

# The Aesthetic of Bridal *Songket* in Malay Traditional Wedding Attire

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## ABSTRACT

*Songket* is one of the valuable traditional Malay weaving fabrics which is often used as a Malay wedding dress. The term *Songket* is derived from a Malay word “*menyungkit*” (leverage) using “*gimpal*” thread (gold and silver). However, nowadays its usage is beginning to decline due to the presence of foreign fabrics such as Thai silk and the fact is that many Malay brides and grooms are beginning to favor foreign fabrics to dress up at their wedding. This situation eventually would disrupt the production of *Songket* and affect its reputation as the popular traditional fabric of Malay weddings. Hence, this research aims to examine the aesthetic of *Songket* fabric in Malay traditional wedding. Researchers used these six principles of the beauty in Malay art by Zakaria Ali in order to interpret the aesthetic of *songket* in Malay wedding attire that consists of finesse, functional, symbolism, unity, meaningful and contrasting. In conclusion, it could be stated that the aesthetic aspect *Songket* is very important in Malay society regardless of social status or wealth. Hence, as a national heritage, *Songket* has to be preserved and revived to its former glory so that it will not be forgotten by future generations.

**Keywords:** *Aesthetic, Beauty, Bridal, Malay, Songket, Wedding.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Songket* is one of the basic materials in Malay textiles and being used as a Malay wedding dress which is from a yarn into a beautiful fabric. In Malay society, *Songket* cloth is a valuable traditional Malay weaving fabric (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1994). Normally the making process of *Songket* is headed by Malay women. It is widely produced in Malaysia especially in the East Coast of Peninsular and in Sarawak state (Norwani Md. Nawawi, 2007). The history of the use of this *Songket* is not clearly known, but it is believed that *Songket* is a heritage derived from the palace or related to the Malay sultanate. According to Sulaiman Abdul Ghani (2008), the term *songket* is derived from the Malay word which is “*menyungkit*” (leverage) using “*gimpal*” thread (gold and silver). Indeed, the inclusion of various cultures enriches the Malay *songket* and also the inclusion of Islamic thought is enhanced the beauty of Malay *Songket*. The word aesthetic or ‘*aesthetica*’ having derived from the Greek word *aesthesis*, is defined as any element that relates to beauty. (Sabariah Ahmad Khan, 2016). At the beginning of the *Songket* development, it was a noble dress, and royal families using *Songket* to show their position and greatness (Salikin Sidek, 2014). As stated by Abbas Alias and Norwani Md Nawawi (2003), the average use of this *songket* is associated with certain ceremonies and festivals especially at weddings.

Generally, it can be said in this era that the popularity of *Songket* is so prominent. According to Salikin Sidek (2014) however, nowadays the presence of foreign fabrics such as Thai silk and French lace seems to have taken over the *Songket* as the main fabric of the Malay wedding dress. Azzah Aziz (2009) stated that Malay people often use the *Songket* during special occasions particularly in Malay weddings. Initially the *Songket* is considered as a palace dress, and for that reason the Malays call the bride and groom as a “*raja sehari*” (King of the day. According to Salikin Sidek (2011), apparently nowadays the aesthetic value of the *Songket* is gradually declining, due to the growing popularity of foreign fabrics. Adding to that, some parents of the bride and groom also support the use of foreign fabrics as well. This situation eventually would disrupt the production of *Songket* and affect its reputation as the popular traditional fabric of Malay weddings. Unless preservation action is taken, the cultural values of our ancestors and the national heritage could be lost and forgotten. Hence, this research aims to examine the aesthetic of *Songket* fabric in Malay traditional wedding



Figure 1 Shows *Songket* used during the Malay wedding ceremony. (Author Collection)

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Songket* is a product of Malay handicraft which has a high aesthetic value, and can be seen from the beginning of manufacturing until becoming beautiful clothing. According to Zakaria Ali (1989), the beauty of Malay art is based on six principles which are finesse, functional, unity, contrasting, symbolism, and meaningful. Researchers used these six principles of the beauty in Malay art in order to interpret the aesthetic of *Songket* in Malay wedding attire. Based on these approaches, researchers conclude that the beauty of *Songket* art in Malay wedding dress can be seen through these six principles.

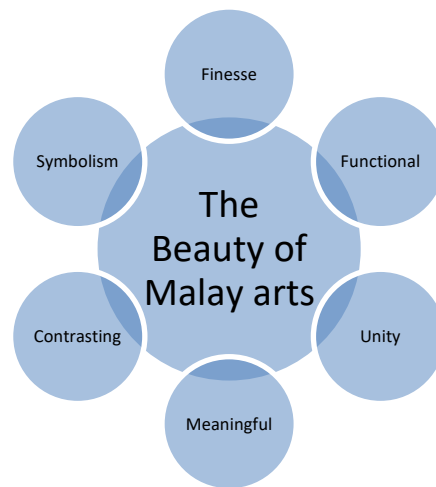


Figure 2 Shows the principle of beauty of Malay arts by Zakaria Ali (1989).

## FINDING

### The aesthetic of bridal *songket* according to principle of beauty in Malay arts

#### A) Finesse

The finesse principle in the beauty of bridal *Songket* can be seen through the skills owned by the Malay weavers in producing *Songket*. In addition, only high skill weavers can produce fine *Songket* to be used as a Malay wedding dress. According to Art history, it is impossible to create something fine without skill. The finesse in *Songket* production can be seen through two factors, firstly is the way of making it and secondly is the material used. Since the wedding dress is very important to the bride and groom, the finesse aspect must be emphasized. To ensure the quality of bridal *Songket*, the fine must be including not big, not rough, soft, and smooth in physical (texture) and are carefully crafted. Furthermore, the use of high-quality yarns and colours without changing or mixing them with other materials.

#### B) Symbolism

The symbolism of *Songket* can be seen through the motifs on that fabric. In addition, the various motifs placed on the *Songket* contains its own meaning. In the Malay society, *Songket* also brought a particular symbolism, such as the *Songket* was associated with a symbol of luxury. In the Malay

wedding, the use of *Songket* symbolically reflects the luxuriousness of Malay weddings as well. Every groom and bride want to look great in a luxury ceremony. By wearing the bridal *Songket*, they do look good, perfect and great. Other than that, the authenticity of *Songket* bridal production represents the greatness of Malay art and craft. For example, the authenticity of *Songket* production through the dyeing (*mencelup*) process until the weaving process is done. The most authenticity of Malay bridal *Songket* can be seen from the selection of the motif, and the fineness of weaving. It is also showing the skills of the Malay weavers in creating authenticity in bridal *Songket*.

### **C) Functional**

This functional principle can be seen through the production of *Songket* that match the needs and values in society. The production of a *Songket's* pattern or design is compatible with its function. Functioning means in the production of *Songket* is not only focused on the decoration but *Songket* is used to cover the body. In addition, the design and pattern of Malay *Songket* is also compatible with the beliefs and values of society. For the Malay community every decorative motif contains a certain meaning. It does not matter whether it is geometric, flora or fauna. Besides the beauty aspect, choosing the right color also needs to look from its social aspect. For example, during the wedding ceremony, the function of white colors of *Songket* represents something pure, fresh, and clean while the yellow color of bridal *Songket* represents royal families.

### **D) Unity**

The next principle in the aesthetic of *Songket* is the principle of unity which can also be regarded as the unification between human and god. In addition, the use of *Songket* is also seen to comply with Islamic teaching which is to cover *aurat* (private body parts). For example, *Songket* fabric should not be produced in the thin, transparent, or see-through fabric and *Songket* attire is usually quite loose, and not tight fitted. In addition, the *Songket* made for the *Samping* (a type of sarong worn after worn trousers and usually from the waist to the knee level only) modestly covers the *aurat* for the groom from the waist to the knees. The proper use of *Songket* attire in Malay wedding that comply with the Islamic dress code indirectly brings Muslim closer to God as well as maintaining the relationship among human beings. In other words, wearing the proper attire during the wedding ceremony can avoid the negative things. Nature is only a source of inspiration in styling the Malay *Songket*. Overall, it explains that in the production of the Malay *Songket* is keeping us in mind regarding the greatness of God.

## E) Meaningful

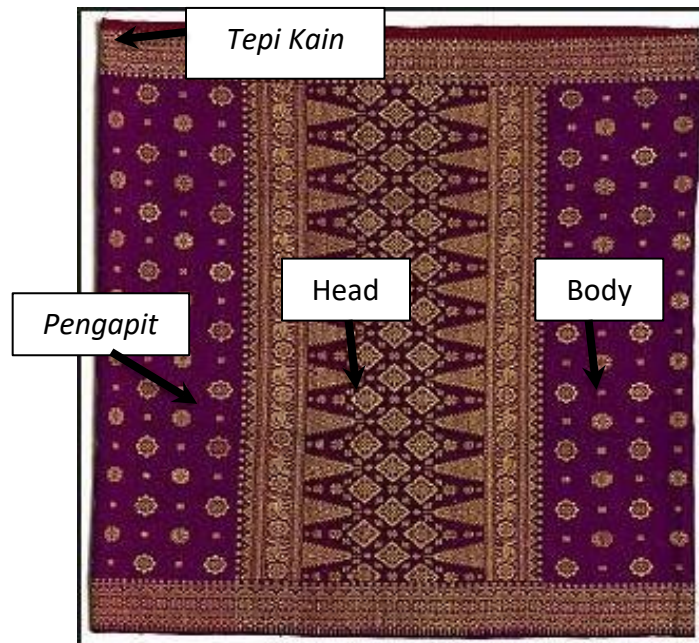


Figure 3 Shows the detail of *Songket* fabric.

Typically *Songket* has its own meaning. In this regard, Malay weaver does not simply produce fabric and every part of the *Songket* fabric has a distinctive name. For example, the design of *Songket* consists of a few parts such as body, head, *tepi kain*, or *pengapit*. It is the same for the motif used. The entire motif is taken and inspired from what has existed around them. Lots of the motifs were inspired from flora such as *pucuk rebung*, pomegranate fruit, *bunga lawi ayam*, *bunga setelop*, *tampuk kesemak*, *bunga tanjung*, mangosteen, *bunga baling*, *bunga cermai*, and *tapak kecupu* (Azah Aziz, 2009). *Songket* are also inspired from abstract patterns such as *jong sarat*, *pecah lapan*, *bunga tiga dara*, *tapak kacip*, *bunga kerongsang*, *kasap*, *bunga logam*, *potong wajik*, and *bunga logam*. In addition, some of the motifs were inspired from nature and were named as *bintang buta*, *awan larat*, *air molek*, and *teluk berantai*. Furthermore, the *Songket* is inspired by fauna such as *sisik kelah*, *unduk-unduk*, *bunga lawi ayam*, and *bunga hati*. Thus, the wearing of *Songket* as a wedding dress would be meaningful because it reflect the Malay culture as well.

## F) Contrasting

Contrasting principles in the aesthetic of *Songket* can be seen through the *songket* making mainly based on its weaving process. Weaving is the last process whereby the *losen* thread is interlaced by the *pakam* thread to form a fabric. The weaving process from a thread becoming a fabric called *mengarat*. One thread will act as a warp at the vertical side and the weaver will fill another thread at the horizontal as a weft. This process is repeated so as to produce a *songket* fabric. In addition, to produce the beautiful colors of a *Songket*, the color of motif must be contrasting from the color of fabric. This is because it gives interesting and beautiful visual effects. Normally, Malay weaver used

a darker color on the fabric as a background compared to the motif's color. Therefore, it will make the bride and groom look more appealing and cheerful.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the aesthetic and beauty of Malay *Songket* is very important in Malay society regardless of social status and wealth. It is very important to make *Songket* a symbol of the Malay wedding attire. Everything has been the nation's identity such as our tradition should be preserved primarily especially something involving local art and culture. Hence, as a national heritage, the *Songket* has to be preserved and revived to its former glory so that it will not be forgotten by future generations. In order to achieve this goal, Malay brides and grooms should not substitute *Songket* with other fabrics especially from outside of Malay tradition. It is hoped that Malay brides and grooms will prefer *Songket* as the official Malay wedding attire so that the global communities can recognize and appreciate the authenticity and cultural value of the Malay wedding Malay as often seen in the Chinese and Indian wedding. Other fabric can be used as additional but *Songket* must be made compulsory for the reception ceremony. However, until now *Songket* is still worn by Malay groom and bride in wedding ceremonies. In summary, the *Songket* brings philosophy to combine the influence of Malay culture and Islam is very strong that consisting of the six principles of beauty of Malay arts such as finesse, functional, unity, contrasting, symbolism, and meaningful. Last but not least, it is hoped that the Malay society will continue using *Songket* for the sake of Malay traditional heritage.

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