

# *Skat Limar*

The Ancient Malay Textile

Norwani Md. Nawawi



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TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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# *Dedication*

To my family and the people of Malaysia  
for their dedicated tenacity in preserving Malay traditional textiles  
especially the *ikat limar* fabric...





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*Kain sarong limar bersongket (Weft ikat with gilded gold leaf)*  
(Source: Yusuf Abdullah 2012)

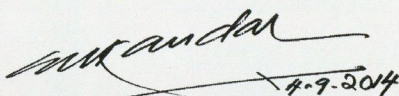
# Foreword

Malaysia is rich with traditional textiles and crafts that its people have proudly and painstakingly made by hand, either as a spare-time pursuit or as a full-time endeavor, both of which helped sustain a culture. One such living tradition is *songket*, one of the most popular of Malay textiles. Since the olden days to this day, *songket* has been sustained as a cornerstone of culture. However, little do the locals know about *ikat limar*, its name is derivative of the technique employed. It is also known as *kain limar*. Beautiful and elegant, *kain limar* has nearly almost become obsolete. Through her research, writing and teachings, Norwani is trying to revive this unique cloth, which was once worn by Malay royalty and peoples of the palace.

In this book, Norwani provides detailed descriptions of the *kain limar* and *limar bersongket*, which were produced by the Malay weavers of the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula. As such, this publication serves as a tribute to the weavers and designers of the past, who were unsung heroes for producing such beautiful works of art that have endured through the ages. This book provides a guidance to those who wish to know more about the historical background of *kain limar*, its uses and more importantly how it was made. It also describes in detail the unique designs, motifs and patterns of *ikat limar* cloth.

Textile champions and enthusiasts have long awaited the rediscovery of the techniques of *kain limar* making, which Norwani has unearthed and revived in the most innovative way. Her new method saves time, as the original process which was laborious and extremely time consuming. This rich, newly found knowledge can now be imparted to a new crop of young weavers and be preserved to ensure the continuance of this unique textile.

Finally, I am confident that the effort of documentation on *ikat limar* cloth and its historical origins will open up new ideas in our effort to revive and sustain this beautiful craft. It will act as a catalyst to revitalise weft-ikat skills amongst our craftspeople and further developed into innovative products for the benefit of our future generation of weavers, designers and textile lovers.

  
4.9.2014

**DULI YANG TERAMAT MULIA TENGGU PUAN PAHANG,**  
TUNKU HAJAH AZIZAH AMINAH MAIMUNAH ISKANDARIAH BINTI ALMARHUM ALMUTAWAKKIL  
ALALLAH SULTAN ISKANDAR AL-HAJ



# Foreword

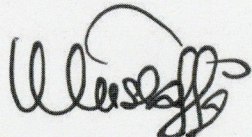
The development of traditional textile in Malaysia is well supported by the Malaysian government with the increase in production to preserve the traditions of hand-woven textile among the weavers. Public awareness of the local tradition of this hand-woven cloth should continuously be made especially to the younger generation.

The Faculty of Art & Design, University Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam is one of the pioneer school of Art & Design in Malaysia. One of the main areas and the earliest department formed in the faculty was the Textile and Fashion Design Department. It is from the teaching and learning of this department that the Textile Design history of the Malaysian textile is embedded.

Thousands of patterns and motifs can be found in the Malay textiles of *songket*, *tenun*, *tekat*, *pelangi*, *kelengkan*, *batik* and *ikat limar*. This book with the aim of reviving *ikat limar*, is indeed a noble deed for the country. The book traces the origin and the history of *ikat limar* in determining how it can be re-materialized for contemporary usage.

Finally, I am optimistic that the development of textile weaving, with its natural uniqueness, will continue to find ways for its beautiful existence. This book will inspire the young generation to learn and to love their culture and tradition that has been outstandingly prolonged for many generations. Exploration and transformation of local textile is, therefore, encouraged to perpetuate the tradition of weaving *ikat limar* for many years to come.

Insyah-Allah...



**PROFESSOR DR. MUSTAFFA HALABI HJ AZAHARI**

DEAN

FACULTY OF ART & DESIGN, UiTM, SHAH ALAM

2014



*Kain sarung ikat limar bersongket*

*(Source: Haji Rahizan A. Rahim Collection)*

# Preface

**M**alaysia is a fast developing country and rich with national heritage including its local Malay textiles. However, I feel so attached to weaving since I am a weaver as well as a textile designer. Letting this lovely creative intricate weaving dissolve in time is unforgivable. Unfortunately, that has been the case with *kain ikat limar*.

For that reason, I feel that I need to do something to revive its designs such as its motifs, patterns and the technique of how it was produced. Perhaps this knowledge of mine would be of assistance in preserving our Malay textile heritage and developing new challenges for the future weavers, researchers and art students.

It is also my hope to educate the public about the existence of *kain ikat limar* that was once the pride in the traditional Malay textile. This would make the public to be aware and appreciate the skills, ideas and technology that have been put in the weaving of this magnificent and majestic piece of work of art that has become our national treasure. With these awareness, knowledge and understanding; I perceive that it would increase the economy of local weaving industry by developing new ideas of contemporary designs in *kain limar bersongket* in the future.

**Norwani Md. Nawawi**


2013



**Figure 1** *Kain ikat limar lepas* that has pattern of *teluk berantai* and *pucuk rebung gigi bota*.

(Source: Terengganu State Museum)

# Introduction

 *ikat* textile is one of the oldest ways of creating a pattern woven into fabric. The technique was developed well before the advent of printing on cloth. It was known in many parts of the world under different names, using different kinds of tools for its production. In Malaysia, the art of traditional weaving produced a lot of beautiful and classical patterns in *ikat* woven materials such as *kain limar* (Figure 1). The name *kain limar* itself has been forgotten and today is seldom heard of. This is due to the fact that production of the fabric ceased after the Second World War in 1945. However it was at one time a very precious fabric to the Malays, conveying beauty, power and status. It was often told poetically in the Malay literature about the quality and beauty of the woven fabric. As illustration, the following was written about 200 years ago in *Hikayat Penglipur Lara Seri Rama Melayu*:-

*Bukannya pakaian raja-raja sekarang,  
Pakaian raja dahulu kala sedia lama,  
Dijemur bertambah basah,  
Direndam bertambah kering,  
Koyak sedikit berjerumat,  
Usahkan kurang, bertambah harga,  
Seratus rial pembeli benang,  
Dititik embun setitik,  
Sehasta panjang benangnya kusut,  
Angin selatan datang menyelesaikan.<sup>1</sup>*

1 Azah Aziz, 1996. "Kain ini Kain Nan Indah" dlm. *Seni Tekstil Tradisi Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Asia, Universiti Malaya.



**Figure 2** *Kain ikat limar* of Malaysia woven in single weft *ikat* usually worn by the Malay nobility and royalty.

(Source: Kelantan State Museum)



This literally translates as:-

It is not the attire of kings at present,  
 But the attire of kings in the days gone by,  
 If it is dried, it becomes wetter,  
 If it is soaked, it becomes dryer,  
 When it tears, it will darn,  
 The value never becomes less, in fact it becomes more,  
 One hundred riyal, the cost of the yarn,  
 With a drop of dew,  
 The length of yarn becomes entangled,  
 Southern wind comes to disentangle.

In most classical Malay poems, the description of the woven fabric used by the nobility or royalty always mentions the fine quality of the fabric and the difficulty in producing it, which resulted in the richness of its beauty and revealed its high status in the Malay society. Among the traditional Malay textiles, one of the finest fabrics was *ikat limar*, which was produced using *ikat* or tie-dye technique.

The word "*ikat*" is a Malay word meaning "tying". According to Loeber and Haddon, Prof. A.R. Hein introduced the word "*ikat*" into the *European Weaving Vocabulary* in 1880 (Loeber, 1916; Haddon, 1936). Later "*ikat*" was introduced into the European language by G.P. Rouffaer, who studied the whole subject of "tie and dye" in the year 1900 and produced standard works on the subject (Robinson, 1969).

In weaving, there are normally longitudinal threads along the loom known as warps and horizontal threads that interweave the warps, known as weft. Related to this, there are three types of *ikat*, namely the single-warp *ikat*, single-weft *ikat* and double *ikat* of warp and weft (which also includes the compound *ikat*). *Ikat* cloth is produced by tying and dyeing the yarns prior to weaving. *Ikat* refers to binding fibres with resist material such as banana stem slivers, rubber tubes or plastic strings, to prevent dyes from entering the fibres. The dyeing process is repeated numerous times with different colours to produce a repeat pattern. After the yarns of warp or weft are dyed, they are then set on the loom and woven. The effect of this weaving forms a blurred pattern, because of the capillary action along the yarn. The bleeding or fuzzy edges that are accentuated during weaving are a typical characteristic of *ikat* fabrics (Figure 2).

Many of the world's ancient cultures produced single *ikat* cloth, such as the warp *ikat pua* cloth from Sarawak (East Malaysia) (Figure 11) and the Sumba cloth from Indonesia.

# *Ikat Limar*

## The Ancient Malay Textile

*Ikat limar* is an ancient Malay weft *ikat* cloth, produced by a highly sophisticated technique which involves using tie-dye weft yarns. *Ikat limar* is documented in classical Malay literature and poems and was regarded as the finest and most valuable textile, and thus it was specially made for the royal court and the nobility during past times. Unfortunately, the *ikat limar* is no longer produced in Malaysia, due to its complexity in weaving and at present no weavers understand the weft *ikat* technique. In principle, *ikat* or resist dyeing involves the sequence of tying and dyeing sections of bundled yarn to a predetermined colour scheme prior to weaving. Thus, the dye penetrates only the exposed sections of the yarn to form the pattern, which is then woven into fabric.

This book represents a systematic study undertaken on *ikat limar* patterns and motifs, using authentic *limar* fabrics from museums, antique shops, local weavers and personal collections. The first section provides a historical perspective on the Malays in Malaysia and their culture which relates towards their textile. What is notable about Malay textiles is that they have kept their value in creating patterns and motifs within their surroundings and experience of everyday life. In Malay textiles various motifs and patterns from the past are still preserved in songket textiles but not *ikat limar* which is also part of the Malay heritage. This first section of the book provides a new historical perspective on Malaysian motifs and patterns for *ikat limar*.

In reviving the *ikat limar*, field trips to countries which are still practising *ikat* weaving were carried out to study the weft *ikat* techniques. Brief comparison studies between the *ikat* weaving in Thailand, Indonesia and India were conducted. In the conclusion of these comparison studies it was ascertained that weft *ikat* techniques could be revived for the making of *ikat limar* cloth. This knowledge has been passed to the weavers of Pahang, and the resulting weaving can be seen in the final section of this book.

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