

Reviving tekot

The exquisite craftsmanship of tekot embroidery will be lost forever if no concerted effort is taken to preserve it.

RUSLINA YUSOFF writes.

TEKOT is the art of embroidery using gold thread on velvet material. It is also known as *suji timbal* or raised spine embroidery because the embroidery is filled with *mempulur* (an inner core), made from either rattan, bamboo or cardboard.

According to Dr Siti Zainon Ismail's book entitled *Rekabentuk Kraftangan Melayu Tradisi*, laymen were prohibited from using garments embroidered with *tekot* unless they were specially given by the royal family.

Then again, *tekot* only makes its appearance on special functions such as weddings, engagements, the birth of a child, circumcision or when a child graduates from her Quran-reading class. The art used to be exclusive to royalty, especially in Perak. *Tekot* is believed to have been first introduced in Malacca and later spread to Perak, Johor and Pahang.

The art is still very much alive in Kuala Kangsar, Sayong, Parit and Teluk Intan. Highly valued because of its exquisite craftsmanship, it is beyond doubt that *tekot* not only has tremendous potential as a commercial product but should also be preserved as a national heritage.

Unfortunately, *tekot* is relatively unknown outside of Perak and Selangor.

Siti Zainon, dean of the Department of Malay Letters, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, said, "We have numerously recommended that there be a national policy

on culture as there are policies on education and finance, for culture to be better appreciated. She hopes that these recommendations would be enforced as an Act. Until it becomes one, she can only laud the bold move by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjung Malim for taking the lead in promoting traditional culture and arts, with the introduction of a Bachelor Degree in Craft Design (Rekabentuk Kraf).

"We have inherited a lot of traditional arts and cultures but our people regard them as either insignificant or trivial," she said, and audaciously blamed "the Malays for killing their own culture." Siti Zainon, who has written numerous books on traditional arts and crafts, insists that the appreciation of culture begins in the primary schools, otherwise we are prepared for a gradual death of the crafts. Her opinion is shared by Assoc Prof Najib Nor, dean of Performing Arts in

UiTM, Shah Alam.

"Lose this heritage and you lose your identity."

Whilst the economy of Indonesia is nothing to shout about, the

development of its vastly diversified culture is something that we

could learn from. Najib said, "Children are first taught to master their local dances and songs before taking up ballet or piano lessons. Culture is given prominence in Indonesia and it comes within the purview of the Education Ministry."

Being culturally illiterate may explain why our people at the KLIA airport are naively marketing the American version of the sarong, which are long pieces of fabric to be tied at the waist, as a local craft. Traditional sarong is fabric that has to be sewn together to be tied at the waist. "To see our people selling yards of material under the guise of the 'sarong' really disgusts me," uttered a disappointed Siti Zainon.

There should be serious steps taken to instil a love for our's culture. Siti Zainon's hopes for the growth of culture and arts were dashed when she discovered that universities offering degrees in fine arts preferred teaching modern arts.

"Perhaps we could give the flagging cultural interest a boost. Dangle a carrot in front of the mule."

Najib favoured the Government giving out grants to help revive the *tekot*. He suggested organising camps, where *tekot* craftsmen can share their skills with students, who, hopefully, may want to pursue it further. For it to succeed, he cautioned that these camps should not be competing with the existing producers, otherwise it would result in an overspill.

Then again, these talents should be given the right kind of nourishment.



EXQUISITE ... Misroni admiring a kebaya with tekot patchwork

"Shower them with the right kind of encouragement and incentive, not just giving them the chance to bask in the limelight.

Tekot designers or craftsmen also need to know their "intellectual property rights", just like singers, actors and writers. Najib said he had heard of several complaints from designers and craftsmen, who had been shortchanged by the authorities. "Such an attitude would only thwart the growth of talent."

Siti Zainon, on the other hand, finds this very idea repulsive, putting it down as an additional obstacle. "Why should we need incentives? We should be doing it for ourselves, not for anybody or anything else."

She is also against substituting the original *tekot* motifs with contemporary designs. "Imagine an outsider claiming that we have borrowed their designs! I would turn red-faced if foreign tourists were to inquire where our Malaysians motifs are. While she is all for creativity, it is imperative that the traditional elements be retained.

She argued that the Indonesians had successfully penetrated the international market without modifying their traditional designs, so why do we have to bow to foreign pressure?

Najib feels that borrowing ideas from others makes our designs gaudy, loud and overwhelming. To ensure that the designs are modern yet contemporary would mean that *tekot* designers must also have a passion for culture.

Tekot has always been hand-made, hence the limited production. Is mechanisation the solution to meeting market demand? Is this the reason why hotels are lukewarm to the idea of having *tekot* tapestry — because whilst it is possible to computerise the designs, mechanisation is bound to adversely affect quality. (*Tekot* is usually woven on wooden frames using a winder for twining the thread.)

Siti Zainon, for one, has no objection to the mechanisation or computerisation of the works, provided that the quality is retained, similar to that of the mechanised Sumatran songket.

What she detests is superimposing mechanised *tekot* over hand-made *tekot*, which she equates as "humiliating the craft."

Another way to keep the *tekot* alive is not to limit the needlecraft to the costly white gold threads, which have to be imported from Japan and China or to restrict the fabric to velvet.

Tekot use should be diversified and not be limited to bedspread, pillows and scatter cushions. "Why not embellish them on smaller decorative items or into fashion accessories which tourists can take home," suggested Tokoh Budaya Negara Azah Aziz. Her hopes may soon materialise for Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia is already venturing into applying *tekot* on traditional kebaya.

The private sector should not just be a passive onlooker. It should play an active

role in reviving the craft. In Indonesia, it is compulsory for banks to adopt a craft as their foster project and they are also required to contribute to a craft fund. On the local front, it has been suggested that banks send officers for art appreciation courses, who in turn could recommend traditional crafts to grace their walls instead of the reproductions of Western painting.

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UNIQUE ... Tekot food covers



FOR MODERN USE ... Some decorative items