

The Traditional Pelangi Cloth of Malay Peninsula - A Study of Design and Identity -

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Abstract

Cultural products reflect a living culture and evolve despite being based on traditional forms only. It is known as traditional cultural expression that portray certain culture groups, materials, spiritual and creativity inspired from their living environment that characterize a society. The old Malay community had a close relationship with their surrounding and environment. Sensitivity towards the nature and surrounding environment moved them into creative people. In designing the local traditional textile, role of the motifs, design and product design play an important element in Malay cultural values. This reflects the symbols and philosophy of the arts and culture and thus becomes the identity of the Malay community, which in general practice their culture and tradition based on Islamic culture and religion. Kelantan and Terengganu are the pioneer states for most producers of Malay traditional textiles. In these states the Pelangi cloths, is one of the unique textiles use and inherited by the Malay communities. Base on history, the Malay rulers and Malay nobility used Pelangi cloth as complementing clothing and ornament in attending various ceremonies and customs in their daily life. In this paper will discuss the specific picture of Pelangi motifs, design and its usage in Malay society in Malay Peninsula through its identification aspect of representations. It shows that this textile represent certain insights of Malay customs and identity.

Keywords: Pelangi cloth, motifs, usage, identity

I . Introduction

Malaysia is among the countries in the world that have various types of beautiful, unique traditional textiles which expresses its own identity that has been generated for the last centuries. This textile production has been one of the skilful arts and handicraft activity which fulfils the needs of the Malay community especially in the Malay Peninsula

since ages ago.

They had practised skilful arts in producing textile for daily use by implementing traditional methods individually or collectively. In this textile production process, in the old Malay community in the Malay Peninsula had shown their creativity by the adaptation of motives, designs and textile products that were brought in from other countries. These had then been combined and modified by the local artisan according to the local style and taste (Haziyah Hussin, 2006).

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Referring to the execution of the Malay Peninsula traditional textile, the motifs, the designs and the textiles product as a whole were between the key elements that were interrelated. All these elements were functioning as a symbolism in the expression of the Malay philosophy, artistic values, culture, and their identity.

Rahmah Bujang and Nor Azlin (2002) has stated that, the Malay arts especially it supports the Malay philosophy, picturing the cultural soul, displaying the nature and manifesting the aesthetic values that are distinctive. These in a way are describing the Malay community in Peninsula Malaysia since ages ago inherited the civilization and high culture that is worthy and very significant.

II. Definition of Malay Traditional Pelangi Cloth

According to B. A. V. Peacock (1977), *Pelangi* cloth was the simplest textile product among the three local Malays resists techniques but still have its speciality. *Pelangi* is Malay word which means 'rainbow' referring to the rainbow which has many colours. The production starts with a piece of empty cloth that been tied and bounded either in small or large portions according to the patterns which is determines by the fibre thread to avoid from being absorbed by the dye.

On the other hand the *Tritik* was a subtler technique in the production of *Pelangi* cloth that had existed and been practiced around Southeast Asia including the Malay Peninsular since long ago. It is a tack sewing technique or running stitches on the cloth surface then is tightly bounded. This technique will create a colourless effect in the motive and the design of the Pelangi cloth. This technique is also commonly used when it is combined with tie technique before being dipped into dye. The cloth that has been sewed and tied might be dipped once or is immersed several times to produce a

colourful *Pelangi* cloth.

This textile is specified as *batik* although the process is without the usage of wax. This is because patterns resulted through this technique leave behind the *tritik* effect the form of small flowers that same as in wax batik effect. The technique to produce a *Pelangi* cloth is an advanced technique from the *ikat*. The *ikat* or tied technique which is normally a thread tied process before being dyed in the weaving process. Meanwhile this *Pelangi* technique needs a white based cloth, thread and dyestuff (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1997).

III. A Brief History of Pelangi Cloth in Maly Peninsula

The admission of the Pelangi cloth in Southeast Asia has the connection to the textile trade activity by traders who were Muslims. According to Warming and Gaworski (1981), the Pelangi cloth originally was brought and introduced in the Indonesian and Malay Archipelago by Muslim Gujarati traders from India in the 14th and 15th centuries AD. The textile traders had also strengthened the relationship between the communities around the South East Asia that some of them had converted to Islam from the Arab-Muslim preachers who had arrived earlier.

Since the early AD, the Malay communities around Southeast Asia had the basic skills and expertise to produce textiles for their own used. It then expanded and reached the peak due to the adaptation and assimilation from various cultures gradually. The development of culture and lifestyle and the arts of the Malays moved and changed from animistic practices into Hindu-Buddhist practices, and then reinforced through strong practice and belief in Islam that is held up till now.

According to Arney (1987), the developments of Malaysian history have led to various effects on the concept of art and aesthetic in the local commu-

nity and their view on the world and the environment. In every new era in the local history have added new dimension to the Malay culture and manifestation toward change of their art and craft. Such as *Pelangi* cloth; although in local history stated it hails from “*odhini*” or “*bandhani*” cloth that came from Gujarat and Rajasthan in India, but it has undergone adaptation and assimilation with local culture since the past hundred years.

Barnes (2005) stated, textiles from India had a special place in communities around the Malay Archipelago and Southeast Asia. It was commonly used in everyday life, especially in attending certain ceremony, customs and rituals. The textiles were then reproduced by the local community that originally already had expertise in the production of textiles that was passed down from their ancestors. The design and textile manufacturing process from India was adapted and assimilated by local textile artisans to suit the needs and preferences of their communities.

A type of textiles from India especially Gujarat, using ‘*ikat*’ or bind technique on the surface of the finished woven fabric before immersed into dye is known with ‘*odhani*’ (bandhani) which quite similar to the Malay *Pelangi* cloth. This *Pelangi* cloth is a luxury textile used by the Malay community of Jambi and Palembang in Sumatra. *Pelangi* cloth is widely used as clothing or decorations in various important occasions. In Southeast Asia, as well as in several places in Indonesia *Pelangi* cloth are widely used among the Malay communities in Cambodia, Patani and the Malay Peninsula.

Textile arts, based in Champa, Cambodia have spread down to the southern Siamese coastal area and into Patani. The Patani Malay Kingdom, located in the southern provinces of Thailand in the past was a Malay-Muslim government that was widely known as a trading centre between east and west since the 14th to the 17th century. It had been the focus of traders from Arabia, Persian, India, China, Europe and the Malay Archipelago after Malacca

was defeated by the Portuguese in 1511. Various forms of other goods including textiles were traded at the Patani port during that time (Mohd. Zamberi Abd.Malek, 1994). The art of textiles making from Patani that flourish at the same time had expanded further down to Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang in the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. This art was later expanded to the other parts of the Malay Archipelago.

Mubin Sheppard (1972) also had stated that Patani is a Malay indigenous Indo-China Peninsula hereditary state with many Malay cultural heritages. This state was known by foreign merchants and travellers as a rich nation that has its own civilization and distinctive culture. Various forms of art such as architecture, visual arts and textile arts influenced Malay palaces in the north of Malaysia around the 14th to the 18th century. Patani, Kelantan and Terengganu in the north east coast of Malay Peninsula is among the states that are under the Langkasuka Kingdom.

There are several important areas in Southeast Asia that contributed directly and indirectly to influence the basic development of textile arts in Malaysia in particular the Malay Peninsula. Rusmawati Ghazali (1995) in her thesis entitled ‘Tie-dye in Resist Art’ stated that the *Pelangi* cloth that spread in the Malay Peninsula in ancient times is likely to come from the Patani. This statement is based on the information contained in the research paper written by the Kedah State Museum entitled “*The Old Textiles Pattern and Motive Narration*” which according to the local history, Sultan of Terengganu Tun Zainal Abidin had lived at the Palace of the King of Patani, before he was installed as the Sultan of Terengganu and later became Sultan Zainal Abidin I.

During his reign, the king had brought together a group of people from Patani, including artisans to Terengganu to begin settlement by opening Patani Village that is located near Masjid Abidin in Kuala Terengganu where the village is still exists to this

day. Mohd. Zamberi A. Malek (1994) stated that the wife of the Sultan Zainal Abidin I (1725-1733) was the sister of the King of Patani. This is showed that the art of textile making including *Pelangi* cloth in Terengganu might be started and develop during that time.

In the past, aesthetic and appreciation on textiles art making continue to be developed through support from Malay Sultans and the dignitaries that act as patron to these activities. According to Azah Aziz (2006),

“Malay rulers yesteryear so concerned and care on development of cultural arts. Many Malay artisan at that time work in the palace court yard under Sultan, queen and nobles patronage, that not only provide encouragement, even also contribute invention of fine motives and designs to the artisans that indeed competent in their fields respectively”.

This prestige and lovely textile normally been used by Malay Sultans and aristocracy in various ceremony and particular purposes.

In the past this group only can afford to have and wear those textiles compared to the commoner because the material and the cost in manufacturing it were very expensive. After that *Pelangi* cloth's manufacturing was introduced and developed widely by palace craftsmen to their heir and descendants then later that textile slowly been spreader and able to be produced and owned by the community.

According to information from Mrs Ramlah Latif the Museum Curator from the Terengganu State Museum, during the reign of Sultan Zainal Abidin II, the third Sultan of Terengganu who ruled from 1793 to 1808, the *Pelangi* cloth was produced extensively in the state during his reign. During that time there was a craftsman as the prominent *Pelangi* cloth maker by the name *Cek Minah Pelangi* who was a renowned textile manufacturer. Similarly, Azah Aziz (2006) also stated that the *Pelangi* cloth was sold by Malays on the East Coast of Malay

Peninsula since the 18th century. At first, it was all produced using cotton fabric and then switched to silk fabric. At that time, *Pelangi* cloth was coloured using natural dyes from plants.

As written in the old Bingham:

Dyed Cloth Using Bixa Orellana

Kain Dichelup Akan Kesumba

Soaked So Long To Be The *Pelangi*

Direndam Lama Jadi Pelangi

You Were Hugged Than Laid On My Lap

Tuan Dipeluk Lalu Diriba

My Long Desire Is Truly Fulfilled

Puaslah Dendam Selama Ini

One of the well known *Pelangi* cloth entrepreneur at that time was Minah Pelangi as stated by Hajah Ngah Taib, through (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1986 & 1997). *Pelangi* cloth at that time was also known as “Perai Silk” a delicate and thin fine silk, as has been written in another old Bingham:

Perai Cloth, Perai Clothes

Kain Perai Baju Perai

The Garment of The Prince of Your Highness

Pakaian Anak Raja Yam Tuan

The Broken Body Divorced Bones

Hancur Badan Tulang Bercerai

Than Your Kindness Will Forgettable

Baru Lupa Budimu Tuan

Pelangi cloth is a traditional textile heritage of the Malays that is specially made part for the furnishings and clothing of the Malay community, especially the nobles and the Malay rulers in Malaysia in the past. Syed Ahmad Jamal (2007) stated the privileges and functions of the *Pelangi* cloth as a decorative and complement clothes of the nobles.

“Pelangi cloth held a very special place in Malay culture. It was worn by palace dignitaries

and used in various way... as fabric to complete one's attire, as a head covering, sash tied around the waist or as a wall decoration in royal bed-chambers"

Its shows how the *Pelangi* cloth been used by the Malay people in the past.

Siti Zainon Ismail (1997) also stated that the status of the *Pelangi* cloth used in the Malay community in which it has a high and special position, especially during the golden age of traditional Malay sultanate,

"Pelangi holds a special place in new society, especially in the great tradition",

Siti Zainon Ismail refers to Raja Chulan (1967) stated, the *Pelangi* cloth has a symbol, status and value, especially as the costume insignia of the Sultan during ceremonies and formal occasions. It was made as a gift or an award by the Sultan to the recognized people. It is often used as a head gear, as well as sarong and waist cloth that are usually complementary fashion for men and women.

Although the origin of manufacture was from India, this fabric is widely used and worn by the nobles around the Malay Archipelago including the Malay Peninsula. As explained further by Siti Zainon Ismail (1997) about the application of the *Pelangi* cloth in several places in the Malay Archipelago,

"When in Java, Bali, Palembang, Kelantan and Terengganu... Pelangi textiles take pride of place as an accessory to other cloths, particularly at court".

If we look at the motives and designs structure arrangement on the Malay traditional *Pelangi* cloth, it still has the features and characteristics of Malay culture design. Besides that, the usage of the old cloth style and method in the past are still being practised and maintained by the local Malay culture and identity.

Based on the Malay Misa (Raja Chulan, 1967), he described the clothing of Perak's King,

"... Beautiful clothes, using Pelangi cloth together with "geramsut murup" clothing and the head dress decorated with Pelangi techniques: but it is sprinkled with gold dust, combined with the thin golden leaves (Perada cloth)."

It certainly proved that the *Pelangi* cloth had become the clothing of the King of Perak in the past where it was used or worn as waist cloth and as well as head gear.

At the beginning of the 20th century there were some British researchers who made studies on various matters of history, community, commerce, industry and resources, including cultural aspects and the way people lived around the Malay States of Malaya. Based on studies reported by A. Wright (1908) and L. Wray (1909), they described the use and production of this cloth around the late 19th century to early 20th century, the *Pelangi* cloth became the fashionable apparel among the Malays who lived in the states of the Federation of Malaya.

In the state of Kelantan, this textile was the main production before the widespread use of block batik wax was introduced in Malaysia. According to the study by Pauziah Abdullah through Koo Kay Kim (1983) in 1911 the *Pelangi* cloth manufacture has been carried out by Haji Che Su bin Ishak and his colleagues at Kampong Lorong Gajah Mati, Kota Bharu that is situated near Kelantan River. At that time, the *Pelangi* cloth was made using a silk imported from Thailand called "Pereir" silk or the Malays called it *Perai* cloth. Conducted in a traditional production process, it uses natural colouring of plants as a dye. It was widely marketed within the state of Kelantan and also exported to Thailand until 1920s.

At that time, the *Pelangi* cloth was often used by men as a cover and tied around the head or tied around the waist while women often use *Pelangi* cloth as headscarf or shawl (Haziah, 2006). The production of block batik or 'cap batik' using wood

blocks and metal blocks with wax was first introduced in Malaysia around the year 1920. During that time, the *Pelangi* cloth slowly had been less produced by textile manufacturers. In 1928 the block batik manufacturing has replaced the traditional resist (teritik/tie-dye) of the *Pelangi* cloth. Petals of betel leaves are used as a resist material that used to cover and tight around on certain parts of the pattern of the cloth to prevent colour absorption. After the 1930s, *Pelangi* cloth is no longer widely produced because its production process is quite complex and intricate compared to the production of block batik.

IV. Characteristics and Identity of Malay Pelangi Cloth

Motives and designs in Malay textile were composed of the elements and concept of the Malay Art and the Islamic philosophy. Motives and designs arrangement in the old Malay traditional textile avoided the fauna and figure motives realistically with the intention to distant away from committing sin or in other words it aroused the desire of the wearer to seek religious blessings.

In the past product of traditional *Pelangi* cloth normally can be used in everyday life. It's usable as casual ware or can be used as formal ware for special occasion and ceremonial costume. In the Malay community in the past *Pelangi* cloth usually had been designed to be used as complement attire and also for the interior purposes especially at court. The Malays in the past has high regard toward custom and etiquette in the way they dressed up. The complete and perfect clothing not only rely on the appearance but it also inclusive of the motives, pattern and design that are well blended with certain colours. That entire element could describe the identity, standard, art and culture of the old Malay community (Siti Zainon, 1997 & Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2007).

According to Arney (1987), the developments of Malaysian history have led to various effects on the concept of art and aesthetic in the local community and their view on the world and the environment. In every new era in the local history have added new dimension to the Malay culture and manifestation toward change of their art and craft. Such as *Pelangi* cloth; although in local history stated it hails from “*odhini*” or “*bandhani*” cloth that came from Gujarat and Rajasthan in India, but it has undergone adaptation and assimilation with local culture since the past hundred years.

Pelangi cloth was traditional local heritage textile that is really special that have been used for interior and garment of the Malay society's especially rulers and aristocracy in the Malay Peninsula of old days. Syed Ahmad Jamal (2007) stated on *Pelangi* cloth's position,

“Kain Pelangi held a very special place in Malay culture. It was worn by palace dignitaries and used in various ways”.

Siti Zainon Ismail (1997) also mentioned the same where according to her

“Pelangi cloth holds a special place in Malay society, especially in the great tradition”.

Nevertheless unfortunately its position and speciality is no longer been appreciated and get attention by current society compare to certain Malay heritage textile that has started extinct production and application.

Generally the design of the traditional *Pelangi* cloth was alleged to have a unique and interesting pattern. However until this day, there are no clear and specific information that can explain in detail about their characteristic and identity in the aspect of the background, motives and pattern, the design, techniques, product and concept including the symbol and the philosophy. Other than that the application and the usage of the traditional *Pelangi* cloth's also yet to be highlighted widely compared to the other types of local traditional cloths such

as batik, *songket*, *Pua* and woven cloth.

As the initial, field research was initiated to document using photo record method of the *Pelangi* cloth's artefact that still existed and kept in a few museums and galleries around the Peninsula Malaysia. This documentation then have been analyzed closely by the researcher to get a clear picture on how are the details and their identity in terms of the background, motives and patterns, the designs, techniques, products and concept including the philosophy and the symbol of the *Pelangi* cloth. At the same time information through experts, friends and acquaintance in the textile field besides continuous contacts with the museums and gallery curators involved were made.

There are several museums and gallery around the Peninsula Malaysia that had been identified that having the cloths. Among the museum that were visited for that purpose are the Kelantan State Museum, Terengganu State Museum, National Textile Museum, Selangor State Museum and RA Fine Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. Before those locations were identified reading were made on books related to traditional textiles in Malaysia.

In this study more than 50 pieces of *Pelangi* cloth pictures has been recorded through this field research. From the said amount of 29 pieces of *Pelangi* cloths pictures were observed and analyzed to identify the types of motives, designs and the product. The result from observation and analysis on that *Pelangi* cloth can be justified as follows:

a. Motive Inspiration

Generally motive and design that is in *Pelangi* cloth in the Malay Peninsula is the inspiration from subjects matter that are from nature and the environment of the designer and the textile maker such as :

1. Flora

- i. flowers
- ii. leaves
- iii. fruits
- iv. bunches

2. Fauna

- i. birds
- ii. sea creatures

3. Cosmic

- i. sun
- ii. star
- iii. cloud
- iv. moon
- v. wave

4. Foods

- i. cakes
- ii. sweets/candy
- iii. rice grain
- iv. dried fruit

b. Design Arrangement

Overall the design arrangement of the Malay traditional *Pelangi* cloth nearly identical with the arrangement that usually been used in the design arrangement of *Songket* and *Limar*.

- i. all over
- ii. scatter
- iii. chain bay
- iv. stripe
- v. alternate

c. Techniques

In the Malay traditional *Pelangi* cloth they have a special techniques that slightly similar to the other types of resist cloth.

- i. running stitches
- ii. tied/*ikat*
- iii. *colek*/paint brush

d. Product

The products of the Malay traditional *Pelangi* cloth normally are in line with the common Malay style of attire.

- i. sarong

- ii. head cloth
- iii. shoulder cloth
- iv. waist cloth
- v. scarves

e. Design concept

Malay/Islamic Art and design concept always avoided the fauna and figure motives realistically.

- i. stylize
- ii. abstract
- iii. continuity
- iv. structured
- v. uniform

f. Philosophy and the symbol

- i. floral - fragrance and tenderness, sincerity and fineness of the behaviour, friendship/brotherhood and fertility.
- ii. fauna - imagine attitude responsible and cooperation.
- iii. cosmic - worship and belief creation of god - Islamic concept of art.
- iv. food/sweets/candy - source of livelihood, delicacy and sweetness.

V. Conclusion

Motives and designs in Malay textile were composed of the elements and concept of the Malay Art and the Islamic philosophy. Motives and designs arrangement in the old Malay traditional textile are avoiding the fauna and figure motives realistically with the intention to distant away from committing sins or in other words it aroused the desire of the wearer to seek religious blessings.

Through photo records observation study, the characteristic and the special identity features of the traditional Pelangi cloth technique in the Malay Peninsula is the combination of running stitch sewing technique or *teritik* in most motives and designs with the *ikat* or tied technique. The *ikat* or tied

technique is made only in a few certain particular motives and designs that are on the white cloth before being coloured by dye. Other than that the paint brush technique is also used in a few parts of the particular designs in the *Pelangi* cloth. This is clear evidence that the Malay traditional *Pelangi* cloth in Malay Peninsula has their own special characteristics and identity that is distinctive and different from a few types of the resist cloth that been produce by other country.

Since long ago the Malays are attached and dependent on their environment. Arba'iyah (2010) who stated that,

“Close ties with natural environment that has been formed since ages ago, making the Malays more sensitive and understand more of their entire nature”.

The Malay community really appreciate their natures that is created by God and is the place they derive food, materials for shelter and to earn their lively hood. Sensitivity towards nature and the environment resulted in them becoming creative and innovative. In relation to the production of the *Pelangi* cloth the creative and innovative Malays in the past has accentuated highly aesthetic value in the making of this textile.

Malay community in the past hold very firmly in their custom and their religion. In producing their textile design and product, they did not only see the process of the textile production externally in fact they also saw it internally. Hence while we make an appreciation on Malay textiles art we could not escape from combining the design, symbol and philosophy aspects. Through their practice and attitude in this matter, it will make them becoming more understanding, adore and appreciate their textile design and product and at the same time their belief and their faith in their religion is also increased.

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