

Royal Influence: Reviving the Tenun Pahang Diraja weaving industry in Pahang

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Abstract

This study examines the historical development of Pahang's weaving industry and the influence of the Royal Institution. With a 300-year history, this industry is vital to Malay cultural identity. Utilizing qualitative methods, the research highlights the pivotal roles of HRH Tengku Ampuan Meriam and HRH Tengku Puan Pahang Tunku Hajah Azizah in the industry's revival and growth. The conferment of the "Diraja" title in 2006 reinforced its cultural significance. This research underscores the enduring importance of Tenun Pahang Diraja (TPD) in Pahang's cultural and economic landscape.

Keywords: Tenun Pahang Diraja; weaving; craft

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1.0 Introduction

The origin of TPD fabric is uncertain, but it is believed to have spread with the arrival of a Bugis nobleman, Keraing Aji, in 1722, who sailed to Pahang and introduced weaving patterns for sarong and sampang (Zakaria Hitam, 1989; Linehan, 1973). Consequently, TPD became a significant part of Pahang's merchandise. Known for its exceptional quality and fine silk threads, the fabric became the attire of choice for royal ceremonies and official events among royals, noblemen, and gentry. It was also commonly presented as gifts to high-ranking Malay dignitaries and foreign acquaintances (Zainal Abidin Borhan, 2009).

TPD's cultural significance continued into the 20th century. Traditionally, it is used as part of a Malay wedding dowry, to swaddle newborns in welcoming ceremonies, as attire for boys in circumcision ceremonies, for new mothers during confinement, and as a shroud for the deceased (Zainal Abidin Borhan, 2009; Mohd Yusof Abdullah, 2009; Norwani Md. Nawawi; Rafeah Legino, 2016). The weaving industry attracted attention from various government agencies, including the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (MHDC), the Pahang Department of Museums, and the Pahang State Government, leading to the establishment of weaving centers in places like Felda Chini 5, Rompin, and Kampung Sungai Soi, Kuantan.

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Weaving, once a primary source of income for Malays, faced decline due to historical events such as the Pahang civil war and the Japanese invasion during World War II, which disrupted silk supplies. However, HRH Tengku Ampuan Besar Pahang, Tengku Meriam played a pivotal role in reviving the industry with support from government agencies like the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA), the Southeast Pahang Development Board (DARA), and MHDC, along with weaving training programs to attract younger generations.

HRH Tengku Puan Pahang, Tunku Hajah Azizah Aminah Iskandariah, has continued this legacy, demonstrating her commitment to preserving and strengthening the TPD industry. Her hands-on involvement with weavers and dedication to promoting "intangible heritage" are highly valued by the people of Pahang (Ahmad Farid Abdul Jalal, 2013c). Her efforts have elevated Tenun Pahang to its current prestigious status, showcasing the Pahang Royal Institution's ongoing support for the weaving community and national heritage. This research delved into the influence of Pahang Royal Institution on the growth of weaving industry in the state of Pahang. Its goal is to provide the community a better understanding of the weaving industry in the state, so that the legacy left by our forefathers receives greater respect and appreciation.



Fig. 1: Beragi Pattern
(Source: Yayasan Tenun Pahang Diraja [@yayasantenunpahangdiraja], 2020)

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The History of Weaving Industry in Pahang

Historically, weaving is one of the oldest activities that accompanied the development of human civilization (Habibah Abdul Jabbar et al., 2015; Norwani Md. Nawawi, 2022). According to Zainal Abidin Borhan (2009) and Nasha Sharieyna Dzulkarnain et al., (2021), the meticulous craftsmanship of woven cloth symbolized the greatness and sovereignty of Malay rulers. Influences from China, India, and Arab further enriched the style and fashion of local weaving.

The Malay Peninsula's strategic location between two major trade routes, the Indian Ocean (West) and the South China Sea (East), attracted traders and significantly impacted the Malay economy, politics, and society. Trade relations flourished in the 15th century, and the blending of foreign cultural elements influenced the Malay community, including weaving. The arrival of Keraing Aji, also known as Tok Tuan, and his followers in Pahang marked a new era in weaving. The Bugis brought patterned woven fabrics, which spread to Terengganu and Kelantan (Nor Hanim Awang @ Mohd Noor, 2021), where local weavers developed new patterns, although the traditional Bugis method remains practiced in Pahang (Azizah Mahmood Iskandar and Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, 2017).

The weaving industry in Pahang gained further momentum with the opening of Singapore Port in 1819, which facilitated the import of raw materials like cotton threads from England and silk threads from China. Weaving thrived in Kampung Mengkasar and surrounding areas such as Pulau Keladi, Kampung Jambu, Kampung Benta, Langgar, and Ketapang. During his 1838 visit to Pahang, Munsyi Abdullah described weaving as one of the state's main economic activities, reflecting Keraing Aji's success in inspiring local interest. However, the industry declined from 1857 due to the Pahang civil war, which lasted until 1863. Despite this, woven products remained popular among the nobility for ceremonies and official events, symbolizing authority and prestige for Malay royals and courtiers.

2.2 Involvement of The Royal Institution in The Growth of TPD

The royal institution plays a crucial role in traditional Malay culture, serving as a center for knowledge, literature, arts, culture, and religion (Siti Mariani S.M. Omar, 2002; Azizah Mahmood Iskandar; Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, 2017; Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, 2022). According to *Hikayat Anggun Tunggal* (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1986), woven fabrics have long been the attire of Malay royalty. The sultans of Pahang have worn TPD as their official attire at significant events, showcasing the tradition of wearing TPD with pride—a custom that persists among Pahang royalty to this day.



Fig. 2: HRH Tengku Ampuan Besar Tengku Meriam binti Sultan Abu Bakar
(Source: Sahaimi Abd. Manaf et al., 2006)

In 1903, the weaving activities of Malay women in Pahang caught the attention of English Resident Cecil Gray. Despite efforts to engage the younger generation, interest declined, prompting Gray to seek support from the palace through Tengku Ampuan Meriam to revive the weaving industry. With the palace's sponsorship, the art of weaving in Pahang was revitalized and remained vibrant into the 1920s. Tengku Ampuan Meriam played a key role in this development, making weaving central for women in Pekan. The presence of looms in nearly every household in Kampung Pulau Keladi, Kampung Jambu, and Kampung Benta attests to this success.

The weaving industry's growth drew the attention of the Pahang government, which mandated Malay employees to wear black and white horizontally striped woven sampang. To further promote the industry, various incentives were introduced, supported by government agencies such as RIDA in 1963, DARA in 1974, MHDC in 1980, the Pahang State Development Corporation (PSDC) in 1992, the Pahang State Museum in 1986, and the MHDC Pahang Branch in 2002. In 1964, the Pulau Keladi Silk Weaving Institution in Pekan was established as the first weaving training center to encourage youth to learn traditional skills. PSDC further supported these efforts by offering training programs through workshops in Peramu Jaya 3, Kampung Temai, and Sungai Lembing, helping to cultivate new weavers. Renowned weaving masters like Natipah @ Nortipah Abdul Kadir and Azman Zakaria were recruited to share their expertise with young people.

The royal family has played a significant role in sustaining the weaving industry. The 1986 royal wedding between HRH Tengku Abdullah Ibni Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah, Crown Prince of Pahang, and HRH Tunku Azizah of Johor reinforced the weaving tradition, continuing a legacy started by Tengku Meriam's marriage to HRH Tengku Besar Mahmud in 1897, as both princesses were deeply interested in arts and culture.

Tunku Hajah Azizah began her efforts in motif development and contemporary pattern design in 2004 (Dato' Mohd Zubair Haji Mohd Zain, personal communication, November 4, 2022). She worked tirelessly to rejuvenate the TPD industry, gifting TPD to local and international friends and leaders and adopting it as her attire for festive occasions. Numerous meetings with entities like the Pahang State Museum, MHDC Pahang Branch, and the National Craft Institute were held to support this effort.

Her dedication to cultural heritage was crucial in reviving the weaving industry, which had dwindled to just 15 weavers in the 1980s (Zaharah Othman, 2021). Her efforts were so impactful that Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah of Pahang conferred the title "Diraja" on the craft on May 8, 2006, and established the TPD Council, chaired by Tunku Hajah Azizah. Her contributions were further recognized on May 8, 2010, when Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib presented her with the Special Award (Craft Art) at the Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex for her contributions to the TPD industry.

The involvement of Tengku Ampuan Meriam in 1904 was assisted by two British officers namely Cecil Gray and G.M Laidlaw marked the beginning of the palace's influence. This effort was then continued by the state government in 1928. However, the government still faced a lack of young weavers (Habibah Abdul Jabbar, 2020) and the dominance of weaving from outside (NurulKhasanah Agost, 2021). Tunku Hajah Azizah's visit to Pulau Keladi in 2005 opened a new chapter for this industry. Tunku Hajah Azizah in her speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 8th Asean Traditional Textile Symposium 2022, recalled the moment when she expressed her desire to wear the TPD on the day of the launch of her first cookbook. Since then, various initiatives and development frameworks have been intensified in collaboration with government agencies (Kassandra Kassim et al., 2022) including the establishment of the Institut Kemahiran TPD Tengku Ampuan Besar Meriam (IKTPD), training prison inmates and exhibitions at London Craft Week (LCW).

3.0 Methodology

The findings of this study were obtained through a qualitative approach that focuses on aspects of observation, written sources and interviews based on field studies in several locations around Pahang, Terengganu, Penang, Kuala Lumpur. Field studies and informant diaries were key in data verification. However, secondary sources are also used as references in this writing. The triangulation method is used for accurate and comprehensive data analysis. The purposive sampling method is a basic measure of consideration in the selection of information so that the information obtained is authentic and relevant only as shown in Figure 2.

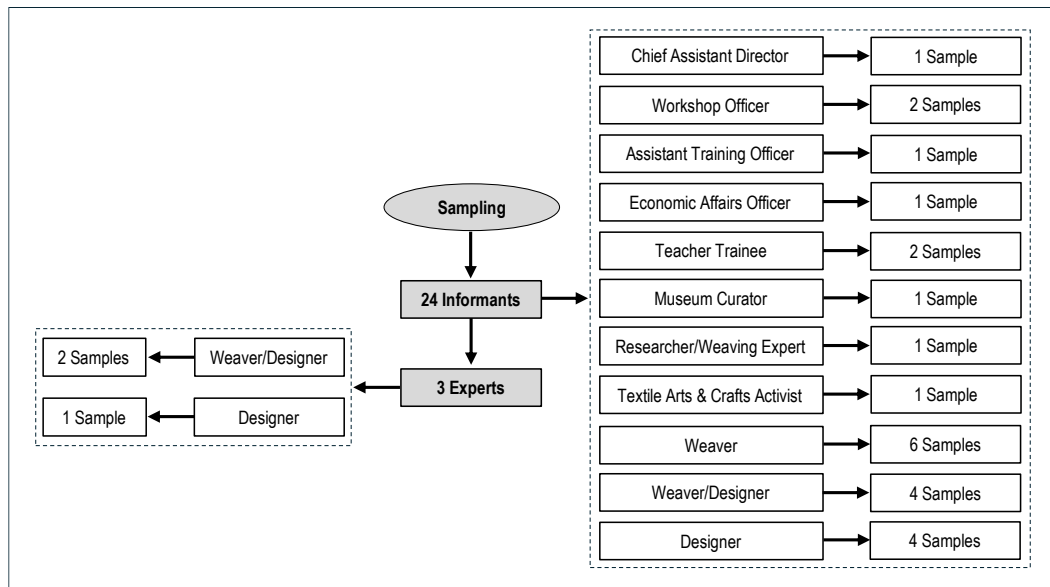


Fig. 3: Sampling and Informants
(Source: Researcher, 2024)

4.0 Findings and Discussion 1: The Role of Pahang Royal Institution

Tunku Hajah Azizah has taken significant steps to conserve TPD over two decades under the patronage of the Pahang Royal Institution. The TPD Advisory Body, established under HRH Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah in 2006, has overseen TPD's growth, reflecting Her Majesty's dedication to this art form. In 2015, Bentong Prison officers revealed that Datuk Mustafa Osman, Chief Director of Penor Prison, envisioned weaving workshops in Penor and Bentong Prisons on August 7, 2006, inspired by Her Majesty's efforts. The workshops started with five inmates and two looms and expanded to 500 trained inmates. On October 15, 2015, the Pahang Royal Institution and the Malaysian Department of Prisons opened the Tenun Bandar Gallery and TPD Resource Center in Kuantan, providing inmates opportunities to earn weaving skill certificates for life after release. During the inauguration of TPDF on April 1, 2018, Tunku Hajah Azizah emphasized:

"The weaving heritage can endure and be disseminated more widely while serving as a branch of occupation if the effort to sustain it continues from one generation to another through the support and attention provided by relevant parties."

A key contribution by Tunku Hajah Azizah was the establishment of IKTPD. HRH Sultan Pahang laid the foundation stone on June 25, 2007, at Kampung Pulau Keladi Cultural Complex in Pekan, Pahang, and Tengku Abdullah inaugurated it on November 20, 2013. By 2022, IKTPD had enrolled 160 students, with 60 completing their studies, ensuring the continuation of this traditional industry by nurturing a new generation of skilled weavers.

Her Majesty also visited weaving centers abroad and participated in seminars and workshops in countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, Brunei, and Cambodia (Ku Mohamad Nasir Ku Mohamad Bashah, personal communication, April 7, 2022). She shared her knowledge and exchanged ideas with local weavers, fostering relationships to elevate Malaysian crafts. As Chairman of the TPDF, Tunku Hajah Azizah has aimed to empower the art of weaving, a key identity of Pahang. This mission gained prominence after her installation as the 16th Queen Consort on July 30, 2019, at Istana Negara. Following the installation, the "Tenun Pahang: Weaving Hope" exhibition at the Malaysian High Commission in London during LCW from May 9 to 15, 2022, showcased TPD internationally, featuring weavings from prisons and Her Majesty's private collection. TPD was featured again at LCW in 2023, with collaborations involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, state governments, MHDC, and The Royal Songket of Terengganu.

The 8th ASEAN Traditional Textile Symposium 2022, themed "Celebrating Textiles: A Journey," was held from September 25 to 30, 2022, at the Putrajaya Marriott Hotel, Malaysia. During the symposium, Her Majesty highlighted the importance of preserving arts, culture, and heritage (HRH Raja Permaisuri Agong, 2022). Thirteen ASEAN countries participated, and the foundation has received substantial government support for community development and job creation through TPD.

A special village, Perkampungan Kraf Diraja Tunku Azizah (Tunku Azizah Royal Craft Village), is being established in Pahang to reflect Tunku Azizah's dedication to TPD. Construction began in May 2023 and is expected to be completed in 2024, including facilities like the IKTPD, Cheminahsayang Sdn. Bhd., Queens Hall, and Craft Art Workshop (Fairuz Hafiezal Rosli, personal communication, October 8, 2023).



Fig. 4: Perkampungan Kraf Diraja Tunku Azizah is currently under construction
(Source: Shared by Fairuz Hafiezal Rosli via WhatsApp on October 8, 2023)

Table 1 highlights Her Majesty's dedication to TPD through her active involvement in workshops, seminars, and exhibitions locally and internationally, demonstrating her commitment to its global cultural and economic significance. Her efforts have increased TPD's visibility and facilitated the transfer of skills to younger generations, preserving the craft for the future. Beyond its aesthetic value, TPD represents the historical and cultural narratives of Pahang. The royal support has elevated the fabric's status, making it a symbol of pride, while also exploring its potential for innovation by blending traditional techniques with modern design.

Table 1: Her Majesty's Involvement in the Traditional Heritage Crafts of TPD
(Source: Researcher, 2024)

No.	Date	Workshops/ Courses/ Seminars/ Exhibitions	Venue
1.	25 June 2008	The TPD Event Showcased 92 Fashion Designs from the Malaysian Famous Designers	Kuala Lumpur Complex Craft, Malaysia
2.	25 Nov 2008	TPD Showcased in the Islamic Fashion Festival	JW Marriot Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
3.	12-14 May 2009	Proceedings of the Nusantara Weaving International Seminar: Continuity of Tradition & Culture	Vistana Hotel, Pahang, Malaysia
4.	22 March 2013	IKTPD Collaboration with Malaysian Fashion Designers; Dato' Rizalman, Datin Sharifah Kirana & Jovian Mandagie	The Royale Chulan Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
5.	18-20 Jan 2015	The 5 th ASEAN Traditional Textiles Symposium 2015	Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand
6.	8-13 June 2015	Short Term Course in Lamphun	Chiang Mai, Thailand
7.	15 May 2016	Bali Weaving Trail: Gringsing Traditional Weaving & <i>Tenun Imam</i>	Bali, Indonesia
8.	8-12 Dec 2016	Culture Week of Indonesia, Malaysia & Vietnam	Vietnam
9.	19-23 Nov 2017	The 6 th ASEAN Traditional Textiles Symposium 2017	Brunei Darussalam
10.	21-28 Jan 2018	'Tawaf Tenun': Royal Visit	Cambodia & Laos
11.	31 March 2018	TPDF Launch Ceremony	Kuala Lumpur Complex Craft, Malaysia
12.	26 Sept 2018	'Tawaf Tenun': Royal Visit	Kg. Penyabong Acheh (Endau Johor), Pulau Keladi, Temai & TPD Center – FELDA, Malaysia
13.	16-17 Feb 2019	Natural Dyes Creative Workshop	KPKCC, Pahang, Malaysia
14.	18-22 Nov 2019	Limar Workshop	KPKCC, Pahang, Malaysia
15.	9-15 May 2022	LCW 2022	London, UK
16.	25-30 Sept 2022	The 8 th ASEAN Traditional Textile Symposium 2022	Putrajaya Marriot Hotel, Putrajaya, Malaysia
17.	19 Feb 2023	HRH Chaired the TPD Development Committee Meeting	Craft Incubator Center, Pahang, Malaysia
18.	17 March 2023	Royal Visit to IKTPD & Cheminahsayang Sdn. Bhd.	KPKCC, Pahang, Malaysia
19.	18 March 2023	HRH, TPDF, Malaysian Handicrafts, Malaysian Prisons Department (Penor & Bentong) to TPD Entrepreneurs and Weavers Meeting Program	Sultan Abu Bakar Museum, Pahang, Malaysia
20.	6-14 May 2023	LCW 2023	London, UK
21.	12 July 2023	Hi-Tea Ceremony (TPD Fashion Show, Tuanku Nur Zahirah Foundation Songket, Pink Jambu Batik & <i>Telepuk</i>)	National Palace, Malaysia
22.	5-8 Oct 2023	An Exhibition of HRH Personal Garment and Fabric Collection	Malaysia International Trade and exhibition Centre (MITEC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



Fig. 5: HRH Raja Permaisuri Agong Tunku Hajah Azizah (Centre)
During a Special Visit to the United Kingdom
(Source: *Tenun Pahang Diraja – Tengku Ampuan Pahang* [*@tenun.pahang.diraja*], 2021a)

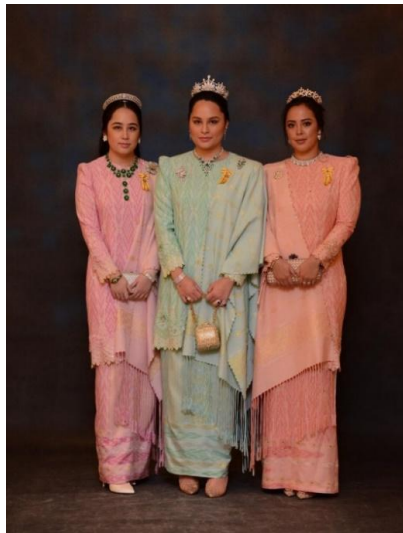


Fig. 6: The Princesses of Pahang Wearing the *Ikat Paku* Technique
(Source: *Tenun Pahang Diraja – Tengku Ampuan Pahang* [*@tenun.pahang.diraja*], 2019)

5.0 Findings and Discussion 2: Product Design Innovation

According to Mohd Taib Osman (1984), textiles reflect a society's cultural development. This evolution has led to woven textiles being used not only as body adornment but also in Malay ceremonies and customs. As shared by a TPD Master (personal communication, July 19, 2022), TPD continues to evolve, particularly in manufacturing techniques, patterns, colours, and applications. Patterns are being diversified with contemporary touches, including warp and weft ikat elements, gaining attention among woven fabric wearers (Habibah Abdul Jabbar et al., 2015). Examples include ikat simpul, ikat bersilang, ikat pucuk rebung berlapis (Natipah @ Nortipah Abdul Kadir, personal communication, July 19, 2022), and sapuan (Zulhani Abdul Kadir, personal communication, December 23, 2022).

Zulhani Abdul Kadir (2022) mentioned that the sapuan technique was inspired by HRH Raja Permaisuri Agong, combining her experience and knowledge from 'Tawaf Tenun' visits. Collaboration between the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (MHDC) and the government has further developed and introduced various woven products, aiming to revitalize the Malaysian weaving industry. The vibrant colours and patterns of Pahang woven fabrics lend themselves to diverse uses, including face masks, clutch bags, wall decoration panels, ties, cushion covers, and tablecloths.



(a) (b)
Fig. 7. (a) The Ikat Simpul Pattern; (b) The Ikat Bersilang Pattern
(Source: a. Researcher, 2023; b. Ahmad Farid Abdul Jalal, 2013a)



(a) (b)
Fig. 8. (a) The Pucuk Rebung Bersilang Pattern; (b) The Sapuan Pattern
(Source: a. Ahmad Farid Abdul Jalal, 2013b; b. Shared by Ku Mohamad Nasir Ku Bashah via WhatsApp on April 7, 2022)



(a) (b)
Fig. 9. (a) Ketupat Bags; (b) Face Mask
(Source: a. PKNP Tenun Pahang Soi [pknpnptenunpahangsoi], 2019; b. Tenun Pahang Diraja – Tengku Ampuan Pahang [tenun.pahang.diraja], 2021b)



Fig. 10: The Private Collection of HRH Raja Permaisuri Agong
(Source: Researcher, 2022)



Fig. 11: The Private Collection of HRH Raja Permaisuri Agong
(Source: Researcher, 2022)

6.0 Findings and Discussion 3: Policy, Education and Craft Industry Sustainability

The findings of this study are not only relevant to the TPD fabric industry, but also have far-reaching implications in the context of policy making. The results of the study can be used as a reference for policy makers in formulating better policies especially for traditional craft conservation programs as well as strengthening rural economic development. A more comprehensive policy can be introduced to ensure that the craft industry receives continuous support either through financial assistance, awareness campaigns or incentives for small entrepreneurs.

In addition, this study also opens up space for the introduction of craft training programs in the curriculum of schools and skill institutions. Through collaboration and cooperation between educational institutions and training agencies, this effort can be made part of a strategy and plan in strengthening cultural identity and promoting entrepreneurship among youth. Programs like this can increase the participation of the younger generation, further contributing to the sustainability of traditional culture. The involvement of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) and the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) can help intensify the country's craft industry.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines the influence and role of royal institutions in supporting the preservation of the weaving industry in the State of Pahang. TPD requires effective planning and continuous implementation to ensure its long-term viability in preserving local heritage. However, the results of these findings may need to be adjusted according to different contexts and needs in order to be suitable for the location of the study. The limited sample size is compatible with a qualitative approach to obtain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study. The purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure a relevant population so that the findings of the study

can be accurately generalized. The applied methodological approach successfully achieved the objective of the study. The same method is also recommended in future research with slight modifications depending on the local geographical and cultural context.

Some suggestions that should be implemented to empower the art of weaving. Among them is introducing specific training programs for the youth as an alternative to increase their participation in the industry. In addition, collaboration with international e-commerce platforms helps expand the local weaving market to the global level while opening greater export opportunities and generating more sustainable returns.

This study also provides a foundation for the implementation of future research, especially in examining the long-term stability of the weaving industry and the effectiveness of modern approaches such as the use of technology and digital marketing to increase production efficiency and productivity. In addition, a comparative study between other traditional crafts in Malaysia or regional countries can also be conducted to see a more effective approach in expanding the global market of local crafts.

All in all, this study has contributed to an in-depth understanding of the TPD fabric and provides practical recommendations in the effort to empower the local craft industry more comprehensively.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research not only emphasizes the important role of Pahang Royal Institutions in the development and sustainability of TPD, but it also provides practical suggestions for policy makers to take advantage of the palace's support in promoting traditional handicrafts.

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