

## The Meaning of Malay Motif Wood Carving in Terengganu Mosque

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### ABSTRACT

Wood carving is among the many delicate arts derived from the work of wood carvers. It can be seen as an object decorating buildings such as mosques, houses and more. There are various types of carvings that find their way to the mosques' architecture in Terengganu. Places in Malaysia have various kinds of carving, mostly originate from the culture or outside influence. Terengganu is a state within the Malaysian Peninsular that possesses various kinds of carving that are both unique and beautiful to its mosques. The main question is what *motif* that influences the decoration in these mosques? To answer this question, qualitative descriptive was used in gathering precise, accurate and fast data. In addition, both interviews and observations are used to strengthen the primary and secondary data. The findings have found that there are a few flora, fauna, and geometric *motifs* present in the various unique carvings. Each produced carving contains both clear and hidden meanings, illustrating the everyday lives of the Malay community. The architecture shows the refinement of the Malays' crafts, important to be preserved for future generations. It is hoped that the study can increase the awareness of preserving the nation's cultural heritage among the public.

**Keywords:** *Motif, Wood Carvings, Mosques*

### INTRODUCTION

Terengganu is situated along the coastline of Peninsular Malaysia. The spread of Islam around the world had reached South-East Asia, finally reaching Malaya and created mosques throughout it. The entry of Islam to South-East Asia began in the early Hijrah era with the discovery of stone tablets carved in Arabic dated either 1082 or 1102 B.C. at Gerisik, Jawa (Mohd Jamil Mukmin, 1992). The building of mosques at that time is used to spread Islam to the Malaya locals. Mosques are built incorporating all the important elements as well as including the Malays' surroundings at that time. Thus, mosques were built from wood, unlike modern mosques that use bricks. Wood were considered to be less expensive at that time as compared to nowadays.

Hence, the mosques in Malaya at that time mostly used materials from wood. The wooden mosques were also decorated with many designs that include various carvings embedded with Malay elements. Up until 2014, there has been 164 mosques around Terengganu, including the State mosques. Each of them possess

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various interesting carving with many *motifs* and symbols. They also have their own identity that display the designers' creativity in illustrating the Malays' cultures.

This is present at the National Mosque from 1963 to 27 August 1965 whereby Islam became the official religion in Malaysia. The development of the mosque represented the unity and tolerance among the different races in Malaysia (Maruwiah Ahmat, 1968). Thus, the study on Mosques in Terengganu would be conducted at 9 states where a number of mosques from each state will be studied according to the objective of the study. The study also include the function of a design as well as the width of both the mosques' interior and exterior. Each of these mosques has their own history that not known to others.

### THE HISTORY OF CARVINGS

Craftsmanship in South-East Asia is present in tombstones, mosques and various kinds of home decorations. However, Islam forbids any carvings to statues and cooper that have become an art favoured by the Asians. Nonetheless, Islam never forbids its followers from producing artwork or carving in the form of writings. Hence, during the advent of Islam to Malaya, calligraphy was overtaken by pro-Islamcraftsmen. Mosques and castles were also decorated with astonishing carvings. Regardless, there were still Buddhist Hinduism influences trending into later Islamic craftsmanship that didn't follow living things such as humans and animals. It can be seen at a mosque in Jawa that still displays Buddhist Hinduism and Hyang art such as the lotus and a few religion symbols on its drainage system as well as the edge of its roof. The Masjid Kudus tower was used as a place for azan but maintains elements from Hyang. High places are traditionally viewed as a holy place for the souls of deceased ancestors.



Illustration 2: Various carvings decorating the main hall of a mosque.

Islamic craftsmanship is clearly depicted on tombstones, as seen on the tombstones for the royals. The earliest Muslim craftsmanship in South-East Asia can be seen in the carving on tombstones and the related calligraphy. Calligraphy letters carved onto tombstones also contains wonderful Islamic arts that are first introduced in Kedah in 10 BC. Tombstone and early letters can be seen at the grave of Sheikh Abdul Qaddir Hussain Syah in Langgar, Kedah. He passed away in 903 BC. By 13

BC, the patterns on tombstones look better. However, there is a possibility that the tombstone were imported or ordered from Gujerat, India. Similar tombstone can be seen at the tombstone of Sultan Malik Al-Salleh in Samudera-Pasai. Nonetheless, the tombstone used at that time most probably used local raw materials to create the most beautiful tombstone in South-East Asia, cinema is considered to be a part of Islamic ritual (Ahmad Jelani Halimi, 2008).

## CARVING DEFINITION

Referring to Malay Literature Reference Centre, (Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu), craftsmanship refers to something or a drawing carved with emerging decoration. Additionally, carvings on objects like gold, copper, silver or wood done by sculpting, tapping or scratching. Each carving activity is done through sculpting, tapping and scratching.

## CARVING TYPES

The types of carvings can be divided into four parts. Each of the carvings has its own meaning. The process for wood carving starts with the use of materials and craft tools, assisted with the handwork in the carving. Additionally, the carvings can be divided into two dimensional and three dimensional carvings. Two dimensional carvings are present in wall decorations, doors and more while three dimensional carvings can be seen on house tools, statues and furniture's like *congkak*. (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan, 2009).

The uniqueness in Malay carving can be seen on the basic element known as '*silat*' that becomes the expression for '*liuk lentuk*' to the produced *motifs*. There are four carvings that are commonly produced:

- i. *Ukiran timbul tanpa silat*  
The carving is produced by badging the empty surface and does not have any carving patterns. This resulted a reduction in the patterns on empty surface. Patterns or *motifs* on the carvings will appear emerging. Both patterns and *motifs* are left empty as can be seen on the wall and doors.
- ii. *Ukiran timbul bersilat*  
Similar to the above but differs on patterns or *motifs*. Its patterns and *motifs* produced on carvings used *silat* and can be seen on walls and furniture's
- iii. *Ukiran tebuk tembus tanpa silat*  
Looks nearly identical to *ukiran timbul tanpa silat*. The difference can be seen at the empty depth surface, drilled into a hole while the *motifs* and patterns were left flat without any form. Can be seen at lattice space restrictions and eaves
- iv. *Ukiran tebuk tembus bersilat*  
Quite identical to *ukiran tebuk tembus tanpa silat* with the only difference is the *motif*. Can be seen on furnitures, lattice and armrest.

## CARVINGS ON MASJID TERENGGANU

In the production of carvings, it can be seen on several parts in the mosque that are commonly decorated with wood carvings on the *mihrab*, pulpit, windows, roof rails and more.

### a. *Mihrab*

One of the many core structures in the building of a mosque. Its construction is pointed to Mecca and functions as to point the *Qiblat* for prayers. While praying, the imam is placed in front of the *mihrab*. The construction process of the *mihrab* consists of various designs that usually built inwards from the wall surface to the *Qiblat*. It is decorated with various calligraphies taken from the Koran and is geometric form.



Picture 3.0: A mosque's *mimbar* decorated with geometric *motif*

### b. *Pulpit (Mimbar)*

Has three stairs during the time of Rasulullah S.A.W where he will seat on the most upper stair. It shows that the *mimbar* has certain functions, being the '*khatib*' place during the sermon on Friday prayers. Its position is usually on the right side of the wooden or concrete *mihrab*. However, there is also pulpit equipped with small dome with a circle or oval upper part. Currently, pulpits experience change where the number of stairs is no longer restricted to three. The pulpit can be said as the heaven communicator.



Picture 4: Mosque's pulpit used by the iman to give sermons during Friday prayer.

### c. Windows

The function of windows for every mosque is to allow air and light distribution into the mosque. Mosques are commonly built with many doors at each corner. There are a number of mosques in Terengganu that has window-shaped doors as shown in the picture below. The windows are decorated with various carvings.



Picture 5: Carvings decorating doors for air and light distribution into the mosque

**d. Roof rails (*Susur Atap*)**

Each roof rails are adorned with simple carvings. Often it is decorated with geometric carved using elements of redemption through.



Illustration 6: Carving also becoming decorations on the roof of a mosque

**MOTIF DEFINITION**

Malay craftsmanship is not competing without being decorated by interesting *motifs* and design on the wooden surface to the mosque's decorations. Creating new

*motifs* is closely related to the traditions and influence inherited from one generation to another (Abdul Halim Nasir, 1986). Communities will find it difficult to identify of a race or nation without a *motif*. A race can be identified though its unique and *motif* difference that exhibits the level of knowledge and expertise of a nation in creating dazzling craftsmanship. The *motif* decorations can differentiate the art type from different places, districts and state other than becoming the trademark. It also shows how the early Malays were very detailed and possess high thinking skills in the creation of *motifs* in the embroidery. Through the *motif* creation, it can uplift Malay craftsmanship to a higher level as well as getting acknowledged for the creation of a sophisticated carving. Without experiencing the hardships in creating a carving from the most simple to the most difficult, we may have no unique *motif* that differentiate us from other nations.

## 1. *Motif* types

It can be divided into four *motifs* that are commonly known as flora, fauna, geometric and calligraphy. Each of the *motifs* holds each own speciality where when observed, can give the viewer a peace of mind. All produced *motifs* also can be related to the craftsman himself in his daily lives. All *motif* forms produced are also used to teach man in conducting their daily lives.

### a. *Flora Motif*

*Motifs* that are taken from nature such as the names of trees commonly used in the Malay's daily lives or for food like the mangosteen. The mangosteen *motif* is most often used in craftsmanship as well as other arts such as cane arts. In addition, flower *motifs* are also used in carvings such as the *Bunga Melayu Tuamotifs* (Nila InangaManyamKeumalaDaud, EzrinArbi& Mohammad Faisal, 2012). The use of flower types is also associated with traditions and cultures of a community from their ancestors up until today. In Malaysia, flowers are also used in daily lives of a community as fragrance among the different races with different traditions according to their uses that have their own unique meaning



Picture 8. Floramotif decorating Koran storage place

### b. Fauna Motif

The elements are taken from animals or insects that are commonly close to man like ducks. The duck returning home at sunset *motif* is done a lot in Malay wood carvings. The use of animals and insects in craftsmanship by the early Malays is a form stainable from all God's creations that complement one another in this universe. The animal *motifs* are also influenced by Hinduism at one time before the advent of Islam to Malaya. This is commonly seen in the eagle *motif*. However, after the advent of Islam, animal *motifs* used were simplified to help lighten the work of producing *motifs*. The simplified animal form is suitable with Islam wants that forbids the use of animal *motifs* in man's lives.

However, Islam forbids the use of any statue in the homes of Muslims as it pulls angels away from that house. A hadith from Rasulullah S.A.W reveals that "Angels will never enter homes with statues in it". By having statues in a house, it distances the angels assigned to bring prosperity to the house' dwellers. Additionally, manufacturing statues is one of the activities resembling the unbelievers that most commonly admire the statues they keep in their homes. Rasulullah S.A.W said that those who make pictures (statues) will get the heaviest torture in the hereafter (Syekh Muhammad Yusuf Qardhawi, 1993). This forces the Malays to think of other ideas that are appropriate for the use of animal *motifs* in their craftsmanship. Thus, they keep on producing new items by simplifying the forms so that it does not appear real with the actual illustration.

### 2. Geometric Motifs

Geometric *motifs* are often associated with abstract, casual or hard *motifs*. It is more attached to mathematical formulas due to its form and is rarely done in



forms. According to HaziyahHusin (2006), this *motif* is associated with arrangement like organic and geometric forms according to the arrangement types produced. The process of geometric pattern is the interpretation from patterns that use high level imagination to the point that it is difficult to recognize. It is known to exist in the prehistoric times and continues to develop to this very day as a *motif* that interests others due to its unique form from other *motifs*.

The geometric form itself refers to the forms that have pointed properties and border lines. It is also more bound unlike organic forms that are free when it comes to designing their patterns. Geometric forms are usually arranged in row and the forms are rarely combined with other forms (Abdul Halim Nasir, 1986). It is identified by looking at the designs that uses basic elements used in the design through straight, oblique and transverse lines. The production of the lines will produce carvings in the form of boxed arrangement and straight that can be seen at the space filled with carvings on a particular object. An example of geometric pattern can be seen in market such as grids that are still beautiful and unique despite using only straight line elements (Eman, 2008).



Figure 9.0: Example of geometric carvings on the stair way of UlulAlbab Mosque, Besut.

The appeal of geometric *motif* started to spread in Egypt, known for the production of one of the most important *motifs* in their art, aside than the leave and plant *motif* used in other arts. It spread throughout the world due to the influence of Islamic arts that were mostly used in the same design on wood carvings in a mosque around Egypt, carpets and even the patterns in the Koran that began with simple patterns to the more complicated ones that even the westerns acknowledge it. It cannot be denied that the geometric pattern is produced from the influence of math in the forming of variable geometric *motifs* to the point that it can create elegant patterns (Manja MohdLudin dan Ahmad SuhaimiHj. Mohd. Noor, 1995).

### 3. Calligraphy Motif

*Motifs* in the form of calligraphy are most writing on texts in the form of advice, law, teaching, religion, prayer and more (Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009). Is is commonly seen to the carving at the entrance, written as 'Assammualaikum', 'Bismillah' and more. The creation of calligraphy *motifs* has a deep meaning as one of the way to deliver message to others. The arrangement for it depends on the appropriate function and places following the produced carved text. The produced carved text is embedded with flora or geometric *motifs* to add more detail to the craftsmanship. It is rarely produced using any text in a calligraphy carving.



Illustration 10.0: Calligraphy *motif* placed at the entrance of a mosque so that it can be seen and read clearly.

### 3. Definition Behind Carving

Carving gives hidden meaning as well as having aesthetic values that gives importance to the symbol and craftsmanship. The product of the craftsman's soul gives birth to the symbol of the Malay community. There are several expressions in Malay craftsmanship that give deep meaning.

**a. Tajam Tidak Menujah Lawan (No Sharp Pink Fight)**

According to the tenets of Islam, tolerance is applied in a community, giving priorities to peace and welfare to the daily lives of man. Islam forbids any enemy-like activities that could lead to cut ties among themselves.

No Sharp Pink Fight (*Tajam Tidak Menujah Lawan*) is more geared towards every point where plants meet with other leaves to avoid conflicts. The bowing leaves signifies the Malay culture to respect one another.

**b. Lilit Tidak Memaut Kawan (Wind Does Not Link to a Friend)**

It refers to the human daily life context, showing life as conflict and success is born from conflicts. Man is a conflicting being and this concept is used in their lives and struggles such as title, recognition and wealth.

Islam promotes positive competition based on the Koran and the Sunnah for equality as well as to avoid any selfishness. The term '*melilit tidak memaut kawan*' (wind does not link to a friend) holds a deep meaning where it reminds humans to not use rivalry as means for destruction among themselves as well as to other living beings.

## CONCLUSION

Majority of the *motifs* produced a long time ago are present in today's carvings. However, there are also some *motifs* on today's carvings that are influenced from the west like the use of simple *motifs*, unlike the traditional *motifs*. Western *motifs* commonly use simple forms that do not require a high level of detailing like its traditional counterpart. The result from using traditional craftsmanship on mosque architecture allows development for today's generation with the names of *motifs*. However, the knowledge on carving *motifs* needs to be spreader so that the current generations can differentiate between local and international *motifs*. Local carving *motifs* are mostly derived from plants and geometry as well as being abstract. They are mostly plant *motifs* as Islam forbids the use of animal *motifs*. Geometry *motifs*, on the other hand, are the influence from Islamic arts from the Arabs whereby it was developed from arabesque forms that mostly decorate the mosques in Malaysia.

Each *motif* on a produced wood carving is mostly derived from the community's environment. The *motifs* produced illustrate what was going on in their daily lives. The *motif* arrangement on a carving also shows the relationships between men and their Creator, among themselves and with their surroundings. The process of creating various *motifs* exhibits the ability of the craftsmen during that time. Each *motif* produced allows the current generation to wonder about the uniqueness of the craftsmanship by craftsmen at that time. The carving requires a high level of patience for each craftsman in order to produce a carving. Without it, a beautiful and interesting carving cannot take place as the crafting process would take a long time

as small *motifs* require detailing. In addition, high thinking skills are also a necessity as the arrangement for a carving should be placed accordingly to produce perfect arrangement.

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