

Where Traditional Culture Endures

Malay Jewellery

By Prue Harrison



Kerongsang sets, 19th century, Kelantan, Malaysia

The Malay culture values tradition. In Singapore, the Malay community's traditional culture is derived from both the Malaysian and Indonesian heritages and survives to this day, albeit in a modern form.

Malay traditional jewellery is no exception. Designed according to Islamic tradition, human and animal forms are avoided in favour of stylised patterns of leaves, flowers and geometric designs. Similar jewellery was worn by the *nonyas*, their designs taking inspiration from butterflies, birds and shells. Ann Richter, in *Jewellery of South East Asia*, mentions families associating with the British regime commissioning jewellery designed around stylised coats-of-arms, trios of coronets and the triple feathers of the Prince of Wales' insignia. Whereas in the olden days gold and silver jewellery was worn only by royalty, courtiers and the wives of wealthy Malay merchants, it is worn now by Malay children during Hari Raya, by young brides during their weddings and women of all ages when they dress up for special occasions.

The *dokoh* is a necklace comprising three or more flat plates of gold or silver, attached to each other with chain links and worn with the *baju kurung* (long tunic) on special occasions. Still following tradition, the leaf, diamond and bean shapes are popular current designs. Today you can order a custom-made *dokoh* online, much like that worn by Malay royalty in times past. Adorning the designs and adding colour, crystals have taken the place of semi or precious stones and are usually chosen to complement the *batik* pattern of the *baju kurung*.

The *kerongsang* is a three-tiered brooch, each piece attached to the other by fine chain links and still worn today for bridal gowns and with festive *baju kebayas*, to hold the blouse together at the front. In the old days *kebayas* had no buttons.



Kerongsang gold and diamond brooch set, 1930s, gift of Mr Edmond Chin

Although the *kerongsang* is similar to the tiered *dokoh*, it can be separated to form three brooches. The top 'mother' brooch, or *kerongsang ibu*, the largest of the three, is usually worn separately. The smaller two 'child' *kerongsang anak*, are worn below the main piece, keeping the *kebaya* closed all the way down the front. In Singapore, the *kerongsang* is more popular today, whereas the *dokoh* is making a comeback in Malaysia. One wedding gown designer now designs *baju kurung* with beads and crystals sewn on to resemble a *dokoh* and *baju kebaya* with sewn-on *kerongsang*.

No bridal outfit would be complete without the *sanggul*. This piece of jewellery was once a simple hairpin, *cucuk sanggul*, used to secure Malay women's long, luxurious hair - considered a must-have for attractiveness. It has become a meaningful part of the bridal outfit, *sanggul lintang*, often covering the whole head and comprising over 10 floral motifs, each design representing plants that can be found in the jungle. The *sanggul lintang* is an elaborate hair-knot, or chignon, made from copper and gold. A more elaborate wedding adornment can also comprise real flowers, set into the *sanggul* with *cucuk sanggul*, or intricate hairpins. In Melaka, the belief was that each layer represented the heavy responsibility a bride was taking on when becoming a wife. Some *sanggul lintang* can weigh up to two kilogrammes, contain over 70 *cucuk sanggul* and take over two hours to create. It is still the practice today for grandmothers to pass their treasured *cucuk sanggul* down to their favourite granddaughters.



Dokoh, 19th century, Kelantan, Malaysia

Prue Harrison, originally from England, has lived in Singapore since 1984 and been married to a Malay for 20 years. She still treasures the gold and sapphire *kerongsang* she was given for her wedding outfit.

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