

Couched Gold Thread Embroidery (Tekat) in Malay Weddings

By Noor Azlina Yunus

Malay weddings are invariably elaborate affairs, steeped in tradition and celebrated over several days. Months before the event, the bride and her mother and other relatives begin planning the wedding, especially the decoration of the bridal chamber and the *pelamin* or raised dais on which the *bersanding* or ceremonial 'enthronement' will take place. They will also plan the trays of gifts for exchange between the bridal couple and the gifts (usually an egg in a decorative holder) for the many relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues who will attend. Malay weddings continue to follow prescribed rites and ceremonies, but many modern brides put their own spin on the decorative aspects, choosing a wondrous range of colours and materials for the wedding paraphernalia. In some states in the Malay Peninsula, especially in Perak, the traditional choice is to include at least some items crafted from *tekat*

bersuji or *tekat timbul*, better known simply as *tekat* or *tekatan*.

Tekat bersuji or couched gold thread embroidery is needlework in relief. Strands of gold (occasionally silver) thread are passed back and forth over a cardboard template or filling, with the thread being anchored to a base fabric on both sides of the template with silk thread worked from the underside. Not only does this method produce a raised effect but the gold thread, an expensive imported product, is not wasted on the underside of the embroidery where it cannot be seen. The background fabric is usually richly coloured velvet, generally maroon but sometimes crimson, royal blue, purple, bottle green or black, allowing the *tekat* pattern to stand out in shimmering relief.

Tekat was originally a court art, particularly in the royal towns of Perak, Pahang, Terengganu, Selangor and Johor where it was associated with royal regalia, palace adornment and rites of passage, such as a marriage proposal,



Framed *tekat bersuji* pillow and bolster end panels and betel box covers form a backdrop for this wedding dais (*pelamin*) for the 'sitting-in-state' or blessing ceremony (*bersanding*), 2007. Photo courtesy of the author

engagement and wedding, the birth of a child and the child's haircutting ceremony, the circumcision or ear-piercing ceremonies of young boys and girls, and the completion of a child's reading of the Qur'an. The art is believed to have been influenced by the decorative gold thread embroidery styles, materials and techniques carried along maritime routes from China, India, the Arab World and Europe from the early 16th century and there is mention in Malay literary classics of embroidered items in the palaces and households of sultans and nobles. Originally the monopoly of women embroiderers employed by royalty, the craft only spread beyond the courts to commoners when the prohibition on the use of luxury items, such as velvet, gold and silver thread and sequins was lifted.

Nowadays, *tekat* is mostly crafted for Malay wedding ceremonies to beautify the bridal dais and bridal chamber and is often limited to a few

items, in particular cushions, hand-held fans and slippers. Formerly, a full set of *tekat* for a traditional Malay wedding would include items for the matrimonial bed, such as four decorative pillowcases and a bolster cover, bed valances and mattress panels, and panels for the tops of windows and doors; a large square padded mat for the bridegroom to sit on while taking his wedding vows and another for the bride waiting in the bridal chamber; tray cloths for the exchange of gifts (*hantaran*); panels for decorating the top of the *bersanding* dais and the borders of the steps; small rectangular cushions and hand-held fans for the *bersanding* ceremony, and slippers for the bride and groom. The most important item was always the *tekat*-covered betel nut box. A full set of items was often part of a family's bridal set, carefully stored and brought out for family weddings, or was borrowed from relatives or friends. Sometimes items were hired. If specially commissioned from a *tekat* embroiderer, the items would



Sirih box cover, tekat, photo courtesy of Khir Johari



Wedding fan, tekat, photo courtesy of Khir Johari

take at least a year to make, with the design and motifs either custom-designed by the family or chosen from the embroiderer's pattern book.

Tekat bersuji is made exclusively by women who usually work at it in between household chores, in Peninsular Malaysia's villages and small towns. The embroiderer sits on the floor behind a rectangular wooden stretcher frame, raised on legs, of a size and shape that matches the design to be worked. The frame is usually positioned near a window for natural light. Using sturdy thread, she first fastens the edges of a white cotton or chintz backing cloth to the frame, before tacking the background fabric in place. Velvet is favoured for the background because of its short, strong pile and lustre. She then stitches the design template at wide intervals to the velvet cloth. Most often, the template is made of thick paper or card on which the design has been drawn and carefully cut out. Between four and seven strands of imported gold thread are usually laid at once. These are pre-cut into equal lengths and wound around a small bamboo or wooden cross-shaped bobbin to minimize contact between the hands and thread during the embroidery process. The embroiderer guides the threads across the template using the bobbin, moving back and forth until each part of the template is fully covered. She uses her other hand underneath the embroidery frame to pierce the velvet, on both sides of the template, with a needle carrying a cotton or silk thread to anchor each group of gold threads to the base cloth as they are passed over the template.



Tekat food cover, photo courtesy of Khir Johari

From the front, none of the couching stitches are visible and the gold threads look as though they have been sewn through the fabric. For a more luxurious effect, an embroiderer may cover the 'joints' of flowers or stalks with sequins, or add beadwork trim or spangles to valances, or fill in petals and leaves with tiny glass seed beads.

The motifs

of *tekat bersuji* are similar to those of carved and pierced wooden reliefs and, like them, are generally symmetrical and comprise small floral motifs – the buds or blossoms of common plants – amidst intertwining stems and leaves. Older *tekat* pieces include designs of birds and fish. From the early 20th century, probably in the interests of speed and economy as *tekat* items came to be used by commoners, simplified floral motifs in the form of single stalks, for example a sheath of padi or a simple floral bouquet,



A Malay bride waits in the bridal chamber amongst items embroidered with *tekat bersuji* while the bridegroom takes his wedding vows during the marriage solemnisation ceremony (akad nikah), Kuala Kangsar, Perak, 1972. Photo courtesy of the author

found favour. Today, Islamic calligraphy, abstract patterns, geometric motifs and flowing arabesques are increasingly popular though much depends on the shape and purpose of the item being embroidered. Although the decorative art form of *tekat bersuji* has changed with the times, its visual beauty remains an integral part of the Malay aesthetic, a reflection of the artistry and meticulous craftsmanship of its creators, and an important part of the richness and tradition of the Malay wedding.

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