cultural communication (recitation, practices or observance) might change with the passing of time. Reappearing and restoration of ‘loss’ cultural identity are dependent on the function of the cultural memory of the society members (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). As mentioned earlier, this paper argues that the Sarawak’s traditional headscarves of *Selayah Keringkam* are two different pieces of material culture to which the initial notion of *Selayah* has

disappeared, and has been replaced with *Keringkam* and thereafter, known as *Selayah Keringkam*. Notably, the *Selayah Keringkam* has been acknowledged as the social (culture) identity of Sarawak traditional Malay culture. Therefore, this paper phenomenologically frames the cultural memory to unfold the argued premises on the differential form of the said traditional headscarf. Furthermore, the depletion of interest among the young generation to inherit the making of *Selayah Keringkam* has contributed to the ‘loss’ of social identity. Hence, the preservation of the distinctive material culture and adaptation to the young generation are vital for the sustainability of the Sarawak’s traditional culture and its social identity.

Considering the above issue, this paper attempts to capture the attention with regards to the need to enact the tradition and to find cultural acceptance within the different spheres. Thus, the main premise posited in this paper is that there is a distinction between the *Selayah* and the *Keringkam*. Secondly, this paper will disclose the reasons for the diminishing interest among the young generation over *Keringkam* headscarf. The following sections discuss the methodology to prove the premises as coined.

METHODS

This paper assumes the transcendental phenomenology enquiry to restore the understanding of the distinctive nature between the *Selayah* and the *Keringkam*. The Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh), is a philosophical approach to qualitatively seek to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994). The TPh focuses on people’s meaning of the lived experience of a concept or phenomenon. In particular, the transcendental phenomenology enquiry is about “*the understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge*” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 14). However, this paper does not attempt to establish a substantive theory or test a conceptual model or hypothesis, nor does it provide a generalization of the fundamental understanding of the differences between those two material cultures. Essentially, this investigation is also known as the preliminary work to discover the agreement on the issues as postulated.

Specifically, the empirical transcendental phenomenological embodied in this paper is “*to experience the comprehensive descriptions which provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essences of the experience*” (Moustakas, 1994). The experience began after the first author was given his grandmother’s pieces of headscarves (believed that the headscarves are more than 50 years old) by his aunt. The given headscarves triggered the interest to explore the significant difference between the *Selayah* and the *Keringkam*; how the name emerged, and the extend of culture evolved over time in Sarawak.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the two pieces of headscarves. As aforementioned, the *Selayah* (on the left) is weaved with more embroidery threads, while the *Keringkam* (on the right) is usually weaved using either silver or gold threads. It initiates to show the differences between these two as posited in this paper. Hence, the gathered data consisted primarily of extensive critical observation and multiple interviews. The unstructured interviews were conducted using a non-formalised interview schedule in which in-depth conversations were developed from casual encounters with individuals (Burgess, 1995).



Figure 3. Selayah



Figure 4. Keringkam

This paper is conscious of the saturation of knowledge (Bertaux, 1981: p. 37) on the feasibility of sampling (Seidman, 2006). This paper considered a preliminary point in exploring issues on the distinction between *Selayah* and *Keringkam*. Hence, to preserve the fundamental understanding of the distinction between *Selayah* and *Keringkam*, data were collected using a purposive selection of participants and the critical criteria of selection are that one must be a Sarawakian Malay woman (a native Sarawak’s Malay woman who has personal collection of *Selayah* *Keringkam*). A total of six unstructured interviews were conducted. Two

interviewees are active *Keringkam* weavers identified as Weaver A and Weaver B and the other four were elderly Malay women, aged more than 60-years old.

The unstructured interviews were conducted by adapting the ‘framing’ technique (Ember, 2009; Dumbravă, 2010). The interviewees were shown the two pieces of different headscarves (*Selayah* and *Keringkam*) as in Figure 3 and Figure 4 and were then asked to freely narrate their memories, stories, perceptions, and understandings about those materials. The interviews were recorded on tape. According to Polkingshorne (2005), the narratives or stories are the data which exclusively stand as an untainted description of the experiences. Furthermore, the framing technique employed in this paper is perceived as a method to reminisce the cultural memory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) particularly to decipher the possible differences between *Selayah* and *Keringkam*.

The interviewees’ narrations were then illustrated and contextualized to identify possible levels of indexing codes relating to emerging themes and patterns. The indexed codes are subsequently checked to identify any single instances or recurring patterns. A diagram of depletion interest among the young generation is drawn, and the possible elements are labelled based on the understanding of the contextual narration data. The data gathered were important to dismantle the highlighted premises in this paper. The description of the findings in this paper is well represented and sufficiently justifiable for the methodological validity (Winter, 2000) and credibility (Patton, 1999). The following section illustrates the findings and discussion on the posited issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As *Selayah Keringkam* becomes a state-of-art among Sarawak Malay culture, a normative description as illustrated in the social identity theory is vital to ensure a pure identity descended to the next generation (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Chang & Jetten, 2015; Hall, 1992; McNay, 2008; Nurse, 2006). To restate the premises, this paper posited that there is a distinctive difference between *Selayah* and *Keringkam*. Besides, there is a need to solicit the essential requirements in sustaining the interest among

young generations in the production of the *Selayah Keringkam* and its uses in modern ladies' wear.

Differences between Selayah and Keringkam

Weaver A and Weaver B agreed that there is a possible existing difference between the forms of the traditional headscarves in Sarawak. The link between *Selayah* and *Keringkam* as argued in this paper remains questionable. Both weavers were found facing difficulty to recall and had blank answer to whether the *Selayah* was widely used by the women in Sarawak. According to them, it is possible that the headscarves exhibited to them were kind-of 'special ordered for a personal collection of the limited edition of headscarves' which belongs to the headscarves collector. Hence, this statement refers to the speculation that the headscarves (*Selayah*) were hand-made by a person with the capabilities in embroidery sewing skills. This embroidery skill is known by locals as *ndero* or *ketok*. The weaver first needs to draw the pattern on the fabric before sewing the pattern with thread using the sewing machine. Apparently, the *Keringkam* is stitched barely by hand due to the size of the gold/silver thread used. Therefore, there is a possibility that the use of *Selayah* has been replaced due to the luxurious *Keringkam* value and status; and the proper wear of *Hijab* (Weaver A). On the contrary, there is also a possibility that the *Selayah* is created as a substitution to the *Keringkam* (Weaver B). The contradictory opinions which humorously matched the chicken-and-egg metaphor, happened due to the non-existence of proper historical evidence or documents. Thus, in seeking for justification and confirmation on the historical events, the cultural memory of the society members (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) is critically needed.

The other participants also have limited knowledge and life experience knowing that there are distinctive features between *Selayah* and *Keringkam*. Most of them are socially knowledgeable about silver/gold threads *Selayah Keringkam* as a preserved identity of the traditional Malay woman headscarf in Sarawak. Other forms of headscarves (other than *Selayah Keringkam*) are believed to be not originated from Sarawak or made for a limited personal collection. These cumulative opinions by other participants add support to the rejected first distinctive premise as argued in this paper. Additionally, Weaver B described it as a simple scarf shown

in Figure 5 and recorded as a preferable headscarf for daily wear among Sarawakian women in the 60s and 70s.



Figure 5. Scarf worn by women in 60s and 70s. (Source: UiTM Sarawak's archive)

Weaver B also exhibited another type of thread embroidery shawl worn by women in the 60s and 70s as shown in Figure 6. This shawl is considered as a fashionable option of headscarf traditionally worn by the Sarawakian women in the past. This 0.5m x 17m shawl proves the embroidery skills of the weaver. Note that the weavers in the past used the manual foot or hand press *Singer's* sewing machine for their embroidery works. Thus, intense sewing and embroidery skills are required to produce a quality headscarf as shown in Figure 6. This type of shawl is found rarely worn by women nowadays.



Figure 6. Thread embroidery shawl worn by women in 60s and 70s. (Source: Weaver B)

Hence, the first premise conceived in this study has not been conclusively proven, i.e. in identifying the distinction between the two pieces of the headscarves. Subsequently, this statement invites further study, on a larger scale, to empirically prove the distinctive premise. However, the findings of this study tentatively offer a picture to define the types and forms of traditional Sarawakian Malay headscarves. In supporting the headscarves' definition by Salem (2006) the findings show there are three types of the Sarawakian Malay traditional headscarves namely veil (*selayah*), scarf (*tudung*) and shawl (*selendang*). The veil shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 is used as the main distinctive premise of the present study. The Weaver B proves that the scarf is a small headscarf as shown in Figure 5, while the shawl is shown in Figure 6. With these three definitions of traditional headscarves, therefore the women have an option either to wear a thread embroidery headscarf or a gold/silver embroidery headscarf, depending on their usefulness and types of events attended.

Future of *Selayah Keringkam*

The second premise of this paper is to explore the diminishing interest among the young generation over the *Selayah Keringkam*. The analysis of the data from the interviews revealed the number of elements that evidently influences the interests in *Selayah Keringkam*, as illustrated in Figure 7.

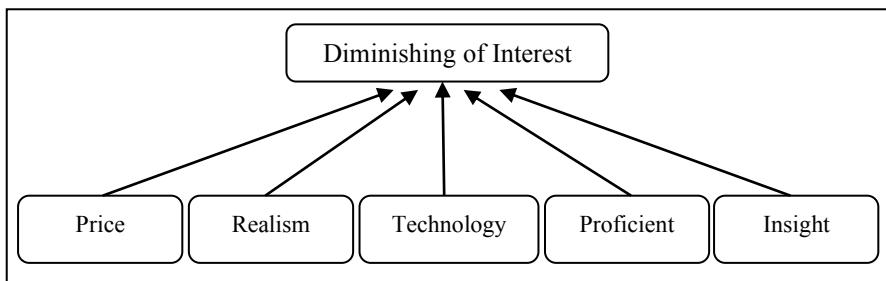


Figure 7. Elements contributing to the depletion interest among the young generation

Firstly, the pricing of *Keringkam* is a critical element. All interviewees agreed that most of the young people cannot afford to

purchase *Keringkam* by themselves. As mentioned earlier, the selling price of *Keringkam* can reach RM10,000 per piece (Abang Josmani *et al.*, 2012; Salem, 2006). A piece of simple embroidered *Keringkam* veil comes with RM3000.00 price tag per piece. It should be noted, that the interviewees (Weaver A & Weaver B) were reluctant to reveal the actual cost of making *Keringkam*. Notably, the selling price is inclusive of the material cost and time spent to weave the headscarf. According to Salem (2006), the silver and golden threads are imported from India and there is only one supplier in Kuching. Besides, it takes at least a month to weave a complete headscarf (depending on the size, yarns and embroidery motives). Hence, this reinforces *Keringkam*'s status as a premium headscarf, and, thus, not for daily wear.

The second identified element is labelled as 'realism'. This element is significant especially in the context of choosing *Keringkam* as a headscarf. The exclusive look of *Keringkam* is only suitable for special occasions and not for daily use. Furthermore, the *Keringkam* requires special care to ensure the lifespan of the silver or golden thread weaved on a *Keringkam*. For instance, it requires, among others, folding skills. Initially, *Keringkam* used a base fabric of soft and sheer material which was easy to slip-down while wearing and required a headscarf pin or clip. The use of a pin or clip is worrisome as it might damage the base fabric. Besides, it requires a dry-clean care and the material should be avoided from long exposure to direct sunlight. Specifically, the transparent fabric of gauze, voile and gossamer fine are hardly available nowadays in Sarawak (Daud, 2001). This not-so-easy care of *Keringkam* has led, to some extent, to the depletion interest among younger generations to own *Keringkam*. However, valuing and acknowledging the traditional *Keringkam* as a cultural heritage is more crucial as a foundation for sustainable culture development (Nurse, 2006, Siivonen, 2007). Culture development is inclusive of the future headscarf innovation and creation; and conserving the cultural identity sustainability.

Thirdly, to the best of the interviewees' knowledge, there is no sewing machine available in the market to make the *Keringkam* commercial. Hence, traditional weaving techniques and processes are the only options and this element contributes to the exclusive craft of the *Keringkam*. This lack of modern technology in *Keringkam* weaving also leads to the next reason that contributes to the depletion interest among the

younger generation in the *Keringkam* making i.e. proficiency of the weaver. This paper identified less than five active, skilled and experienced *Keringkam* weavers in Kuching. Furthermore, most of them are more than 50-years of age and their health conditions have become obstacles in continuing the art of making *Keringkam*. Undeniably, there are young weavers but, according to the interviewees, their key agenda is the return rather than preserving the art of making the veil itself.

Arguably, *Keringkam* has a significant influence in Sarawak's Malay culture. Apart from being a woman's headscarf, *Keringkam* is also perceived as a symbol of status, kinship connexion and part of protocols in a wedding ceremony. For example, in an old tradition of Sarawakian Malay wedding, the bride would send a rolled mat and a *Keringkam* to the bridegroom's house as a 'signal' that the bride is ready to start the ceremony (Salem, 2006). Nowadays, most of the Malay communities, especially in the urban area, prefer to hold a joint wedding reception (*bejemuk*)² with western-influenced protocols; and it often take place in the town hall. This move is mostly due to the constraints of time, cost, place and manpower. Thus, the old practices were perceived as insignificant. In general, the simplicity of today's living is found to have strongly replaced the complicated and elaborated traditional protocols. This shift results in the social identity of culture being cast aside as reflectance of folklore.

Predominately, the manufacturing sector in Malaysia is reported to account for RM63,684.8 million in 2017 where RM42,141.8 million comes from domestic investment (MIDA, 2018). Among others, the textile and textile products industry gains approximately RM15.3 billion in Malaysia's total exports of manufactured goods. The manufacturers need to develop and improve the efficiency processes through automation and focus on higher value-added products which are crucial in the competitive exports markets. The international customers demand product quality, new designs and product differentiations. Despite ready-to-wear garments contributing to the industry, Malaysia is known for its delightful variety of traditional handicrafts. Specifically, in the craft of textiles production, the art of weaving, batik printing and embroidery works are manifested in diverse design, styles and decorative products. Although batik and

² In traditional Malay culture, the wedding reception is held separately at the bride and bridegroom parents' house; same day or different depending on the distance.

embroidered materials (especially *songket*) dominate the industry, other products of indigenous such as *pua kumbu*, *tekat* and headscarves are constantly emerging. Therefore, the idea of *Selayah* per se possibly brings more commercial innovation in the headscarf creation. Internationally, India is synonymous with Sari, Japanese with its Kimono and Chinese with Cheongsam to name a few; hence, it is not impossible to make Sarawak known globally via its *Selayah Keringkam*.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite a declining interest in *Keringkam* due to modernisation and simplification reasons, it still receives overwhelming responses, and values, especially among women in Sarawak. The *Keringkam* continues to be a choice and as a sign of formality; worn at cultural festivals and during a special occasion, especially during solemnisation ceremony in Malay weddings. Although limited in production, the preservation of inherited pieces of this material culture is vital to keep a sacred social identity. In addressing the two premises stated earlier in this paper, the research limitation and direction for future research would probably give new insight for clarification.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of this paper are hampered by the small number and homogeneity of the participants. As aforementioned, this paper is narrated through in-depth interviews only with few selected respondents via purposive sampling. They were selected because they are knowledgeable about *Selayah Keringkam* and their input was methodologically framed in this paper. Unsupported premises are expected and that it invites future research in this matter. Secondly, in highlighting the reasons behind the depletion of interest among the young generation, the responses received for this paper only came from the view of one generation only (i.e. those who are 50 years old or older). The findings did not take the views of the younger generations themselves. Thus, future research may consider taking the views of a wider demographic cluster, especially the young generation themselves, and institutions like social-club, cultural society, schools, libraries, government and non-government organisations. This

inclusion will certainly add values and enrich the understanding of *Selayah Keringkam* and social identity in Sarawak.

Concluding Remarks

Southeast Asia particularly is the home of a wide range and version of textiles which is firmly rooted from the indigenous cultural materials. Some of the making techniques, materials and designs utilised age hundreds of years unrecorded and mystical past. Some of those have disappeared due to not having documented shreds of evidence on the mystical restriction. Some of the cultural materials are still in use but are considered sacred or exhibits by the collector. Thus, preservation and restoration of social identity are significant as tutelage for future generations as well as for establishing a national identity. Various institutions and individuals are demanded to put efforts in creating awareness among the public to keep and/or preserve Sarawak's cultural inheritance. The material culture is supposed to be a blueprint for dynamic innovation, invention, and design. Take the example of Sarawak-born renowned international designer, Datuk Tom Abang Saufi, whose fabric creation and collection are plated with colourful batik and native Sarawak's motifs. The *Keringkam*, on the other hand, has been rather static, as it is restricted by old technology and motifs.

To conclude, there is an urgent need to prevent, at the earliest possible time, the loss of knowledge in the arts of making this material culture: *Selayah* or *Keringkam* or *Selayah Keringkam*. It is an essential service to sustain the local culture. Public awareness on the existence of *Selayah Keringkam* and effort to commercialise this material needs to be invented to keep this sacred social identity alive. Exhibition, conference, forum, symposium and academic workshop are possible avenues to expand the knowledge about cultural preservation, especially among the younger generations. To emphasize, sustainable development of cultural heritage is a “...critical catalyst for identity, nation building and reinforces and expands the cultural confidence of former colonial societies and their diasporic communities” (Nurse, 2006). Hence, conserving a *Selayah* and *Keringkam* is valuable as a material heritage with ‘easier’, better information and knowledge sharing and understanding.

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