

BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES **FLAIR** cover story

LEGACY STITCHED IN GOLD

A traditional art form originating from Perak, *tekak* is having a revival moment. **Nadia Badarudin** meets one of the artisans in Kuala Kangsar

"It isn't easy to learn *tekak* because it's complicated. It requires a lot of passion, patience and years of commitment."

Azizah Adam



I LIKE *tekak benang emas* (gold thread embroidery), a traditional Malay textile art unique to the northern state of Perak.

I grew up in Kampung Sungai Rokam, Ipoh, where my late grandmother was a well-known wedding planner. Apart from her signature specialty dishes for weddings like *rendang tok* and *acar*, she crafted wedding gifts and designed the *pelamin* (dais) reflecting the cultural heritage of the state. Bridal accessories embroidered in gold thread are essential.

My grandmother introduced me to the classic beauty of *tekak* when I was in primary school.

Although she did not have the skill to do *tekak*, she always had fresh ideas to improvise the motifs and roped me in to sketch the designs before getting the accessories custom-made in Kuala Kangsar.

I always found the raised, intricate motifs stitched on velvet intriguing. This is an art that I love to watch artisans doing.

TEKAK DEFINED

Tekak benang emas, commonly known as *tekak timbal*, involves the stitching of imported gold threads on velvet fabric.

What makes this special is that the motifs (which are the crafter's interpretation of nature and geometrical shapes) are first created on a pith called *mempular*.

The pith is made from thick paper (called elephant board) and serves as an underlay that makes the patterns look "raised" and stand out, according to Malaysia Craft Information.

Tekak used to be exclusively for members of royalty and nobility. It is slowly being re-branded by local fashion designers as an in-demand vintage feature in today's fashion and accessories business, moving away from merely being an art element in special Malay occasions, traditional clothing and furnishing.

FROM THE PALACE

To see how *tekak* is made, I made a trip to Kampung Padang Changkat, Bukit Chandan in Kuala Kangsar to meet Azizah Adam, a *tekak* craftswoman.

Azizah has been making and teaching the skill for almost 40 years in her village, which is known for various heritage handicraft and skilled craftsmen.

Her clients are mainly royalty and her outstanding works have featured in many royal occasions related to the Perak sultanate.

For instance, she made the exclusive



A complete *pelamin* set.

dais and bridal accessories, including a layered mat called *tikar langkat*, for the royal wedding of then Raja Muda Perak Raja Dr Nazri bin Shah (now Sultan of Perak) and Tuarika Zara Salim (now Raja Permaisuri Perak) in 2007.

"The royal artform was passed down to commoners through villagers who worked in the nearby Istana Iskandariah. I learnt the skill from my husband's grandmother who used to work in the palace," says Azizah, the founder of Azydar Enterprise.

She is skilled in all three types of *tekak* — *tekak benang emas*, *tekak perada* (gold foil applique embroidery) and *tekak gubah* (couched embroidery) — but her specialty is *tekak benang emas*.

"To me, this type of *tekak* is the most traditional in terms of workmanship and motifs. It's a legacy that I want to preserve," says the 56-year-old entrepreneur.

FINE WORKMANSHIP

Observing the master crafting her latest work, I can say that the traditional art requires passion and is only meant for those with a lot of patience.

"It isn't easy to learn *tekak* because it's complicated. It requires a lot of passion, patience and years of commitment," says Azizah who sometimes spends more than 12 hours to complete a piece.

"Good hand coordination is also crucial especially the left hand because the needlework is done from the bottom of the *penிடang* (a wooden frame that holds the piece of work in progress).

Before the needlework, cutting out the design of the *mempular* on thick paper using a cutter and a pair of small scissors can be tedious and painstaking.

The process was more difficult previously because the *mempular* was made using layers of newspapers. "Although now we can laser-cut

the design, I prefer the traditional way because laser-cut *mempular* makes the finishing less refined."

For such hardwork and skilled craftsmanship, it is not surprising that a set of basic bridal accessories comprising pillows, cushions, fans, *tepak sirih* (betel leaf container) and *clor* (mat) costs RM15,000. A complete *tekak dais* can cost as much as RM150,000.

MODERNISING THE ART

Modernising the traditional designs, motifs and materials is among the challenges that Azizah faces in her quest to preserve the textile art and yet make it more fashionable.

"There is a demand to use other types of threads which are more colourful. But I don't agree, so I stick to gold or silver thread," she says.

"*Tekak benang emas* without gold thread is just an ordinary piece of



Top: *Tekak benang emas* wedding accessory items on red velvet.

Improvised versions of *bunga raya* and *pucuk sirih*.



Left: Gift boxes with *tekak* designs in gold and silver threads.

NAZHA HANDBAGS

TODAY, Raja Puan Mahkota Perak Raja Datuk Seri Nazhatul Shima Sultan Idris Shah will be rolling out the *Tekak Nazha* handbag collection.

It will be launched by Raja Permaisuri Perak Tuanku Zara Salim at at Mayang Sari Ballroom, JW Marriott Hotel, Kuala Lumpur at 2pm.

Pouches for handphones and tablets.



A diary cover embellished with a *tekak* design.

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embroidery."

She also tries to engage young handicraft designers to help her improvise the traditional motifs to make the art more appealing to modern society, especially the young generation.

However, it is quite challenging because many designers do not have the basic knowledge and skills to make *tekak*.

"When it comes to design improvisation, most of the time the idea looks promising on paper. But when it comes to practicality, it turns out otherwise due to the designers' lack of basic knowledge and skills in *tekak*-making," says Azizah.

Adding more products and varieties is also high on her agenda; for that, she feels blessed that her second child, Nor Faizatul Faziha Mohd Rasdi, joined her in the enterprise three years ago.

Apart from making *tekak*, Faizatul, 33, helps her mother with promotion and marketing.

She is the brain behind Azydar Enterprise's new product range which includes gift boxes, diary covers, *tekak* canvas paintings as well as handpouches.

Her fresh approach has landed them a collaboration with a local fashion accessory brand where they supply *tekak* for handbags and clutches.

THE FUTURE

For Azizah, *tekak*-making goes beyond earning a living or providing job opportunities for villagers. It has become a responsibility for her to ensure that the heritage is well-preserved for the next generation.

"However, I have yet to find more youths who are willing to learn the art and take *tekak* to the next level," she says. "Perhaps they are unaware of its promising potential."

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