

Continuing the tradition

By ANNA VIVIENNE



Traditional Rungus beads

The little girl follows her grandmother closely as they walked through the jungle. The elderly woman picks little red seeds and lengths of rattan as she meanders through the greeneries. The little girl does the same, although she also picks fanciful items such as flowers and interesting looking twigs.

The little girl also follows as her elders go to the seaside to scour the sand and rocks for shells. The unbroken ones are usually picked and kept in small hand-woven baskets that only that group of people know to weave.

“And that is how I learn how to collect materials from the jungle and the seaside to make beads. I also learned how to get the best reeds for making baskets that way,” the little girl who is not so little now, says.

Now in her late 30’s, she believes that her experience as a little girl is shared by others in her community, and is usually how the knowledge of weaving, stringing beads and making other household items from materials acquired from the jungles, are perpetuated or continued.

“The bequeathing of knowledge from an elder to a child is usually carried out orally in the olden days. They will show us what to pick and what to leave behind. We will also be shown the process of making the handicraft or household utensils. For instance, we must have knowledge of what reeds to pick for our basket and how to dry them.”

“The handicraft beings old now such as the baskets, containers, winnowing tray and items like them are functional in the olden days. We did not make miniatures.”

However beads necklaces, bracelets and sashes, have always been decorative items.

“In the past we just sold them among ourselves in villages. They are our traditional decorative items after all. But then as time went by, we found out that others outside of our community are also interested in collecting our handicrafts. So some of us went commercial with it. I used to sell my beadworks in my village in Kg Inukiran Matunggong when I was a teenager.”

“I was not satisfied with the scope of customers I had, however, so in mid 1990’s I venture out to Kota Kinabalu and began to sell my work. I join any handicraft exhibitions held during events such as the Sabah Fest and harvest festival celebrations.”

“I also frequent the Gaya Street Sunday fair and tried to promote my handicrafts. Yes the competition is quite tough but I believe that our handicrafts have its own uniqueness and that it is its selling point.”

“I started my handicraft business more than 10 years ago and I have since diversified,” she shares with a laugh, adding, “I am also selling t-shirts now. The t-shirts are souvenir items, showing off various motifs that are uniquely Sabah.”

Nuriah believes that diversifying her goods is

good as something modern should complement her handicrafts. Thus the T-shirts.

“I concentrate mostly on my rinagoh or miniature baskets but I will not refuse a good offer to make traditional beadwork for sash, necklaces and bracelets. I will usually get my relatives in the villages to help me.”

She says that it is also a way to give her friends in her village a bit of business.

On selling handicraft as a livelihood, Nuriah says it helps.

“I have two children now and of course we need to have more income. But so far, I am making end meets, so selling handicrafts and t shirts seem to be helpful.”

She also believes knowing how to make handicrafts is helpful to her as she repairs and value add some items that she acquire from her friends.

“It helps that I like making handicrafts,” she laughs, adding that she also has a booth at Handicraft Street at Star City North formerly known as Asia City Complex.

“This will enable my customers to get souvenir items from me anytime they want,” she says.

Nuriah is selling her souvenir items at the City Mall today, so if you are at the vicinity, hop in, meet this tenacious businesswoman and buy her beads, handicrafts and other interesting items with Rungus motifs.

It will not only help Nuriah and her counterparts but also the State in its bid to promote tourism in Sabah.



Rinagoh or traditional baskets



Typical souvenir t short



Rungus motif



Nuriah and her t shirt