

Churning Art Skills Into Business Opportunity : A Poverty Alleviating Approach

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Abstract

Once upon a time, arts activists fall into the category of poor people. Upon realizing that they have to struggle to live if they solely depend on their beloved arts, they have to find alternative ways of turning the skills in arts that they possessed to some profitable ventures. They have no other avenues to turn to except for capitalizing on the artistic skills that they have acquired since small.

Many arts activists have proven that their artistic skills can be commercialized and became a stream of stable income for them to continue flourishing in the field of entrepreneurship. Clinging on their expertise in related field of arts such as performing arts and handicrafts, they have turned from rags to riches.

This paper discusses some successful stories of art activists who have turned to become art entrepreneurs by commercializing their art products and skills. Six cases are highlighted in this paper while addressing issues and factors related to their success.

1.0 Introduction

Art has always been viewed as free commodity by the art activists as well as the art lovers. Many nations in the South East Asian region have witnessed the potential of art as an industry. Many art activists have transformed their skills in art to become a profitable business by commercializing their products. In Kelantan, many art activists have indulged themselves in art related businesses. On the other hand, many have also remain dormant and have not improved their earning just because they cannot comprehend opportunities lying ahead of them. However, this paper will reveal some of the success stories of arts entrepreneurs who have capitalized and manipulated their artistic skills to become a profitable endeavours.

A Makyong (a form of classical theatre which incorporates dance, drama and song) activist who had found herself idle after the banning of Makyong in Kelantan has resorted to producing and commercializing handmade accessories for traditional performances . Since her involvement in this business, she has made a stable living out of her creativity in making accessories from waste pet bottles and polystyrene.

Another activist, the Rebana Kercing (a tambourine like musical group) performer has taken a step ahead by commercializing the art through the innovation of their performances. Performance duration is shortened while the structure of the show incorporates dances so as to attract the interest of the viewers.

One Bamboo weaver has given her life a turn around by producing a more commercial Bamboo weaved products for wall and ceiling paneling. Her strategies have made her well

known in Bamboo weaving and orders were piling in, resulting in her working almost every hour attending to the orders from as far as Kuala Lumpur.

A traditional musical instrument maker also faces huge demands from many traditional music groups, hence making him fully occupied in meeting the demands of the buyers. Sometimes he has to turn down requests made by some buyers due to the production constraints.

A traditional Kuih (cake/ snack) expert has commercialized her skill by mass producing the long winded and tedious making processes. Her traditional kuih has gained popularity to many kuih lovers throughout Malaysia.

A young art activist who loves to perform the Malay Healing rituals, the Main Puteri uses his skills in traditional massage to start his own massage business. He is now often sought for his relaxing massage where his main earning comes from.

2.0 Objective of the research

The main objective of this research is to descriptively investigate the journey of becoming a self sufficient income earner by becoming an arts entrepreneur.

In specific, the objectives are as follows:

- i. To uncover the personal background of arts activist cum entrepreneurs
- ii. To investigate the business venture that art activist have initiated
- iii. To identify factors contributing to their involvement in business

3.0 Scope of the research

This research lingers around the premise of art activists turned art entrepreneurs in Kelantan. Cases of art activists are constructed based on the interviews conducted with them at their working station. A qualitative analysis approach is used in this research.

4.0 Research methodology

The qualitative research approach is used in this research whereby interviews were conducted at the premise of the respondents. The respondents were initially contacted through phone calls and appointments were made for an interview session. The researcher then visited the entrepreneurs and data were gathered. The data were then recorded and written in a document. Analysis of the data was descriptively performed to find common patterns and themes observed from the data.

5.0 Findings

5.1 Case 1: Khatijah Awang (MJ)- Norhayati Zakaria(T)

MJ who was awarded the national arts hero in 1999 was an art activist of Makyong (a form of classical theatre that assembles all kind of performing arts genres such as acting, singing, comedy, dancing and music). All through her life (she passed away in 2000), she had made used of her skills in arts to make her living. Upon realizing that the state government of Kelantan was prohibiting the performance of Makyong in Kelantan, with the help of her family, she then started to form her own company-named, Spectrum Inovasi- in the early nineties and decided to move to the capital city of Malaysia- Kuala Lumpur. Upon arriving in Kuala Lumpur, she found vast opportunities in the business of traditional performing arts. She immediately discovered that she was in a gold mine whereby people in Kuala Lumpur were so fond of organizing traditional performances especially for official ceremonies as well patronizing traditional performing arts. Her group, Seri Temenggong received many sponsors and was making profitable businesses in traditional performing arts. Upon Khatijah's demise, her youngest daughter, T, which Khatijah had groomed as her manager, took over the business and continue her legacy as an art entrepreneur. With nobody to support her in Kuala Lumpur, T then decided to come back to Kelantan in 2007 and had to strive for her living. She managed to secure a job as an Instructor of Makyong at the Department of Arts and Culture Kelantan, but was then terminated after a year of service. T realized that her only asset is her skills in performing Makyong and hence embarked on reviving the Seri Temenggong group inherited from her mother. She organized classes on dance, taking assignments for traditional musical ensemble for some official ceremonies and performed Makyong on invitational basis. Up to date, she still continues her business in performing arts and her business is currently receiving regular invitation. Her effort was recently recognized and was awarded a few thousand Ringgit Malaysia by the Art, Culture and Heritage Ministry for her undying support in sustaining traditional performing arts in Malaysia. Like what she had said:

“Her story would not be fruitful, should her mother choose not to make pathway for commercialization of her skills in performing arts.”

5.2 Case 2: Harun Hassan (H) and The Association of Rebana Kercing, Kampung Laut Kelantan.

Realising the dying of Rebana Kercing, The Department of Culture and Arts together with the Rebana Kercing Club of Kampung Laut and Encik Harun have successfully implemented the project Kelab Budaya Rakyat. This project is a community service offered by the Rebana Kercing Club which is headed by Encik Harun, the main Rebana Kercing activist in Kelantan, to school pupils of three schools in Kampung Laut, namely Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut, Sekolah Kebangsaan

Seri Kampung Laut and Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut. As of now, the activity has flourished in Kampung Laut and considered as the star of arts product of Kampung laut.

The Rebana kercing is a form of traditional performing arts that stresses on music, singing and dancing. No acting is involved in Rebana Kercing. The Rebana Kercing is normally performed by 10 to 30 dancers, (sometimes the number of dancers can be up to 40 performers) supported by 10 Rebana music players. The Rebana players will stand in a line at the back of the dancers.

The Rebana Kercing Association of Kampung Laut is a non governmental organization established by the kampung folk to ensure the continuity of their precious traditional culture which can be regarded as an effort of preserving the dying arts. It was initiated by the guru of Rebana Kercing that is Encik Harun Hassan who inherits the skill of performing Rebana Kercing dance from his late father. His late father who was once the expert of Rebana Kercing in Kampung Laut has left Harun with all the precious skills to perform Rebana Kercing. He is the only person bestowed by his late father the skills to treasure and continue the legacy of the endangered cultural commodity. The community of Kampung Laut has performed the Rebana Kercing for ages and they master the skill and trade of performing Rebana Kercing. Through the Association, the group has performed not just in Malaysia but also to the neighbouring countries. Their performances received overwhelming support from the viewers, so much so that they are able to accumulate enough yearly income that enable them to organize a trip to Medan, Indonesia as an incentive as well as a token of appreciation to the group members for their undying support.

In Kelantan, Rebana Kercing Kampung Laut is the only remaining group that is actively involved in many cultural functions organized by the Department of Culture, Arts and Heritage Kelantan. The organization of the association is headed by the Chairman, a teacher by profession, Cikgu Wan Azmi Mohd Nor, Deputy Chairman, Assistant Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. Encik Harun is the appointed as the Advisor cum Principal Trainer for the group.

Students from the neighbouring schools especially Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Laut are the main feeder for the trainee of Rebana Kercing Kampung Laut because of its close vicinity with the school as well as being the locals who reside around the training centre. The training centre is just an old semi brick building owned by the Youth Club of Kampung Laut. The association was given the permission to use the first floor of the building for administration, operation and training purposes whereas the ground floor houses a kampung restaurant.

Training schedule is planned according to the students' school schedules. Earlier parts of the year that is from January till July, the frequency of training done is three to four times a week starting Monday to Thursday. However, as most important school examinations are expected to be held at the end of the year starting August till December, the training schedules were then changed to twice a week, on Thursday and Saturday. Both days are considered as end of the week day and weekend whereby most students are free to come for practice on those days. Normally, training lasts for 2 hours from 5.00 p.m to 7.00 p.m. This training activity was initially organized under the "Tunas Budaya" programme run by the Department of Culture and Arts, Kelantan branch with an aim to preserve the dying arts. It is now fully organized by the Rebana Kercing Kampung laut as the Ministry programme was dissolved. The endless support and strong effort put forward by the lovers and activists of this form of arts has made Rebana Kercing stay in Kelantan and continue to serve the need of the community through his humble yet substantial descendant programme.

As stated by H to his group member :

“ We are proud that we are the only surviving group. It has come a long way until it became precious gem to the eye of the people and government. Now we are getting repeat invitation from time to time all over Malaysia.”

5.3 Case 3: Yah the Bamboo weaver turn handicraft wholesaler and retailer.

Yah has been seeing her father weaving Bamboo from small. After completing her secondary school, she inherited the weaving skills from her father and started to practice her weaving abilities. She found weaving Bamboo interesting and began to fall in love with the activities. After finishing her higher education, she then decided to be a Bamboo handicraft weaver, focusing on weaving panels for wall, normally used is chalet construction. After a while of involvement in Bamboo weaving , as well as facilitated by piling family problems, she then thought that it would be a great idea to start retailing the Bamboo handicrafts made by her. Upon realizing the growing demand of Bamboo handicraft, she embarked on opening a retail outlet in front of her house selling just Bamboo product. The demand was quite satisfactory and she decided to enrich her range of merchandise by getting other Bamboo product produced by the villagers. Her retail outlet gets bigger and she was not just selling Bamboo wall but also other decorative products of the villagers such as woven sitting mat, place mat, coconut shell products and rattan products. She has now stopped weaving since she has to be present at the shop all day long. She then opted to subcontract her merchandise to the villagers which now became her main source of supply. She provides them the necessary raw material needed in making the product and the villagers were then paid a certain amount of wage to produce the products that she had specified. It is not too exaggerated to say that at this point of time, her strategy in getting the villagers to work for her has popularize her as the sole retailer as well as the wholesaler of Bamboo products in Kelantan. Should one asked around in Kelantan

on where could Bamboo product be obtained, one would point out Yah's shop as the main supplier of Bamboo products especially Bamboo woven wall. Her success story is mainly due to her undying love towards her own art and craft.

5.4 Case 4: Hamzah Yusof and traditional musical instrument of Gelang Emas

Hamzah Yusof is a renowned Kelantan traditional music player. As early as 40 years of age, he has started to make traditional musical instruments while playing it at ceremonies around Kelantan. Currently at 60 over, he is one of the leading Kelantanese traditional musical instrument maker. He became a musical instrument maker out of his profession as a traditional musician, when he observed the huge demands from many traditional music groups towards traditional musical instrument while the number of maker is only a handful of them in Kelantan. He embarked on the business of traditional musical instruments seriously and received overwhelming orders from all over Malaysia, hence making him fully occupied in meeting the demands of the buyers. Sometimes he has to turn down requests made by some buyers due to the production constraints. At this point of research, he received many orders from universities in Malaysia. However, lately, he has slowed down on taking orders due to his ailing health. He is still playing music when there is invitation for him to do so. His passion for music still stood high although sometimes he has to pass his work to his fellow friends due to his declining health problems. As what he inspires in his word:

“I will continue playing and making because this is my blood and flesh. I was born in this trade and I will not surrender”.

5.5 Case 5: Puan Hajah Nik Faizah Bt Nik Abdul Rahman (NF) and Serimas D royale.

NF is the woman behind the ever popular Kelantanese delicacy, Murtabak Raja. She was born in Kelantan and had acquired the skill of making traditional delicacies, ranging from sweets to savoury from her grandmother. At the age of late fifties she has uplifted the Kelantanese delicacies to become very popular among Malaysian who visited Kelantan. One cannot leave Kelantan without getting her local delicacies in the hand luggage.

From a humble housewife that is equipped with the skills of doing house chores, she found herself restless and wanted to put her skills into good use. As a housewife, she started making and selling local sweet delicacies and savouries to her relatives and friends. From there on, her passionate dedications and endeavours in making local delicacies has brought her to fame all across the country. Based on her expertise in making traditional delicacies, she has commercialized her skill by mass producing the long winded and tedious making processes.

Operating from her house at Seksyen 4, No19, Jalan merbau, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, initially not many people knew of her existence in the delicacy business. Since her house is easily accessible and close to Kota Bharu town, as well as the so called “sole seller” of authentic traditional delicacies, subtly her presence was seen in the limelight of food makers in Kelantan. To date, her trade name needs no introduction to Kelantanese as well as visitors of Kelantan.

Operating on a trade name Murtabak D Royal, the name implies that foods produced by her only fit the taste bud of the royals. The name was derived from her grandmother who worked for the palace that produced food for the palate of the royals. The legacy of the royal was then passed to her that was consequently viewed as a business idea for the consumption of the masses. Her family has assisted and motivated her to push through in her attempt to preserve, conserve as well as commercialised the precious heritage gem of Kelantan. Serimas D Royal has currently opened two single standing outlets in Kota Baru (One small outlet located close to the State Muhammadi mosque and another one large outlet situated at Tanjong Chat) with many private distributors (unofficial and self appointed) across the country. Her main kitchen is still operating at her traditional home in Jalan Merbau, Kota Baru. Currently, the whole state is very indebted to her undying effort and love for traditional delicacy. Her business flourishes and her business can be surfed at the e-mail address of serimas_droyal@yahoo.com. Her blog is also accessible on line.

Although her trade name has conquered the nation, she is still the old housewife as she says in the interview conducted by the star:

“ I learned how to make murtabak from my mother who named it the Royal Murtabak”

5.6 Case 6: . Mohd Shaifuldin (MS) Bin Jusoh, the traditional healer and Massage

MS is a 27 year old young art entrepreneur that has embarked on arts related skill that he possesses. His journey in performing arts particularly Main Puteri, the traditional spiritual healings started while he was still in secondary school at the age of 18. His determination to acquire the skill of performing the main puteri, Makyong and playing musical instruments was refused by most Gurus that has charted his way to an Art Academy (named, ASENI) in Terengganu. He did not complete his studies in Terengganu and hailed back to Kelantan to practice his ever loving yet dying arts, the Main Puteri and Makyong. He enrolled himself into a Makyong class but to his frustration the Guru was not encouraging enough. He then run solo and started his role as an arts entrepreneurs by commercializing part of his traditional healing that is massage. He started concentrating on the business of traditional massage and had regular booking for his service. Once a while, if there is invitation, he will perform the Main Puteri and Makyong.

He is now working on setting a traditional SPA, strictly for male clients at his house in order to enrich and add to the type of services that he offers. He is currently earning more than RM 1,000 a month just doing traditional massage which is seen as a source of income to him. He is very happy with his current achievements and as what he has uttered when interviewed at the Main Puteri performance recently at Gunung (9.00 p.m, 9 Oct 2011):

“ I am very happy to work at my own house so that I can be closer to my mother and help her out in her daily house chores. I want to see traditional healing excel in its own way so that we can still be called the Kelantanese Malay that is rich with sprights.”

5.7 Case 7: Mohamad Razali Che Hamid (MR) and Persatuan Jalinan Seni, Tanah Merah

MR aged 50 started to be involved in performing arts such as Malay dance and theatre since he was in primary school in the early seventies. After he had completed his Higher Certificate Education, his dream of going to university was shattered due to the poor performance in the examination. From that moment onwards, he had devoted himself by indulging into performing arts seriously especially in traditional dance. He inherited the yearning love towards art through his mother. His mother was once a Rebana Kercing dancer and later runs a bridal shop. To gain skills in performing traditional dance and making traditional dance accessories, he stayed weeks and months with Shaari Abdullah and his family in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan, simply to acquire the skills of making accessories. Together with his high inclination on creativity coupled with high motivational quality, he easily acquired the skills and started embarking on traditional accessories making business.

In the early eighties, after his higher education, much thought came to his mind as to whether to work for himself or get employed. He then decided to start trying on his advantage of being good with his fingers. He started sewing accessories for his own consumption as well as for his group dancers of Persatuan Jalinan Seni Tanah Merah. He found his initial heart sparkling point of passion in art when his first sewn accessories for the dancers were praised by them and from that magical point onwards, he has never turned back. Currently, he is still sewing accessories for dancers and the orders that he gets is more than enough to sustain his daily living expenses. In 2009, he was granted the Certificate of Dance Instructor by the Malaysian National Department of Arts and Culture that certified him to freely teach dance at national schools in Kelantan. As he wept when he received his certificate, he softly whispered:

“This is the highest achievement that I have ever obtained in my life. I will never forget dance in my life, even a second. This is an area that I will always treasure. Its my *Makanan* (bread and butter). I have been dependant on this business since I was young. I feed my family with the incomes from making accessories to the performers. My love for arts will never die”

6.0 Analysis

Table 1.0: Common patterns of the art entrepreneurs

Point of observation	Case 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Common pattern
education	SPM	2dary	University	Primary	2dary	STPM	STPM	Fairly educated
Inherited from the family	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	inherited
Very passionate	Highly	Highly	Highly	Highly	Highly	Highly	highly	Highly passionate on arts
Are they activist	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Still performing
Main reason for involving in business	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	Source of income to help family
Satisfaction achieved	Very high	high	average	average	Very high	high	high	Moderately high satisfied with their business endeavour

Table 1.0 explains the common patterns of the cases dealt in this study. In general, most of respondents are educated although at minimal level that is primary education and they inherited the artistic skills from their parent. All of the art entrepreneurs in this research are art activists and have demonstrated high passion towards arts and doing business is a way of getting monthly earning to support their families. On average, from the researcher's observations, all cases have shown a moderately high satisfaction towards their involvement in business.

7.0 Suggestions

Below are some possible suggestions that can be viewed as a strategy in assisting poor people or communities:

- a. Motivation and awareness training on the feasibility of arts as commercial commodity to the art activities can be carried out by relevant authorities such as ministry.
- b. Training of the younger generation to love arts and view them as an economic element in their life need to be implemented as frequent as possible.
- c. Poverty is not a problem yet a business opportunity.
- d. Special training on product innovation and development can be planned.
- e. Business management training is also an area that needs to be pondered.
- f. Visit and exposure to art industry can be organized to help arts activist witness face to face with the real world.

8.0 Conclusion

Art like any other commodities when commercialized will bring a stream of income to the entrepreneurs. Many art activists have turned to become entrepreneurs when they found a need to get sources of income for their living. There are still activists living out there in poverty, although the number is still unknown. However, this research found that they need to be given awareness on the economical aspects of their skills. Given proper training on capitalizing artistic capabilities to becoming a business venture, these artists can turn rags to riches.

It is inevitable for artists to embark into business as they possess the skills of making products or ornaments. However, it is not only the details of design that the artists could be proud of, yet making others happy is also a good deed that they can rewarded by the almighty GOD.

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