

# A Study of Woodcarving Motifs on Traditional Malay Houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan

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## ABSTRACT

Malay woodcarving contains a rich history derivative of the cultural identity, beliefs, customs, and traditions of the Malay people. It is deemed as an important and integral part of vernacular architecture in Peninsular Malaysia. Traditional Malay houses are representative of the ancient aptitudes of the workmanship with opulent ornamentations as they reflect the socio-cultural identity of the Malay world. Previous research on woodcarving motifs immensely centred on the east coast of Malaysia, requiring more investigations of woodcarvings motifs on the southwest coast. The objective of this study is to identify the woodcarving motifs on traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan by using a qualitative method such as primary data involving photography. The results indicated different categories of motifs such as fauna, flora, geometry, still life and combination motifs. On this basis, it is hoped that this study could serve as a reference concerning the cultural heritage of woodcarving motifs and Malay traditional houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan and it is recommended that further exploration should be carried out more concerning woodcarving motifs and traditional Malay houses on the southwest coast.

**Keywords:** *Motifs, Traditional Malay Houses, Woodcarving,*

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is rich with its exceptional cultural diversity and endlessly wide and unique variety of traditional heritages. The art of woodcarving and vernacular architecture is a balanced unification as they have been venerated by Malays over the centuries. Traditional Malay woodcarving has been recognized as one of the oldest, sophisticated, and complex forms of art in Malay heritage. The art of Malay woodcarving is an amalgamation of artistry and wisdom. For many years, it has been closely associated with the cultural identity of the Malays; hence it is one of the many symbols denoting Malay art. Woodcarving is anthropologically known to be a form of visual language that is potent with storytelling through the intricate

and intrinsic detailed carvings. Furthermore, it is a tradition that has been passed down from one generation to another. Chiefly, through apprenticeship. A motif is perceived as a symbolic icon, image, or object most frequently seen in artworks. Suhaimi Tohid et al. (2015) asserted traditional woodcarving as profound ornamental art (p. 55). Ornamental art is deemed as art that entails embellishing with ornamentations on architecture and objects. Much of the woodcarving creations were largely influenced by religious, ethical, and moral values of the carvers, which were eventually cultivated by their submissions to the great Allah SWT (Suhaimi Tohid et al., 2015, p. 55). Due to its minute details to produce a composite and rhythmic whole, inherently linked with the woodcarvers' and carpenters' spiritual evocation towards the carvings, it is now considered a rarity of a skill to possess for today's younger generation as such craftsmanship is only being held informed by only a handful of masters and experts of traditional woodcarving. Nasir (1987) was able to recognize the influence of cultural elements infused into the design and philosophy of woodcarving. Moreover, woodcarving is a representative symbol of Malay arts, acting as an identifier to the society and nation (Sumardiashah Silah et al., 2013, p. 823).

The traditional Malay house (TMH) is characterized as a structural timber house built on stilts, and it is made with lintel and a post structure with bamboo or wooden walls (Kamal et al., 2004, p. 175). With TMH being laid in an expansive compound, they were assembled not only to demonstrate the appealing innovation of the Malays but also to enable them to coalesce with their environmental, socio-economic, and cultural needs (Kamal et al., 2004, p. 175). The methods in the construction of a TMH were established with a basic design to allow considerable flexibility in such a manner that the extensions to the house could be carried whenever it is deemed required (Nasir, 1985). The research was aimed to study the woodcarving motifs of traditional Malay houses with the objective to identify the woodcarving motifs of traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. The importance of this study is set out to determine the woodcarving motifs that can be found on traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan since there seems to be a scarcity pertain to the symbols and meanings of motifs on the southwest coast. Hence, this research will expand more on the documentation of woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan.

Furthermore, this study only focused on specific areas in the district of Kuala Pilah. The scope of this study is appropriated based on the research objective; hence, this research narrows its aim towards woodcarving motifs on traditional Malay houses in the district of Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. Kuala Pilah is recognized as one of the oldest districts that still preserve the structure of vernacular architecture and woodcarving motifs. Furthermore, there are over 250 traditional houses in Kuala Pilah. Therefore, the researcher will emphasize only four selected houses that were chosen as samples for this study that still preserve woodcarving motifs. There is an inadequacy of studies on woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan due to the lack of interest regarding the field of study. There are four selected houses that were obtained for samplings of this study due to certain restrictions such as Movement Control Order (MCO). There were several houses where the researcher was permitted to enter for observation reasons. In contrast, other houses were not permissible for the security and safety of the house owners, mainly due to Covid-19. Hence, most of the motifs that were ascertained for this study were mainly on the exterior of the houses.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview History of Woodcarving**

Past researchers have acknowledged that the traditional art of woodcarvings originated during the arrival of the Langkasuka Empire, bringing together the cultivation that further changed the cultural evolution for the Malays (Farish and Eddin, 2003; Suhaimi et al., 2015; Nurdiyana et al., 2017). Historically, Hinduism played a significant stimulus in the advancement of Malay civilisation. As a result, the Malay world was encompassed with Hinduism's socio-cultural impact, for instance, literature, religion, and even beliefs (Haziyah Hussin et al., 2012). Driven by its discerning influence, it prolonged a lasting effect on the development of the Malay kingdom. Due to this, the people during the period of the Langkasuka empire placed their belief in the concept of spirits dwelling in all parts of nature and livings

things. The natives during that era were accounted as animists (Shaffee & Said, 2008). Ergo, nature was their harbinger of worship. In conjunction with this, the entire infrastructure was behest to conforming to the socio-cultural influence of Hindu-Buddhism. It was during this time that the creation of Malay woodcarvings began to emerge as their motifs were heavily predisposed with Hinduism facets, which were predominantly shaped with figurative depictions (Haziyah Hussin et al., 2012). Significantly, the era of animism and deities were substantial benefactors, resultantly swayed the cultural anthropology, arts, and humanities. Before the advent of Islam reached the Malayan shores, the patterns of motifs were mainly embellished with figurative and animal representations. Based on historical facts, pieces of evidence show that Islam was brought over by the Arabs, Persians, and Indians (Nasir, 1986). It is believed that the Malay woodcarvings became significantly evolved in vernacular architecture from as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in the northern part of the Peninsular and Southern Thailand (Said, 2002).

Woodcarving is an art and aesthetic form used to chisel on any wooden surfaces, from small objects to furniture, architecture, boats, and utensils (Nurdiyana et al., 2017, p. 385). The primary categories of woodcarving can be divided into five: flora, fauna, geometry, cosmos, and calligraphy (Said & Saifuddin, 2001). Malay woodcarving is known to be a traditional art in Malaysia, and it is also the pride and glory of wood craftsmanship. However, only a handful of carvers have acquired such distinguished wisdom and knowledge; especially with the alarming rise of modern urbanisation continuing to this day, wooden carvings are slowly declining in numbers. Woodcarving is pondered to be an art form of storytelling by carpenters, a reflection of their experiences and influences from external factors. In other words, their storytelling is redirected into the woodcarving motifs (Nurdiyana et al., 2012).

### **Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan**

Malay communities have been continuously enriching their lives with traditions and arts. Vernacular architecture of traditional Malay houses included. What is inimitable about these traditional houses is they were exclusively made with durable and resilient woods such as *cengal*, *merbau*, *kempas*, *penak*, and *bacang hutan*, which are endemic to Malaysia and can only be found locally (Nasir, 1986, p. 17). Each structure of the house was designed to seamlessly assimilate into the environment and the local climate. What remains of the old traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan today have detectable Minangkabau attributes, emphasising Malay Archipelago's traditional and architectural heritage (Mohd Haizra et al., 2018). Nasir (1985) emphasised elements of culture such as custom, belief, and hereditary origin are factors that influenced the designs of traditional houses. Due to the *Adat Perpatih* system structure, each room of the TMH in Negeri Sembilan has its designated functions and purposes.

The concept of gender segregation is espoused in *Adat Perpatih* as it correlates with the teachings of Islam. Therefore, this design element of the house is essential as the segregated spaces allow female members to acquire their privacy and comfort (Radzuan & Sukri, 2019). The TMH in Negeri Sembilan is comprised of three main rooms, which are the *serambi* (porch), *rumah ibu* (main room) and *dapur* (kitchen), attached to the *rumah ibu*. The function of the *serambi* quarters is a place for social gatherings such as *merisik*; where the man and the family pay a visit to the potential bride's family house to ask for her hand in marriage. Official ceremonies such as *adat berkadim*; a prevalent tradition practised by the locals that enable an individual to leave his clan (*suku*) to move to a new tribe, and a room to educate proper etiquette as the locals stress the concept of good manners and being courteous with one another (Siti Fatimah & Kamarul, 2018). While the *rumah ibu* and the kitchen are designated for the comfortability and privacy of the women of the house (Othman & Raja Shahminan, 2016).

The TMH in Negeri Sembilan were essentially built on stilts supported by high flooring, walls, and roof with a flight of staircase (Masri, 2012). It was also stated by Othman and Raja Shahminan (2016) that the structure of a building in the Old Malay community must be built on stilts, and it had become an obligation since historical times, it grew to become part of an identity. In the early days, the houses in Negeri Sembilan were recognized as Minangkabau houses but according to Raja Shahminan (2007), traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan are now more widely known as *Rumah Bumbung Panjang Negeri*

*Sembilan*. This goes to show that even though the people of Negeri Sembilan have origins of Minangkabau roots, they have established their own significant Malay identity over time. Negeri Sembilan's traditional houses are inclined to their unique architectural vocabulary, and this is what differentiates their identity compared to other traditional houses in other states in Malaysia. Monir (2007) remarked the design of TMH is influenced by the owners' surrounding environment with elevated flooring.

## Definition of Motif

A motif is defined as repetitive ornamentations that form a certain pattern (Mohd Yatim, 2000). He added that there are underlying philosophical connotations to these carved motifs, which he posited,

*“Motif in woodcarving means a decoration carved into two or three dimensions, then arranged or composed into a certain pattern.”* – (Mohd Yatim, 2000, p.7)

Nasir's (1987) statement coincides with the aforementioned by adding the ornamentation requires a detailed process of forming a specific composition, following a set of rules inherited by specific Malay ethnic groups pertaining to customs and techniques. The motif appears to be the key component in the woodcarving patterns. Malay carvers observed three common characteristics of woodcarving: 1) employing four basic principles of design forms, 2) extrapolating motifs from elements in the domain area, notably flora and fauna, and 3) expressing the natural beauty as an act of devotion for the Creator as well as a gift to fellowmen (Osman, 1997).

These aspects portray a role in illuminating the aesthetic repetitions within the ornamentations. There are various basic types of motifs found in Malay woodcarving. These motifs are divided into five types: flora, fauna, Arabic calligraphy, cosmos, and geometry (Said & Abdullah, 2001). Malay carvers displayed highly notable prowess from their *air-tangan* to express the level of physical beauty (Said, 2019). Moreover, the natural surrounding contributes an essential element in guiding carvers to create motifs, as it acts as abstract analyses and nature's impressions of human life (Nurdiyana et al., 2014).

From Norhaiza's greater perspective (2005), he informed that to coordinate a specific unit of motifs, acquired skills in organisation principles and appreciation for beauty are considered necessary to produce woodcarving motifs. Not only are the motifs revered as aesthetic splendour, but they serve another greater purpose as well – for pragmatic functions such as safety and air ventilation reasons. At the same time, the motifs act as a source of light to penetrate through.

## Influences of Woodcarving Motifs

As far as past studies are concerned, traces of influences on traditional woodcarvings can be detected from the history of houses and original artisans of the architectural carvings. As Zumahiran and Said (2010) claimed, the influences of woodcarvings in Malaysia are comparably linked to neighbourhood countries such as Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand (p. 6). Othman (2005) affirms religion to be one of the strongest influences, and the dawn of animism reached its crowning moment in between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Malay woodcarving motifs contained early influences of Hindu-Buddhism, Malay Langkasuka, and the enlightenment of Islam. Before the arrival of Islam during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Hinduism was the central religion practised by the people, and it facilitated depicting the woodcarving of Hindu motifs (Said & Abdullah, 2001).

Over time, the motifs began their gradual transformation after the advent of Islam. As intended, the principles of Islam completely prohibit the usage of figurative and animal depictions in motifs. Representations of humans and animals are strictly forbidden as they serve no functional, meaning, or value purposes whatsoever (Muhammad Faiz Sabri et al., 2019, p. 359). Synonymously, figurative depictions in the form of idols and icons were objectionable as they might lead Muslims astray to the path of idolatry.

This is why the Malay motifs are now only inhibited from the creations of nature, geometry, cosmos, and calligraphy. Islam, being the religion that is whole and perfect, emphasises that it never forbids its followers from creating artworks or carvings in the form of woodcarving calligraphy (Ramli et al., 2014, p. 188). It is permissible as long as Muslims are not producing an exact mimicry of such perfection of the Islam religion, merely representations to display the Islam religion itself.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative was the most suitable method to approach this research because it provides a richness to understand better people's beliefs, behaviour, attitudes, experiences, and interactions (Pathak et al., 2013). The qualitative method is an essential and integral part of the research as it permits participants to articulate and open their eyes to new aspects of a particular phenomenon. The visual research presents data collected through observation such as photography which were taken from four different angles of the traditional Malay houses. For observation, two selected traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah belonging to Kahar Siak Bakhi and Dato' Mohamad Dahalan were collected for necessary visual findings regarding a traditional Malay house's architectural structure and woodcarving motifs found on the external parts of the houses. The instrument that played an imperative role was a camera that photographed the woodcarving motifs and different angles of the houses from an architectural aspect to capture the primary observation data. Sutton and Austin (2015) shared their views on qualitative methodology as a work that necessitates reflection, both before and during the research, to present a form of perspective context and knowledge for readers.

## FINDINGS

The houses that were selected for this research were based in the area of Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. These houses comprised of woodcarving motifs and still maintained the structural integrity of a traditional Malay house were purposely selected for data collection. They align with the objective of this research, which is to identify the woodcarving motifs on traditional Malay houses Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. The motifs found on the selected houses were mainly encompassed flora, fauna, geometry, still life, and combination motifs. The combination motif category is a mixture of different motifs coalesced into one uniform unit.

**Table 1. Selected houses**

No.	Houseowner
1.	Kahar Siak Bakhi (Tukang Kahar)
2.	Dato' Mohamad Dahalan (Dato' Bangsa Balang)

## 1. Rumah Tukang Kahar, Kampung Tanjung Beringin



**Figure 1. House No 1**  
(Source: Author's personal collection)



A: motif *bunga kiambang* & geometry (circle)



D: motif *bunga kiambang*

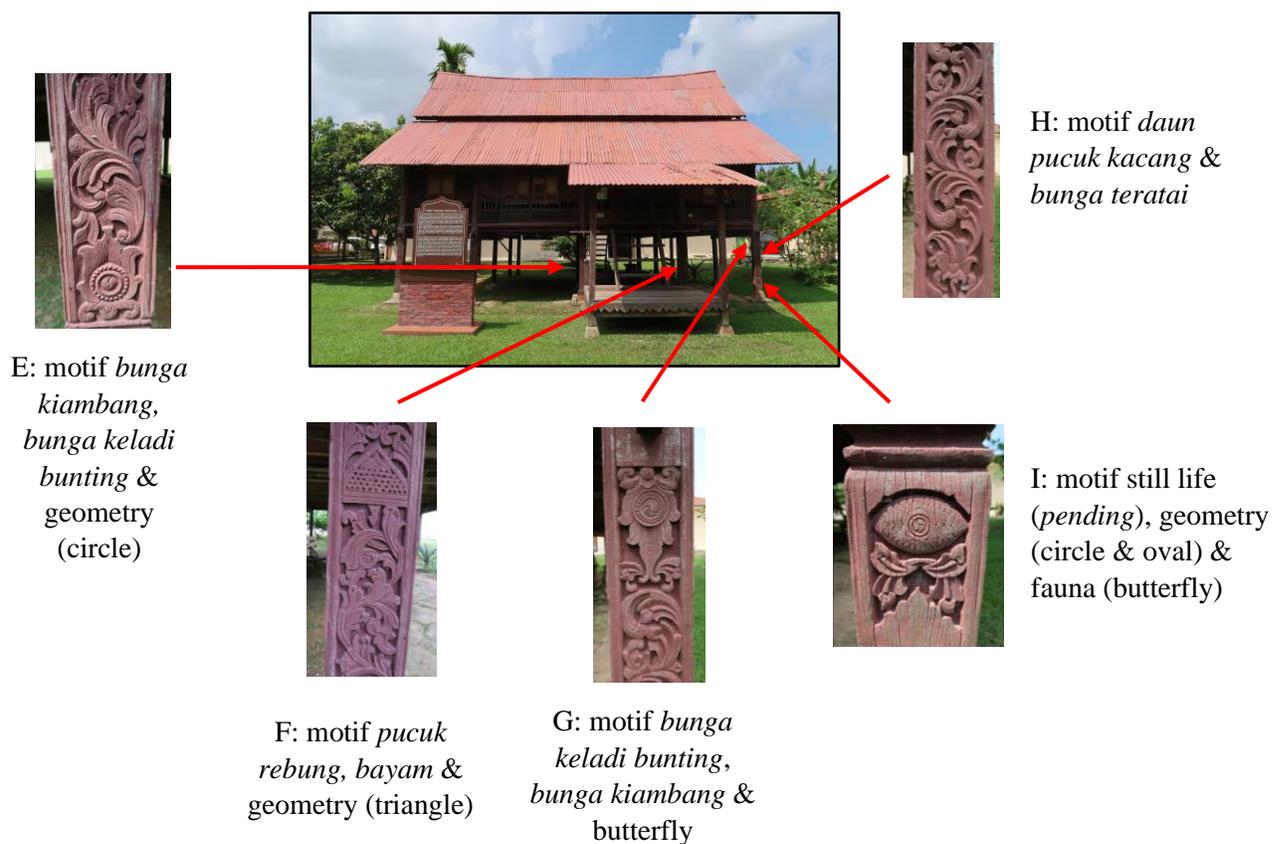


B: motif four broken flowers & geometry (square)



C: motif *bayam*

**Figure 2. Motifs on House No 1(a)**  
(Source: Author's personal collection)



**Figure 3. Motifs on House No 1(b)**  
(Source: Author's personal collection)



**Figure 4. Motifs on House No 1(c)**  
(Source: Author's personal collection)

## 2. Rumah Dato' Bangsa Balang, Kampung Tanah Datar



**Figure 5. Motifs on House No 2**  
(Source: Author's personal collection)



**Figure 6. Motifs on House No 2**  
(Source: Author's personal collection)

The categorisation of the motifs found on the selected houses consisted of flora, fauna, geometry, still life, and combination motifs. They do not only serve as mere aesthetics but also provide specific functional uses for the house owners. Rumah Tukang Kahar showed detailed motifs on the stilts and stairs as he was deemed as the *Tukang raja* (king's craftsman) due to his social standing. At the same time, Rumah Dato' Bangsa Balang displayed simpler floral motifs on the gable, barge board, and fascia board. The findings also revealed floral motifs to be the most prominent element in the art of woodcarving. Subsequently, in Malay woodcarving, the stimulus of the motifs was predominantly from the natural beauty of the surroundings, mainly from the local plants found in the near vicinity, such as *Bunga kiambang*, *daun sirih* and *Bunga keladi bunting*. Nature is one of the main determinants that has capacitated fellow craftsmen to manifest their imagination into visual narratives.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the selected houses presented different motifs categories, consisting of flora, fauna, geometry, still life, and combination. Malay woodcarving has been ingrained as an important element in Malay architecture. The history of woodcarvings provides us with the context of the evolution of woodcarving. Woodcarvings began erstwhile from animism to Hindu Buddhism until the arrival of Islam. The transition of the motifs has gone through multiple stages of paradigm shifts, eventually influencing the Malay people's current beliefs and virtues. As a result, woodcarvings and traditional Malay houses have implicitly shaped the minds of the Malay community. It is recommended that more in-depth woodcarving studies should be further explored in the area of the southwest coast in order to preserve the tangible cultural heritage of woodcarving motifs and traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan.

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