

# Handicraft Innovations: A Strategic Approach to Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage of Malaysia

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Received	Revised	Published
25.06.2023	20.07.2023	31.07.2023

## Abstract

Handicrafts are skilled activities made traditionally by hand rather than machines and are usually carried out on a small scale. Handicraft products often show the value and importance of culture in society, while also being a source of income for people. Like in most other countries, tangible cultural heritage such as handicrafts in Malaysia is facing the threat of extinction caused by various factors such as lack of basic manufacturing materials, increased manufacturing costs, lack of skills, and limitations of use. In this context, various methods are used to preserve and ensure that traditional handicrafts remain relevant. One of these is the innovation of the handicrafts. Therefore, this study aims to identify the innovations implemented in the preservation of handicraft cultural heritage art and the limitations to such innovation in preserving the authenticity of heritage.

This study used a qualitative approach involving interviews with experienced handicraft workers and government agency officials involved in the country's heritage policy.

It found that several forms of innovations exist: hybrids, motifs, materials, techniques, and uses. The innovations in making traditional handicrafts should be carefully balanced to preserve the authenticity of traditional handicrafts. This paper provides an overview of the handicraft innovations implemented by handicraft makers in Malaysia without neglecting the value of craftsmanship in manufacturing traditional craft products. It can help the authorities to prepare policies and take appropriate actions so that the heritage of handicrafts in Malaysia will remain relevant in today's modern world.

**Keywords:** Heritage Preservation, Handicraft Innovation, Textiles, Ceramics, Handicrafts.

## Introduction

Handicrafts are part of the art of intangible cultural heritage that is a symbol and identity of a nation. They are created with high ideas and creativity (Ferreira et al. 2019; Mokhtar 2018). It is an activity that requires careful and consistent planning to produce something of high quality. They are also often associated with making clothes, decorations,

handicraft products and others. Handicrafts reflect the intellectual values of previous societies inherited by today's generation. Intangible cultural heritage such as handicrafts has a high heritage value meaning they become art objects that need to be preserved sustainably (Kamaruddin 2020). Like other cultural elements, handicrafts are important in symbolizing a country and community. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that handicrafts are always preserved because it means preserving the traditions and culture of the nation.

As time passes, handicrafts face various challenges in remaining relevant. Factors such as rising prices and difficulty obtaining high-quality raw materials cause handicrafts to become less popular (Akhir et al. 2015; M.Ghouse 2012). Innovations can help in preserving the heritage of traditional handicrafts, and even expand it to a broader market (Mokhtar 2018; Romana 2018)

In Malaysia, the government takes heritage issues seriously and takes proactive steps to preserve the cultural heritage, including the handicraft industry. Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia is an agency under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture established under Act 222, the Malaysian Crafts Development Corporation Act (1979) with the aim of commercializing craft products through market, product, and entrepreneur development. Even in the act, it also defines handicrafts as an artistic product that has cultural appeal or traditional elements and is the result of a process that depends on hand skills. It also includes any Batik products, which has a Batik design on in any part of it. Handicrafts have been divided into several categories: textiles, forest products, metal products, land products, and various crafts.

Textile craft refers to batik, weaving, songket, and embroidery, while ceramic crafts refer to pottery, crystal, glass and marble. This handicraft heritage continues to grow and experience innovation. Accordingly, this study examines the innovations in two categories of crafts: textiles and ceramics. Its objectives are as follows:

- i. To identify forms of innovation in traditional handicrafts namely Batik and Labu Sayong
- ii. To examine the limitation of each innovation in traditional handicrafts to preserve the authenticity of traditional handicrafts

## Literature Review

Several studies highlight the issue of preserving traditional handicrafts and the need for action to prevent their extinction. For example, Noor (2017) and Zakaria (2016) point out that by improving product quality and design, promoting traditional crafts through tourism, and providing support and training for artists, it is possible to restore and preserve this important cultural asset. Unfortunately however, the traditional craft 'Songket' is now almost non-existent due to several factors, including lack of support from the government, competition from cheaper imported products, and a shift towards mass-produced goods (Scrase 2003; Abisuga-Oyekunle 2016).

Studies on the issue of craft extinction are also widely discussed in other countries. Sukarsono et al. (2018) examine the extinction of traditional crafts in Indonesia. They point out the factors contributing to the extinction of traditional handicrafts in Indonesia, including changes in consumer preferences, lack of support from the government and society, and the deterioration of the quality and authenticity of traditional crafts. They propose several solutions to address the issue, including improving product quality, promoting traditional crafts through education and tourism, and supporting artisans and craftsmen. Sugiyanto et al. (2023) show that socio-cultural capital also has an important role in preserving traditional crafts. Nguyen and Nguyen (2019) have investigated the decline of traditional handicrafts in Vietnam, using the example of lacquerware and finds that the decline of traditional handicrafts is due to a lack of innovation, competition from cheaper imported products, and a shift towards industrialization.

Extinction of handicrafts is also caused by modern tools that replace their use. In Kelantan, one of the states in Malaysia, there is a type of traditional roof known as the 'Singgora roof' that covers the house and is capable of being a natural cooler because of its porous nature

and absorbing water. However, since the 70s, along with the development of construction technology, its function has been replaced by zinc, asbestos, laminated ceramics, and various modern construction tools (Surip 2016). Its extinction is also due to the raw materials used in its manufacture, causing it to quickly become brittle and not durable (Mohamad 2013).

Same factors have also caused the extinction of traditional 'Mengkuang' woven mats. The 'Mengkuang' mats have been replaced by plastic mats and modern, more attractive and durable carpets. Its extinction is also due to the lack of skilled labour in weaving and the difficulty of obtaining raw materials to make them (Som 2020). Thus, in dealing with the problem, various measures have been implemented.

Scrase (2003) points out that innovation is one of the methods used apart from education and government campaigns. Preserving heritage through innovation involves finding new and creative ways to honor and celebrate the past while incorporating new ideas and technologies. By incorporating traditional design elements and materials, heritage can be preserved while still accommodating contemporary needs. Innovation also refers to using raw materials that rely heavily on natural materials such as bamboo, wood, rattan and Bemban, now replaced by synthetic or plastic materials, all or part of the handicraft components (Omar, 2016).

Further, traditional handicrafts also experience a process of innovation in terms of use (Nuryakin 2018; Harwiki 2018). It is seen from the innovation of batik blocks which are synonymous with manufacturing batik hijabs, but now they are also used as decorative crafts for home decoration (Yusop 2015). Moreover, the materials used in its manufacture are also innovative from the use of copper. A mixture of zinc flakes and yellow copper is used to reduce costs. In production of Labu Sayong, Hamdzun et al. (2018) and Haron et al. (2014) stated that the exchange of techniques implemented by entrepreneurs had brought positive results in sustaining this art of heritage. The study of innovation in traditional handicrafts has proven that there is a diversity of innovations that have been done and become very significant to maintain the heritage of this craft. However, authenticity and heritage value must be considered in developing innovation in traditional handicrafts. Therefore, in addition to focusing on implementing innovations in traditional handicrafts, this study also looks at the limitations of these innovations to maintain their authenticity while preserving this local cultural heritage.

## Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to gather data systematically. Helaluddin (2019) states that a qualitative approach is used to systematically understand difficult phenomena and processes. The study was conducted in several states in Peninsular Malaysia and was selected based on the types of handicrafts popular in the states. Within the qualitative approach, it uses a case study method. Burns (1997) and Merriam (1988) state that case studies are suitable for use in studies related to events, cultures, and human groups. Data collection involved interviews with several government officials from the departments involved in handicraft preservation activities in Malaysia. They are: the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan Malaysia) and the National Handicraft Institute of Malaysia (IKN).

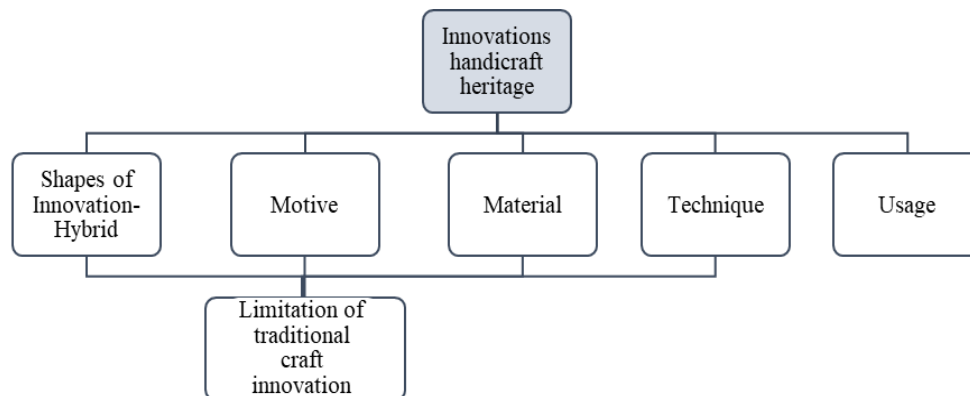
The interviews also involved 14 handicraft entrepreneurs and representatives of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in traditional handicraft activities such as the traditional Terengganu Songket weaving, Labu Sayong in Perak and Batik textiles. Non-participant observation was also used for recording techniques, motifs, and materials. The data obtained were then analyzed with the help of Nvivo software.

## Findings and the Discussion

Malaysia has a rich heritage of traditional handicrafts, including Songket weaving, Batik, woodcarving, and pottery. The findings show that handicraft industry entrepreneurs have innovated to make this traditional craft more attractive to modern consumers and make traditional handicrafts remain relevant and get customer demand. Some of the innovations that have been identified are as follows.

1. Hybrids in the manufacture of Labu Sayong pottery, and Batik textiles,
2. Renewal of new motifs in Batik textile patterns,
3. Modern motifs in Terengganu songket weaving,
4. The process of making colour-blocking Batik, and
5. The use of modern technology to speed up the songket weaving process.

Those innovations are categorized into hybrids, motifs, techniques, materials and uses. The study also discussed the limitations of the innovation, especially in the technique used. The authenticity of traditional handicrafts needs to be preserved to preserve the cultural heritage and folk arts that become the cultural identity of the local community (Valentina 2015).



**Fig. 1:** Innovation in Traditional Handicrafts In Malaysia  
Source: Author

### **Innovative Form- Hybrid**

Hybrid in this study means the coalition of two elements in one subject to create a new subject. In the case of handicrafts in Malaysia, there are several examples of hybrid innovation implemented in the manufacture of Labu Sayong pottery and the combination of traditional and contemporary motifs in Batik textiles. In the state of Perak, the research and development results carried out by the Perak Branch of Malaysian Crafts succeeded in producing Labu Sayong, which has been innovated in function and design. Labu Sayong is a traditional craft product from Perak, Malaysia. Labu Sayong is made of clay and used as a container to store drinking water. The Labu Sayong has a unique and attractive shape, with a narrow neck and a round and fleshy body. It is also famous for keeping the drinking water cool. Because the basic material used to make Labu Sayong is clay, the mass is a little heavy, making it difficult to lift easily. Considering this factor, the Labu Sayong has been innovated with a more user-friendly design.

There are two designs of this 'water dispenser' style gourd. First, which still maintains the traditional pumpkin-shaped design with the use of colours with more attractive tones. Second, which uses a more elegant cylinder design with a modern motif on the cylinder body and uses a more exclusive black colour. However, the original clay material in its manufacture is still maintained. This innovation seems simple, benefits the user to the maximum, and increases buyer demand.



**Fig. 2:** Labu Sayong style 'water dispenser' with a modern design.  
Source: Author

In comparison, hybrid elements can also be seen through the creativity of Johor Batik entrepreneurs, who combine the 'Shibori tie dye' technique with the Johor stamp Batik motif. The Shibori technique is a shirt dyeing technique that originated in Japan. Shirts or other textiles will be tied in a certain way to create a unique motif when soaked in dye. This fashion has become a 'trend' that most of today's teenagers follow. This modern technology is combined with batik cap techniques with Johor batik elements, making it unique and interesting to style.



**Fig. 3:** 'Shibori tie dye' shirt combined with batik stamp technique.  
Source: author

### **Motifs**

Motifs in Malaysian batik patterns have a deep meaning and philosophy and are often related to the beliefs and traditions of the Malaysian community. The flora and natural elements often inspire the traditional motifs that decorate traditional Malaysian handicrafts (Haziyah 2012; Kamarudin et al. 2021; Abdullah & Samin 2020). The study found that observing natural elements is still maintained in some of the new motifs produced by Batik makers ( Morni et al. 2021). What makes it more interesting, the elements of nature that are introduced are related to the characteristics of the state. For example, the state of Johor, is famous for its agricultural commodities, such as pineapple and black pepper and has a local cultural art known as Ghazal. These characteristics have been adapted as motifs in Johor batik patterns. It highlights the national identity of producing traditional handicrafts in the state. Introducing new motifs can add value to traditional handicrafts in terms of aesthetics. The introduction of this new motif is not because the existing traditional motifs are unattractive and outdated, but it is just an added value to make the traditional handicrafts more attractive.





**Fig. 4:** Batik Block with Black pepper motif and Kaftan shirt with black pepper motif.

Source: Author

Innovation in motifs is also seen in the making of Songket. Songket is a type of textile that is famous in Malaysia, especially in Terengganu. This Songket is woven with gold or silver thread on silk or cotton fabric and decorated with various unique traditional motifs. In Terengganu, some entrepreneurs introduce a modern and contemporary Songket weaving motif. Songket becomes attractive when featuring a combination of contemporary and traditional motifs. This innovation aims to make Songket more relevant to modern fashion trends while maintaining its traditional values and identity. This innovation in the production of Songket in Terengganu not only preserves tradition but also helps keep the art relevant and attractive to the younger generation, ensuring that it continues to last in the future.

### Materials

As discussed in previous studies, one of the contributing factors to the extinction of handicrafts is raw materials. Difficulty in obtaining raw materials can be one of the contributing factors to the extinction of handicrafts, especially for handicrafts that use raw materials that are difficult to find. For example, for handicrafts that use natural materials such as wood, rattan or plant fibres, the availability of raw materials may be limited due to the reduction of forests and natural plant areas due to human development. It can lead to increased costs and difficulty obtaining the necessary raw materials, ultimately hindering the production of quality handicraft products. In the context of this study, the increase in the price of raw materials and the difficulty in obtaining them are factors why most entrepreneurs and handicraft makers no longer continue their business. However, by introducing alternative materials to existing manufacturing materials, this problem can be overcome, for example, in making batik, which uses wax as a resist agent to create patterns on fabric. The wax is applied to the areas of the fabric where the artist wants to keep their original colour. From the interview with the batik entrepreneurs, the cost of wax used in batik making is considered expensive. Therefore, in the production of batik fabric, using clay as a resist agent that replaces wax in the batik process can reduce manufacturing costs. Using wax as a quenching agent requires it to be constantly hot and liquid, so a gas stove is needed throughout the batik process. The increase in gas prices will increase the cost of making batik. So, alternatives like clay are convenient, apart from the price, cheap, easy to find, and easy to handle. The result is the same as using wax and can even save costs and simplify the batik process. Using clay can also reduce the risk of injury and make the workplace safer because the batik maker is not exposed to the high temperature of the wax.

### Techniques

Craft-making is a process that involves various techniques that require a high level of artistry and skill by artisans. Innovation in traditional crafts is also seen from the aspect of craft-making techniques. For example, in the Songket weaving process, preparing the warp and weft threads will take at least four days because this process is very complicated. The production of

Songket is a painstaking and time-consuming process that requires the skills of trained weavers. The traditional procession process was now replaced by 'heddle eye' to shorten the process to one to two days only. Innovations created in Songket manufacturing techniques have saved weaver's time and increased productivity.



**Fig. 5:** The use of traditional “Karak” and 'heddle eye' on a loom-  
Source: author

### Use

Innovation is also seen from the aspect of the use or function of the craft. Traditional crafts have changed their use. For example, Songket woven fabric, synonymous with clothing, has been made into interesting souvenirs and jewelry. Among them are statues, 'luggage tags,' tablecloths, pillowcases, and wall decorations. Diversifying the function of Songket can introduce more traditional Malay weaving art in various ways, not only through clothing. In this way, Songket no longer seems to be used only by adults but looks more 'friendly' for all ages. In addition, in the manufacture of pottery, the Labu Sayong, whose original function was used as a water cooler, was also expanded to include decorative lamps. Its attractive shape adds a draw that will create a difference in aesthetic value. Diversifying the use of a product is essential and provides a tremendous added value to craft products. It can also introduce the product more widely and attract more customers.

### Limitation in Innovation

Innovation is essential in preserving traditional handicrafts because it can renew and improve the quality of handicrafts. It aims to ensure that the handicraft remains relevant and can survive in the market. Without innovation, traditional handicrafts will tend to die out due to lack of demand due to competition with modern goods and even make it less attractive for the younger generation to become consumers or operators of traditional handicrafts.

In addition, innovation can also help preserve traditional handicrafts by introducing new technologies and methods that can improve the quality of craft products and speed up the manufacturing process. Traditional handicraft entrepreneurs can produce better-quality products in larger quantities by applying new technology and more effective methods. The effect is that traditional handicrafts are able to compete and become more competitive with cheaper and readily available modern products.

However, the innovations and changes implemented in handicrafts cause concern among traditional craft art activists regarding the issue of authenticity. The innovation of handicrafts is claimed to change the originality and sentimental value. Entrepreneurs and enthusiasts of traditional handicrafts have been engaging in a lengthy discussion on the matter of authenticity. Sometimes, those who are involved in making traditional handicrafts from generation to generation also feel worried about the long-term effect of innovation on the sustainability of the artistic skills possessed by traditional craft makers.

Because of this, there are views from some traditional craftsmen who interpret innovation in traditional craft-making in a more selective framework. Innovation that can be

done in craft-making is in any form of improvement that does not replace the skills the artisans possess in craft production. For example, the existence of a machine that prints Batik patterns on a piece of fabric is not an innovation in handicrafts because this machine will replace the role of Batik drawing artisans in the production of Batik. Therefore, no craftsmen's art skill is needed to draw Batik because a printing machine has done everything. Because of this, the respondents who were found were very firm in stating that using machines in directly making handicraft products is killing creativity and artisans.

*"This craft is a process. The craft is not a product, the craft is a process, if we replace the work of carving with a machine that can carve, the technology is actually killing the skills of traditional craft carvers. We kill our employees means we kill our heritage. It's just that no one rejects innovation. Innovation can happen but only during the pre-manufacturing process".*

(I9, T1)

The pre-process meant by the informant is innovation in preparing raw materials to produce handicrafts. Innovation can also be implemented by replacing existing raw materials with alternative materials with similar functions, such as wax in Batik-making, which can now be replaced with clay in Batik-making. In maintaining the authenticity of handicrafts, some informants insist that the definition of handicrafts lies in the manufacturing process. For example, Batik is often associated with flora and fauna motifs, and it goes through the process of weaving and some through the process of applying wax and dyeing colour. If a fabric is produced with flora and fauna patterns through machine printing, it is not considered Batik, even though it resembles Batik. Batik is one of the textile handicrafts that face the misuse of innovation, which is the use of printing machines in producing artificial Batik. However, if the wax is replaced with clay in the batik weaving process, it is considered an innovation in the batik manufacturing process.

Informants have stated that Batik used not only for clothes or shirts but also for other uses, such as water bottles and mobile phone cases, is also Batik as long as the manufacturing process is maintained. Some other informants who shared their views on the issue of the authenticity of crafts also thought that innovation should not destroy the authenticity of handicrafts. For example, in textiles, innovation often occurs in new patterns and motifs that aim to add value to handicrafts through colours, motifs, and new mediums.

Based on the observations and opinions from the recorded informants, most handicraft innovations are necessary to ensure they remain in demand. The innovation that exists does not damage the original aesthetic value of handicrafts because the skills possessed by the craftsman in the manufacturing method are maintained. Innovation exists only to add aesthetic value to keep up with the times and to facilitate and speed up the production process without distorting the manufacturing process. So, as long as the innovation remains the same way it was made, the originality of the craftsmanship is beyond dispute.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, innovation in traditional crafts is a critical way to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. Artisans and craft designers can create innovative and original products by innovating conventional techniques with new materials, technologies, and design concepts. Despite the various types of innovation, the reforms carried out need to emphasize the aspect of authenticity because it shows the high art and skills of traditional artisans. Innovation is significant, but to help artisans instead of replacing them. As society moves into an increasingly global and technologically advanced future, it is important to remember the value and importance of traditional crafts and find new ways to innovate and appreciate their artistic value. Handicrafts are proof of the wisdom and ingenuity of previous generations. Therefore, the responsible parties must make a concerted effort to preserve this intangible heritage to remain sustainable.



## Acknowledgments

This paper is a result from research from a project funded by the Fundamental Research Grant No FRGS/1/2021/WAB10/UNISZA/03/1, University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu. Utmost appreciation to the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, and University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) for the funds given for this project.

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