

## ANALYSING THE EXPRESSIVE CULTURE OF TELEPUK TEXTILE AS MALAY MATERIAL CULTURE HERITAGE

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**Abstract:** *The production of textiles in general is due to the human basic need to dress and protect them from environmental factors such as temperature. Textiles is a form of material culture being produce in the development of Malay art and craft. In certain point, telepuk textiles almost being forgotten, although, recently there have been several efforts to reintroduce this art through workshops and newest publication of books. However, many people did not recognize the art of telepuk, probably this art was produced for royalty, used on certain palace occasions and in addition, the complexity of the production of this textile may involve extension processes which involve very high costs that only the rich can afford and commissioned telepuk production. Even so, this art should be maintained and preserved because due to its values of cultural expression that symbolizes the height of Malay art knowledge. This study will analyse few samples of telepuk collection exhibited in the National Textile Museum, Kuala Lumpur. The research method used in studying the contextual interpretation is based on cultural formation theory by Edward B. Taylor and Islamic concept and principles of Malay Aesthetic by Zakaria Ali through observation to evaluate the cultural expression from the aspect of functionalism and aesthetic. The finding of the study will be able to understand the factors that influence the Malays in shaping their philosophy of Malay art. The connection of traditional cultural practices and beliefs of the Malays in the production of this textile to unravel the value of this cultural expression.*

**Keywords:** *Malay Art, Malay Heritage, Malay Textile, Material Culture, Telepuk*

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## Introduction

Before the formation of culture and civilization, humans first formed their communities by settling in a certain place. The formation of society based on the similarities they have, such as skin colour, language or dialect of speech, religion and others, collectively. Similarity and cooperation between members of the community is important to ensure the group is functional and interdependent on each other (Din, 2016).

The definition of culture referring to the ability of particular society in creating, inventing and developing the world. What is meant by ability; the progression of human's mind, to think in finding solutions to life's problems, try to create and inventing something – art. Many sociologists and anthropologists give different definitions of culture according to their observations, studies and findings. Culture is always associated with a way of life, a way of thinking formed by religious beliefs and what are being practicing whatever they have as customs. (Bierstadt, 1970, as cited in Deraman, 2003). Other definition of culture by Edward B. Taylor, and Ralph Linton;

“Culture, or civilization, ...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”

(Taylor, 1871, as cited in Birukou et al, 2009).

“The culture of any society consists the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour which the members of that society have acquired through instruction or imitation and which they share to a greater or less degree

(Linton, 1936, as cited in Birukou et al, 2009).

In the context of Malay culture formation, according to Anwar Din, Malay culture appears to extend beyond time earlier than the definition of culture presented by Western scholars in the 19th century because, since the existence of the Malays in the archipelago region, they have practiced their own customs (Din, 2016). The process of socialization from Malay custom perspective, exist in every phase of life of the Malays. Each of it has its own customs from the moment he is born until he leaves this world. In the Malay wedding itself, has a long process of customary which can be divided into several stages; before, during and after the marriage processes.

Culture includes two main components; material culture and non-material culture. Non-material culture refers to the form of human thought that creates a view of life or world view – life philosophical matters, spiritual conception or religious beliefs. Also, refers to moral practices according to customs and beliefs. Material culture on the other side, refers to all forms of equipment or products created and used by humans (Deraman, 2003). It is often served as support objects for non-material cultural practices, for example; in the practice of solah, prayer clothes and mosques are described as material culture that supports the practice of non-material cultures. Material culture basically is not related to the materialistic conception, but the creation and possession of things beyond basic needs, can be a benchmark towards the definition of materialism.

The formation of material culture is due to human basic needs and desires for food, clothing and shelter. In pre-historic era, the society practiced the simplest life still performing a primitive culture. Although the notion of survival in this period is said to be backward; due to the way they lived, this perception may need to be corrected because the use of created objects while hunting and preparing food is a sign of culture, an achievement of culture due to the technological advancements that correspond to their time.

The progression of mind, resulting numerous changes in the production of material cultures, eventually leading towards the achievement of high culture. Problems serves as a catalyst for human to be creative inventing and innovating new technologies. Based on cultural theory by E. B. Taylor (and others) had mentioned art as an important component in the formation of culture, and without knowledge, skills and art, human may not able to create all of the material cultures, thus civilization will never be emerged.

Expressive culture emphasis a solidly built of an artistic and symbolic meaning in a particular society as their true and unique identity and only owned by that community. Expressive culture involves a lifetime (socialization) process, emotion, knowledge, talent and skills. It is a way of societies personifying and conveying the significance of their culture through visual arts such as material cultures and non-material cultures (Burstein, 2014).

This expressiveness related to the factors which influenced the formation of material, and non-material cultures – environment, climate, religion or belief and history of the community. Basically, humans need clothes as a means of protection from temperature, weather and also to cover their bodies, but different Muslim community in different geographical location, following the same religion universally, however, the expression of clothing covering the aurah varies between these communities due to different environment, temperature and practicing different cultural norms. Based on these factors, the production of patterned textiles will use different motif inspirations even though all Muslims adhere to the Monotheism principle of Tawhid as the fundamental life philosophy.

### Literature Review

Malay *telepuk* are handicrafts which categorized as material culture. This textile uses plain woven fabric such as cotton. It is also included in polished fabric category. Polishing the fabric to make it finer and smoother. Technically, *telepuk* is a stamped technique as same as batik except, batik is non-polished type of fabric which is using wax and colours, while, *telepuk* using gum and gold dust or leaf. The name of *telepuk* is familiar in Malaysia, however in Java and Bali it is known as *perda* or *perada*, while in India, it is known as *kain serasah* (S. Z. Ismail, 2018).



**Figure 1: Kain Setangan.**

**Figure 2: Sultan Iskandar Al-Khaddasullah (1881-1938) Wearing A Headdress, A Destar, Decorated in Telepuk.**

Source: (Figure 1) Photographed by Shaliza Dasuki, Muzium Tekstil Negara.

Source: (Figure 2) *Telepuk: Bunga-bunga Emas yang Dilupai* (2022).

Common definition of *telepuk* related to a type of lotus flower used as decoration by using gold dust or gold leaf on fabric specifically polished woven cloth. The name of *telepuk* may also take from the process of *menelepuk* or *menepuk* (patting) – the action of gilding the gold leaf on the fabric (S. Z. Ismail, 2007). Other definition of *telepuk* can be understood through philosophical appreciation based on study by Khairulanwar Rahmat (Jailani et al., 2022);

*“Pendapat kedua lebih kepada falsafah kain itu sendiri yang mana perbuatan menelepuk dengan menggunakan perada emas bagi mendapatkan motif itu hanya dilakukan di atas permukaan kain yang kebetulan bersifat seperti teratai, di mana tumbuhan teratai (telepok) itu hanya duduk di atas permukaan air. Begitu juga dengan motif yang terhasil selepas menelepuk perada emas pada kain, yang mana ia hanya duduk di atas permukaan kain, yang melengkapkannya ialah kain bergerus itu yang berkilat dan bersinar-sinar seperti permukaan air sifatnya”.*

According to a writer and curator of Perbadanan Adat Melayu dan Warisan Negeri Selangor (PADAT), Intan Salina Idrus, *telepuk* was once categorized as an extinct art for about a decade. PADAT begin their effort to restore this art through the production of new *telepuk* stamping blocks or *sarang* (Ibid) by requesting to Adiguru Kraf Ukiran Halus, Norhaiza Noordin, to produce the *sarang* sometime in 2014. Since then, Norhaiza began to show interest and involves in promoting *telepuk* art through Pergerakan Langkasuka and Yayasan Hasanah. Both of this organizations actively organized series of *telepuk* workshops as an effort to intensify this heritage in addition to promote this art to the public (Unknown, 2021). There are also several efforts on sharing lectures about *telepuk* along with demos of how to produce *telepuk* by other culture enthusiasts in most recent event Splendour of Malay World Textiles which was held in Menara KEN, Taman Tun Dr. Ismail, Damansara Kuala Lumpur from August to October 2022 (Victor, 2022).

With the use of gold as decoration, there is no denying that the production of this *telepuk* consumed a handsome cost and was widely used by royalties and Malay aristocrats. *Telepuk* is the clothing of the Malay Kings (Arsyaad, 2021; Muhamad Amin & Ab. Aziz, 2019). Other factors that causing the manufacturing cost to be high is the production process which is said

to be complicated. It involving several phases of work; high quality woven fabric selection, the polishing process by the polish master, the production of *telepuk* block or *sarang* by wood carver, the gilding process by artisans and last, the complete gilded fabric should be polish again to finish (“Kain Telepuk,” 2020).

The beauty of *telepuk* being described in many classical literature texts, among them, *Sejarah Melayu*. Early studies of Malay history and poem also often mentioned about *telepuk*. In the text of the *Hikayat Misa Melayu* (Raja Hamid, 2015), there are several depiction about *telepuk* or *kain perada* which was worn by the Royalties;

*“Adapun akan berjaga-jaga itu pun sampailah empat puluh hari empat puluh malam. Maka Balai Pancha Persada itu pun sudahlah diperbuat orang, maka terlalulah indah perbuatannya, kemuncak tungkubnya, ditatah dengan emas kerencing dan sulur bayungnya daripada perak, ditatah dengan perda terbang, tiangnya gadingan disendi dengan tanduk diukir dicat dengan sadalinggam, ...”*  
(page: 83).

*“... Tuanku Raja Ampuan membayar kaul pula menyiramkan paduka kekanda baginda, lalu dipersalinkan dengan selengkap pakaian yang indah-indah berkain pelangi dan berbaju kesumba murup dan berbulang ulu pelangi. Maka semuanya itu dipercikkan air emas serta bertelapuk dengan perda terbang sekeliannya.”*  
(page: 99).

In *Sejarah Melayu* narrates, Sultan Mahmud of Melaka had instructed Hang Nadim to buy *kain serasah* at Kalinga. In fact, Hang Nadim has taught Indian artisans to produce the patterns and decorations based on his sketches to fulfil the Sultan’s wish, whom wanted as much as forty pieces of *kain serasah* and each piece of cloth had forty motifs (A. S. Ahmad, 2019);

*“Hatta maka Sultan Mahmud pun hendak menyuruh ke benua Keling, membeli kain serasah empat puluh bagai; pada sebagai empat puluh helai; pada sehelai empat puluh perkara bunganya. Maka Hang Nadim dititahkan baginda ke benua Keling membeli kain itu; kerana Hang Nadim itu terlalu pandai barang pekerjaan.”*  
(page: 218).

*Telepuk* textile is a valuable heritage that needs to be preserve. The beauty of this textile does not only rely on the ornamentation, or symbolic meaning, but also through the expression of how it was being made and the usage of this *textile*.

### **Art Appreciation Methodology**

Art appreciation approach used to study the contextual interpretation by using cultural formation theory by Edward B. Taylor and Islamic concept and principles of Malay Aesthetic by Zakaria Ali through observation data collection to evaluate the cultural expression from the aspect of functionalism and aesthetic.

In order to understand the expressive values in *telepuk* textile, the process of appreciation is relating on Malay society and culture. All form of visual arts including material cultures influenced by few factors such as; their environment, custom, beliefs and religion (Abdul Rahman, 1993) including the type of source available to use as medium, and climate. In the process of artistic creativity, artisans need sources of inspiration to shape the formal aspects of

their artwork. The background of cultural practices, beliefs and religion will shape the meaning of his work. According to the Islamic principles, morality must be embed in producing work of arts, thus, the artists must follow the rules of the process; imitation, denaturalization and stylization, and abstraction from nature (Md. Zain, 2008).

Formalistic and contextual analysis on selected telepuk motifs and patterns are based on Zakaria Ali's the five principles of Malay Aesthetics; finesse "*berhalus*", unity "*bersatu*", contrast "*berlawanan*", symbolism "*berlambang*", and functional "*berfungsi*" (Unknown, 2009). In certain explanation, it stated as six principles; finesse and flexibility "*berhalus dan berlembut*" and additional principle of balance "*seimbang*" (Ali, 1989, as cited in Hasan, 2013). The appreciation process can be seen in the table below;

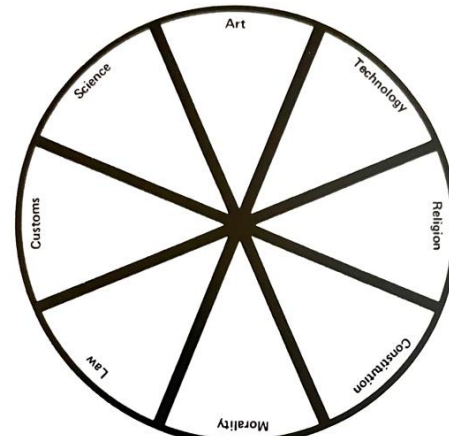
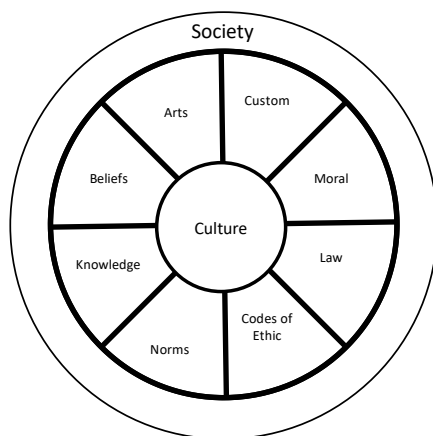
**Table 1: Art Appreciation Based on the Malay Aesthetic Principles**

	<b>Formalistic Aspect (Elements)</b>	<b>Formalistic Aspect (Principles &amp; Composition)</b>	<b>Content &amp; Contextual Aspect (Meaning)</b>
<b>Means:</b>	Extrinsic values. Physical characteristics that can be seen.  How the subject being depicted.	Extrinsic values. Physical characteristics that can be seen.  How the subjects / images / symbols / motifs being arranged.	Intrinsic values. Inner side or soul of the artwork, meaning.  Small "c" content – generic, surface meaning, primary level.  Capital "C" content – deeper, specific, theological, aesthetical and philosophical meaning.
<b>Process:</b>	Description and analysis	Analysis	Interpretation
<b>Creative Process:</b>	Imitation from nature.	Denaturalization and stylization – Idea development and composition.	Stylization and abstraction of nature – complex composition in forming pattern or Islimi design
<b>Term used:</b>	<b>Finesse "<i>berhalus</i>";</b> Observation towards nature. Looking for idea and finding subject matter.	<b>Unity "<i>bersatu</i>";</b> Dynamics composition; repetition, conjunct and disjunct <i>Awan Larat</i> pattern.	<b>Symbolism "<i>berlambang</i>";</b> Emphasized on meaning. Every motif used, and repetitive pattern governed in the decoration contains meaning.
<b>Term used:</b>		<b>Contrast "<i>berlawanan</i>";</b> Dynamics composition; perfect balance	<b>Functionality "<i>berguna</i>";</b> Craftwork which has its purpose. Daily usage of material culture. Invention and innovation.

Source: (Dasuki, 2021).

This research paper emphasizes the importance of cultural context in identifying the expressive values of Malay handicrafts. As stated in previous discussion, the formation of culture covers all aspects of life. E. B. Taylor had explained the cultural formation is determined by several components; custom, moral, law, code of ethics, arts, belief, knowledge, norms, and maybe some other aspects (Figure 3). Each of these components is interconnected with each other. There is a clear connection between the existence of art that forms the culture of a society. It is that due to human’s creativity in creating, inventing and innovating, societies are able to form such stylistic way of life and elevating their culture and civilization. Social norms and other social process such as assimilation, adaptation, socialization, acculturation and so on, that are practiced consistently, will continue to develop and eventually became the foundation of a particular civilization.

In art history field, similar stylistic appreciation method which based on cultural context explained by E. H. Gombrich by using an ecology framework (figure 4). In this theory, Gombrich emphasized on culture formation as distinctive characteristics qualities in interpreting the expression or aesthetic values in artwork. Gombrich depicting art, technology, religion, constitution, morality, law, custom and science as the important component to be analyse and interpret to identify the stylistic development of art, such as paintings and sculptures, also a type of material culture (Gombrich, 1998; Gombrich, 2010). As the similarities are clearly obvious, this theory should apply in studying the material culture craftworks created by the Malay; *telepuk*.



**Figure 3: Visual Concept of Cultural Theory as Stated by E. B. Taylor**

**Figure 4: Ecology of Art by E. H. Gombrich**

Source: (Figure 3) <https://archive.org/details/primitivculture1891tylo/page/26/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater>

Source: (Figure 4) (Fernie, 1995).

## Analysis and Result

### Analysis of Formalistic Aspects: Formal Elements and Composition

The earliest stage of creating motif by following the principle finesse “*berhalus*” involving the idea development of motifs to be designed. Most of *telepuk* motifs such as *bunga pecah empat*, *bunga pecah lapan*, *sulur*, *tampuk manggis*, *bunga cempaka* and many more were taken from nature. The imitation process is part of the observation to identify the subject matter. Observation also includes the process of understanding and studying the characteristics of the selected subject matters, what are the advantages or, is it beneficial to humans or animals. The

next process is stylization and denaturalization, which is a process of removing the element of reality and making the motif more abstract. The last process, abstraction of nature is a much more complex which involving the process of composing two or more different motifs, arranging in repetition until it become an intricate pattern or design.



**Figure 5: Kain Sarung with Telepuk Decorations**

**Figure 6: Kain Setangan with Telepuk Decorations**

Source: Photographed by Shaliza Dasuki, Muzium Tekstil Negara.

The colour of the fabric used commonly in darker shades, thus, it is suitable to emerge the motifs and patterns that are gilded with gold, thus, contrasting the background. In some textiles such as *kain tenun* or batik, which already has its own design or motifs, the gilded motifs and pattern must appear in most front from other motifs as can be seen in Figure 5. The overlapping upper motifs and patterns onto beneath motifs appears to, as it is creating a three-dimensional effect. It looks like seeing through what is under the water.

Earlier development of Islamic art in the Middle East, Mediterranean and Europe, has triggered an Islamic design known as *arabesque*. A significant characteristic of arabesque art is, its repetitive structure and geometrical element that influence the design. There is similar concept in Malay art called *awan larat* which has resemblance to the arabesque principle (A. R. Ismail, 2014). Although *awan larat* is mostly composed and widely applied in Malay wood carving, but this design also commonly found in other Malay handicrafts such as metal ware, fine metal and textiles.

The principles of unity “*bersatu*” and contra “*berlawanan*”, refers to the compositional matters that is concerned with elements of perfection, and accuracy. It shows the accuracy of the layout of the pattern on the fabric surface. The compositional structure of the motif or pattern is a precise geometric shape, however, there are also non-precise organic shapes such as ylang-ylang flower, night-blooming cereus flower or rose flower motifs which are usually arranged in scattered pattern. Decoration on the fabric can be done by using a single motif arranged in scattered and repeated manner, and another way by arranging several motifs into a complex pattern like a network; connected in chained, intertwined with each other, and also, be arranged repeatedly to fill part of the fabric. This arrangement actually giving some illusion of seeing a single object (motif) and at the same time, a complex pattern. The illusion continues in looping eternally.

According to a research, *telepuk* pattern can be divided into six patterns; rhomboids, scattered or isolated, stripped or banded, chevron or zig-zag, checked, and bamboo shoot. Each of these patterns are arrange in several transformation; translation or in the same direction, reflection,



glide reflection and rotation (Abdullah, et al, 2019). The analysis of arrangement of composition definitely can be elaborate in an extensive explanation.

### **Interpretation of Cultural Context in Malay Art**

The use of Malay textiles can be grouped into several categories. Based on the functional “*berguna*” principle, textile production is used as clothing and also as household appliances. According to a prominent scholar, Siti Zainon, Malay clothing is a symbol of social values and customs. Malay clothing is not only appreciated to its fabric but also includes jewellery that complements it from head to toe (S. Z. Ismail, 2009).

The expression of telepek is also categorized as a type of luxury textile due to the use of gold leaf or dust and the intricacy decorations that fill the cloth’s surface (Muhamad Amin & Ab. Aziz, 2019). The production of telepek were commissioned by the royalty and only be worn by the royalties and aristocrats during wedding ceremonies and also as wedding dowry. Among recorded history the wearing of telepek during other ceremony in 18<sup>th</sup> century is the *Adat Menggelar Orang-orang Besar* in Selangor; meritorious person was given award of sets of *persalinan* in telepek or other type of lavish textiles and a title. In 19<sup>th</sup>, there was a centre for telepek making under the reign of Sultan Sir Abdul Samad of Selangor and frequently wore during official ceremonies. The tradition of wearing telepek in royalties circle continue until 20<sup>th</sup> century; *baju layang* or robe were used in the installation ceremony of Sultan Sir Hisamuddin Alam Shah in 1939. Another robe with telepek decoration and state emblem owned by Sultan Musa Ghiatuddin Riayat Shah (Idrus, 2015).

In this research paper, emphasized the importance of linking aspects of art and culture. In terms of socio-cultural Malay community that adheres to the Islamic religion, is greatly influenced by the Sufism thought of Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazzali. According to a prominent Malay scholar, Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, the Malays were actually not practicing Hinduism as a whole, but only practiced by the nobility and eventually, mixed with the original beliefs and cultural practices of the Malays. They ignored the philosophy that exists in Hinduism, although there are indeed elements of Hindu influences entering into literatures, however, the strength of Malay thought based on its original culture is actually formed their *weltanschauung* and philosophy of art (Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, 2022).

S. M. N Al-Attas also emphasised the teachings of Sufism that were brought to the archipelago shaped the Malay views in term of moral, social and political aspects (S. M. Naquib Al-Attas, 2020). The Malay aesthetic view was heavily influenced by Sufism after the arrival of Islam since 7th century until the peak of its development between 17th – 19th centuries. Many Arabic manuscripts translated into Malay language and were distributed or used as teaching by Sufi missionaries (Moris, 2016).

“... Islamic spiritual teachings as embodied in Sufism had an appeal to the psychological and spiritual temperament of the Malays which caused it to be easily and popularly accepted. The Malays were inclined to teachings and practices of a mystical nature as manifested in their religious history. These scholars claimed that Sufi missionaries presented Islam in a way which emphasized continuity rather than change in local, traditional beliefs and practices.”

(page: 29).

“..., Malay intellectual history began with the Islamization of the world view of the Malays which was primarily effectuated by Malay Sufi scholars. They accomplished this through their oral teachings and writings especially, on the intellectual aspects of the religion which they wrote in Malay thus making the language a vehicle for philosophical discourse and enriching its vocabulary and technical terminology process. It was Islam – a religion in which knowledge is given supreme importance and status – which imbued the rational and intellectual spirit into the Malay psyche.”

(page: 40).

Manifestation of beauty in Malay *telepuk* textiles through the view of nature that follows the principle of monotheism. The principle of monotheism that limits the use of figurative subjects does not limit the creativity of Malays. The archipelago is an area filled with enormous resources of flora and fauna and a vast tropical rainforest. The reality of animal figures was diminished through the process of stylization and denaturalization. The creativity of combining several motifs into a complex pattern also makes it abstract (A. R. Ismail, 2014).

Repetitive pattern of *arabesque* and *awan larat* can be interpreted as the expression of unity and a remembrance to Allah. The design intertwine in infinity symbolized the oneness of Allah the Almighty. (Hasan & Ismail, 2013). In a perception, it may seem as a continuum but illusively, we can still perceive a single motif. The illusion of conjunction and disjunction of *awan larat* pattern do not showing confusion but asserting the existence of real things understood through human senses, but, at the same time there are many things that goes beyond human ability to grasps theological concepts such as the God's Essence and His secrets, because by nature, Allah created man with limitations.

The view of nature in producing textile motifs such as *telepuk* as a way the Malays relating their beliefs in a conceptual to understand things that are limited to human senses. The teaching of Tawhid leads to a form of belief in unseen things as a fundamental in Muslim's faith. Thus, in terms of creativity, the Malays tend to form metaphors as analogies in understanding theological concepts by placing appropriate images as symbols or iconography in any form of artistic creation through observation of nature (H. Ahmad, 2003).

## Conclusion

Society and culture are the two important things that are often considered as the same, but in terms of meaning, the differences are clear. Society is a formation of groups of people based on their similarities, interconnected and cooperate with each other, while culture, is a value of norms they are practicing in togetherness through social processes. There are many cultural theories that can be relied upon such as Functionalism Theory and Cultural Ecology Theory (or Natural Adaptation Theory) to support the formation of material culture that strengthens the value of artistic expression of the Malays. Based on the factors of material cultures formation, the cultural objects produced by the Malays become unique. The aesthetic values of the *telepuk* motifs does not exist in out of context of Malay culture and archipelago.

Based on the study from *telepuk* found in Muzium Tekstil Negara, it is understood that the expressive culture can be identified into two; Firstly, the technical production of gilding and creation process of *telepuk* motifs are very much influence by the concept and the principles of Islamic culture. Secondly, the element of expressive culture in *telepuk* can be identified through the usage and functional values of *telepuk* in Malay culture. It is obviously that Malay creativity

had strong influence through religion that shape the Malay mind. The geographical environment, norms and custom also play important part in shaping the philosophical aspect of the Malays. Due to the material used, *telepuk* is indeed regard as a high culture of Malay art and craft that specified for royalties. In the discussion, however, this study does not focus on other aspect of Malay textile cultural expression, which related to the philosophy of wearing or how to wear Malay clothing. There are other opportunities in discussions about expressive culture related to Malay textiles.

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