

The story of Che Minah Songket: The Family Business For Cultural And Heritage Economy

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Prologue

Mr Mohamed was staring at his office room, his face uneasy from thinking about business matters. He exhaled slowly, remembering what his mother, Che Minah, said to him: "You must continue the legacy of this big family business. Do not let the legacy of the songket be swallowed up, and remember, your cousins are doing the same thing, too. Nevertheless, forget about the last differences." This is an aging mother's trust in her son.

Company and entrepreneur background

Cik Minah Songket and Batik Company was founded in 1940 and is located in Kampong Miners, Jalan Pantai Cahaya Bulan, Kota Bharu, Kelantan. The company is presently operated by Cik Minah's uncle, Mr Mohamed bin Haji Hussein, the second generation of Cik Minah Songket. Despite being part of a large family, he was chosen to inherit the business as his other siblings were not managing the family company. He and his brother, Ahmad Kamel, are the only ones who intend to continue the legacy.

In the 1970s, Mr Mohamed was a neighbourhood organiser but decided to focus on business while studying at the University of Technology Mara (UiTM). The situation was coincidental as he was only 20 years old at that time. The issue was preserving the company reputation that he operated on for approximately 30 years. Mr Mohamed recalled the experience as he explained:

"I did not have any experience in this area. It has been a bitter experience for me. But, I realised, it was common for someone to take on this burden, and then I just went on to do it".

The harrowing experience has brought the business to its current level. The company is a family-owned business with a century of traditions and is part of a large community of businesses owned by siblings and close relatives. Hence, Che Minah Songket and Batik Company are close as they share a common purpose and

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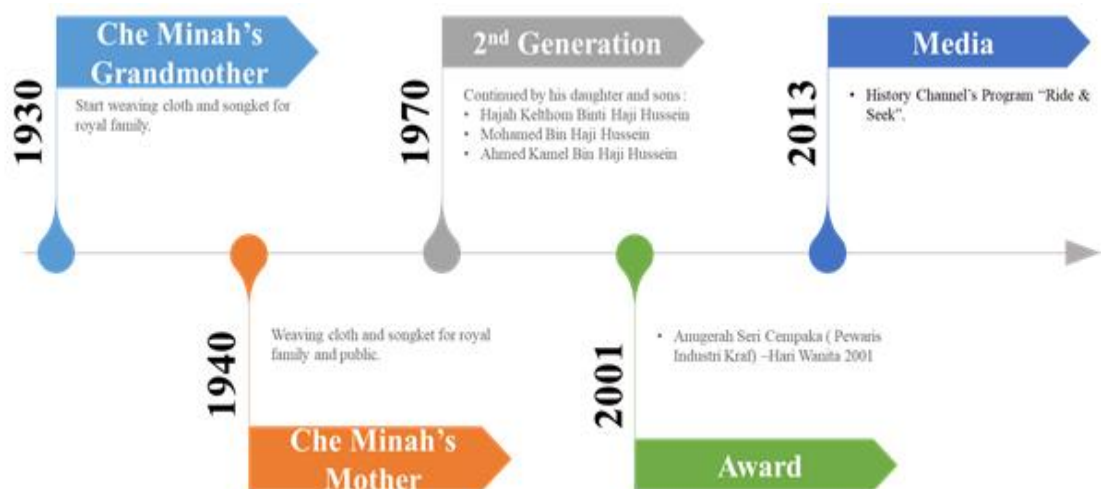
support each other to ensure that the Songket industry remained on the market perpetually. The company inherited unique songket-making techniques and honoured the founders' contributions (see Table 1).

Table 1: The company heritage

	Milestone	Key Person	Relationship
1.	Pioneering in weaved cloth and songket.	Great grandmother	Mr Mohamed's grandmother
2.	Weaved cloth.	Che Minah's mother	Mother
3.	Honoured to be the songket weaver for the royal families.	Che Minah's aunty	Aunty (Wife of Datuk Istiadat Istana)
4.	Inherited her mother's passion for weaving songket (specifically for the royals) and continue the business.	Hajjah Kalthom bt. Haji Hussain (Siblings)	Daughter
5.	Continue the business.	Mohamed b. Haji Hussain (Siblings)	Son
6.	Continue the business.	Ahmed Kamel b. Haji Hussein (Siblings)	Son

The founders' affiliation has been translated into milestones as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Che Minah Songket and Batik Company milestone



In pursuit of opportunities and expansion

Over the years, the company has encountered issues and challenges in maintaining its position as a cradle of culture and the economy. The first challenge is competition from other similar businesses. Surprisingly, the other companies are owned by Che Minah's relatives. Although the competition is considered mild, Che Minah Songket and Batik Company needs to be different from the others. Cik Minah Songket and Batik has depended on relationship with customers due to long being the centre of attraction among songket enthusiasts. Generally, taxi drivers and hotel workers around Kelantan know of the company existence when asked about an authentic and leading producer of songket and batik in Kota Bharu. Nevertheless, the company needs to become a premium songket and batik distributor in Malaysia. Cik Minah Songket and Batik could be more competitive by adding more value to their designs.

Clients are crucial to Che Minah Songket and Batik, thus customer preferences for the products is prioritised. Cik Minah Songket and Batik customers are from the Kelantan Royal Family, VIP, artists and international customers. Cik Minah Songket and Batik also supply school products. Customers comprise high-end customers, therefore the company ensures to produce the customised products. The company needs to meet the restless buyer demands who are not always satisfied with the design or products provided. Nonetheless, the business presence in the local market for consumers is not fully developed.

The company owns a workforce of approximately 30 people. Workers are undeniably essential for a company to ensure that the production of songkets and batiks remains smooth and that the design produced satisfies customer needs and wishes. Che Minah Songket also anticipated that the company would be impacted if the workers did not produce products according to customer needs. In order to operate, workers perform knitting processes in their homes. The company supplies the raw materials needed and the workers must finish the product within the time agreed. The company concerns include not owning enough skilled workers, and the workers are aged people around Kelantan. Some workers even quit work and moved to another player, as Mr Mohamed stated below:

"They often leave us for another play that we are in the know of them".

Mr Mohamed attributes the lack of workers to low interest among the youth in embracing the profession as a career considering that it is not in-trend. Moreover, several workers encounter issues in making the customers' product, which lowers the business production and productivity, thus requiring them to manage multiple customer inquiries. Songket weaving is performed at the worker's house, which has led to dishonesty among them. Occasionally, workers would obtain side orders to earn extra income. Most weaving equipment was sent to each home to assist

workers in working from home. Once completed, the product will be sent to the Cik Minah Batik and Songket Main Store with the storekeeper waiting for the products. The workers handle inward goods and are responsible for receiving visitors, which makes them busy. Nevertheless, the workers are not competent in designing the latest songket despite being skilful weavers. Che Minah Songket and Batik operations need to be vigilant about the weather, which is a crucial factor due to the batik process depending on the natural drying technique to preserve the garment texture. The company suggested that more advanced technology could be utilised for drying purposes.

The company encounters marketing challenges as it struggles to advertise its products and services. The situation hinders customers from seeking the company location, the products and the extra services provided. Mr Mohamed expressed his disappointment when he mentioned as follows:

"We are solely based on our existing rapport. It is not sustainable."

Mr Mohamed's disappointment is justified because the company depends on the power of word of mouth of its regular customers. The company do not currently own e-marketing channels, such as Instagram and Facebook. Even when the company attempted to use Facebook as a marketing tool years ago, they could not appoint the right staff to manage the pages. Resultantly, the company Facebook page has remained idle since 2014. Mr Mohammed admitted the defeat, stating:

"Online marketing is important for you to survive. It can promote and deliver products and services to the customer. Nowadays, people tend to buy online shopping. But we are still left behind at Che Minah. ..."

The company could take advantage of the e-economy by marketing products via online marketing channels. Nevertheless, the company encountered challenges in failing to find a designated employee to manage the business e-marketing channel. Mr Mohammed reiterated his pessimistic view of the situation:

"We tried our best to recruit a webmaster. But he could not find the right one. One needs to have IT skills with a deep knowledge of this industry."

He added that the situation is a hard reality of the business due to most employees being old and have not received information on how to utilise online marketing to promote products and services.

Che Minah Songket and Batik must be vigilant about the weather for its operation. The factor is critical as the batik operation depends on the natural drying technique to preserve the garment texture. The company operation is often halted between November and March due to the monsoon season on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Moreover, the drying process has a significant impact, resulting in the low

production of songket and batik garments. Consequently, company sales have often plummeted.

Approach towards the economic and cultural establishment

The primary concern in the sector is overcoming competition, Cik Minah Songket and Batik included. For the company, the main strategy is to generate different designs and high-quality songket and batik for the customers and to attract new generations. The main reason is due to changing taste and preference, where people seek products that are trendy, rare and different from others. Che Minah is attempting to produce updated songket and batik according to the current trend on the market, as Mr Mohamed mentioned, "We are trying to keep up with the trend." The main rationale is that the company can increase the number of customer demands while increasing profits. Furthermore, the company needs to ensure that the songket and batik offered are made using high-quality products to encourage customers' confidence in the products compared to other competitors. The changes could increase customer loyalty to the products by Cik Minah Songket and Batik.

The company is optimistic about the employees' upskilling. Mr Mohamed described the strategy as a long-term sustainability strategy:

"I have a strong feeling that the workers are capable of producing miracles. Of course, they are going to be good with proper training. It is good for us, too."

The positive comments demonstrate the future paths of Che Minah Songket and Batik. Training is definitely beneficial to increase worker productivity, promoting faster production and effectiveness. Cost savings in a company are regarded as a return on investment in training and can indirectly affect profitability positively. Therefore, workers can deliver a smooth and less problematic production process. Ultimately, companies need productive workers who can do excellent work in producing songket or batik. Additionally, the company needs to train workers, particularly teenagers with no experience in producing songket and batik, who may also be interested in participating in the songket and batik field.

In Che Minah's business operation, the company considers marketing a key issue in pursuing business competition. The company should hire a reasonable individual to manage and conduct marketing. Nonetheless, the hiring term should be open for in-house individuals to be in charge or for out-source marketing activities to a third party as the company does not own any expert employees that handle online marketing. The company only has Facebook as an online marketing tool but no updated information. The situation complicates individuals from knowing the existing company on the market. Thus, the company only has a few customers who buy songket and batik. Online marketing is currently vital because people search for

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products online to save money and time. Therefore, the company needs to act by hiring the right person who is an online marketing expert.

Cik Minah Songket and Batik need to prepare emergency finance as a backup if they encounter future financial issues to avoid bankruptcy. The emergency finance can be used when the company does not possess enough money to produce songket and batik and for the company to repair any broken machines used to produce songket and batik. Hence, the company can avoid using the company funds to repair the machine.

A strategy to overcome the weather issue includes producing batik earlier than the monsoon season, which prevents issues regarding batik production, specifically during the flood season. Hence, the company can still fulfil customer demand for batik even during the monsoon season. Companies similar to Cik Minah Songket and Batik must always own stocks to avoid customers waiting long to receive the batik. Consequently, Cik Minah Songket and Batik must constantly be prepared by producing batik before the monsoon season in order to gain customer loyalty.

Che Minah Songket and Batik still strongly believe that batik and songket will not disappear from the industry, as the products are a heritage of our ancestors that will not be overrun by time. Nonetheless, one day, art and batik weaving and printing may decrease if the younger generation is no longer interested in the profession. Thus, the company continues to endeavour in preserving songket and batik weaving and printing craft and encourage younger generations, particularly women, to learn the art.

Cik Minah Songket and Batik need to explore the outside world by engaging in a relationship with their customer. Cik Minah Songket and Batik remain in their circle without exposing the business to the outside since the company establishment. The company needs to venture into the outside world and compete with other countries that also produce songket and batik. Cik Minah Songket and Batik can join the Songket Festival and Batik Malaysia to develop their business. Summarily, the past Malay art appreciated nature and displayed their sensitivity to the environment created by God. Various names of flowers, animals and the cosmic were composed in shapes to suit the patterns of craftsmanship. The past Malays possess a rich knowledge of the names of the flowers in their surroundings.

Epilogue

Mr Mohamed walked into his house with a happy smile considering that everything worked smoothly. He laid his body on the sofa in the living room of his house. After a full day's work, he lost all feelings of fatigue when his eyes saw his children play joyfully. In his heart, "If I had gone someday, my children would replace me in order to continue this business. If not the rest of them. I am grateful for all that God has given me." That is right, people said, "There are many challenges in life, but most people choose to run away from them. They cannot see that the challenges make you more responsible and stronger.

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