

Weaving the future

The traditional Iban craft of weaving may soon vanish unless more young weavers learn the skills from their elders.

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Photo: JENNIFER ADOP



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THE technique of Iban weaving is a closely guarded secret often passed down through generations and Sarawakian weaver Mia Cintan, 57, couldn't be happier to share her knowledge with her daughter-in-law, Jennifer Adop, 29.

"I've been teaching Jennifer weaving and also embroidery for five years. She is a fast learner and I'm blessed that she has an interest in Sarawak's traditional handicraft.

"These days it's hard to come across young people who want to learn these skills," says Mia

who lives in Betong, a town that's a four-hour drive from Kuching.

Sarawak is well known for its intricate handicrafts such as ikat-weaving, beading, embroidery as well as basketry and mat making which traditionally use rattan, mengkuang, bamban and bamboo.

The state has over 27 sub-ethnic groups, all with their own distinct language, art, traditions and culture that are reflected in the motifs and patterns of the various handicraft produced by its artisans.

Iban women, like Mia, have been known for producing traditional handicrafts for generations and their crafts are said to be a representation of their identity as Iban women.

Unfortunately, these heritage crafts are in danger of becoming extinct as more and more youth leave their villages for better prospects in big cities.



Bound by

tradition

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It can also be challenging to get the younger generation to learn traditional handicrafts because the work is time-consuming and the income can be inconsistent, says Mia.

That's why she's so thrilled that her only daughter-in-law has shown an interest in learning the dying crafts like basket weaving. She feels it is necessary to share her knowledge and skills with Jennifer, just like how she's taught her two daughters before.

"I'm willing to teach anyone who wants to learn weaving and embroidery.

"The key is interest. These days, many young girls aren't keen to learn these traditional crafts because it seems old fashioned. They prefer to buy ready-made bags which they feel are trendier and can be purchased at affordable prices online," shares Mia.

Over the years, Mia has taught Jennifer how to weave traditional Iban designs on baskets and mats. Jennifer has also honed her embroidery skills to create intricate Iban motifs on sashes that are often worn as ceremonial pieces.

Jennifer admits that learning the basket weaving techniques was challenging.

"It was difficult to figure out how to mix and match the designs and colours and also how to use the different techniques.

"In the beginning, I found it hard to figure out the number of weaving strips to use for a particular pattern and how to alternate the strips to create the pattern.

"But while it was difficult at

first, I'm happy that I am finally starting to master it," says Jennifer, who is a mother of two.

Proud of their heritage

Mia is among the older generation of traditional Iban weavers. With over 50 years of experience in traditional weaving, the grandmother of six is an *indu takar* or an expert weaver.

Mia is skilled at various sorts of woven handicrafts, particularly mats, baskets, and *marek empang* (an elaborate beaded collar worn by Iban women in dances and ceremonies).

She explains that learning these skills were a rite of passage for her as a little girl.

"My grandmother started teaching my sisters and me these techniques when we were still in primary school.

"She said it was customary for Iban girls to learn plaiting (for basket and mats), weaving the *pua kumbu* and beading.

"We didn't have a TV back then, so most of my time was spent sourcing rattan and bamboo in the jungles to weave mats, fish traps, trays and baskets," explains the soft-spoken Mia who was born and raised in the Tuai Rumah Sigan longhouse in Pelo, a two-hour drive from Murat Skrang, Betong.

Although Mia is about 40 years older than Jennifer, the two women have forged a close relationship through their shared interest in handicraft and also preserving their heritage craft.

Both housewives reside at Tuai Rumah Karin longhouse in Murat Skrang.

The pandemic and the various



Jennifer (right) has mastered the art

movement control order has given Jennifer more time to further hone her skills under the guidance of her mother in law.

Jennifer is grateful to have Mia as her teacher.

"Ibu Mia is a patient and kind teacher. She has taught me the techniques of mixing and matching colours and isn't strict. She is willing to teach me the techniques over and over again.

"Even when I make a mistake, she will correct me and go through the techniques for as many times as it takes."

They weave baskets using two types of weaves – diagonal interlacing and horizontal-vertical interlacing weaves – through which they create intricate floral, honeycomb and herringbone



of weaving, under Mia's watchful eye. — Photos: JENNIFER ADOP

designs, among others.

They weave mats using the traditional Iban *kelarai motif*, which features flowers and animals that are represented in their ethnic culture.

However, some of the plaited designs are based on their own ideas and inspirations.

As it is increasingly difficult to procure bamboo and rattan for their weaving, Mia and Jennifer now weave their handmade items using polypropylene strapping tape.

There are many weaving techniques such as randing, pairing and waling.

Mia and Jennifer mostly use randing – which is the simplest weaving method, where one strip of material is placed over a stake

and then under the next; and so on.

“Pliable strapping tape is readily available in shops as well as e-commerce websites. It takes between one to four days for a skilled weaver to complete a mat or basket.

“We use simple tools like scissors, penknife, and pliers to weave baskets.

“It's difficult to find rattan, *bemban* reed or bamboo. Plus, these items must be harvested deep in the jungles.

“It requires a lot of effort to cut it and chop away the leaves and thorns. And then there's the task of transporting them – an hour by foot – back to our longhouse,” says Jennifer, who shares that she takes about five hours to weave a

simple basket.

She adds that there are many folk beliefs and superstitions about harvesting raw material for their crafts from the jungle: for example, the women have to carry the *bemban* reed that they harvest on their shoulders and back because it is believed that if the reed is dragged on the ground, snakes will follow them home.

There are many other taboos and beliefs as well about how rattan had to be harvested and “treated well”.

However, these days, many weavers are opting to use material that's more easily available such as raffia string, straw, ribbon and even newspapers, shares Jennifer.



Mia dries bemban reeds before weaving them into a mat.



As rattan and bamboo are increasingly hard to find, Mia and Jennifer have started using alternative material for their baskets.

With the availability of video tutorials online and on platforms like Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube, anyone can learn these crafts using all sorts of material, she adds.

“There are many online videos where crafters can learn how to weave mats, baskets and even embroider traditional Iban sashes.

“Social media is a wonderful place to learn new skills. I also go on the Internet to learn new sewing and embroidery techniques,” says Jennifer.

Before the pandemic, the two women used to sell their items at the morning markets around Betong.

Due to the MCO, Jennifer promotes their handmade items on

her Facebook page Jennifer Jenn (Jenn mitt).

Jennifer is a proud of her heritage and wants to continue the legacy of making woven baskets, mats and sashes.

“I’m part of the younger generation who has learned the art of weaving.

“Hopefully, I can continue this legacy and pass it down to the next generation too,” she concludes.

Clarification: The headline for a story on Muslim matchmaking service Baituljannah published on August 6 should have read “Helping Muslim singles find a match”. The platform helps singles find their match.