

SUSTAINABILITY OF MALAY TRADITIONAL CRAFT AND CRAFTSMANSHIP AS CULTURAL HERITAGE IN KUALA KANGSAR, PERAK, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the traditional craftsmanship that have been sustained in the making of traditional arts and crafts by local Malay craftsmen from the various places in the royal town of Kuala Kangsar, located in the state of Perak, Peninsular Malaysia. Series of interviews with the craftsmen and field observation were conducted and found that the Malay craftsmen's drive for preservation of traditional crafts and craftsmanship had paved the way for sustainability of the Malay cultural heritage in the region through continuity of craft industries with local and fresh inspiration. Cultural themes with visual aesthetic of local motifs are depicted on the pottery, embroidery, metal ware and woodwork craftsmanship which make up the essential part of the heritage. Creative tradition can be seen on these crafts through their craftsmanship style and design, materials and texture, the embellishment technique and construction. Examination on the traditional arts production by the craftsmen exemplifies their distinctive craftsmanship that was sustained as regional identity. It was found that the industry of pottery is the most profound works that dominate the local art and craft especially in the area known as Sayong. The pottery produced by them are inspired and derived from old traditional techniques and aesthetics which signify their strong preferences to maintain and preserve the art tradition from this region. Apparently, the physical and practical nomenclatures of the local crafts extracted from the past traditions are still intact that exemplifies their distinctive attributes and meanings as cultural heritage for Kuala Kangsar. The challenge for the present Malay craftsmen is to continue encouraging and sustaining their interests in the art and craft production while attempting to maintain its perception of authenticity and uniqueness among local residents and visitors to the region. There is a potentiality for further investigation on the tangible and intangible authenticity and technical uniqueness of the art and crafts through scientific documentation and experimental study. This is significant effort to ensure the sustainable development of the traditional arts and crafts in harmony and unity with local environment and its community.

Keywords: Kuala Kangsar, Malay craftsman, traditional craft, craftsmanship, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘sustainability’ in relation to traditional crafts and craftsmanship is strongly connected to environmental, cultural and economic concerns (Raj Isar, 2004). In general, the craft industries could provide employment opportunities, and the ability to earn an income from craft making especially with high level of authenticity and identity contributes to the longevity of cultures, and craft making communities. However, demand for such crafts needs to be properly managed in order to maintain its sustainability. It carries environmental as well as economic challenges especially to the entrepreneur and, or artisans. Therefore, there must be an integrated effort to support the craft that are culturally significance and to encourage artisans to institute sustainable management practices and natural resource management to ensure their ongoing survival. In Peninsula Malaysia, the traditional crafts making is still alive in certain areas, for example in Kuala Kangsar, Perak. This is attributed to a number of local artisans and producers who are actively involved in the industry. This would stimulate the wide application and development of art and craft not only in the Malay traditional community of Kuala Kangsar but also among modern Malaysians which could have not happened with a small number of artisans and producers. In addition, the availability of skilful artisans in the crafts industry also contributes to the development of the traditional art and craft. Hence, the first objective of this research is to investigate the current situation of industries in Kuala Kangsar, Perak that focus on craft production by examining how it was made and techniques of production those crafts which still exist today. The second objective is to identify the type of efforts for sustaining the craft making in the region and its traditional craftsmanship as cultural heritage that are still part and parcel of Kuala Kangsar landscape in the twenty-first century. As such, this paper focuses on the still survived traditional crafts and craftsmanship of pottery making, *tekat benang emas* (gold thread embroidery) and traditional weaponry that have been sustained by local Malay craftsmen from the various places in the royal town

of Kuala Kangsar, located in the state of Perak, Peninsular Malaysia.

A few studies that focused on cultural heritage issues were conducted by foreign scholars (e.g. Moreno et al., 2005 and Leask, 2006) and local scholars (e.g. Kamal et al., 2008; Siti Norlizaiha, 2008; Siti Norlizaiha et al., 2010; Sabrizaa et al., 2003; Mohd Sabrizaa and Sufian, 2009; Habibah et al., 2009). Different types of studies on heritage conservation were the major focus, for example a study by Moreno et al. (2005) highlighted the importance of heritage and its sustainable development. Other studies focused on world heritage site (Leask, 2006), conservation of historical buildings (Kamal et al., 2008; Siti Norlizaiha et al., 2010). Apparently, there is lack of research that focus on the identification and investigation on the methods for sustaining the heritage value of traditional art and craft that serve as an evident of human expression of creativity and ways of communicating their thoughts and skilfulness. Inasmuch, art and tradition of the craft is part and parcel of socio-cultural elements which should be recognized as being of outstanding regional or local and national importance that has heritage significance.

THE BACKGROUND

Traditional Crafts and Craftsmanship

Craft as defined by Adamson (2009) is the application of skills and material-based knowledge to relatively small scale production. Meanwhile Siti Zainon (1997) posits that handicraft is a type of work done entirely by hand or by using only simple tools to produce functional and decorative objects. Leigh (2000) pointed out that some of craft industries are workshop ventures and others are much larger global enterprise. A number of crafted items are produced by hand. However industrial-based production is much more common in the modern world. Therefore, the relative importance of each in terms of production and contribution the national economy differs from one to another. Inasmuch, the perceived connection between craft production and sustainability has provided an opportunity for craft producers or makers to continue selling their products at various venues including market places thus generating their livelihoods. Raj Isar

(2004) argues that not only do handcrafted objects form an important part of the creative cultural industries, they also occupy a space to counter techno-aesthetic dominance, for crafts inherently represent, to the patron of sustainable practice, a connect and concern with material and the environment.

Cultural Heritage

Heritage means the combined creation and products of nature and of man that make up the living environment in time and space ((UNESCO, 2005a). Cultural heritage which cover a variety of forms, falls into two groups (Moreno et al., 2005): (1) tangible heritage, and (2) intangible heritage. Tangible heritage include natural and cultural sites, for examples, monuments, archaeological sites, and movable heritage collections, historic urban areas, vernacular heritage, cultural landscapes. Living dimensions of heritage and all aspects of the physical and spiritual relationship between human societies and their environment are grouped as intangible heritage. It may be something old that becomes rarer and more valuable with age, but it may also provide a way of understanding the past, be associated with a famous event, people, places or values, or be a symbol of identity. These include the art, buildings, traditions, and beliefs that a society considers important to its history and culture. Movable or immovable objects, sites, structures, groups of structures, and natural features and landscapes that have archaeological, paleontological, historical, architectural, religious, aesthetic, or other cultural significance are considered as cultural heritage. Most recent properties to be inscribed on the World Heritage List (WHL) are cultural, natural and mixed of those natural and cultural criteria (UNESCO, 2005b). Thus the profile of the world heritage list is varied within the various settings. UNESCO plays it key management role to identify and aid the conservation of those sites deemed to be of outstanding universal value (Leask, 2006). A site deemed to be of significant worth is inscribed onto the WHL. The recognition as a heritage site means that this particular area could be regarded as a heritage unit because of its distinctive and particular characteristics.

Socio-cultural and Traditional Heritage of Royal Town, Kuala Kangsar

Sungai Perak, the second longest river system in Peninsular Malaysia flowing along 400km of river basin that consist of traditional villages, architectures and royal tombs that hold many mysteries on its long socio-cultural and economic history of the traditional Perak Malays. Mohd Sabrizaa and Sufian (2009) highlighted that the potential of the long marginalized legacy along this river should be captured as one of the true essences of the traditional Malay world. Sungai Perak also holds the long lost historical data possibly equivalent to the empire of the Malacca Sultanate that should be protected. Issues on socio-cultural and architectural heritage discovered along this river system and the marginalisation of this cultural heritage should be addressed. (Mohd Sabrizaa and Sufian, 2009). Siti Norlizaiha Harun (2008) posits that during the British colonial period, the old towns were also known as Bandar DiRaja (royal town) because they were established by the ruling sultan. Pekan, Kelang and Kuala Kangsar are examples of royal town. Most of the towns were located along the river basin, for example Kota Bharu, Kuala Terengganu, Kuala Dungun, Pekan, Johor Lama, Kelang, Kuala Kangsar and Kota Setar are known as Bandar Kuala (towns along river basin) and are still intact. They are categorized under Bandar Melayu Lama (old Malay town) due to their systematic town planning which reflects characteristics of a township. The buildings of these towns started in the 18th century which had colonial influence on the concept of town planning. The towns have geographical similarities, for example as apparent in Kota Bharu, Alor Star, Kuala Terengganu and Kuala Kangsar that are located along the river basin which signified them as centre for trade and transport.

In the context of Sungai Perak, traditional township such as the royal town of Kuala Kangsar has huge potential for tourism and heritage development. The Kuala kangsar's cultural inheritance from the past is national significance because it is the evidence of human activity from traditional settlement through periods of colonialism to the present day in the built and natural environment. Malay art and architecture and its civilisation has often been the inherent manifestation of its culture and belief. For

example, Masjid Ubudiah is one of the most recognized monuments around the district of Kuala Kangsar. Moore (2006) notes that the Ubudiah mosque which was built by Sultan Idris in 1913 to 1917 with funding from the British Administration was more famous building as compared to Kuala Kangsar's historic residences and palaces. This mosque captures the glory of Islam with a great beauty of craftsmanship from Moghul-influence on structure and ornaments and remains one of Malaysia's most treasured historical landmarks.

A few researches also have mainly general references to the different types of art and crafts form Perak and have emerged as a topic of interest in the last few years. For example, Habibah et al. (2009) explored on the significant development of *Tekat benang* which uses gold threads in cultural tourism. Meanwhile, Sabrizaa et al. (2003) explored on vernacular Malay architecture and its embellishment found along the Sungai Perak. The art and crafts of this region represent one of the most significant achievements of the civilization which is part of a legacy of Perak Malay craftsmanship (Mohd Sabrizaa and Sufian, 2009). There are many traditional activities that can be seen among the settlers living along the Sungai Perak and most of which were inherited throughout the ages.

METHODOLOGY

This research has its own cogent approach and rigor in the collection and analyses of data whereby qualitative methods of data collection were principally involved. These include semi-structured interviews with the artisans and local people, field observation and photographic documentation. This empirical research was carried out in three operational stages; (i) background study/theoretical framework, (ii) investigation the research area: gathering primary data, and (iii) documentation and report writing. Different technique was employed in the different stages of investigation which is in line with the research objectives. A pilot-study investigating the current situation faced by the artisans and producers in safeguarding the craft's identity and tradition also was conducted to identify the related issues. The study was based upon a field survey of selected

craftsmen/artisans on their perceptions and values of making the art and crafts as heritage product and sustaining its authenticity.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Reputation of Industries and Craft Production in Kuala Kangsar

The study found that the Malay craftsmen's drive for preservation of traditional crafts and craftsmanship for example, in the art of pottery especially *labu sayong* (traditional earthenware container), *Tekat benang emas* (gold thread embroidery) and metal weapon had paved the way for sustainability of the Malay cultural heritage in many areas in the region of Kuala Kangsar which includes Sayong, Kota Lama Kiri and Kota Lama Kanan. It is observed that the preservation of traditional crafts and craftsmanship are exercised through continuity of the craft industries with local and fresh inspiration that are reflected on different types of products including *labu sayong*, *tekat benang emas* and *metal work*.

It was found that the industry of *labu sayong* is the most profound works that dominate the local art and craft especially in the area known as Sayong, located on the opposite bank of Perak River. *Labu sayong* is a type of earthenware container also known as a gourd-shaped clay pitcher usually found in brown, black and dark grey. This bottle-gourd is a manifestation of the pumpkin or wax-gourd (Siti Zainon, 1997). This bottle-gourd is one of the most famous pitchers produced in Sayong, for example those made in Kampung Kepala Bendang (Figures 1a and 1b). This small village is located 1 kilometer from the town of Kuala Kangsar, Perak and the industry of *labu sayong* has been originated from the village. Sustainable management practices and the availability of natural resource in the same vicinity, for example clay material that is taken from the nearby river bed, have ensured the ongoing survival of *Labu sayong* industry that has been around for many years. This environmental aspect has become one of the contributing factors to the survival of the craft industry in this region.

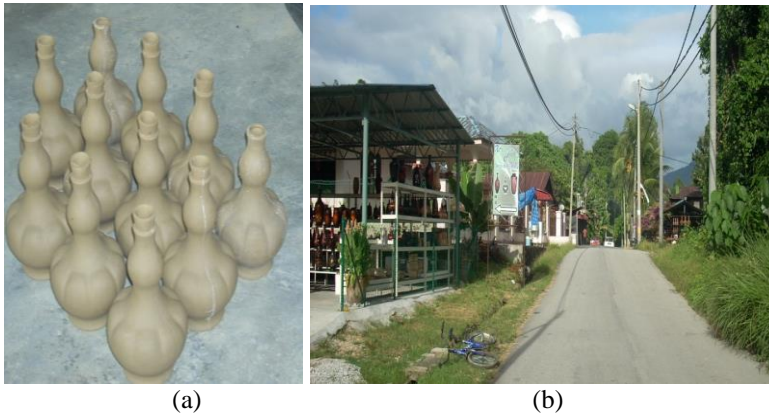


Figure 1: (a) Labu Sayong of Kepala Bendang, (b) Kampung Kepala Bendang in Sayong

In Sayong, the terms handicraft industry, traditional industry, village or cottage industry are often used interchangeably. The handicraft or cottage industry of pottery that is found all over the village share common characteristics which include: (i) the production that is done in the cottage or the home of artisans or producers and, (ii) the productive work is labour intensive. These are important characteristics of traditional handicraft industry whereby most of crafting the pottery are done manually by hand. It was observed that the production of *Labu Sayong* is largely championed by male producers, for example, Encik Saparudin Mohd Noh in Kampung Kepala Bendang, Sayong (Figure 2b) who has a workshop that is located close to his home.

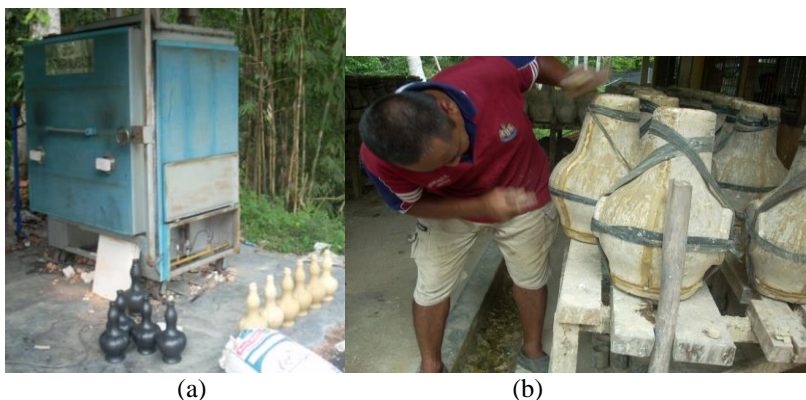


Figure 2: (a) Labu Sayong crafted by Sarapudin using traditional method, (b)Saparudin also use plaster mould to produce Labu Sayong.

Saparudin (2012), a master craftsman and a producer, proclaims that *labu sayong* is also known as Sayong pitcher and it is admired not only for its utilitarian quality, but also for its visual beauty. Although he also produces his pitchers using modern method like casting, he still admires the beauty of *labu sayong* that are made via traditional method including techniques of hand building and coiling. This method involves certain process and principles of production in which human expression of skilfulness and creativity is physically and visually evident. In the process, skilful hand and creative mind are utmost important. Meanwhile, he agrees that the modern technique ensure fast production of *labu sayong* that is important for economic gain. Even though this type of pitcher is a product of modern day techniques, they are still authentic by maintaining its traditional function and design.

According to Mohd Rashid Uda Ahmad (2012), a potter from the same village, there are about thirty to forty industries found in the district of Sayong. These include small-scale and medium-scale industries whereby most of the works are done in workshops which are located at the backyard or by the sides of houses. His workshop is located by the side of his house and it was started by his father in more than thirty years ago. It was observed that his works signify changes and variation in the method of production of pottery. Casting, throwing and hand building techniques are commonly used in the pottery making. Mohd Rashid and Saparudin are among the potters in Sayong who are actively involved in the *labu sayong* industry with a full-swing enterprise. Both choose to break away from the monotony of a particular method of pottery production thus making them as exclusive individual potter and designer.



Figure 3: Mohd Rashid owns a small-scale workshop for labu sayong production

In Kuala Kangsar, *Tekat benang emas* is exclusively done by women both in the past and in the present. *Tekat benang emas* is a type of handicraft whereby gold thread is neatly embroidered on velvet pieces following specified motifs. *Tekat benang emas* is known as royal craft and it is synonymous with the royal town, Kuala Kangsar. Today, this traditional embroidery is found among the Malay artisans who reside in Kampung Padang Changkat, Kota Lama (Figure 3). This cute and serene village is located just behind Istana Iskandariah at Bukit Chandan, Kuala Kangsar. Salmiah Joyah, Azizah Mohd. Yusof and Azizah Adam are among the well-known artisans from this village, who have more than 40 years of experience in the traditional embroidery. The first artisan interviewed was Puan Salmiah, who has started the cottage industry of traditional embroidery since 1980s. They are a variety of embroidered products produced by Salmiah, for examples as shown in Figure 4b. Among these products are betel nut boxes, pillowcases, hand cushions and beddings for wedding ceremony. These handiworks are showcased in her small workshop located next to her house. Most of the works are reflection of her continuing admiration to the traditional way of making the craft through hand embroidered. According to Salmiah (2012), the reason she retains the old technique is to ensure that the remnant of the pride of the old days is still alive and will not become a dying art. Nevertheless, the demand for this craft is getting less due to the expensive cost. The making of the craft is very costly because the gold thread and velvets had to be imported from foreign countries like Germany or France.

Meanwhile, Azizah Mohd Yusof (2012) proclaims that among the factors that contribute to the lack of interest among the younger generation in the craft industry are: (i) the number of craftsmen is died out, (ii) the making of craft is very costly, (iii) intricate handiwork, and (iv) hand-crafted embroidery is time consuming.



Figure 4: Kampung Padang Changkat, Bukit Chandan, Kuala Kangsar



Figure 5: (a) Salmiah demonstrates the craft work of Tekat benang emas, (b) Different design of Tekat benang emas crafted by Salmiah

Few village industries of traditional iron weapons are found in Kampung Padang Changkat, Bukit chandan, Kuala Kangsar. For example, Pak Abdul Mazin Abdul Jamil is a renowned *pandai besi* (blacksmith) with 50 years experience and owns a metal craft workshop and runs his own shop. According to Pak Abdul (2012),

the market of products from metal work such as *kris* (Malay dagger) *golok* (machete) and *parang* (sword) has little expanded from the last decades as only few *pandai besi* are still around. Today, the production of the weapons is still on the ongoing survival and the craft is significant locally and confined to certain areas only such as Padang Changkat. He claims a skilful *pandai besi* can make a decent living, and most importantly they are passionate about their works. The future of this craft can only be sustained if *pandai besi* could find proper channels to marketing his products and pass down the art of *kris* making to the younger generation.



Figure 6: Pak Abdul Mazin is an expert in making traditional weapons

In Kuala Kangsar, many old traditional houses that were built in the early twentieth century are well preserved in its original form. The timber houses showcase wood work components that embellish its roof eaves sections. These components have become a central feature that is imbued with the natural sense of taste, style and fine craftsmanship. As in most other parts of Kuala Kangsar, a good number of old traditional houses are retained as dwelling units by their owners. For example, the houses found in old villages of Padang Changkat and Kota Lama Kiri are residences belong to Yakob Kasa and Ngah Saadiah, respectively. These houses conform to the basic form of traditional house of Perak and their existences are in harmony and unity with local surrounding and its community.



Figure 7: Old traditional Perak houses found in Padang Changkat and Kota Lama Kiri

Cultural Themes and Creative Tradition

Cultural themes with visual aesthetic of local motifs such as elements from nature and local plants are depicted on the pottery, embroidery and metal ware craftsmanship which make up the essential part of the Kuala Kangsar heritage. Creative tradition can be seen on these crafts through their craftsmanship style and design, materials and texture, the embellishment technique and production. This is particularly marked in pottery making where it has continuously developed through the creative mind of the potter. In this process, old designs and motifs are sustained because they are being regarded as highly valuable and therefore being preserved and replicated. Likewise, examination on the traditional arts production by the craftsmen exemplifies their distinctive craftsmanship that was sustained as regional identity. It was found that the pottery in forms of water vessels, for example, bottle-gourd such as *labu leper* is still authentic that takes the shapes of natural elements such as *gelugur*. According to Siti Zainon (1997), these types of pottery developed rapidly in Sayong and triggered potters' interest. These are among the traditional types of production that still exist until today. The vessels are produced by them which are inspired and derived from old traditional techniques and aesthetics which signify their strong preferences to maintain and preserve the art tradition from this region. Similarly, the traditional embroidery work still continues embracing the precedent techniques and aesthetics that have characteristics of 'royal art'. Compared to the pottery industry which has remained as exclusive enterprise, the productive work of *tekat benang emas* is yet to be more outstanding and flourishing to ensure its sustainability. The artisans of the various

crafts draw their inspiration from natural and cultural environment and this tradition will continue surviving.

Apparently, the physical and practical nomenclatures of the local crafts extracted from the past traditions are still intact that exemplifies their distinctive attributes and meanings as cultural heritage for Kuala Kangsar. Nevertheless, the crafts are unique to this place and represent the town as a well-recognised Malay art and tradition. In short, the development of the art of *labu sayong* and *Tekat benang emas* has been attributed to the roles of artisans and producers that consequently caused the expansion of the creativity and growth of this art form in Kuala Kangsar.

Islamic Perspectives on the Production of Crafts and Its Heritage Preservation

Islam permeates into every aspect of man's life, leaving nothing untouched by the sacred teaching. Likewise, the works of art and crafts, which form a substantial portion of man's culture and complex social phenomena, embrace the sacred teaching of Islam. This universe and its components submit themselves to Allah without any objection as mentioned in the Qur'an;

'Do they seek for other than the religion of Allah? While all creatures in heavens and on earth have, willingly or unwillingly bowed (Aslama) to His will (accepted Islam).'

(Al-Qur'an, 3:83)

Muslim artisan should adhere to Islamic teaching and this is manifested in all the skills, activities and products of any craft works. Likewise, the works of *tekat benang emas* and Sayong pitcher are not only admired for its utilitarian quality, but also for its Islamic visual beauty. Local motifs such as elements from natural surrounding and local plants are depicted on the pottery, embroidery and metal ware which serves as surface embellishment. The visual aesthetic quality is prevalent and has become a thematic composition of motif style and form of the crafts. In Islam, the natural surroundings and its elements are signs of Allah or the proof of His existence. The creation of the

natural environment is purposive, not in vain or random as mentioned in the Qur'an;

“(Righteous are) those who ponder the creation of heaven and earth and affirm, “O God! You have not created this creation in vain....”

(Al-Qur'an, 3:191)

Art is skill in producing beauty or that which arouses aesthetic pleasure. The potters or embroiders express their artistic skill through the production of the beautiful crafts. It is the role of Muslim craftsmen to establish an intimate tie with beauty with the essence of the truth. They consciously reflect the forms, patterns and rhythms they see around them in nature, thus confirming that their works do not stand separately but as part of Allah's creation on earth. Their personal observation of the beautiful creatures stem from their deep and abiding faith to the Allah's order as mentioned in the Al-Qur'an;

“Say, who hath forbidden Say (O Muhammad): 'Who has forbidden the adornment which Allah has brought forth for His creatures or the good things from among the means of sustenance?'²² Say: 'These are for the enjoyment of the believers in this world, and shall be exclusively theirs on the Day of Resurrection.'²³ Thus do We clearly expound Our revelations for those who have knowledge.”

(Al-Qur'an, 7:32)

It is apparent that Islam does not prohibit man from art and craft activities and sustaining its production as cultural heritage. Also Islam provides regulations for more specific works produced by Muslim artisan including the characteristics of design form, for example, selection of patterns and motifs. As such, the decoration of works with geometric patterns and floral forms must not be perceived simply as surface decoration or the superficial application of patterns. This decoration must be seen as a fundamental element in the overall composition that reflects the artisan's appreciation and understanding the natural elements and their beauty. In short, the form of the crafts has its root in the

Islamic religious belief, and so does the imagination of the artisans.

The works become a direct and sincere expression of the artisans' adherence to the Islamic teaching. Nonfigurative and nonrepresentational imagery and symbols, patterns and decoration show the Islamic imprint of man's handicraft on Sayong pitchers, embroidery and metalwork. Man is able to produce objects with his hands for everyday use which also become symbolic forms, with their identity and meanings that are not in conflict with Islamic teaching. Artistic skill cannot be separated from the *sharia* in the production of a work of art and craft. Both components interact and this value is central to their artistic creativity and to ensure the sustainability of the arts and crafts not only in Kuala Kangsar region but also in Malaysia.

Muslim craftsman is a practicing Muslim and as the *khalifah* (vicegerent) who should follow the regulations stipulated by Allah. All of their actions can be considered as *ibadah* (devotion) if they abide by those regulations. They will eventually earn reward from Allah and this will lead them to happiness in this world and hereafter.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenge for the present Malay craftsmen is to continue encouraging and sustaining their interests in the pottery, embroidery and weaponry production while attempting to maintain its perception of authenticity and uniqueness among local residents and visitors to the region. There is a potentiality for further investigation on the tangible and intangible authenticity and technical uniqueness of the art and crafts through scientific documentation and experimental study. This is significant effort to ensure the sustainable development of the traditional arts and crafts in harmony and unity with local environment and its community. However, with the advent of new technologies and methods of craft making, the local art scene would be unavoidably transformed into modern outlook that is ignorant of the immense heritage and tradition of its *genius loci*. The responsibility to manage them successfully and ensure that

the resources are not damaged by foreign influences and environment is vital which should be shouldered by various parties including artisans, producers and local authorities like Jabatan Warisan Negara. In comparison with the natural heritage and tangible heritage, intangible heritage like the traditional craftsmanship of craft production needs a continuous community involvement in order to sustain its existence as observed in Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research undertakings including the fieldwork in Kuala Kangsar was made possible by a research grant of IIUM funding. The authors also would like to convey their appreciation to all craftsmen who have been kindly involved in the interview and discussion sessions during the field visits especially in Sayong, Kota Lama Kanan and Kota Lama Kiri in Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

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