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## INTRODUCTION

**ARTE: Art and Expression** is a biannual book chapter, published under collaboration of Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM Perak Branch with Galeri Al-Biruni under the supervision of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. 'ARTE' is an amalgamation of english word 'Art', and malay word, specifically Perak slang 'Ate' which translate as conversation starter. 'ARTE' uses the concept of book chapter that platform art enthusiasts to express their inner-creativity in the form of literacy conjecture

## VISION

Art and expression as aspiration towards stylistic and artistic practices

## MISSION

- To enhance the culture of research and academic publication among academician and artist for international recognition
- To promote intellectual, cultural and knowledge sharing through artistic expression
- To celebrate the diversity and differences in arts practices thus creating and intellectual platform for artist to express their interest in art

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# TRADITIONAL MALAY COUCHED EMBROIDERY “TEKAT BENANG EMAS” AND COMMUNITY IN PADANG CHANGKAT KUALA KANGSAR, PERAK

*a chapter by*

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## **Social & Culture of Craftsman at Kuala Kangsar Perak**

Sungai Perak is the second longest river system in Peninsular Malaysia and flows along 400km of the river basin that consists of traditional villages, architecture, and royal tombs that hold many mysteries in the long socio-cultural and economic history of the traditional Perak Malays. Kuala Kangsar’s cultural inheritance from the past is significant because it is the evidence of human activity from traditional settlement through periods of colonialism to the present day in the built and natural environment (Mohd SabriZaa & Sufian, 2009). Malay art, architecture, and civilization have often been the inherent manifestation of its culture and belief. For example, Ubudiah Mosque is one of the most recognized monuments in the district of Kuala Kangsar and “Seni Tekat” is one of the oldest crafts that has been practiced since the 10th century by the Malay community for their royal ornaments, as a luxurious and prestigious textile. A few researchers also have general references to the different types of art and crafts from Perak and have emerged as a topic of interest in the last few years. The art and crafts of this region represent one of the most significant achievements of the civilization, which is part of the legacy of Perak Malay craftsmanship (Kamaruddin Z. et al., 2013).

Many traditional activities can be seen among the settlers living along Sungai Perak, including Padang Changkat, most of which were inherited throughout the ages. The crafts that were very synonymous with the place and have been inherited until now are “Tekat Benang”, “Labu

Sayong” and “Keris” (Iron Work). “Tekat” was originally made for royal kin as their palace ornaments, wedding dresses and also formal clothes. Until now, it’s been inherited to be one of the most significant crafts in Kuala Kangsar, especially Padang Changkat, as a community economic resource. “Labu Sayong” is also one of the cultural values that have been inherited from the Minangkabau races as a tool to store drinking water during their travels from place to place. “Labu Sayong” has now become one of the significant crafts in Kuala Kangsar as several replicas of it have been placed around the Kuala Kangsar region. Iron smith, or so-called “Tukang Besi/Keris” are also famous in the Kuala Kangsar community and have been there since the 18th century. One of the professional iron smiths is En. Abdul Mazin bin Abdul Jamil and he has been hired by the royal kin as their official “Keris” maker since the 19th century. He also once made ‘Keris’ for Tuanku Abdul Halim at the 14th coronation ceremony (Bernama, 2016).

Most of the craftsmen in Padang Changkat are still active but have become educators to the new generation to ensure that social and cultural value is preserved in the future. Some of their descendants have inherited the skill of craftsmanship and are carrying on the family legacy (Going Places Magazine, 2019).

## **Background and History of “Seni Tekat” Embroiderers Community in Kuala Kangsar**

The origins of Malay embroidery (Seni Tekat) are uncertain, but after the opening of new trade routes between the Malay Archipelago and

China and through the golden age of the Malacca Sultanate, there has been refinement in the field of art and aesthetic appreciation as well as the flourishing of arts and crafts movements, resulting in the exchange of decorative styles and techniques

throughout the Malay Peninsula (Tanah Melayu). There are several types of embroideries, however “Tekat timbul” with metallic (gold or silver) thread is among the prominent arts at Royal Town Kuala Kangsar and this place has acquired the distinction of being a major producer of “tekat timbul”, also known as “tekat benang emas”. These embroideries of metallic (gold or silver) threads are couched over a cut template to create a relief effect of beautiful motifs on velvet fabric. The beauty and finesse of this craftwork naturally made it sought-after by members of royalty and nobility (Yusof, S., & Mahamood, M., 2015).

The history of “tekat benang emas” is interwoven with our country’s history. During the 15th century, it is said that the embroidery style was introduced to the Tanah Melayu local community by traders from the Middle East. Later on, after Malacca fell in 1511, Sultan Mahmud Shah’s retreat led to his descendants establishing new ruling dynasties in Johor and Perak, where later on the centres of embroidery started to flourish in these states (Kamaruddin Z. et al., 2013). In Perak, the art of embroidery is believed to have been fostered in the Palace of Kuala Kangsar by the Raja Permaisuri of Perak, Raja Nuteh Aishah wife of Sultan Idris Murshid A’izam Shah) and has been creating skilled embroiderers since then. “Tekat benang emas” has significantly influenced the royal family in Kuala Kangsar since 1874, during the reign of the 26th Perak Sultanate. At that time, the expertise in making embroidery was dominated by the royal community. As an example, during the reign of the Perak Sultanate, Raja Nuteh Aishah was a great weaver, and she frequently presented her artworks as gifts to the sultanate and royal relatives. Non-nobilities were prohibited from using this embroidery due to its classy status. However, since the 1960s, “tekat benang emas” has become commercialized, which means all statuses can enjoy this royal and classy embroidery (Habibah et al., 2009).

Today, in Daerah Kuala Kangsar, a craftsmen

community under Projek Perantisan Kraf Warisan specialized (specializing) in “Kraf Tekatan” led by Hajah Azizah Binti Mohd Yusof has been established. Hajah Azizah Binti Mohd Yusof is a Kuala Kangsar-born “Juru Tekat” who has been given the title ‘Adiguru of Tekatan’ Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia in 1995. She inherits the embroidery skills from her mother, Puan Mahiyah Abdul Majid. Her mother and Allahyarhamah Puan Ainatisah Bilal Din (‘Adiguru of Tekatan’ in 1987) are significant figures who had influenced and injected strong motivation for Azizah to pursue this path, luring clients to her intricate craftsmanship from both locals and internationals such as Germany, Japan, United States, Singapore, and Brunei. Azizah has been awarded the title ‘Tokoh Kraf Negara 2018’ for her outstanding contribution to preserving Malay embroidery art. Currently, the art has been passed on to her students, including her daughter, Puan Mardziah Abu Kassim, and the legacy is still ongoing in the community in Kampung Padang Changkat, Bukit Chandan, and Kuala Kangsar (Ramli, H. et al., 2021).

Demonstrations and workshops are an important strategy to raise awareness of the art that is significant to the local community, local culture, and heritage. Hopefully, more involvement from the local community including men and women, will allow them to have benefits in terms of knowledge and enhance their remarkable art skills, which in turn will improve the quality of life by having a better economy, and social culture (Thani, W. J. I. B. W. A., 2021).



Figure 1: *Tepak sirih and Bantal berina*  
Source: Wan

Nowadays, the artwork extends to i) handicrafts, ii) ceremonial items for weddings, engagements, and birth, iii) decoration on clothes, and iv) household items like curtains, cushions, bedsheets, and tablecloths, which sell for the

price range between RM200 to RM6000 The process of carving patterns on the cardboard can be expedited by laser cutting, and but to maintain the finesse quality



Figure 2

of its art, it essentially requires hand-sewn embroidery (Going Places Magazine, 2019). These processes need one (1) to two (2) weeks to be completed. Although the result is not as easy as it looks, the process can be shortened, and the product can be diversified due to technology and demand. It seems “tekat benang emas” has the opportunity to be competitive, resilient, and soon will confidently stand in the eyes of the world.

### **Tools and process of making ‘Tekat’ in Kuala Kangsar**

In the past, this Malay embroidery, especially “Tekat benang emas”, was adorned by royalty and notable communities because it is well-known for symbols of wealth and high status. Until today, the craft was in high demand from the palace, particularly for royal wedding and coronations accessories. Through the years, technological advancements such as computerized embroidery machines have helped in the embellishment of golden embroidery, and preserve the aesthetics and authenticity of the craft. The hands-on approach is still commonly practised by the “Seni Tekat” community in Kuala Kangsar. Technically, three main steps in the process of making this delicate craft are the preparation of the template, or “Mempulur”, the making of

“kayu pemedang” and “Menekat”.

“Mempulur” is the crucial part of this Malay embroidery as it determines the motifs or patterns that need to be done. “Juru tekat” will sketch the desired pattern on thick paper before the motifs are meticulously cut using sharp cutting tools to ensure it comes out smoothly to achieve a beautiful base guide for the embroidery design. Malay embroidery predominantly features geometric and floral motifs, and these motifs are usually arranged in single formations (Susun tunggal), in crockets or sprawling formations (Susun sulur bayung) or in intertwined formations (Susun Awan Larat).

Along the way, the stretcher frame, or “kayu pemedang” made of wood, is being set up. It is used to stretch the fabric in place while the embroidery process is ongoing. A white thin fabric base will then be placed on the wooden stretcher frame before a layer of soft and thick velvet is layered up on top of it to create a double layer of fabric. To start the embroidery process, or ‘Menekat’, the chosen template is placed on top of the soft velvet fabric. The embroiderer will use gold or silver thread that is twined on the ‘Cuban’ (two bamboo strips crossed together used to hold the thread role and threaded across the “mempulur” (motifs template) and the main thread is then sealed and tied up with white coloured thread to secure. After all the templates have been followed through, the gold or silver thread is firmly knotted and tied down on the velvet fabric. It is said that the size of the needle also plays an important role in ensuring the quality of the embroidery.

### **Malay Couched Embroidery or “Tekat Benang Emas” and the Economic of Kuala Kangsar.**

Since 1970, Kuala Kangsar benefited greatly from the status of Royal Town, and the economic growth for Kuala Kangsar was mainly based on agriculture, industries, and tourism since this town contains a lot of historical and cultural value for Malay Royal families. The tourism industry also makes an economic contribution to Kuala Kangsar from craft products such as pottery and Malay couched embroidery or “tekat benang emas”.

Kampung Padang Changkat at Kuala Kangsar, Perak is well known for its local craft since the old ages, which is from the eighteenth century. Besides pottery known as “labu sayong”, “tekat benang emas” is a symbol of pride for this place. With a population of more than 1000 people at Kampung Padang Changkat, they are also known as active traders of artistic embroidery art. A significant economic contributor, the legendary businesswoman known as “si tangan emas” named Hajjah Azizah Mohd Yusof is known as a “tekat” figure who spreads the embroidery knowledge and artistic abilities throughout the community. She was born in Kuala Kangsar in 1938 and was named National Master Craftsman in 2018. She was invited to deliver “tekat benang emas” demonstrations, overseas. It’s shown that this artistic embroidery is recognized internationally because of its high value due to the uniqueness of local heritage and the high quality of craftsmanship.

It is estimated that around 40 “tekat” embroiderers spread across Kuala Kangsar, and this is aligned with Economic Development Strategies for the District of Kuala Kangsar in year 2035. The strategy is to develop the tourism sector as the main economic driver of Kuala Kangsar. It’s spurring a positive start to “tekat benang emas” in the tourism sector because the art is accepted by locals and internationals. With the power of technology, “tekat” products have the potential to be commercialized, where a few processes can be shortened by using creative software in designing the patterns and cutting the complex patterns can be done easily with a laser cutter. Also, with the borderless world nowadays, the demonstration can be delivered on an online basis. Due to this, knowledge and artistic skills can easily spread and expand globally. However, not many people know about the potential use of this artistic embroidery art that involves high skill craftsmanship and has world recognition. If the “tekat benang emas” can be embroidered on a t-shirt or blazer and then officially worn on a daily basis, it will certainly diversify the usage of this artistic embroidery. Therefore, if the demand for “tekat” products were to increase, it would obviously require more supply.

It seems that economic development strategies are

potentially successful, and will improve the socio-economic conditions of the local community at Kuala Kangsar, ultimately improving Malaysia’s economy. Perhaps, through a successful legacy, this reinforcement eventually saw a shift in the form of economic activity among the Malay community in Malaysia (Abd Wahab, N. 2013). This village, Padang Changkat, has other craftsmanship such as a blacksmith community which also generates an income for villagers and maintains the family tradition of the art of craftsmanship. Figure 3 shows the craft industry in the village of Padang Changkat, “tekat” embroiderers, and “pandai besi” blacksmiths.



Figure 3: Signboard Industry Craft in One District Kuala Kangsar

Source: Wan

### Community Padang Changkat in future

Padang Changkat is a small community located behind Istana Iskandariah Kuala Kangsar, Perak. This village has settlements lined up along the river of Sungai Perak. The people living in this village, generated by people who served sultans long ago. Right now, these people bring their talent to craftsmanship such as Malay art “Tekat” and blacksmiths. This community has a strong, good relationship with the neighbourhood and has connections between families living in the surrounding village.

Hajah Azizah Binti Mohd Yusof has influenced her daughter to do craftsmanship and open a shop at Chandan Puteri near Padang Changkat. Our young generations who are interested in

this craftsmanship can also take courses from NCER or KEMAS on ‘how to make “tekat”’ in Kuala Kangsar, Perak. Generally, this “tekat” is still widely used in Malay traditional wedding ceremonies in Perak and Selangor as certain families still like to continue their wedding ceremonies in a traditional setup and manners. Government organization such as Kraftangan Malaysia still has shown great efforts in promoting “tekat” in Malaysian tourism industry. They have provided a shop under krafttangan Malaysia named ‘My Shop’ where people from local and overseas can order any traditional collections from embroiderers, for their wedding event. In the future, the community in Padang Changkat will still strongly be promoted as a village for “Tekat” embroiderer because it has been their culture and traditions among the families living there to generate economic and making socio-cultural efforts by opening their doors for public and tourist to visits.

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*nar*

*Setuju.*

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