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The spell of songket

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Pucuk rebung, teluk berantai,
Nama diberi menambah seri;
Kain songket coraknya permai,
Direka penenun zaman bahari.
Dari alam luas terbentang,
Ilham dipetik sangat cemerlang;
Bakat pencipta bukan kepalang,
Seni lama kekal gemilang.

ZAINAB watched, wide-eyed, as her grandmother threw the shuttle deftly between threads of warp. Expert fingers wove and, gradually, the pattern emerged. At last, the loom was transformed. Rather than being hung with a bewildering array of massed thread, it sported a discernible length of cloth: the storied songket, beloved of prince and pauper.

As the old woman rose from her loom and disappeared on an errand, the little girl crept up. Ke-TANG, ke-TANG, ke-TANG! Delighting in the noise of wood striking fabric, Ngah - as Zainab, being second of seven siblings, was known to family and friends - threw the shuttle and manipulated the loom's comb in imitation of her Tok.

Her dexterity, however, left something to be desired.

"I played with that comb until the teeth broke," she recalls with glee. "When Tok returned, she was appalled! 'Who's broken my comb?' she demanded to know. 'Haven't a clue,' I replied."

On Friday, 60-year-old Zainab 'Ngah' Mamat was declared National Master Craftsman, receiving a citation and a cheque in the amount of RM30,000 from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. After 47 years weaving songket, she employs 300 and makes, she says, approximately RM2,000 a month.

"At 13," she says, "I began truly trying my hand at songket. Tok didn't teach me then, though; neither did my mother. Like her mother-in-law, she wouldn't waste energy talking to an ignoramus!"

"By the time I was 16," she continues, "They began to pay attention. Today, I weave tekak tiga and tekak lima. The former is fine, having three threads above to one below. The latter - five threads above to one below - is coarser. But it's also cheaper, and more sellable."

A length of songket can take over three months to produce. If the loom is already set up, though, the cloth will be ready in two. And, if the material is songket penuh, a week will suffice.

"Songket thickly woven with gold thread is quickly done," explains Zainab. "It's the songket bertabur, with just a smattering of gold, that needs more time and effort. Each bloom is done individually, so there's more alternating between gold and silk or cotton threads."

Zainab's five daughters, too, are songket weavers. One, Normah, has inherited her mother's expertise.

"Like my grandmother and mother before me," grins Ngah, "I refused to humour them when they were small. But when they began to show real promise - that's when I started to teach."

Zainab doesn't simply reproduce what she has learnt. She creates new patterns, sometimes marrying them with traditional motifs. From her grandmother she learnt the art of weaving the virtually vanished kain limar (tie-dye). She's also responsible for new techniques, such as songket embroidery in coloured metallic thread, and an underlay of gold

thread which makes even the unpatterned part of a piece of cloth shimmer as it catches the light.

"I don't teach this technique to anyone, though," she dimples. "After all, kita orang berniaga. It just wouldn't make good business sense to give everything away!"

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