

## Typological Study Of Woodcarving In Malay Traditional House

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### Abstract

Woodcarving is a common trait seen in a Malay traditional house. Different types of wood-carvings can be found in a Malay house based on the status, wealth, culture, and religion of the owners. After Islam was introduced to Malaysia and became the main principle and guide for the people, they began to adapt the Islamic values in their daily lives, including the illustration of the woodcarvings. The motifs used during those times were floral, geometrical, and calligraphy. These beautiful wood-carving motifs were designed as a symbol of obedience towards a higher power. Unfortunately, over time woodcarving has been neglected and is no longer a popular trend, leading to abandonment and ruins. Without proper acknowledgement, total loss of heritage and identity may happen. Hence, by employing a qualitative method, this research focused on the typology of woodcarvings in Malay traditional houses. The findings showed a wide variety of woodcarving based on the different placements in the traditional house as a form of expression of the art, culture, and belief of the owners. By first understanding the motifs would be a good start before introducing it to the public and educating them on the importance of conserving these motifs for the future generations.

**Keywords:** *Motif, Malay Traditional House, Ornamentation, Influence.*

### 1.0 Introduction

The Malay traditional house is the first indigenous architecture to be built in the country. The art of carpentry is a precious skill that was passed down through multiple generations. The Malay traditional house, set in the middle of a large complex, not only represents the Malays' artistic and aesthetic skills, but also meets their socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental needs (Kamal et al., 2004). Since it represents and communicates the way of life of its users, the Malay traditional house is a significant mark in the development of Malaysian identity in architecture. It has also been evolved by the occupants over centuries, adapting to their needs, culture, and climate (Hosseini et al., 2012).

Woodcarving has been used as a decorative element in the dwellings of people since the beginning of Malaysia's civilization. While the different status of homeowners, culture, and religion can be factors of the different motifs and types of wood-carvings, there still exists a few common types such as floral motifs that can be found in every Malay traditional house. From windows and doors to the walls, various types of woodcarvings can be found adorning these buildings.

These recent years of modernization and technology have completely overtaken the course and style of architectural design. Thoughtless and direct application of woodcarving is an act that occurs due to the lack of knowledge about the principles, ideals, and aesthetic qualities of Islamic ornamentation (Utaberta et al., 2012). Other than that, the constant neglect and regards towards the historical element of a traditional house is a major contributor as to why it is always forsaken and abandoned, leaving them to rot over time.

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Figure 1, 2 & 3: A ruined wood-carving with the drawing of the motifs.

Source: USIM, 2021

## 2.0 Research Background

According to Farah et al. (2018), the main key feature of woodcarving is a composition of motifs, patterns, ideals, carving techniques, and many of the carver's values such as patience, technical skills, and imaginations. The history of Malay woodcarving goes way back to the beginning of the establishment of the country itself, and over time, it evolves according to the ideology of the people. The first one is animism, followed by the Hindu-Buddhist ideology and thirdly Islamic influence (Keumala et al., 2012). Since the rise of Islam, the influence of motifs shifted and has slowly abandoned the use of fauna or living things as motifs. In certain houses, traces of the abandoned motifs are vague, or it has been altered (Azmi. K. A, 2017).

As an effort to counter the issue that could cost the country to lose this priceless heritage, it is necessary for a study on the typology of the Malay traditional house woodcarving to be carried out. This is to recognise the motifs used to collect data for future reference and to understand the meaning of each motif. According to Utaberta et al. (2012), each aspect of the building, such as ornaments and decorations, has a purpose to be there because those elements carry a meaning or can act as the means of communication that is closely tied to the lives of the people who live there as well as the natural environment. It is also commonly linked as a sense of belonging to the community it belongs to as it was passed down through multiple generations (Rahil et al., 2020).

## 3.0 Methodology

A qualitative method was employed in this study, starting with the collection of data and then followed by data analysis which is the main focus. Data were collected from secondary sources such as journals, articles, and books as reference to help complete the study. The sources are chosen based on the same keyword and focus of study. After gathering the necessary data needed, content analysis is done.

In the data collection phase, a few woodcarvings from selected heritage houses of the Rembau district in Negeri Sembilan were observed and studied to achieve the desired outcome. The site is chosen based on its long line of history and is known to be rich in culture. The woodcarvings gathered were from several different placements in the house with more than 100 years of history and each has their own distinct functions. Choosing the most suitable heritage houses is one of the important factors to make sure the motifs collected have their own unique historical value and features.

## 4.0 Findings and Discussions

In the light of Islamic teachings, home ornaments or carvings depicting living things such as man and animals are prohibited. Thus, the development of Islamic wood-carvings motifs started where Muslim carvers produce and create art base on floral,

geometrical and other abstract designs, as long as the motifs do not contradict Islamic guidelines. While some of the old carvings were covered or modified until it was not seen as fauna motifs (Azmi. K. A, 2017).

Narrated by 'Aisha: Allah's Apostle returned from a journey when I had placed a curtain of mine having pictures over (the door of) a chamber of mine. When Allah's Apostle saw it, he tore it and said, "The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah's creations." So we turned it (i.e., the curtain) into one or two cushions.

[Sahih Bukhari: Volume 7, Book 72, Number 838]

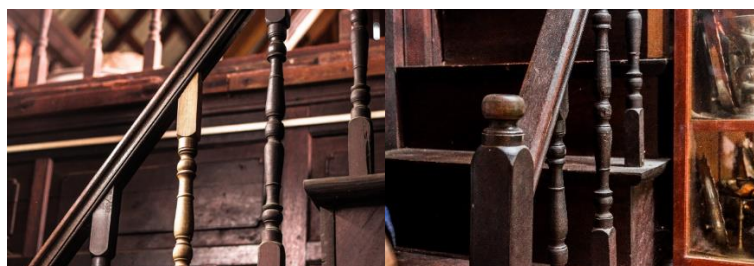
Even in the form of carving, drawing or weaving, Muslims are warned against creating accurate depictions of living things and as it is considered committing a sin that God strongly disapproves of. The use of Islamic motifs in carvings is one of the efforts of Muslims to worship and obey Allah by physical practice. By following His guidance even in the act of everyday lifestyle, such as decorating their homes and buildings. By imitating the beauty of nature in the form of carvings, one can appreciate the creations of Allah while staying humbled before his powers.

It is important to know and distinguish what types of motifs that are used in heritage houses. Hence, to identify the use of motifs for this research, the scope of study focuses on a few elements that can be found in a common Malay traditional house:

- |              |                             |
|--------------|-----------------------------|
| A. Staircase | B. Main Pillar (Tiang Seri) |
| C. Openings  | D. Plaque                   |

#### A. Staircase

In the early years, the settlements were built along water bodies; this living condition required the raised floor construction as the ideal solution for coping with ground dampness in the hot and humid tropical climate, and with the heavy rains that frequently resulted in flash floods (Kamal et al., 2004). The houses were also equipped with the presence of an attic for the purpose of storage (Khairudin et al., 2018). Thus, it is a usual occurrence to find handrails and railings as a common structure found attached to the main entrance and the stairs leading to the attic.



**Figure 4 & 5:** Timber staircase and railings balustrades.

*Source: USIM, 2021*

Figure 4 and 5 shows handrails of a Malay traditional house that leads to the attic of the house. The shape of the head is bulbous with standard timber decorated balusters that are commonly used in the area of architectural design. In addition, Figure 6 shows another handrail that has a geometrical head shaped and a square column beneath. Even with different types of motifs used, both are beautifully designed and have carried out their function well. Besides being pleasing to the eyes, it is comfortable to hold and is sturdy enough to grip while ascending and descending the stairs. These balusters are also found to act as safety rails in the wide openings of the windows.



Figure 6: Geometrical head shaped at handrail of stairs to attic  
*Source: USIM, 2018*

#### B. Main Pillar (Tiang Seri)

The main pillar or Tiang Seri is also known as Tunggok Tuo or Tiang Tengah. It is commonly found in the center of Rumah Ibu, and according to Rashid and Amat (2011), it carries the symbol of the sturdiness of the house while in the matrilineal system, the pillar symbolises the Bundo Kandung leadership (Sri Yunarti, 2021).



Figure 7 & 8: The use of floral motifs in Tiang Seri woodcarving  
*Source: USIM, 2021*

In the figure above, the first Tiang Seri in Figure 7 used the Saik Ajik carving type which creates a good visual interest. This is a unique carving motif that is also known as the star pattern. Other than adorning buildings, this pattern can also be found in the design of traditional songket. The migration of the Minangkabau people to Tanah Melayu in the 16th century brought with it a variety of cultural and architectural influences into the local community which includes the Saik Ajik motifs (Bahauddin et al., 2012). According to research done by Nofriyanto et al. (2019), it carries the symbol of kinship in the community, and it is well-known as a decorative element in a Minangkabau traditional house.

The Tiang Seri in Figure 8 is a combination of floral motifs featuring tendrils and flowers with geometric motifs as the borders. Different patterns of carvings are portrayed on each side of the Tiang Seri. The tendrils are seen to be inside a triangle with a geometric pattern at the base and parallel lines that go from the lower part to the upper part of the Tiang Seri. These kinds of motifs can also be found scattered around the house, carrying symbolism and messages made by the woodcarvers.

Based on the observation done, the woodcarvers highlight the use of floral motifs, accompanied by the presence of tendrils and geometrical motifs that completes the unique look of traditional Malay woodcarving motifs. After the emergence of Islam, the key elements of Malay woodcarvings in Malay traditional houses are mostly floral such as a variety of flowers and leaves. (Shaffee & Said, 2013). This indirectly demonstrates the Muslims' willingness to change and live in accordance with the Deen.

#### C. Openings.

It is not uncommon to find decorated openings in a Malay traditional house as it adds the sense of welcoming and it is a Malay cultural heritage that has been integrated into traditional or vernacular structures in order to add aesthetic value to the building (Hanita et al., 2015). These openings are also crucial in allowing ventilation and lighting to penetrate the house. Every opening such as windows and doors has their own unique carvings or Kerawang.



Figure 9: The use of floral motifs in Tiang Seri woodcarving  
*Source: USIM, 2020*

Based on Figure 9 above, plant-based motifs in the form of tendrils can be seen clearly and, in this component, the carver used a combination of both relief carved and perforated techniques. The carving type is observed to be *Sisir Angin Atas pintu*. These intricate carvings done on the structures are based on the techniques and expertise of the carvers, some are also related to the personality, beliefs, religion, and culture of the homeowners themselves (Mohd Haizra et al., 2017).

Art in Islam should be a continuous educational process and should never contradict to the Islam's boundaries (Shuid et al., 2003), thus, motifs that are mostly inspired by the surrounding vegetation are the most popular and continue to rise in popularity after fauna and living forms are rarely used as to comply with the teachings of Islam. The individuals achieved two objectives at the same time. The first is that it meets the criterion for aesthetic values and is visually appealing, all while adhering to religious practises, which are also acts of obedience to the one and only Creator (Said & Abdullah, 2001).

#### A. Plaque

This element is something that can only be found in certain parts of Malaysia, and it is now an almost forgotten element of a Malay traditional house. The plaques are usually situated in the upper part of the door that connected between Serambi and Rumah Ibu of the house, as seen in the figure below.



Figure 10: Plaque in Gadang 'onyang Siti/Hj Peral House in Kampung Selemak.  
*Source: Author, 2021*





Figure 11: A close-up picture of the plaque.  
 Source: Author, 2021




Calligraphy in woodcarvings is usually used in mosques and takes the form of quotes and phrases from the Quran or the names of Allah. The figures above show a plaque that can be found in a traditional house in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan. The writing on the plaque is written in Jawi, a direct influence of Islam, forming the word 'Seri Lemak' and a date of 1283 in the year of Hijra (Hanafiah, 2021). The plaque uses the combination of three motifs; calligraphy, floral, and a little bit of geometrical at the base of the decorative plaque.







Figure 12: Ibrahim Dakan's house plaque.  
 Source: Author, 2022

Based on a short interview with the current owner, the plaque states the name of the first owner of the house, the year of the construction and the name of the woodcarver involved in the construction of the house. This helps to prove that one of the use of plaque and calligraphy in an abode are usually related to the identity and introduction to the house itself. With the date and names carved in wood, it makes it easier for the historian or researcher to verify the age and history of the building, avoiding confusion and false information.

Table 1: List of placements and types of wood-carvings found.

Woodcarving	Placement	Type of woodcarving	Function
	Staircase	Geometric	Safety Railings
	Staircase	Geometric	Safety Railings
	Central Pillar (Tiang Seri)	Floral: Saik Ajik	Highlights the pillar as the main pillar of the house

	Central Pillar (Tiang Seri)	Floral Geometric	Highlights the pillar as the main pillar of the house
	Entrance	Floral: Arabesque	Adding sense of welcoming
	Upper Door	Calligraphy Floral Geometric	Introduction of the house
	Upper Door	Calligraphy Floral Geometric	Introduction of the house

Source: Author, 2021

## 5.0 Conclusion

The typological study of Malay traditional house woodcarvings in Malaysia is based on the past studies done by various researchers especially by past researchers that are related to Malay traditional houses and its wood-carvings. It is found that the motifs used by Malay carvers are floral, geometrical, and calligraphy. There is also the use of cosmic and fauna motifs, however, it is uncommon and are not use as much as the other three(3) motifs. It is due to the fact that woodcarvings are mostly influenced by the religion of the people at that time and in this context, Islam. Furthermore, the cultural aspect of the people, whether from the citizens of Tanah Melayu, traders, or even immigrants that has brought their culture to which then has assimilated to our own. This has caused a fusion of multiple cultures and religion that was then portrayed by the unique artworks and architectural design that we see today. As a result, these traditional wood-carvings ought to have a symbolic meaning, which refers to the culture and way of life of the people that live there. Art and the Islamic region's manifestations should be well-suited to the locals' identity, and not merely there for aesthetic reasons. This research shows that traditional adornment has a crucial role in not only conveying symbolic meaning but also portraying the local Malays' history, beliefs, and heritage.

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