

# CRAFTING THE EAST COAST ART

ARTICLES / TOP PICKS

## Crafting the East Coast Arts

“We speak to three craftsmen practising their dying craft, keeping the Kelantan heritage alive through sheer inspiration and instruments of aged trade.”



### Pak Shafie Jusoh

The air is still with silence and the only thing one could hear is the scratching of a knife, cutting across a paper surface.

Held by deft but steady hands, the knife's eye carves out a perfect leaf shape, leaving behind a hole.

At 69, Pak Shafie's eyes are still sharp and can make out the intricate carvings of the wau he is working on, even in the dark.

“My teachers noticed that I was interested in making and playing wau, to a point where they taught I must have been mad! But it's a thing I did to earn a little bit of money, so we got by.”

Pak Shafie hardly ever looks up, his eyes transfixed on the dozens of leaf shapes he continues to carve from the large wau bulan he is working on.

This is a craft he's mastered for almost 50 years, and one that's changed his life tremendously in his twenties.

He remembers joining a wau flying competition, flying a wau he designed. It was in this competition that two foreigners were attracted to Pak Shafie's unique wau design. They approached and commissioned him to design a wau for them.

“Designs used to be simple, just red and white. After that, I seriously got into the business and started making wau of all sorts of patterns and designs for a living.”



Surrounded by an army of wau of various shapes and sizes, Pak Shafie diminishes in size as he maneuvers past the strings, bamboo wau frames and sharp paper corners. The process of making a wau can occupy a few days up to a week, depending on the intricacy and the size. He gestures to the bamboo bush outside his gallery, stating that he starts by first cutting up the shoot and thinning it out finely with a long knife until it is supple and easily shaped into a wau frame.

From here, it is shaping the paper or cloth material as well as carving out designs to the frame – a process he does with full concentration. Often in the darkness of his gallery, with only sunlight from the nearby window to aid his sight. Inside his makeshift office, one would spot a portrait from his younger days, sitting cross-legged with a large wau bulan in his hand and many more in the backdrop. His focus rarely wavers, only answering in monosyllables – his dedication poured into his craft, the wau and the life it's destined for in the skies.

### Ismail Mohamed

There is an excitement in his eyes that one could only catch if they spot it in the split-second when the gasing hits the ground and bounces back into the palms of the player.

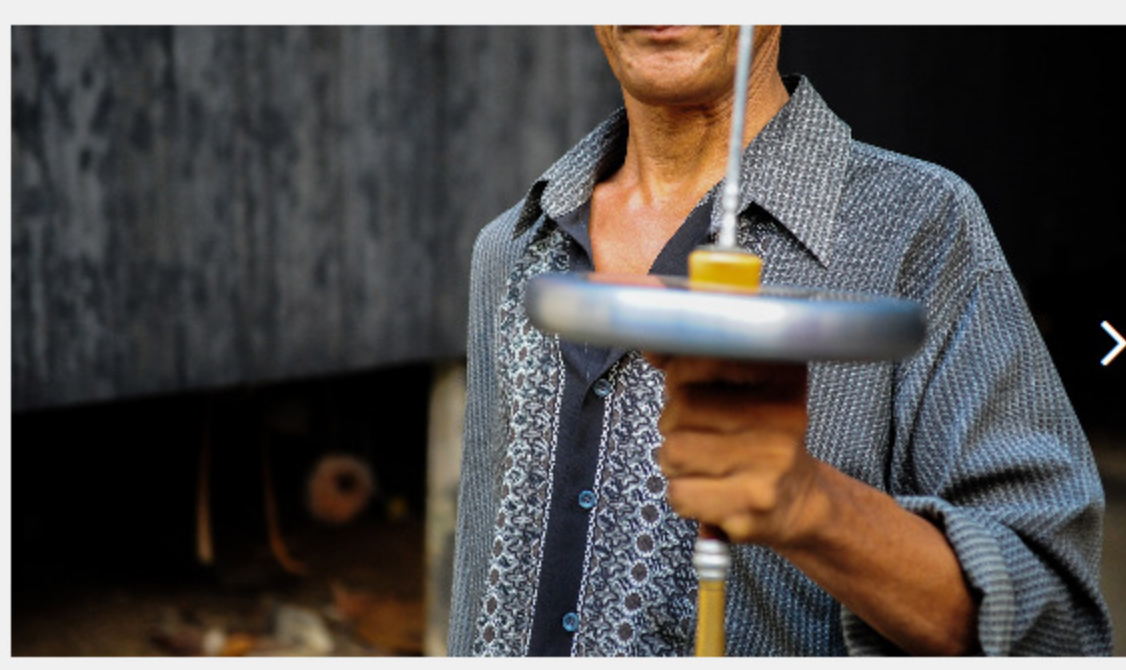
This is Ismail Mohamed's tournament ring, the court he's grown up in for decades and considers part of his flesh and blood.

At 59, Ismail is more commonly known as Abe Nor Gasing, being one of the most renowned gasing craftsman in the state.

Abe Nor has been practising the craft for over 30 years and also spearheads the local gasing squad, made up of youngsters in their twenties. He used to be a gasing player himself but nowadays takes the role of both coach and gasing craftsman, the latter being his more active occupation.



“Gasing making is in my family. My father was a gasing maker, so was his father before him.”



Making a good quality gasing could take a whole day, but the process usually begins months before that. It begins with finding quality wood that one would have to dry for two months before it could be carved into both handle and base. After carving, Abe Nor would melt down tin sludge, which would form the edges of the gasing, important in balancing out the weight during the long spin. He then pours the tin into a mould surrounding the wood base and handle – afterwards smoothening out the gasing into the desired shape. The end product is a gasing uri, 24 inches in diameter and used for competitive gasing.

“The record for the longest spinning gasing is currently 2 hours and 40 minutes,” Abe Nor says as he sets down another spinning top over – one of his students had just caught in a whirl. These gasing competitions are a serious deal in the East Coast, drawing young men from villages all over – testing their strength, form and gasing build to its peak. In between the last second of a dying top and the delivery is a lot of conversation and bonding. For Abe Nor, gasing is a craft he sees lasting through the ages, having an appeal among youngsters who see it as a man's game. As one of the spinning gasing slowly comes to a halt, he eyes the other two – both still in perpetual motion and will continue to do so for a long time coming.



### Razak Latiff

“I was a foreman, fixing motorcycles for a living.” It was a chance meeting in the 1980s that brought Razak Latiff to a Dikir Barat troupe, led by the prestigious Daud Bukit Abal who invited him to watch their performance for RM10.

The instruments, its music and the craft have since enticed him to delve into the art of kompang making.

Razak remembers his first instrument: the gong. “It took me two months to make and back then, getting materials and tools to make these instruments were difficult.”

There were no machines then, and he would set out to work armed with only an axe, chisel and knife to make a full Dikir Barat musical set.

Over the years however, as his reputation grew, generous institutions gave Razak machines to ease his process.

A Dikir Barat set that him as he taps first lightly, then eventually into a maddening rhythm on the kompang, the drumming resounding throughout his workshop. His grandchildren would peek from behind the house door, gazing at their grandfather who would be in deep rhythm and an almost-trance.

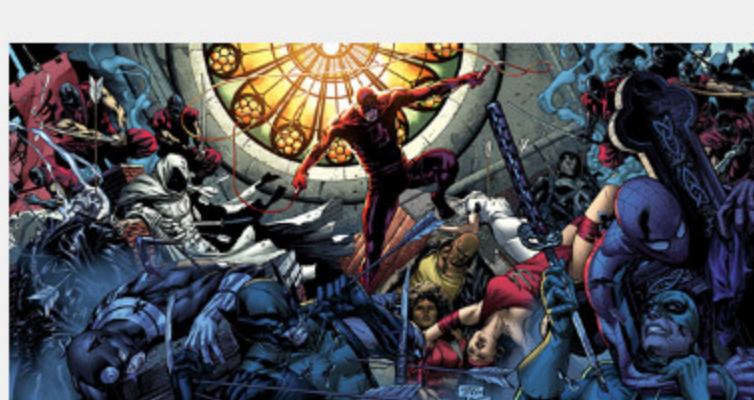


In his workshop, there are dozens of stumps from various types of trees. He would chop them up to size, later smoothening it out with the grinding machine behind him, leaving a pile of sawdust at his feet. The lambskin in the corner would later be stretched over the wooden kompang base, nailed down and adjusted to echo to a perfect drumming.

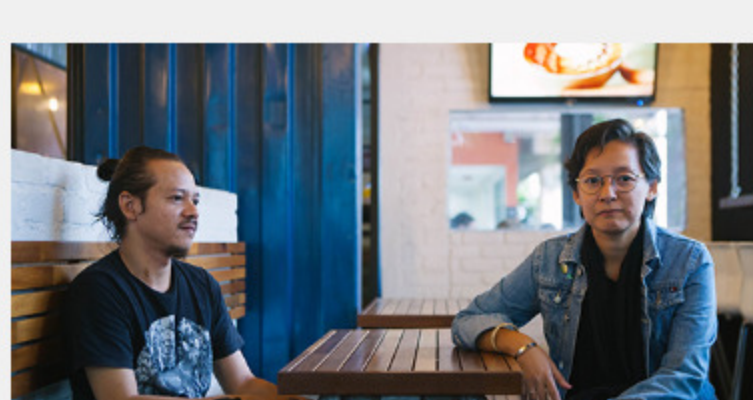
“These things used to cost RM3, now it's RM25 for a sheet,” he laments. As for the survival of this craft, Razak believes that youngsters who come through his workshop are often spirited but not committed. “Crafting these instruments takes a lot of patience. Most of these youngsters lack that nowadays – the attention and focus to detail.” He takes up the biola, tuning it, then running the bow over the fine threads that run across its body – a melodious croon pitching back and forth between melancholy and desired hope.

By Azliff Azuddin  
Photos by Azliff Azuddin  
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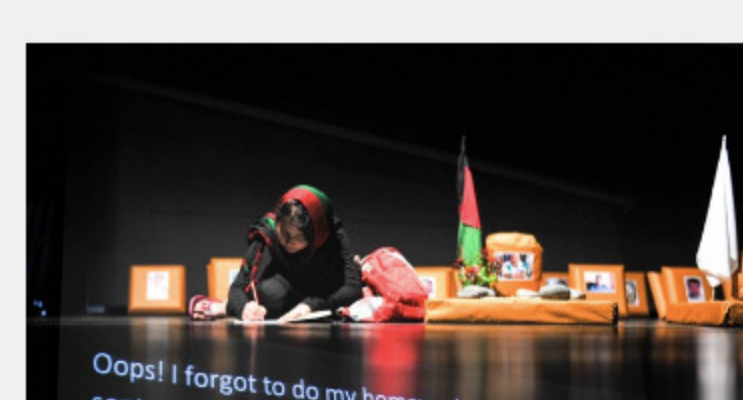
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