

**Songket transformation into contemporary wear**  
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KUALA LUMPUR - Most Malaysians, particularly the adults, know what is 'songket. Songket is a fabric that belongs to the brocade family of textiles. It is hand-woven in silk or cotton, and intricately patterned with gold or silver threads.

The metallic threads stand out against the background cloth to create a 'shimmering' effect.

High quality songket is that usually associated with thick fabrics and full with traditional motifs. With that kind of songket wear, the price is not cheap either.

"But now many are aware of the presence of a lighter, more attractive songket that draws the attention of the younger generation. The songket's quality has also been greatly enhanced," said Dr June Ngo Siok Kheng.

Dr Ngo is the Deputy Dean and senior lecturer of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak's (Unimas) Applied and Creative Arts Faculty.

A daughter of Sarawak, Dr Ngo received her master's in science (textile printing) from Philadelphia University, United States. In 2007, she took the PhD in songket weaving at Unimas.

"Some of my Chinese friends prefer their Cheongsam wedding attire to be made from songket. Its motifs and colours are streamlined with the original culture and that of the customers. I am fascinated with this development," she told Bernama recently.

Songket is the traditional Malay fabric woven with gold or silver-coloured threads worn for big occasions such as festivities and weddings.

Years ago, the dress made from songket was only worn by members of the royalty. Now, the fabric is worn at functions that require guests to wear the Malay traditional attire, matching it with the 'baju kurung' and 'kebaya'.

Now the songket exhibits modern and contemporary motifs derived from the mix and blend of traditional, fine and universal patterns.

And the fabric is now no longer restricted and exclusive to the 'songket native wearers and makers' of Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Sarawak but also the choice of fashion designers in the making of handbags, purses, cushion covers and other fashion and home accessories.

Dr Ngo pursues her keen interest on songket by churning out designs apart from experimenting with colours. She also prints the fabric by utilising natural and synthetic songket colours.

The blending of ideas from the songket natives and 'outsiders' including the non-Malays has produced some extraordinary results, as epitomised by Dr Ngo's efforts.

This is what that preserves the beauty of songket.

Dr Ngo also projects her ideas on batik fabrics. In her effort to expand the fabric-making cottage industry, she offers songket weaving classes for the younger generation.

Dr Ngo believes new ideas and innovations incorporated into songket products to revolutionize this heritage would further extends its existence globally.

"Cultures can be reshaped albeit creatively via education and innovation. This effort will not diminish or alter the authenticity of songket which is the nation's pride.

"The experience of traditional songket weavers can be turned into pointers for songket products to be better developed and maintained," said Dr Ngo who studied on the type and colours of songket threads.

And after the long hours taken to weave the songket fabric, the outcome is something not to be denied of its value and quality.

"The end product demands respect. But it has room for improvements," she said.

There are also efforts to modernise the songket weaving tool or 'kei'. The weaving requires full attention and patience of the weaver.

"If it is not done with care, the thread may break. If it is not well rethreaded, the fabric produced will be fragile and easily torn," said the 40-year-old arts and craft aficionado.

Dr Ngo also focuses on threads used in songket weaving.

She said the coating of threads used should be accordance with the present trend and the 'coat' should be of synthetic material.

Durability of the threads, consistency of their colours and variations available in the market are among the factors to be considered in weaving the songket.

"I was involved with the (songket) R&D at Tuanku Nur Zahirah Foundation. At the foundation, we used Lurex thread imported from Europe.

This thread is used by renowned designers including Giorgio Armani," she said.

Dr Ngo said there are various kinds of threads used in weaving songket. Some are elastic, several are 'metallic' while others are reinforced with other natural materials.

"This brings the uniqueness to the songket," she said.

Dr Ngo is also involved in research on songket threads. Her latest research involves threads coloured with natural bleaching agents made from local herbs, fruits and vegetables.

This made the threads more environmental-friendly, she said.

The materials for the natural bleaching agents include the skin of onions, mangoes, tea and tumeric. These mixes were studied to turn them into 'recipes' that can be used as guidelines for the songket industry in Malaysia.

"Colours preferred by songket users and enthusiasts are based on current trends. Now the metallic colours are among those preferred and the choices are no longer restricted to gold

or silver. The metallic colour like bronze is also on demand.

"The motifs too have changed. They are no longer restricted to the traditional types like flowers but interspersed with that designed by the weavers themselves. The pattern is more elaborate and contemporary," she added. - Bernama

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