

TRADITIONAL MALAY POTTERY OF KUALA KANGSAR: ITS HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT¹

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This essay discusses the pottery-production heritage of Kuala Kangsar, in particular the labu sayong (earthen ware or gourd pitchers from the Sayong area). This particular handicraft of the Perak Malays has a unique history of its own. From the historical aspect, the practice of pottery-production is believed to have started by the Malays thousands of years ago. Over the years the heritage has been kept alive and is still being practiced traditionally by Malays in Kuala Kangsar and produced for commercial purposes. Confronted with the emergence of new and modern pottery-production techniques, which is a challenge to the popularity of traditional pottery, the traditional technique of pressing and pinching has been sustained until the present day. Based on historical and archaeological sources and field study, this essay explains the origins, history and development of pottery-production in Kuala Kangsar. The essay also identifies the problems and challenges which traditional labu sayong practitioners have to face and steps taken by the government to ensure this traditional Malay handicraft is safeguarded and sustained so that it is not wiped out by changes over time.

Keywords: pottery production, Kuala Kangsar, traditional technique, *labu sayong*, commercial purposes

INTRODUCTION

Studies on pottery are invaluable for the historians, archaeologists and anthropologists in understanding and reconstructing the history, culture, and ancient arts as well as to understand the historical stages of a nation's progress and its civilization (Chia, 1995). According to the general view among historians and archaeologists, the study of ceramics could yield a great deal of valuable knowledge associated with the chronology or dating of the technological and social systems of early societies (Asyaari, 1998). Its importance is evident from the history of civilisation which always begins with the invention of basic utensils from rock, stone, bones, skeletons and even clay. According to Ahmad Fauzi (2009: 1), "...the production of ceramics is one of the oldest activities in the history of human life." Shamsu (2005: 77) explains that pottery is "...one of

the earliest handicrafts which were created by human civilization." In Malaysia, the invention of pottery was an indication of the beginning of civilisation; it is irrefutable evidence of the origins of the primal communities referred to as the Malays.

To understand and explain the rise of human civilisation in a particular location, archaeologists usually begin with the study of ancient ceramic utensils. In fact the world's greatest civilisations possess their own tradition of pottery-making. The early Malays had evidently achieved a certain level of cultural attainment through the invention of ceramic utensils. Studies have been conducted to identify how and when the Malays began making pottery although the availability of records is problematic. According to several studies by archaeologists, pottery making in Malaysia started thousands of years ago during the Neolithic age.² Scholars had identified this pottery as primitive pottery. According to Norton (1956: 83):

Primitive pottery making is almost universal in association with early man over the whole surface of the earth, and because communication was practically non-existent, we are led to the conclusion that it evolved independently in many regions.

The history of primitive Malay pottery-making was first studied in the early 20th century. Through excavation works fragments of pottery were discovered at archaeological sites like Gua Cha in Kelantan, Bukit Tengku Lembu in Perlis, Ulu Tembeling in Pahang, Bukit Tambun in Perak and Gua Niah in Sarawak (Siti Zainon, 1986; Shamsu, 2005: 78).³ These discoveries were made by foreign scholars including Evans (1918),⁴ Callenfels and Evans (1982), Sieveking (1955), and Peacock (1959). Some of their findings were made in Perak. Later local researchers like Zuraina (1989), Adi and Zulkifli (1990), Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1990a; 1990b), Mohd. Kamaruzaman et al. (1991) and Chia (1995) began to take the lead in archaeological research.

In 1998, Asyaari Muhamad conducted a doctoral study on the history of pottery-production in Perak and the scientific process that was involved in its production (Asyaari, 1998). Recent studies had reaffirmed the conclusion that the traditional pottery discovered thus far was products of the local community without any external influences in its production (Siti Zainon, 1986; Chia, 1995; Asyaari, 1998; Shamsu, 2005).

IMPORTANCE OF POTTERY IN MALAY CIVILISATION

Many studies have discussed the origins of pottery-production in Perak. Among the earliest and most interesting is the writing of Leonard Wray who became the first curator of the Perak Museum in 1903 (see Wray, 1903). Based on two

significant facts, Wray explains the origins and development of pottery-production in Perak particularly in the Kuala Kangsar area.

The first, that pottery as an invention of the Malays, shows pottery had begun to attain a high level of cultural attainment since earliest times. According to Wray, pottery in Perak had existed since thousands of years ago; it was not produced by the aboriginal Malays (the Sakai or Semang) but by the culturally-more sophisticated Malays living along the Perak River. Wray explains theories about the Malays as migrants from outside the Archipelago are probably inaccurate. Elements in the invention of pottery, which is primary evidence of the existence of early settlements, show qualities which were local in terms of the material used, design and decoration.

Secondly, the uniqueness and originality of the handicraft is intrinsically Malay devoid of any external influences at least prior to the 20th century. Wray insists although the arts of the Malays in the early period had been influenced by external cultures of a higher civilisation, the history of pottery making in Malaysia has not been significantly influenced by foreign elements. In fact the process of production has been preserved in its original form until today (Chia, 1995). Wray (1903: 24) explains that:

The interest attaching to Malayan pottery, as made in the state of Perak, arise from the great antiquity of the art, and from the certainty of its having come down to present time without influence from the more highly civilized nations, who have, from time to time, imparted arts and ideas to the Malayan inhabitants of the Peninsula.

Clear evidence that local pottery is not externally influenced is found in the technology. The Chinese, who had achieved a high level of progress in pottery-production, had introduced the technique of the potter's wheel since earliest times.⁵ Although Chinese influence had existed in the Malay states since the 11th and 12th centuries, the technique of making pottery in Perak and its designs up to the 20th century do not show any clear sign that it was influenced by foreign techniques. At that stage the traditional Malay pottery-making was rather primitive. It was done by hand and not the potter's wheel. Wray (1903: 24) explains that:

The antiquity of the potter's wheel is so great, that in most countries there is no record of its invention. It has been in use in India and China from a very remote period, yet the Malays are quite ignorant of it. It is this fact which forms the strongest proof of the great antiquity of the method of working clay in Perak, for it is inconceivable that a potter, having once learned the use of the wheel, would ever discard it and return to the slow and

tedious process of forming vessels by the hand alone, or that the art could have been introduced by a foreign potter of a nation which was acquainted with the wheel, without the wheel itself being introduced at the same time.

Chinese influence in pottery making might have come at a later stage but pottery production of the early period was entirely a local phenomenon. From the aspect of originality of form or design, it was done without any foreign elements. This was true of the Perak pottery design and decorative embellishment which remained indigenous from the early period to the present. Some of the elements incorporated from nature include trees and flowers which were only found in the Malay states, such as *bunga tanjung*, *bunga padi*, *bunga keduduk*, *bunga pecah empat*, *susur kelapa*, *bunga lawang*, *bunga cengkih*, *bunga cakar ayam*, *pucuk rebung*, *siku keluang*, in addition to the S, X and V shapes as shown in Figure 1 (Wray, 1903; Ibrahim and Sahaimi, 2005).

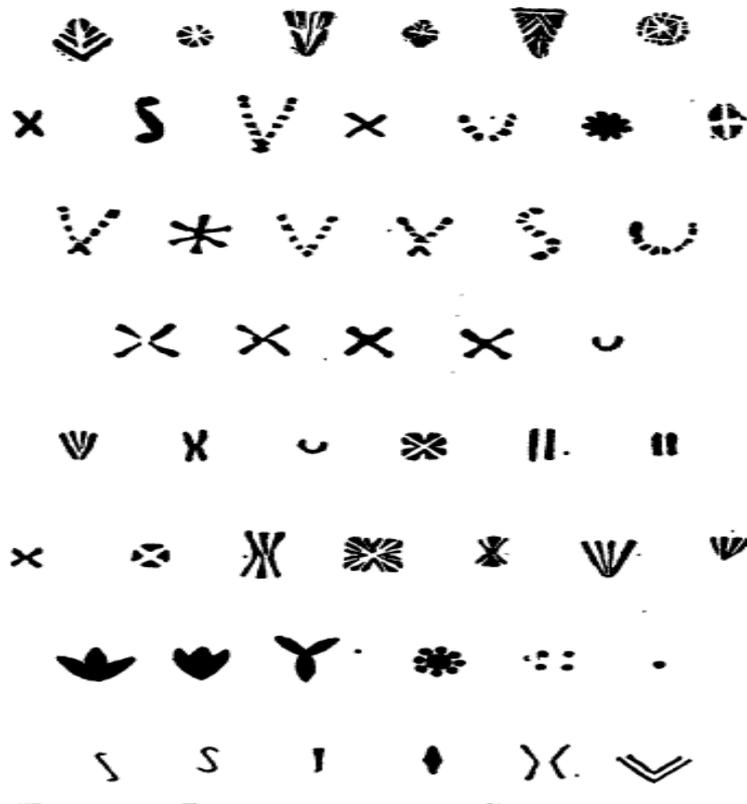


Figure 1: Patterns on *labu sayong* pottery.
Source: Wray (1903).

Winstedt (1925) explains that the invention of pottery by the Malays was very basic with quite simple ornamentation. In his words:

Ornamentation was relatively unambitious; cord-marking is the most usual form or ornament. Simple incised patterns are found. The ware is generally dark in colour with sand and charcoal tempering and often a polished surface produced by burnishing with the application of soot.

Such discoveries could explain that the pottery "industry" had existed in the Malay States from early times. It had developed with diverse forms and decorations based on indigenous influences. The use of indigenous elements supports the argument that traditional Malay pottery particularly *labu sayong* is a local invention. The invention reflects the cultural heritage of a primordial society which is invaluable to the history of Malay civilization. Based on the continuity or endurance of these local elements Wray (1903: 24) emphasises that:

Malayan pottery may, therefore, be looked upon as a survival, amongst a fairly civilized people, of a phase in the ceramic art far anterior to that to be found in other countries in a similar state of advancement, and, such, appears to be deserving of some study and attention.

THE HISTORY OF POTTERY-PRODUCTION IN KUALA KANGSAR

Almost every Malay state does have its own unique pottery handicraft. The pottery handicrafts of Malaysia that are known nationally and internationally are the *Labu Sayong* and *Labu Pulau Tiga* of Perak, the *Terenang* (Pahang), *Mambong* (Kelantan), *Nuan* and *Kudin* (Sarawak), *Kecor* (Perlis) and the *Kuron* and *Lapohan* (Sabah) (Ibrahim and Sahaimi, 2005). Each of these pottery handicraft has its own unique characteristics depending on the customs, traditions and beliefs of the local community, the quality of clay used and the way in which the handicraft was produced. For each state the pottery is produced in various areas. However, the general view among scholars assert Perak is the only state or "...area which has preserved the value of producing it in the same way as it has been for generations, either in its invention process or outer design" (Siti Zainon, 1986: 64).

There are several versions of the history and development of *labu sayong*, from its production for individual consumption to commercial product. According to the locals the origin of *labu sayong* began with the use of the *labu* or gourd as utensil for collecting and storing water. In the past the people of Sayong used old gourds which had been dried as container to store water. As

time went by the community began to produce earthen household utensils. Subsequently, the gourd was replaced by a type of pottery which was of the same shape as the gourd and with similar function. This came to be known as *labu sayong*.⁶

Siti Zainon's study (1986) of the origin of *labu sayong* shows that pottery craftsmen used the old methods which they had inherited from their mothers or grandparents more than a hundred years ago. Informants Hasnah Adnan and two female relatives, who own a *labu sayong* pottery business in Kampung Kepala Bendang, claim they had inherited their craft and skill in *labu sayong* pottery-production from their great grandmother, Nila Hitam. Siti Zainon records that several of Nila Hitam's *labu sayong* still exist and are kept at the Taiping Museum. Nila Hitam passed away in 1903.

More information on the handicraft was provided by Othman Satar, another traditional *labu sayong* maker from Kampung Kepala Bendang. He mentioned another version of the *labu sayong* history which was initiated by his ancestor "Tuk Kaluk" who came from the Minangkabau area in Sumatra. According to Othman, Tuk Kaluk first introduced clay pottery making around 1810 during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Zulkarnain Syah of Perak (actually the Perak ruler at the time was Sultan Abdul Malik Mansur Syah, 1806–1825).

The story goes that Tuk Kaluk had intimate ties with the palace. He was granted a plot of land in Kampung Kepala Bendang by the Sultan of Perak in recognition of his skills in making swords, machetes, kris and pottery. Since that time Tuk Kaluk began to contribute his skills in making *labu sayong* to the residents of Kampung Kepala Bendang. Over time the residents became skilful in making *labu sayong* and it was passed on to the present generation.

There are few written sources that explain the origins and history of *labu sayong*. As explained earlier, pottery-production was invented during a very early period that probably predates the community's ability to record it. That is why the existence of Malay pottery can only be known from more recent writings. This issue was acknowledged by Sheppard (1978) who explains that:

No Malay pottery older than 250 years has been found, however. The gap between the pottery of prehistory and that of the Malays of the past 200 years is intriguing and will remain unclear until further research brings light to this obscure phase.

The claim that *labu sayong* pottery was introduced by "migrants" from Sumatra is probably true as acknowledged by Wray. Although it is acknowledged that those who initially invented pottery of Perak were Sumatra Malays, it should be understood that they were certainly not foreigners because at that time the people of Sumatra and the peninsular shared a common identity, ancestry and ethnicity. As regards this aspect, Wray (1903: 24) explains that:

It seems more probable that what is recorded as the advent of the Malays from Sumatra was only an incursion of foreign Malays into a country already inhabited by people of the same race, though possibly in an inferior state of advancement. Whatever was the early history of this part of the Peninsula, it is certain that for a long time past three races have inhabited it – the Malays, the Sakais and the Semangs; the Malays being settled along the coast and the banks of the rivers, and the Sakais and Semangs in the interior. These latter people call themselves, and are called by the Malays, *Orang Darat*, literally "men of the land" and they may be considered as the aborigines.

Studies by Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1990a) explain that it is entirely possible that the "orang asli" or aborigines (the Semang and Sakai) who lived in the Malay states prior to this period (they were known as "orang darat") were also part of the Malay community which shares the same origin and ethnicity as "emigrants" from Sumatra. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1990a: 4) explains that there are differences between Malays and the Malay aborigines or "orang darat", which are "...not entirely due to migration in the prehistoric age but owing to changes through internal processes linked to the advent of outside influence." This means the aborigine and the coastal and riverine Malays are actually of the same ancestry and lineage, but with different levels of exposure and receptivity to change resulting in their different levels of cultural attainment. The early Malays, as Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1990a: 11) further explains, were exposed to change through trading activities which gave rise to the existence of two groups of communities, the coastal and riverine community which was more dynamic, and the aboriginal community which was part of the Malays too but did not receive change from outside and continued with a primitive way of life. According to Wray, the Malay "orang darat" or "orang asli" never possessed the art of pottery-making but depended on elements of the natural environment which were more primitive, such as bones, trees and bamboo to make utensils for everyday use.

Another historical source that provides some additional information on the history of pottery in Perak is the *Misa Melayu*. *Misa Melayu* is a traditional Malay text which discusses the history of Perak in the 18th century. It records, in passing, how pottery was in use since the 18th century by the Perak royalty and aristocracy, as a means for storing water and for taking a bath. When Sultan Iskandar Zulkarnain sailed up and down the Perak River between his palaces at Pulau Cempaka Sari and Pulau Tiga, the sultan took along with him pottery utensils which were used as water-container for drinking and for cleansing purposes (Ahmad Fawzi, 1992).

Despite the differences in view on the origins and the sources, the art of pottery making in Perak was indigenous to the Malays. In Perak it was known to exist only in a few places. According to Wray, until 1903 the industry was found

to exist only in four major locations. Three of them were situated along the banks of the Perak River at Lenggong to the north or upper reaches of the Perak River; at Sayong, Kuala Kangsar; and at Pulau Tiga, at the lower reaches of the Perak river (see map in Figure 2).⁷ Of these the pottery of Pulau Tiga is believed to be of the best quality followed by that of Sayong while the quality of the Lenggong pottery is the most inferior (Wray, 1903: 25).⁸ This means the further away one moves from the Perak River estuary, the lower the quality of the pottery produced. However, according to Maznah Sulaiman and her husband Sapparudin Mohd Noh who were both traditional pottery-makers in Kampung Kepala Bendang, the *labu sayong* from the Sayong area is of the highest quality and the best in Perak because of its better quality clay.⁹

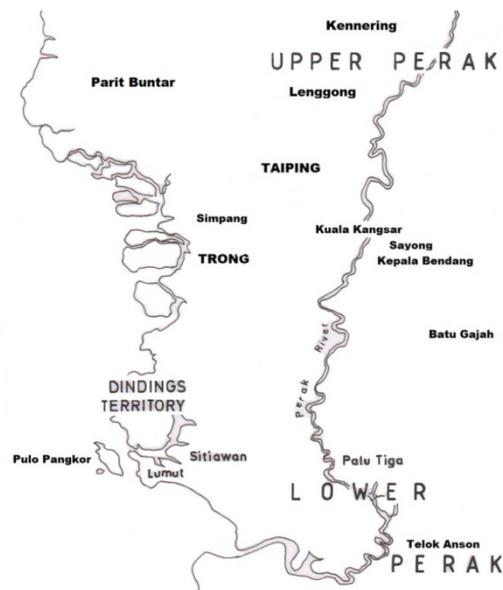


Figure 2: Areas renowned for traditional pottery-production in Perak.
Source: Wray (1903).

Undoubtedly the pottery-production activity is very much influenced by the quality of clay which is the main raw material in pottery-production and the way the clay was processed. According to Shamsu (2005: 78):

Quality clay is a must in pottery production, an artist should know the plasticity, drying and firing shrinkage of clay in order to produce excellent pottery products. An artist should be well verse in selecting clay accordingly to the technique of pottery making.

The area involved in pottery-production is always the one where abundant clay is available. Generally, high quality clay is found in places that are close to rivers. It is not surprising therefore that the major locations of pottery-production are situated along the banks of Perak River.

This fact explains why not all places in the state are capable of supporting the pottery industry. According to Chia (1995), pottery-production in Malaysia had depended on the clay found in the same area since the earliest time. Other studies conducted throughout the world show that pottery producers generally depend on clay that is located close by; they never travel more than seven kilometres to obtain them. Thus the Perak pottery industry is indigenous to the locality and carried out by local inhabitants in areas where high quality clay was abundantly available (Chia, 1995).

The study on present day pottery-production in Kampung Kepala Bendang finds that traditional *labu sayong* pottery-makers obtain the clay from areas that are located close to their village, either at the tributaries and banks of rivers, paddy fields or hillocks and knolls which are not too far away from a river (Figure 3). These are located within a radius of two to three kilometres from the village. However, some of the traditional producers had begun to purchase the clay from outside sources, although the quality is not always satisfactory.



Figure 3: Location of Kampung Kepala Bendang, Kuala Kangsar Perak, Malaysia.

Source: https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=map+of+kampung+sayong.

Wray's (1903: 25) study shows that up to 1903, there were only 10 households in Sayong undertaking pottery making in the traditional way. From field study and information from the Malaysian handicrafts development body, Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia (PKKM), their number had dropped to two or three households. These households produced *labu sayong* pottery by the traditional method while others have combined traditional and modern mode of production.

Significantly, those skilled in the handicraft are elderly women. In his time, Wray found that pottery-production was monopolised by elderly or middle-

aged women while the men functioned as assistants (Figure 4). According to Wray, the young Malay women of Perak have never shown much interest in learning or continuing the art from their elders. Wray's discovery is not surprising because even then it was difficult to pass on the tradition to the younger generations as in the present time. Many are showing disinterest in the family pottery-production that requires a high level of skill, diligence and hard work while the economic returns are uncertain. As a result traditionally hand-made pottery making is finding it difficult to get those who could inherit the skill. This drawback could jeopardise its continued existence.



Figure 4: A woman making *labu sayong* in Kuala Kangsar.
Source: Wray (1903).

POTTERY-PRODUCTION ACTIVITIES IN KUALA KANGSAR UNTIL THE PRESENT TIME

Currently, there are many issues concerning the future of pottery-production in Kuala Kangsar. There are concerns among several parties that Perak's pottery-production industry would face a decline and ultimate extinction as experienced by traditional pottery-makers in Perlis, Kedah and Penang. In the past, demand for traditional pottery was always good because it was used on a daily basis. However, the number of users is decreasing because its functions have been taken over by modern amenities like refrigerators, rice cookers and so on. The other

related issue is the aesthetic value of traditional pottery which is less appreciated by the public resulting in a reduced and indeterminate demand (Ibrahim and Sahaimi, 2005). In fact, there was a tendency in the earlier studies to assume that the pottery industry is facing instability and shrinkage.

However, through interviews with various parties including vendors, pottery producers and the PKKM a different picture emerged. Initially meant for daily utensil the *labu sayong* has developed into a profitable commercial product that are exported overseas. In short, it has become a substantial income earner. This means the pottery industry has not declined, but growing due to the increase demand for Kuala Kangsar pottery.

There is awareness among various parties of the necessity to turn the pottery industry into a tourist product, to sustain the legacy of the handicraft and to make *labu sayong* an identity marker for Kuala Kangsar. Both handicraft and heritage organisations constantly undertake efforts to assist, instruct and advice, encourage and to promote the demand for *labu sayong*. Apart from the Perak state government,¹⁰ the central government through the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (currently Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture) have shown much interest in continuing the art and originality of the traditional local handicraft. Both have promoted efforts to display pottery products throughout Malaysia and abroad targeting pottery aficionados. Since the 1970s, efforts to promote pottery handicraft products were undertaken to ensure the attainment of the stated objectives. This includes the setting up of several agencies to assist in the development of the pottery handicraft industry in Perak. The government has also established the Perak PKKM branch (initially known as Malaysian Handicrafts Board Perak Branch). The Perak PKKM is located in Enggor near Kuala Kangsar; it functions as the centre for the expansion of the pottery industry in Perak.

PKKM's responsibility includes advancing and preserving the traditional skill and to educate existing craftsmen in modern pottery making as well as managing and marketing the products in a more systematic manner (Ibrahim and Sahaimi, 2005). In Kuala Kangsar, the PKKM's role is not only to assist in promoting and marketing the products but also to provide expertise and training to meet the needs of the ceramic industry. To ensure the continuity of the traditional industry, training is provided to interested youths in both traditional and modern pottery making.¹¹ In order to undertake these programmes, the PKKM is provided with a substantial government grant. In developing the local handicraft the PKKM is also focusing on gold thread embroidery, mat weaving, kris making and so forth.

With regard *labu sayong*, since 1975 PKKM had taken the initiative to introduce modern methods using moulds and machines. It had also built factory facilities using machines and equipment for pottery-production. To speed up the manufacturing process, modern equipment for the casting and throwing was used.

This enabled more pottery to be produced and sold.¹² The production of pottery by modern methods and with diverse and creative designs has led to more varieties of products like decorative lamps and flower vases. The modernisation process has increased the *labu sayong* appeal with Kuala Kangsar increasingly known as producer of the best quality *labu sayong* in the country.

The rapid expansion of the *labu sayong* were not without its problems. Some producers claim they were unable to meet the high demand for *labu sayong* including for trade expositions or handicraft exhibitions. With the assistance, encouragement, guidance and advice from Perak PKK, producers in Kuala Kangsar have made advances in the pottery industry enabling them to achieve considerable profits. This has encouraged more petty traders as well as new large-scale industries in the Kuala Kangsar district to produce a variety of pottery products particularly *labu sayong*.

Kuala Kangsar pottery producers have received positive acceptance from Malaysians. According to a PKK source, although the present pottery market has not reached the level of export to foreign countries, demand from the local market is strong especially for the Kuala Kangsar *labu sayong*. In fact, some of the pottery producers have to turn down customer orders.

Based on the field study the *labu sayong* pottery-production of Kuala Kangsar has grown by leaps and bound, far different from the small-scale industry that Wray had mentioned in 1903. According to the PKK director, about 100 households are involved in the traditional and modern *labu sayong* pottery-production notably in villages like Kampung Kepala Bendang, Bukit Lada, Sayong Masjid, Sayong Ulu and Kuala Sayong Ulu.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL POTTERY-PRODUCTION

Although the *labu sayong* pottery-production of Kuala Kangsar has grown quite rapidly, the number of *labu sayong* producers using the traditional method and their output is decreasing. Wray found out in 1903 there were ten households which were involved in the traditional, hand-made *labu sayong* pottery-production; in the 1960s most of the pottery makers were still using the traditional mode of production. However, since the 1970s when the PKK introduced modern production techniques almost all the pottery producers had switched to the modern pottery production. Undeniably, the introduction of modern techniques has jeopardised the traditional pottery industry. Another related factor is the inability of the traditional industry to attract interest and accommodate the need of buyers. This necessitated the change to the modern method of production. The present study found out only a few households are still making pottery in the traditional way using the pressing method, squeezing

and pinching by hand.¹³ They are located in Kampung Kepala Bendang; one is run on a small scale by Saparudin and Maznah and their family.

Both Saparudin and Maznah had inherited the skills of making *labu sayong* from the earlier generations. Maznah terms the skill for making *labu sayong* as "*main tanah*" (playing with the earth). With the assistance from her husband, she can produce 80–90 pieces of *labu sayong* a month using the traditional method. She receives no financial assistance from the government and produces *labu sayong* with her own resources.¹⁴

Another traditional *labu sayong* business run by Zulkafly Pandak Beden is also located in the same village.¹⁵ Acknowledged as *Adiguru* or great teacher of handicraft by PKK in 2013, Zulkafly professed a deep desire to preserve the traditional production of *labu sayong*. He considers these as possessing aesthetic value and unique beauty. However, he does admit efforts to continue the traditional mode of production are very challenging, not only in terms of profitability, but also due to competition from large scale modern pottery production.¹⁶

Traditional pottery-production faces various challenges including the lack of capital, training, promotion as well as the lack of official attention compared to businesses that have switched to the modern mode of production. In many quarters the making of pottery using the traditional way is perceived as an industry that is resistant to change, unproductive, difficult and not worth continuing because it brings poor returns.

PKKM and other government agencies consider the traditional pottery-production mode as unprofitable, incapable of change and unlikely to develop further. Their attention is focused mainly on assisting owners of businesses who are prepared to switch to the modern techniques. Among the constraints traditional pottery makers face are a production process which is considered difficult, time-consuming and indeterminate because of its dependence on a host of variables including time, season, weather, and the health of the craftsman. According to PKKM, traditional pottery-production is unproductive and unprofitable because it can only be done on a small scale.

Asyaari's (1998: 69) study shows traditional hand-crafted pottery-production is very slow and time-consuming compared to those produced by modern techniques. This means to produce a piece of pottery in the traditional way takes four to five days; it took only a few hours using modern methods involving the mould and throwing machine. However, Puan Maznah claims she could produce 80–90 pieces of pottery monthly using the traditional method. This shows pottery-making in the traditional way is capable of producing high output.

Another constraint is pottery design which shows a big difference between the traditional and modern forms of production. Many see the modern techniques as more successful in comparison to the traditional one, with regard to design and creativity to meet the needs and tastes of today's modern society. This means modern pottery no longer functions as utensils for storing water but came

in the shape of handicrafts for exhibition, flower pots and decorative lamps in various styles, designs and forms. In short, the modern method is more flexible and has been appropriated to suit contemporary tastes. The tendency to create various types of designs, forms and uses has made the original use of *labu sayong* unimportant; this indirectly rendered unviable the traditional mode of *labu sayong* production.

Placed against the modern method, traditional pottery-production is indistinctive and outdated in form, design and function. The original, basic form and design remained unchanged. In fact, it still functions as water-storage utensil. Admittedly, there is a continued demand for traditional pottery but the number of loyal clientele is small. This contributed to the small demand for traditional pottery which remains unprofitable. On the contrary, a majority of buyers of traditional pottery do so because of its intrinsic value (Ibrahim and Sahaimi, 2005).

This means traditional pottery-production will not be able to face competition from modern pottery-production which produces to accommodate buyer preferences for functions, patterns and designs. Buyers do not really appreciate traditional pottery either in terms of its historical value or aesthetics. Others could not differentiate between traditional pottery and modern pottery as some of them are of the same colour, design and form.¹⁷ Buyers generally are attracted more to modern pottery with its diverse forms, functions and colours; it is also more creatively crafted than traditional pottery besides the cheaper prices. On the other hand, traditional pottery is more expensive since it is hand-crafted. As explained by Shamsu (2005: 79), "Most buyers do not bother about the technique used by the potters, as long as they can purchase the item at a low price."

The traditional pottery industry of Kuala Kangsar is in need of aid and encouragement from the central or state government. Government policies to foster the heritage of traditional Malay handicraft requires a more balanced attention to the commercialisation process of modern pottery. At the same time efforts at preserving and expanding the traditional pottery industry should be increased. In short, government policies have to strike a balance between the need for more commercialisation and to guarantee the continuity of the handicraft's historical heritage. Otherwise the unique skill of traditional pottery-making may be lost forever.

In this regard, pottery producers and the PKKMM are confronted with a dilemma. PKKMM has difficulty assisting traditional producers who professed little interest in switching to the modern production method as some of them claim *labu sayong* pottery is of better quality, free from chemicals, an antidote for various illnesses and it lasts longer if used for storing hot water. On the other hand, they claim the modern method of production is not only of lower quality but breaks easily.

According to the PKKM whether modern or traditional, the quality of pottery is more or less the same with imperceptible differences. Owing to this misconception, PKKM faced problems in the early stages to assist pottery producers who had difficulty in switching from traditional to modern techniques. Even though the introduction of modern pottery-making techniques was poorly received in the initial stages due to doubt over its capability of producing high-quality pottery, it seems the doubts have been dispelled. Presently, a majority of producers have abandoned the traditional technique and have adopted modern pottery making techniques which are more cost effective. In fact, the response to modern pottery-production is far better because it can meet the high demand from clients.

Although emphasis is to aid and encourage modern pottery-making, PKKM has not neglected the traditional producers. It constantly encourages traditional pottery makers through various incentives including training and the appointment of *Tokoh Adiguru* whose function is to foster traditional pottery-making. For such purposes PKKM has established several units like Technical Unit, Marketing and Promotion/Preservation Unit and Development of Entrepreneurs Unit to carry out research and development for the preservation and conservation of traditional pottery-making. The aims of the PKKM efforts are twofold, that is, to animate, expand and increase the income of modern pottery producers but at the same time to continue its support. It also provide exposure for Kuala Kangsar youths to traditional pottery-making through periodic trainings.¹⁸ In this way, PKKM hopes to advance and stimulate pottery-making and at the same time preserve and conserve the handicraft of traditional pottery-production.

EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THE TRADITIONAL POTTERY INDUSTRY

In the traditional pottery-making industry, expansion and profits may be achieved with encouragement, promotion and financial assistance from the government. Traditional pottery-making can also be modernised without losing its original identity and uniqueness. Through the various agencies the government should provide more guidance, encouragement and aid in terms of financing, promotion, training and marketing so that the traditional pottery-making industry can raised its visibility nationally and at the international level. Financial incentives and capital are needed to enable traditional pottery-producers to continue with a competitive edge alongside modern pottery-making industry. To provide encouragement, the government or its agencies, particularly PKKM could buy pottery products from traditional pottery makers and sell them in the local market or for export.

The government, through PKKM, has provided various incentives for the traditional pottery-producers such as giving recognition to their craft and providing monthly allowances to them although these efforts are still inadequate as they are directed only to one family or a single individual. Instead these should be extended to other producers as well. PKKM should also utilise its facilities to organise courses and skills-training for youths in pottery-production in both the modern and traditional methods. It should also increase cooperation with institutions of higher learning, corporate and heritage bodies to enable students or civil servants to attend courses and training in pottery and other handicrafts. It is far more difficult to gain mastery in the arts and crafts, especially the traditional pottery-making compared to modern techniques which do not require any skills. Such efforts would ensure the youth inherit the heritage of traditional pottery and the skills of traditional pottery or other handicrafts do not die a natural death.

The modern pottery-production is easier, more productive, attractive and profitable, but as a work of art it is not as beautiful or special as the traditionally hand-crafted product. The beauty of traditional pottery lies in its historical and aesthetic values which ought to be appreciated by every generation. To this end, the relevant parties should make efforts to enlighten the younger generation about its importance. It is hoped that hand-crafted *labu sayong* pottery will endure even if the quantity produced is small, so that the history, art and beauty of this pottery will be preserved.

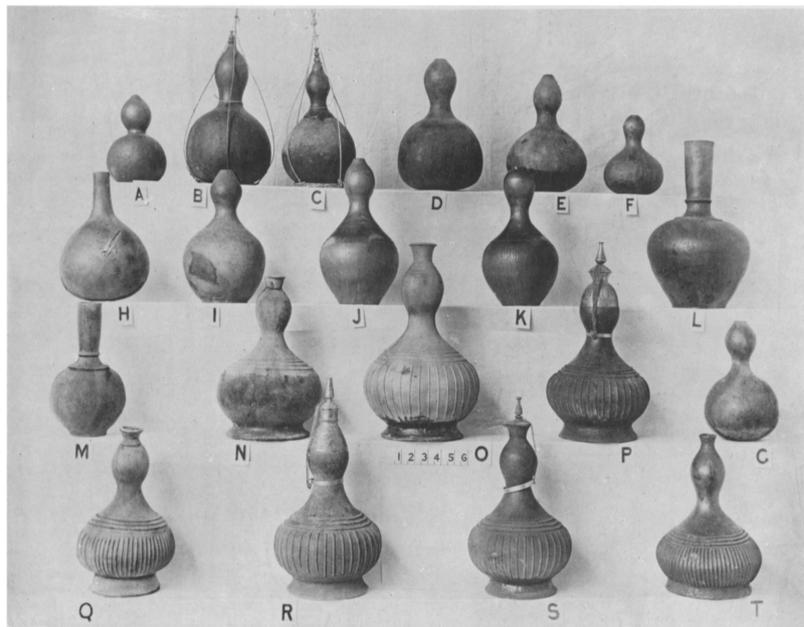


Figure 5: Varieties and types of Kuala Kangsar *labu sayong*.
Source: Wray (1903).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the unique and special *labu sayong* pottery has developed over the years as a heritage product not only for Malays but Malaysians too. This heritage should be safeguarded. Government policies to foster and modernise the pottery-making handicraft are highly laudable although there is a need to be balanced by encouraging the traditional way of making pottery as well. If the government and other bodies have put much effort to expand and develop the modern pottery-making industry, similar attention should be taken to sustain the continuity of its historical heritage so that it does not disappear.

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NOTES

1. Earlier versions of the essay had appeared in Abu Talib Ahmad (ed.). *Utara Semenanjung Malaysia: Esei-esei warisan*. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia Press, 97–115 and *Sari: International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation* 28(2): 131–151, December 2010.
2. Estimated at 2,000 to 1,500 BC. By then the early Malays had invented basic tools for hunting, which later progressed to tools for protection, clothing, cooking utensils (earthen pots and pans) and boats. See Siti Zainon (1986: 20). Ibrahim Darus and Sahaimi Abd Manaf in their book, *Tembikar Tradisional* (2005) claims Malaysia has a history of pottery dated 35,000 years ago. Discoveries at Niah Caves (Sarawak), Cha Caves (Kelantan), Bukit Tengku Lembu Caves (Perlis) which is now known as Kampung Bukit Merah, Beseri and several other places formed the evidence of human settlement and occupation. See Ibrahim and Sahaimi (2005: 10).
3. According to Siti Zainon, Leonard Wray began archaeological excavation at certain sites since 1880 and discovered several crudely-made pottery fragments in Gunung Ceruh. In 1917, N. H. Evans continued the excavation at Batu Kurau, Perak and Kota Tongkat in Pahang. Subsequently in 1935, H. D. Noone conducted excavations at Gua Cha, Kelantan and found several types of pottery in perfect condition. The study was continued by several foreign scholars including G. de Sieveking at Bukit Tengku Lembu, Perlis in 1951.

4. I. H. N. Evans had written on archaeology particularly relating to Perak. Among these are "Preliminary report on cave exploration near Lenggong, Upper Perak", *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums* 7(4): 227–234 which was published in 1918; "On ancient remains from Kuala Selinsing, Perak", *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums*, 44–51(4): 121–156 published in 1928; "A further slab-built grave at Sungkai", *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums* 15(2): 64–70 published in 1931.
5. During the Shang Dynasty (1500–1027 BC), Chinese pottery makers had introduced the potter's wheel. From 618–907 CE, that is during the Tang Dynasty pottery combined with porcelain was introduced and during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 M), China achieved a breakthrough in the world of pottery with the introduction of glazed pottery in diverse forms and types. Since 1200 CE Chinese pottery began to be exported to other countries, particularly Southeast Asia through trade. See Ibrahim and Sahaimi (2005: 9).
6. There are several types of *labu sayong* in Kuala Kangsar, namely, Labu Awok, Labu Tela, Labu Pucung, Labu Gelugor, dippers and water-storage jars. See Shamsu (2005: 78).
7. A fourth location for pottery-making is Bukit Gantang near Larut, which is run by Malays who originally came from Sayong. See Wray (1903: 25).
8. The products of Pulau Tiga and Sayong are said to be the best in the state. Jars of diverse shapes and decorative patterns have been made. Most of the jars from Pulau Tiga are red, with embossed decorative patterns. Sayong is known for black pottery decorated by pressing, and marked with harmonious geometric lines. See Ibrahim and Sahaimi (2005: 13).
9. Interview with Maznah Sulaiman in Kampung Kepala Bendang, Sayong. See also, Azmi, Muhamad Luthfi and Tarmiji (2010).
10. Efforts have been made by the Perak state government to set up a pottery-making cooperative in Kampung Bendang. The cooperative is responsible for marketing of handicrafts made by local residents of Kampung Kepala Bendang. See Mohamad Nazri (2000).
11. Interview with Mai Hafizatul Azimah bt Ramlan, Marketing and Promotion/Conservation Unit, PKK, 21 July 2014.
12. Interview with Mohd Yusof Muri former director of PKK. Among the changes resulting from the use of modern tools and techniques in pottery-making are the electrical *uli* (kneading machine), the use of chemicals such as sodium to ensure liquid clay put into the mould is not viscous, the mould to shape pottery, the throwing machine which is a type of machine that can turn or spin, electrical or gas burning/baking/roasting, and so on. It may be said that the process of pottery-making from start to finish has been wholly modernised and is no longer hand-crafted. It is also devoid of any art. There is no more kneading or processes that use the hand as all the processes depend on modern techniques that do not require the skills of hand-crafted pottery.
13. This fact contradicts the view of Ahmad Fauzi who said in his professorial talk in 2009 that during the period of his study (2007–2009), many types of *labu sayong* which are produced by the traditional *picit-lilit* technique are still available. See Ahmad Fauzi (2009: 11).

14. PKKMM claims they had acknowledged her as *tokoh* or acknowledged figure of the craft and paid out an allowance of RM500 a month in the effort to animate the traditional pottery handicraft so that it does not die out.
15. Zulkafly, who was born on 11 Disember 1948, is a native of Kampung Kepala Bendang, Sayong. He inherited the art of pottery-making from his parents, Pandak Beden Anjang Hussein and Chah Ngah Said while he was in his teens. Zulkafly obtained a two and a half-year formal training in the field of pottery-making under the direction of Lembaga Kraftangan Malaysia from 1975 to 1977. In fact he was appointed a teacher of the craft at PKKMM, Perak Branch from 1977 to 2005. Presently retired, he is involved full-time in his traditional pottery business in Kampung Kepala Bendang. See "Pengusaha Labu Sayong dilantik Adiguru Kraf 2013", *Utusan Malaysia*, 5 November 2013.
16. Interview with Zulkafly, Kampung Kepala Bendang, 21 July 2014.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview with Mai Hafizatul Azimah bt Ramlan, Marketing and Promotion/Conservation Unit, PKKMM, 21 July 2014.

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