

## SONGKET: THE LINKAGE BETWEEN HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** Malaysia is well known for its diversity of cultures and rich heritage. Songket weaving is one of the old crafts that remain popular to this day. Songket is a fabric traditionally woven using silk or cotton, with metallic thread weaved in to form songket motifs. In other words, this means thread is removed or pulled from the back of the weaved cloth using gold or silver thread. The Songket is synonymous with the Malay community, and in Terengganu, making songket is a legacy from the past that is still widely practiced. Interestingly, the songket has also become one of the many symbols used for tourism-related products, representing multi-racial Malaysia in the eyes of the world. This can also be seen in buildings around Malaysia that display the songket motifs. This unique cloth is usually worn as formal wear, such as wedding dresses, costumes for traditional dancers, and robes used in convocation ceremonies. Until today, there are still many songket weavers that produce quality songket as required by nobles, dignitaries, and ministers for use at special ceremonies. This paper aims to identify how far the songket has evolved to become a tourism product in Terengganu and whether this legacy continues among the younger generation. This study uses qualitative methods of face-to-face interviews as well as analysis of secondary data. The results of this study show that the songket draws tourists to Terengganu, and at the same is a source of income for entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** Songket, Heritage, Tourism, Terengganu, Malaysia

### Introduction

Malaysia's tourism industry has continued to grow on the country's prominence as a world-renowned tourism destination in 2016. This can be seen from statistics in which 26.8 million tourist arrivals were recorded, contributing RM82.1 billion to the country's economy. Overall, the tourism sector in Malaysia has maintained its position as the third highest contributor to Malaysia's Gross National Income in 2016 with RM73.3 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2018). The main reason why foreign tourists are interested in visiting Malaysia is their interest in the traditional Malay lifestyle. They enjoy seeing and learning about the Malay traditional lifestyle, heritage, customs and environment. In addition, heritage products bring essential added value for the tourism industry (Abi Sofian and Azman, 2010).

Terengganu is located on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, facing the South China Sea (Tourism Terengganu, 2017) and divided into eight administrative districts, namely Kuala Terengganu, Kuala Nerus, Besut, Setiu, Dungun, Kemaman, Hulu

Terengganu and Marang. Terengganu has many cultural personalities and is endowed with various forms of the arts. Visitors and tourists come to Terengganu to experience the different way of life. Terengganu is also rich in customs and traditions, and the preservation of these customs can be seen in the lifestyle of the people, its arts and crafts, and its traditional cuisine. Terengganu is considered a tropical paradise where visitors can surely revive their senses while exploring glorious nature and rich diversity of traditions and heritage (Terengganu Tourism Department, 2015).

Three main components have been identified by the Terengganu state government to be developed in the tourism sector in Malaysia, namely heritage, culture and environment (Abi Sofian and Azman, 2010). Terengganu is rich in heritage products that can be promoted to tourists. This can be in the form of crafts including batik, silk, carving, woven materials, music and copper products (Terengganu State Tourism, 2004).

**Table 1:** Number of Craft Entrepreneurs According to State and Craft Segmentation in 2016

State	Textile	Forest-based	Metal-based	Earth-based	Various crafts	Total	%
Perlis	9	13	6	-	3	31	1
Kedah	38	58	34	5	22	157	3
Langkawi	7	14	1	3		25	1
Pulau Pinang	19	10	15	3	8	55	1
Perak	41	40	37	122	6	246	5
Selangor	99	41	22	17	21	200	4
Negeri Sembilan	26	59	14	4	18	121	2
Melaka	26	31	20	6	23	106	2
Johor	33	41	14	5	21	114	2
Pahang	38	47	18	2	4	109	2
<b>Terengganu</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>12</b>
Kelantan	324	75	74	13	12	498	10
Sabah	192	1085	255	30	395	1958	38
Sarawak	227	333	100	17	177	854	17
Total	1547	1959	654	229	721	5110	100

Source: Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (2017)

Based on Table 1, Terengganu is ranked first among textile entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Typically, the development of the market size in the travel industry

has a relationship with local heritage product demand in Terengganu. This led the state government to emphasise the importance of heritage, culture and environment to promote tourism products to foreign tourists (Abi Sofian and Azman, 2010). In 2016, Malaysian Handicraft achieved RM508,251,684.45 in sales value where textile (i.e. *songket*, batik, silk) is the highest contributor with sales value of RM239,784,324.65, which is 47.2 percent from the total value (Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, 2017). This shows that the handicraft industry, especially textile industry is important in the development of the country.

The tourism sector also helps the lower income group improve their standard of living through various activities, such as handicrafts, homestay programmes and becoming tourist guides, and, at the same time, it increases the small and medium industries in the society. This can be proven by the fact that in 2016, there was manpower of 10,404 people engaged in this craft industry where as much as 54% was in the textile craft sector followed by 20% in the forest-based sector and the remaining in the field of earth-based metal-based and various crafts (Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, 2017).

Abi Sofian and Azman (2010) revealed that the prime programs (flagships) under the tourist sector in the Terengganu State Tourism Promotion include:

- i. Concentrating on the craft industry in terms of heritage and culture, e.g. *songket*, traditional boats, copper, batik and, wood carving.
- ii. Renovation of Pasar Payang to become a Craft Market.
- iii. Highlighting the activity of research and development in tourism and the creative industry.
- iv. Building an incubator centre and craft complex like Kompleks Kraf Ukiran Kayu, Kg. Raja Besut and Pusat Tenunan serta Tembaga, Kg. Ladang.

To ensure that the national tourism sector continues to move forward, Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism and Culture has embarked on the transformation plan "Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan 2020 towards 36: 168," which was introduced by the former Prime Minister, the Honourable Dato' Sri Haji Mohammad Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia was appointed as the leader to encourage innovation and creativity to boost the tourism industry and help reach the

target of 36 million tourist arrivals and RM168 billion in tourism revenue by 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, 2011). Thus, this study aims to identify how far the *songket* has gone in becoming a tourism product in Terengganu and whether this legacy continues with the younger generation.

### **Literature Review**

*Songket* is handmade silk or silk woven cotton with gold threads. *Songket* is a Malay word that removing thread from the back of the weave using gold thread or silver thread (Md. Nawawi, Aziz, Legino, Ahmad and Ismail, 2002; Mohd Yatim, Borhan, Ahmad, Abdul Samad, 2006). This is not a method of making cloth using embroidery, as the creation of motifs as decorative elements in the cloth is done during the weaving process. The process of producing *songket* involves the process of lifting the *songket* weaving thread on loose thread. This means that the weft thread is inserted into ordinary gold thread (cotton and silk) to produce a motif on *songket* (Haziyah Hussin, 2004).

Based on June (2007), there are eleven steps in the *songket* weaving process and this process has remained unchanged for centuries:

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

Until now, the origin of *songket* and its entry into Terengganu is still a mystery. This is because history shows that during the period of the Malacca Sultanate, *songket* could be found in Terengganu. However, some have argued that *songket* comes from the


Middle East, while some others have said that it comes from the Malay Archipelago such as Bugis and Riau (Norwani, 1989). The activity of *songket* production was very well known and very rapid during the reign of Sultan Mansur (TM 1726-1798). Interestingly, the making of *songket* has become one of the economic resources for the population of Terengganu (Abdullah, 2005).

According to Malay history, it used to be that *songket* clothing could only be worn by royalty, court officials elected by the sultan, and those who have received awards and titles. There were strict rules for wearing *songket* clothing. Those who failed to comply could be severely punished. Nowadays, this unique cloth is usually worn as formal wear, wedding attire, costumes for traditional dancers, and the robe during convocation ceremonies. Besides that, *songket* also be used as decorative items and gifts.

Most *songket* weavers in Terengganu consist of women. Although these small operate in the villages, there are some businesses that have their own manufacturing factory where they hire *songket* weavers by supplying raw materials such as yarn and others. Since *songket* production is carried out fully by hand by the *songket* weavers, it takes a long time to complete a piece of *songket* cloth. In contrast, *songket* made using the machine takes a shorter time to complete but lacks subtlety and uniqueness.

The following motifs are used in different patterns, depending on where they are placed and repeated. Most *songket* fabric motifs come from flora and fauna. Among the popular motifs are eight petals or mangosteen, *bunga tampuk kesemak* (sharon fruit), bitter gourd seeds, small sour fruit, date, cloves, mangosteen fruits, sun ray flower and bamboo shoots (Md. Nawawi, et al., 2002). The main patterns of *songket* are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** The six major patterns in *Songket*

No.	Type	Description
1.		Full pattern ( <i>corak penuh</i> , e.g. teluk berantai)

2.		Isolated or scattered pattern ( <i>corak bertabur</i> )
3.		Horizontal stripe pattern ( <i>corak jalur melintang</i> )
4.		Vertical stripe pattern ( <i>corak jalur menegak</i> )
5.		Chess board pattern ( <i>corak Petak Catur</i> )

6.		Triangle shape pattern ( <i>corak Pucuk Rebung</i> )
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Source: Md. Nawawi, et al. (2002).

### **Methodology**

This study used qualitative research methods involving techniques of data collection, such as interview with the experts on the *songket* makers as well as review of previous documentation. These methods were chosen to complement one another in order to satisfy the objectives of this study. A total of five *songket* makers were chosen as respondents. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to gather the information from the respondents. Semi-structured interviews are ‘non-standardised’ in which the researcher uses a list of questions or themes to be answered as a guide. However, the arrangement of questions may be different depending on the flow of the conversation. Besides that, other questions can be added to the list depending on the suitability and the situation (Saunders et al., 2009; Gill et al., 2008). This method was deemed more appropriate because the researcher could add more questions or modify the existing questions according to the circumstances until all the questions were answered.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Based on the interviews with the *songket* entrepreneurs, the results of this study indicate that the legacy of the *songket* business in Terengganu is inherited by the younger generation. Usually, the older generation working in this business will hand down their business knowledge to their heirs so that the business can continue growing even after they die. These efforts will ensure that their business will survive when their children eventually take over the operations. This passing on of knowledge is important in a business because evolving a business takes time. However, not all generations now enjoy this weaving activity because the weaving process requires a lot of patience and patience.

The results of the interview also show that competition is high between *songket* operators in Terengganu as their numbers is increasing. In addition, the demand and sales of Terengganu *songket* has declined, especially after the Indian *songket* entered the Malaysian market. This was perhaps due to Terengganu's *songket* price being too high. This is because the labour cost for making *songket* in India is cheaper than in Malaysia. However, in terms of quality, Terengganu *songket* is better than other *songket* (Norharizan Hassan, 2018). All of this is particularly worrying because many traders and businessmen make *songket* as their family's main source of income.

Terengganu tourism is synonymous with the *songket* industry compared with other states in Malaysia. However, the interview results show that the *songket* industry is only able to attract domestic tourists to come to Terengganu. International travellers, however, come to Terengganu not to buy *songket* but to visit interesting places in Terengganu. This may be due to the lack of promotion abroad of the textiles industry of Terengganu, especially *songket* and batik. There is no promotion or advertising about *songket* on media such as the television. Tourists are then not aware of the existence of this industry.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study show that the handicraft industry, especially *songket*, is a legacy that can be featured and is not out of date. This is because, to date, the Malaysian society still uses *songket* for formal wear especially involving celebrations and festivals. Because there is still a need for *songket*, therefore *songket* production is still needed to meet the demand. Healthy competition between manufacturers and entrepreneurs in Terengganu can make this industry grow and become one of the tourism attractions in Malaysia.

To ensure that the industry is constantly evolving and growing, entrepreneurs should always look for opportunities to increase their sales such as through online sales and directly through suitable boutiques, shops and programs. However, the government or agencies that are directly involved with the industry also need to intensify efforts to promote *songket* around the world so that foreign tourists get to know more about Malaysia's *songket*. In addition, the government needs to promote the *songket* even more through mass media and social media, so that the use of *songket* is highlighted and this legacy is never lost.



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