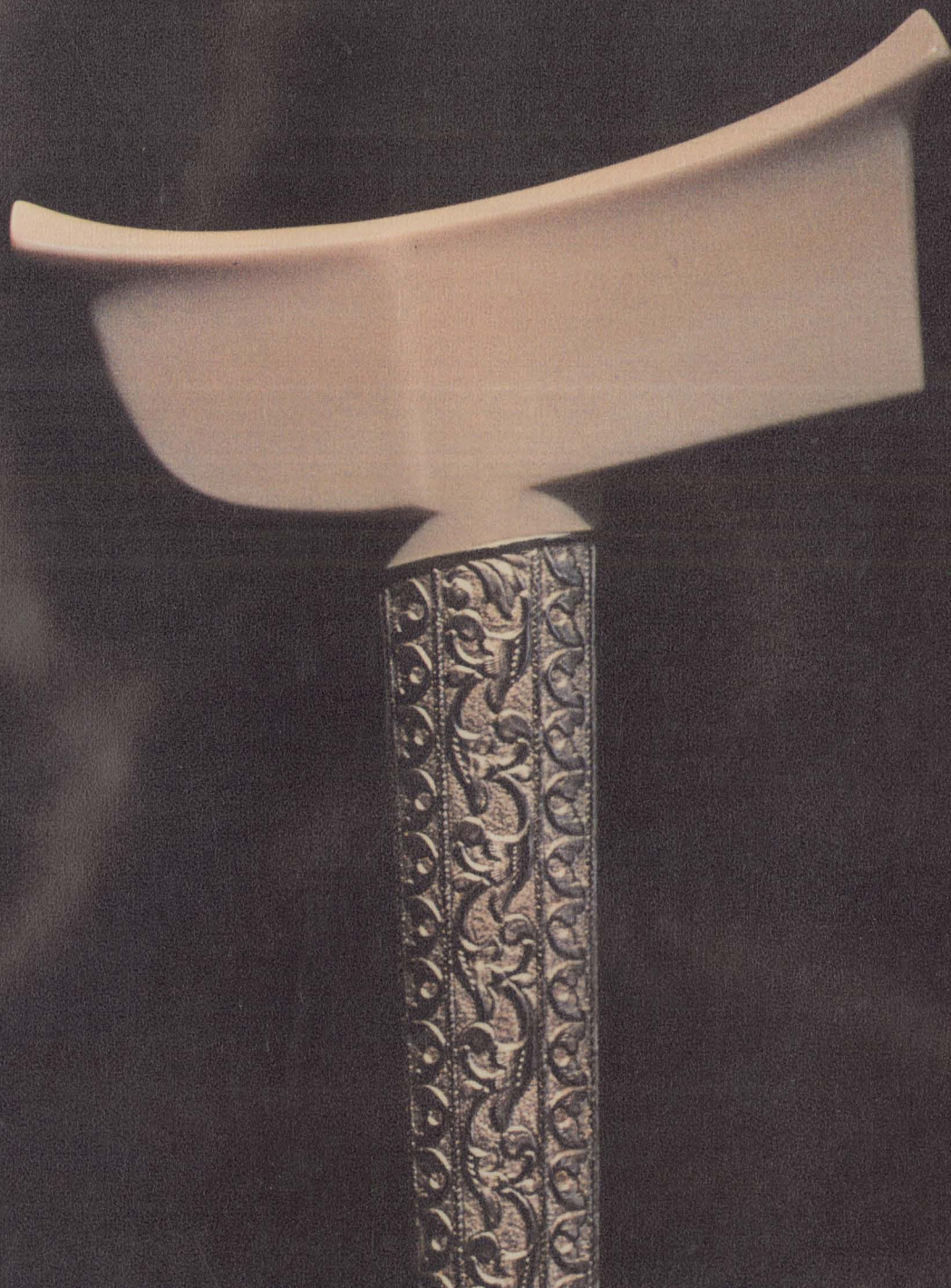


Mubin Sheppard

# Living crafts of Malaysia

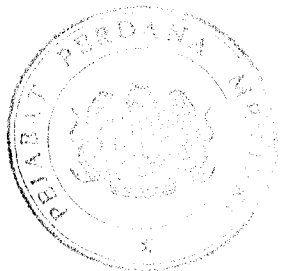


# Living crafts of Malaysia

by Tan Sri Dato Mubin Sheppard

Photographs by Harri Peccinotti

*YAB Dato Seri  
D. Kechather  
with every good wish  
Mubin Sheppard  
13. December 1978.*



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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When an author prepares his list of acknowledgements he usually begins with the names of individuals who have given him particular assistance, and continues with the names of institutions, ending with a few words of thanks to the publisher.

But the circumstances in which this book has been written and the benefits which are likely to result from its publication prompt me to reverse the order.

Traditional crafts, indigenous to this country, have rarely attracted the attention of writers, even when they were still receiving royal patronage and had reached the peak of artistic perfection. The opportunity to do so during the leisured period early in the twentieth century was lost, and the Government-sponsored *Papers on Malay Subjects*, 1906 — 1910, ignored the subject. Nor did it receive more than passing notice in Sir Frank Swettenham's *British Malaya* (1906; revised 1929 and 1946), where it was given only two out of 172 pages, or in Sir Richard Winstedt's *The Malays — A Cultural History* (1947), in which he allotted only 14 out of a total of 190 pages to the subject. Only now, in the last quarter of a century, which has created the age of science and technology, which in its turn threatens their very existence, is a book being published which is entirely devoted to the traditional crafts of Malaysia, supplemented lavishly with photographs in colour.

For this the reading public in Malaysia and elsewhere owe a great debt to Mobil Oil Malaysia, which has taken the initiative by commissioning this book.

I therefore wish to begin these acknowledgements with a grateful tribute to the management of Mobil Oil both here in Malaysia and in the United States for choosing this subject for their newest prestige publication in a series which includes *The Living Culture of Nigeria*, *The Living Treasures of Japan*, *The Art of the Arab World*, and *Art and Archaeology in China*.

For reasons already stated, much of the information contained in the eight chapters which follow was gathered from individual craftsmen and women by word of mouth.

They were unfailingly patient and sweet tempered, although some of my questions betrayed an almost total ignorance, and their replies represented information which in craft circles is common knowledge.

My friend, Abdul Latif bin Long heads my list of benefactors. He is not only an enthusiastic authority on every aspect of wood carving and its traditions, but his expertise extends to the shaping of dagger-hilts and sheaths, and to the botanical origin of many flowers and leaves which can be found on ancient carved wooden panels.

Hajjah Ngah, the doyen of three thousand Trengganu silk weavers, dispensed unrecorded treasures from her store of memories, ornamental and historical, some of which I was slow to comprehend. Weaving is not only a complicated craft, but it employs Malay words which are unknown to the uninitiated.

Hamzah, the famous puppeteer, proved that the hands and fingers which manipulate a hundred shadow play puppets nightly, can be equally skilled in drawing, cutting out, and painting the leather figures by day.

Awang, the silversmith who applies original designs directly to the surface of silver, revealed as much by his reticence as by his replies about the difficulties that surround a talented individual without a regular patron.

Abu Bakar, whose craft was described in some detail by the late A.H. Hill in his paper on the kris and other Malay weapons, published in the journal of the Malaysian branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1970, preferred to protect a few of the secrets which have been passed down from ironsmiths six centuries ago.

Zainab, gently protesting the limitations of her age, still remembered and plaited patterns with screw-pine which members of the present generation of mat-makers prefer to forget, because of their complexity.

Hashim, the master of kite-making, *malgre lui*, finds inspiration in the solitude of deep-sea fishing, and projects his

empathy into objects which will soar to a height of five hundred feet.

Mat Yusof, maker and decorator of bird cage-traps, seemed unconcerned by the thought that he had no rival and probably no successor, and spends eight hours a day creating objects which must, in time, become "museum pieces."

The experience of accompanying a photographer of Harri Peccinotti's eminence on assignment to these craftsmen's homes and workshops came as an unforeseen educational bonus.

The Director General of Museums, Kuala Lumpur, and his staff provided supplementary craft work during the photographic stage, and were at all times most helpful.

In Sarawak, where I was a stranger, my research began at the Museum where, with the permission of the State Government, the curator, Mr. Lucas Chin, and several members of his staff, gave the greatest assistance. When the time came to photograph a long-house wedding, for the better display of beadwork in decorative use, Madam Nyipa Bato, whose home is in the seventh division, made sure that the ceremony was correct in every detail. The curator of the Sarawak Museum and his staff also provided expert guidance and interpretation at the Ng Lee Huat pottery, where father and son disorganised their work schedule to suit our visits. Mr. K.F. Wong, distinguished Sarawak photographer, accompanied me to the remote seventh division, where he was already well-known, and proved more agile than I in negotiating tree trunks, laid vertically up high river banks.

Throughout the period of authorship, I was encouraged by the friendly interest of the Board of Directors of Mobil Oil Malaysia.

*Petaling Jaya, August, 1978*

Mubin Sheppard