HISTORICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF MALAY "BEADWORK"

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Little has been published in English about Malay ceremonial textiles. This article relates early-20th-century beaded examples to historical descriptions and court literature to illustrate the link between beaded and bejeweled hangings.

INTRODUCTION

At the 1938 British Empire Exhibition in Glasgow, the Malayan Court, at 5,500 square feet, was the "largest of the Colonial displays" (*Straits Times* 1938:14). Assembled by the colonial government to demonstrate both the natural potential and enlightened governance of its colony, the exhibits included traditional Malay craft and native industry. Berlin-trained sculptor Tina Wentscher and her husband, painter Julius Wenstcher, were commissioned to produce a series of realistic, life-size dioramas demonstrating various aspects of Malay industry, including a woman and girl at a traditional handloom (*Singapore Free Press* 1938a:9).[1] To emphasize the international appeal of local handwork, the craft section featured mannequins wearing gowns made by European dressmakers of *songket*, a locally produced gold and silver brocade (*Singapore Free Press* 1938b:7). A *Singapore Free Press* (1938c:9) journalist was scathing about the dearth of native crafts submitted for display, lamenting that local crafts of silverwork, palm-leaf plaiting, and "Malayan bead work" were endangered.

Since the late 19th century, the colonial government of Malaya had made repeated efforts to stem what they considered to be the decline of traditional crafts due to the lack of local demand and competition from cheap mass-produced imports or local Chinese craftsmen.[2] Silversmithing, woodcarving, basketry, and weaving were consistently in the spotlight but beadwork hardly, if ever, rated a mention. What, then, was this local "Malayan bead work" mentioned in the news? Was it the beadwork of the Straits Chinese or indigenous groups in Sarawak, for whom beading formed conspicuous traditions? Or did it refer to lesser-known Malay beadwork?

This brief overview introduces some forms of Malay beadwork and relates them to historical descriptions to provide a context for understanding the craft. Here I concentrate on embroideries from the Malay peninsula that make use of imported glass seed beads. Beadwork from other parts of the Malay world, including the east coast of Sumatra, and textiles that incorporate other types of beads such as silver handkerchief weights known as *buah hara* (e.g., *see* Roth 1993: Figures 131-135), is beyond the scope of this review.

MALAY BEADWORK

Glass beads were used in some traditional Malay rites. One of the measures to prevent a woman who dies during childbirth from becoming a *langsuir*, a malevolent flying spirit that takes the form of an owl, is to place glass beads in her mouth so that she cannot shriek (Skeat 2005:325). To prevent a stillborn child from morphing into a demonic *pontianak*, the same can be done with beads or "some simple equivalent" (Skeat 2005: 327). Their substitutability suggests that the beads themselves may not have held any particular symbolic meaning.

In a contemporary context, glass beads are embroidered on the *baju kurung*, a thigh length tunic, as a decorative feature. Traditionally, bead embroidery or *sulam manik* was most commonly seen on Malay ceremonial needlework. Several observations indicate that the latter was fairly common in the early 20th century. Colonial officer R.O. Winstedt (1925:73) remarked that mosquito curtain fringes, purses, watch pockets, and slippers were "covered with bead-work." Winstedt (1909:25) also noted that "pedestal trays are decorated on festivals with an embroidered and bead-work fringe, like the fringe on the marriage mosquito net." Referring specifically to craft instruction for Malay girls, Nicola Purdom (1931:177), the Lady Supervisor of Malay Girls' Schools, also observed a "revival of bead craft in Penang and Province Wellesley" in the 1930s. Earlier, schools (such as the Malay girls' school in Bandar established by the Raja Muda of Selangor in the late 19th century) taught beadwork, although it is difficult to determine what exactly this comprised (*Straits Times* 1896:3).[3]

Beading supplemented ornate gold thread couching, particularly *sulam tekat* which produced a raised embroidered surface with a cardboard underlay. Craft historian Siti Zainon Ismail (1994:144) explains that beads and sequins were placed to neaten the edges of couched gold threads and to fill the empty spaces in-between. It was typically found on pillow and mattress decorations, valances, vessel covers, ceremonial handkerchiefs, and shoulder cloths made for weddings and court ceremonial (Figure 1).

Governed by customary rules or *adat*, the use of ceremonial furnishings made a conspicuous visual statement. The couch or *pelamin* was often the centerpiece. Hung with mosquito curtains and valances (*kelambu* or *tirai kelambu*), it was piled high with pillows (*bantal*) of varying shapes and sizes to symbolize mountains (*gunong-gunongan*). The type and number of pillows was rigidly specified and indicated rank (Figure 2) (Skeat 2005:370-371).

We do not yet have enough information to pinpoint the relationship between beading and status although the teaching of beadwork at schools mentioned above suggests that it may have been carried out by women of varied social classes in the early 20th century. In any case, embroideries were certainly produced in royal compounds or by women associated with the courts. In the east-coast state of Kelantan, the family of Nik Rahimah Nik Idris, a septuagenarian embroiderer, was involved in embroidering for the palace; her grandfather, Dato Nik Jaafar, was *Datuk Istiadat* (master of ceremonies) to the Kelantan court in the early 20th century (Nik Rahimah 2007: pers. comm.).

The mother-in-law of embroidery expert Puan Azizah binti Adam used to do the beadwork on Perak gold thread embroideries (*tekat*). A midwife in the Perak palace, she learned the skill from her mother who was a governess in the palace (Puan Azizah 2007: pers. comm.). The wife of the Sultan of Perak was by far the most celebrated aristocratic needleworker. She crafted a set of gold-thread embroidery comprising a long mat, a seven-layer square mat, and two pillows with embroidered ends for the Prince and Princess of Wales when they visited Singapore in 1901 (Figure 3) (Wray 1989:146).

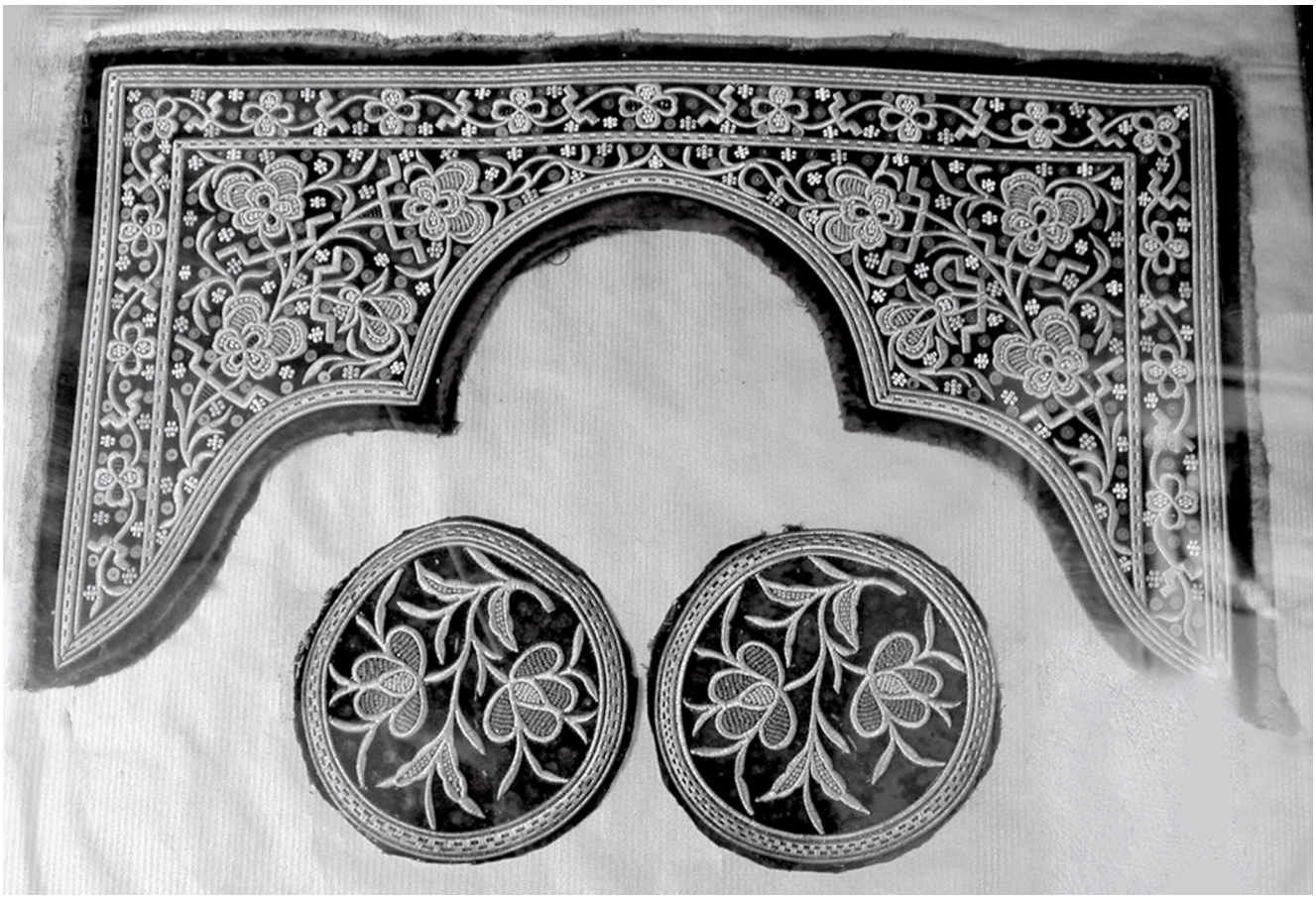

Figure 1. A pair of pillow faces (*muka bantal*) and a decorative panel for a long mat (*tikar*), Perak, early 20th century (collection of Enche Nadimah, Chemor, Perak).

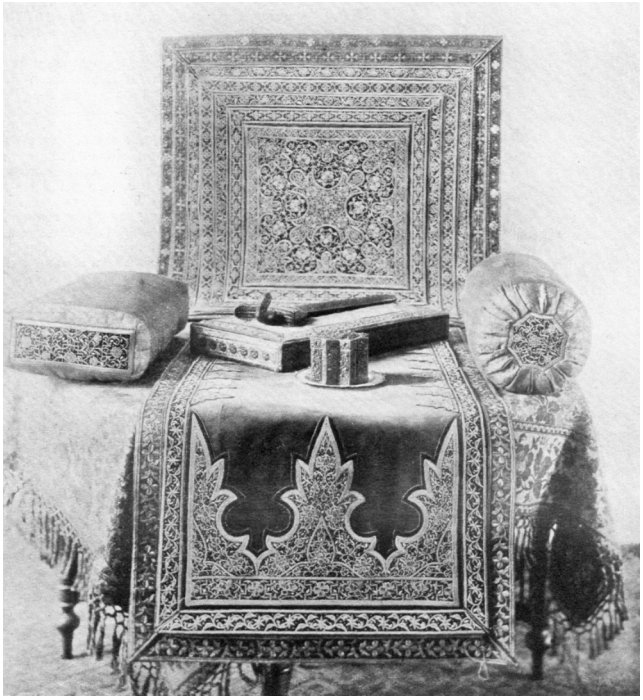

Figure 2. The dias for the wedding of Tengku Ngah Aishah Al-Hajjah binti Sultan Zainal Abidin III, Terengganu, early 20th century (courtesy of Tengku Ismail Tengku Su, Terengganu).

Perak state was particularly well known for *tekatan* gold thread embroidery which frequently incorporated glass beads. The ceremonial handkerchief (Plate IA) is typical of early-20th-century Perak embroidery. It is couched with a conventional Malay design: the two triangular forms from which stylized foliage arises allude to the *pucuk rebung* or young bamboo shoot. Color-lined tubular beads are stitched individually or in short rows onto velvet with cotton thread in a repeating diamond shape referred to as *potong wajik* (cut diamond), a pattern common in Malay brocades.[4]

Pillow faces of the type presented by the Sultan of Perak and his wife in 1901 are shown in Plates IB-ID and IIA. Here, tiny blocks of color are beaded in-between raised bands of gold thread. The uncomplicated beadwork sets off the meandering foliate and floral gold thread designs. As in these examples, beadwork was seldom, if ever, an integral part of the embroidered design. The range of colors was limited and the forms simple.

Pillows decorated with glass of various colors ("*bantal saraga iang ber-kacha-kan puspa ragam*" or in standard Malay, *bantal seraga yang berkacakan puspa ragam*) are referred to in Marsden's (1812:246) English-Malay dictionary. On the octagonal pillow face in Plate ID, a sunburst design is composed of appliques of small discs of yellow glass with a pliable metal substrate (possibly tin or a related alloy). Probably referring to such things, Winstedt (1925:72-73) attributes Malay embroidery of beads and "inlet discs of coloured glass" to Chinese influence.[5] The small circular and hexagonal mirrors liberally stitched across the surfaces of Chinese altar cloths and ceremonial banners were imported, sometimes on commission, for the migrant Chinese communities.

The localized Straits Chinese also made intricate embroidered and netted beadwork. A notable difference between Straits Chinese and Malay embroidered beadwork is the lack of shading and color gradation in the latter, the beads being used mainly as color fill rather than to construct the motif. The flat colors on Malay beading bear more visual affinity to ethnic beadwork from Sumatra. Both the Malays and Straits Chinese decorated their wedding bed valances with netted beadwork fringes. The term *bi*, by which the valance is still referred to in Melaka, suggests a Chinese or Straits Chinese association and further comparative research on their techniques could yield valuable insights on the interlinked histories of bead-using cultures in the region.

In Malay court literature, however, the valance was often referred to as *tirai* or *tirai kelambu*, and may indicate a relationship with Indian *toran* hangings (Maxwell 2003:77). In many Malay embroideries from the west coast of the peninsula, the glass applique stitches (Plate IIA) appear to be a variant of buttonhole stitch resembling Indian *shisha* embroidery, although this needs to be verified technically.

Some netted beadwork was produced, mainly for *lemudi* or *ombak ombak* (wave- or scallop-shaped borders), the valances that were hung at the front of a ceremonial dais (*pelamin*) or couch (*petarana*) (Figure 4). Valances from Perak are often constructed of a narrow embroidered strip to which is attached a row of pendant pipal leaf (*daun budi*) forms, sometimes of silver repoussé, the bead netting in-between creating a lace-like effect (*see* cover and Plate IIB). A closely spaced row of beaded tassels, about 10 cm long, usually hangs along the bottom edge (cf. Roth 1993: Figure 2).

Beyond the Indic association, royal chronicles suggest a historical association between beaded and bejeweled hangings. The *Misa Melayu*, a laudatory account of the Perak court written in the 18th century, describes a royal bathing pavilion decorated with "red paint, gilt and silver paper, white and yellow glass; and above, water issued from the mouths of four dragons with gilded scales, red eyes and jeweled crests. An embroidered bead fringe was hung round it all" (Raja Chulan 1919:217). Such descriptions were tropes of Malay court narratives or *hikayat*. Winstedt's translation quoted here aptly conveys the atmosphere intended, but a more precise translation of the relevant section reads: "the

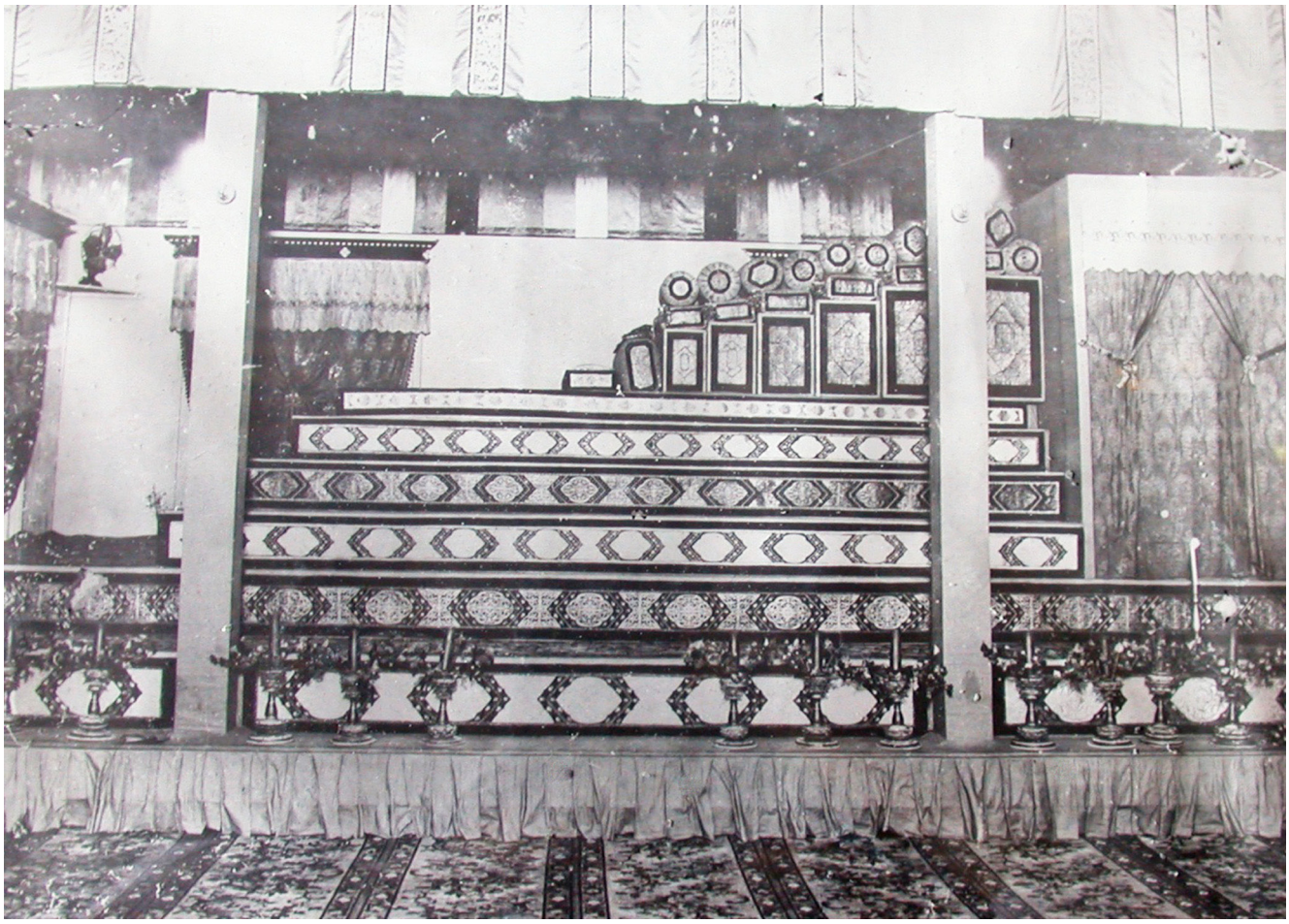

Figure 3. Embroideries from Perak presented to the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1901 (Wray 1908: Figure 15).

Figure 4. Valance (*lemudi*), Negri Sembilan or Malacca, early 20th century (Jabatan Muzium Malaysia).

bathing place was hung about with [a fringe of] pendants in the shape of pipal leaves with gems, sapphires, alabaster and gemstones of varied colours."[6] The correspondence in the form of the fringe described in the text with actual embroidered valances suggests an affiliation between gems and glass beads.

The image of bejeweled textiles is repeated in Malay texts. A search of the Malay Concordance Project (mcp.anu.edu.au) yields several interesting instances. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (9:34, 503:15; *see* Kassim Ahmad 1975), which recounts the exploits of a 15th-century hero of Melaka, describes clothing inlaid with gemstones ("*pakaian kerajaan bertatahkan ratna mutu maknikam* [sic]") and elephants caparisoned with gilded coverings encrusted with jewels ("pakaian gajah itu keemasan bertatahkan ratna mutu maknikam [sic]"). Similarly, the *Sejarah Melayu* (34:2; *see* A. Samad Ahmad 1979), a chronicle of the Melaka sultanate, refers to royal dress gilded and studded with precious stones ("*pakaian raja-raja yang keemasan, bertatahkan ratna mutu manikam*"). While we do not know exactly what

these textiles were, we can be fairly certain from vintage embroideries (Plate IIC-IID) that such phrases were more than figures of speech.

Historian Anthony Milner (2008:61, 65) emphasizes the semiotic role of material culture in Malay courts. Descriptions of dress and furnishings in royal chronicles not only reinforced the sense that the "splendor of the royal courts... would have conveyed the capacity of a ruler to extend patronage." Textiles and clothing sustained rank and reputation; departures from the prescribed norms of dress and ceremony were closely observed and commented upon (Milner 2008:60-66). The tropes of jeweled textiles thus reflect a society in which ceremonial paraphernalia served as a nuanced language.

Malay terms reiterate the idea that beads served to imitate gems. *Manik*, the most common of these, is related to *manikam*, a Malay loan-word from Tamil which means gem or a precious stone (Jones 2007:193).[7] John Crawfurd's (1852:57, 96) English-Malay dictionary defines *jajat* as "glass beads" but also "to mimic, to imitate."[8] From afar, the embroidered glass and beads, enclosed by raised gold thread borders, would have resembled gem-studded cloth and inlaid gold repoussé jewellery that the Malay world prized (e.g., *see* Zubaidah 1999:16, 26-27).

If beadwork was secondary embellishment on Malay gold-thread embroideries, it certainly was not perfunctory or mere decoration. Netted or embroidered onto ceremonial decorations, glass beads alluded to the glittering images painted by royal texts, evoking heritage and links to a prestigious Malay history.

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ENDNOTES

1. For a brief biography of Tina and Julius Wentscher, *see* Peers (2002).

2. For example, *see* the sections on craft in *Annual Report on Education in the Federated Malay States* (Federated Malay States 1901-1906).

3. Like many girls' schools of this period, it was small, with an enrolment of 36 girls between the ages 7 and 17.

4. A type of sweet, glutinous rice cake goes by the same name. Hence, the pattern is sometimes translated as "rice cake" design.

5. The scope of "Chinese" must be clarified, since the items produced for a Chinese market in Malaya reflected local tastes. On these items, the glass discs were probably attached later, as the stitches are visible on the reverse of the finished product, on the outside of the lining (Jeffrey Eng, Eng Tiang Huat Singapore 2013: pers. comm.).

6. The Malay text reads "*maka pada keliling balai itu digantungnya pula daun budi manikam nilam pualam puspa ragam berbagai-bagai jenis rupanya*" (Raja Chulan 1919: 87). Translation kindly provided by Ian Proudfoot, April 2008.

7. Crawfurd (1852:96) relates *manik* to Sanskrit but *manikam* to Tamil.

8. Unlike *manik*, however, *jajat* does not surface in a search of a selection of historical texts in the Malay Concordance Project (mcp.anu.edu.au) and does not appear to be commonly used. *Mutisalah*, a term used in parts of Indonesia for heirloom beads, is also derived from the compound word that literally means "false pearl" (Francis 2002:251).

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