

## Cultural Ecosystem: Relationship Between Nature and Development of Malay Art in The East Coast of Malay Peninsula

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### ABSTRACT

Nature is always the best teacher to mankind. The East Coast of Malay Peninsula is rich with its natural habitat of flora and fauna. The strategic location with a long coastal line facing the South China Sea contributes the best fishing area for the population. There were several Malay kingdoms established in the East Coast area such as the Terengganu Sultanate, Kelantan Sultanate and Patani Sultanate. These kingdoms managed to produce fine artistic works throughout the centuries especially on wood carving, metalwork and textile. The population made nature their home and incorporated the environment around them into their daily life activities as source of materials and decorative inspirations. This paper will study the relationship between nature and the population of the East Coast area in producing their works of art.

**Keywords:** *nature, East Coast, Malay Peninsula, art.*

### INTRODUCTION

The East Coast of Malay Peninsula is known as a centre of art until today. They managed to maintain the culture and tradition in the daily life of the inhabitants, the Malays, even though the area is not fully developed. The area is blessed with beautiful nature and plenty of resources such as woods and minerals which enriched their art and heritage. Some of the famous works of art in the East Coast area are the *batik sarong*, *songket*, *keris*, wood carving and metalwork. The East Coast area has its own unique identity and a special touch by the craftsmen, despite most of these artworks being available in other Malay regions such as Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines. One of the elements which contribute to this unique identity is the natural resources / it offers to the craftsmen. This provides an important basis to study the relationship between nature and development of Malay art in this area.

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The East Coast area produced beautiful and colourful works of art. Its inheritance from different regional rulers and foreign influences contributed a lot in the manifestation of art upon the objects. Nevertheless, the main element to the development of the art in this area is its natural surrounding which provide the raw material and inspirational and suitable weather to facilitate the craftsmen in producing their pieces. In this paper, the discussion will be focusing on cultural ecosystem relationship which involves the interaction between living things and the environment in which they lived in. In this case, it refers to the local craftsmen in the East Coast of Malay Peninsula and their reliance towards the environment in designing and beautifying the works of art.

## BRIEF HISTORY AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE EAST COAST

Historically, the East Coast area has made its appearance on the world map since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Ptolemy's map on the Malay Peninsula depicted two trade ports known as *Perimoula* and *Kole* which are believed to be situated in Terengganu. Kelantan was known by the 6<sup>th</sup> century travellers as *Chi Tu* in the Chinese and Indian records. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century AD, the East Coast of Malay Peninsula area consists of four Malay states; Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Patani. Today these areas have been divided into two different countries with Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang being parts of Malaysia whereas Patani being a part of Thailand. The East Coast area of Malay Peninsula dominated with forests, rivers and an extensive coastline has been inextricably linked to the lives of its people for centuries. Travellers, traders and seafarers are attracted to stop over for several reasons such as to repair the ships and to restock essential supplies such as clean water and food.

Besides food and water, this area contains an abundant variety of other natural resources and minerals. The inland area consists of highlands which are connected to the *Titiwangsa* Range. It houses a rich profusion of flora and fauna species which are categorised as mangroves, swamps, lowland, hill forests and mountain forests. The flora and fauna in this area has variety of colours, shapes and textures. It offers a luxury selection of raw materials such as wood and leather to the local artisans to use in their art production. In addition to the flora and fauna, the East Coast area is also rich with minerals. In the Malay Peninsula, the mineral distribution is divided into several zones (Wan Fuad 1998:23) such as the Western Belt, Central Belt and Eastern Belt. The East Coast areas covered in the Central Belt and Eastern Belt offer an abundance of valuable minerals such as gold, iron, silica sand and tin. This explained how the Malay Kingdoms of the East Coast area such as Kelantan managed to send plenty of gold and gold dust to the Siam Kingdom before the 20<sup>th</sup> century AD.



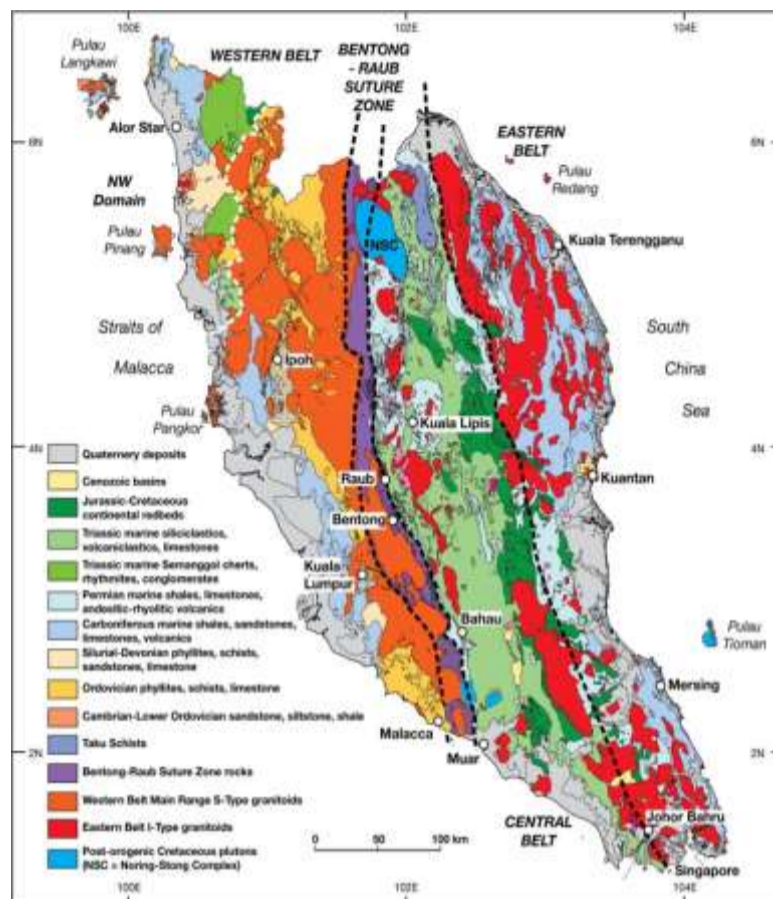


Figure 1: Mineral belts in Malay Peninsula

Source: <http://hardrock.earth.ox.ac.uk/economicgeol/index.html>

Other than the natural resources, the weather in the East Coast area plays an important role in the development of art in this area. In general, the East Coast area has high temperature which is above 20°C but not exceeding 30°C. Since the area is near to the South China Sea, it is heavily affected by the two monsoons seasons, Northeast and Southwest. The warmest months are between March – May while the coolest months are between December – February. Due to their location, most of the inhabitants work as fishermen especially before 20<sup>th</sup> century AD. Weather is an important factor to the fishermen in this area. The Northeast monsoon season in the month of November or early December to early March might have some impact on the art productions due to the heavy rainfall and flood. With all these natural factors availability the works of arts in this area developed.

### INTERACTION BETWEEN NATURE AND ART

Every living thing on this earth is interconnected to each other naturally. Human beings require nature to live and to survive. Art is something produced from nature, material and inspiration. It is common to associate art with nature in the



Malay society. Generally art is a part of cultural history of the society (Mohd Anis 2001) which started when human being wanted something more than their basic needs to beautify their life. This initiated them to produce beautiful objects with what they could find around them creatively.

Sufficient supplies of good materials from forests and mines in the East Coast area is the main key factor of the art production. The dependence on nature such as weather, clean water, wood, and natural dye in producing the art is undeniable. The craftsmen also used the shape of flowers and plants in their design as decoration motifs. It inspired them to be more creative in stylizing the animal decorative motif in order to create a less figural motif to be in line with the Islamic teaching. Some of the foreign traders who are closed with the Malay people have accredited the dependency of Malay people to its nature in their daily life (Ehwan 2001).

This happened because of the traditional Malay lifestyle for those who live near the forest and the river (Hamdzun et al. 2002). The flora and fauna around them such as spices as well as rattan, animal skins, and wood are used as food and trade items respectively. Apart from these materials, the Malays were still using natural resources to make tools and dyes. Another example is by drying the artworks using wind or by leaving them under the sun. This method is used by the craftsmen in the East Coast area especially the *batik* maker until today.

In the East Coast architecture, the Malay traditional house design is environmental friendly. The architect designed the house according to the location, religion and social factors. The design allows the air to flow through the house at the same time cooling it. The height of the house structure from the ground lessens the humidity in the house. The materials used to build the house such as timber, bamboo; *nipah* palm leaves and rattan are easily found in the East Coast area. The design of the roof allows the rain to glide down gently to the ground. The space under the house is always used by the art makers as their workshops in the East Coast area particularly as a place to weave *songket*, to stamp *batik*, to carve wood and to make metal objects. It is an open space area and comfortable for the art makers since they could be with their family and monitor their children while weaving or carving their art work. At the same time, the inspirations for their decorative motifs on their works of art come from the nature around their houses.

### MALAY ART IN THE EAST COAST AREA

The East Coast area is famous with art productions such as *batik*, *songket*, woodwork, and metalwork; silver and brass. These beautiful and vibrant arts require skillful and specialized workmanship from the local craftsmen to achieve perfection in the design especially for the royal family usage such as *songket* and silver objects. There will be no exception in quality even for the commoners' objects such as daily utensils and textiles. Some of the works of art are used in a specific function or ceremony, for example, in weddings, engagement parties and religious ceremonies.

*Batik* is mainly produced in Kelantan, one of the states in the East Coast area. Historically, *batik* was brought to this area from Java by the Javanese traders. *Batik* has been in the local market for ages and it started to evolve from the

Javanese *batik* design to East Coast *batik* design in terms of decoration motif arrangement and colours according to the local demand and material. Another important textile in this area is *songket* which is mainly produced in Terengganu. Terengganu *songket* design is also different in term of its decoration motif arrangement and colour selection. Terengganu *songket* is famous for its beauty and quality workmanship. *Songket* itself is known to be worn as royal attire. Textiles, both *batik* and *songket* in East Coast area feature bamboo shoot or *pucuk rebung* motif in its sarong design. Traditionally, the placement of this design on the sarong by the wearers symbolized their social status in the East Coast area (Azah 2006).

Apart from textiles, wood carving also maintained its unique identity in this area. For centuries, Buddhism and Hinduism were present in Malay arts before the advent of Islam. Figural motifs in wood carving design have been replaced with ones which are less figural as well as Islamic motifs especially to decorate houses, boats and *kerises*. In house architecture, wood carving could be found in certain areas such as walls, doors, window panels, staircase and the central pillar. Islamic decorative motifs which are non-figural in their designs are the floral and foliate, geometry and calligraphy motifs.

Metal works made from silver, gold, brass and tin are mainly used as daily utensils and ceremonial objects. The local craftsmen created the design and decorated the metalwork objects based on the function of each object. For ceremonial usage especially related to the palace, the value of the material is higher and the decorative motifs are more complex and beautiful compared to the objects used as daily utensils.

#### NATURE AS DECORATIVE MOTIF IN THE EAST COAST ART

The interdependence relationship between all living and non-living organisms can be seen in the development of any design motif of the artwork. Various motives can be established as a result of the interdependent and mutually linked environment. The motifs available on *songket, batik*, vernacular architecture, brassware, gold jewelry, carvings and paintings on boats show that the environment influenced craftsmen to design the motifs in their artworks.

The environment also works as a compass to guide the process of designing and decorating motif in the Malay world. This indicates that the East Coast community has developed these processes for functional objects in their life. Surrounding nature being their focal point of observation thus teaches them to enhance life principle and philosophy for guided life. The ecosystem does not only exist outside of an artwork, but it also appears in the works of craftsmen.. It appears in each level of the art processes continuously from imitation to denaturalization, followed by stylization and transcendentalism. The ecosystem that inspired the design and decoration of arts in the East Coast can be divided into 3 types of inspirations namely 1) cosmos, 2) flora and 3) fauna.



**a. Motif inspired by cosmos**

The cosmos has inspired the expansion of cultural development through works of art. Observations on the movement of day and night, the sun and the moon, glittering stars, mountains and valleys, rivers and oceans constantly move the human intellect. People develop various types of intelligence through these inspiring natural ecosystems. Intelligence on arts also arises by inspiration from continuous cosmos ecosystems. Those motifs are *gunungan*, and *tali air* which shed some significance on the Malay life.

**Mountains (Gunungan)**

Motif *gunungan* can be seen on pulpit decoration and the 18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> century handwritten Qur'an manuscripts from the East Coast. Nor Azlin (2002) mentioned in 'Kesenian Melayu', that the *gunungan* motif is believed to be related to *Gunung Mahameru* in the Hindu-Buddha belief.



Figure 2 & 3: View of Kuala Terengganu with mountainous background and pulpit of Masjid Kampung Bukit Bayas, Kuala Terengganu (picture of pulpit is courtesy by Zahamri Nizar)



Figure 4: Pulpit in Masjid Kampung Laut, Kelantan  
Source: Balai Islam, Kelantan

### Waterway (*Tali air*)

*Tali air* is an irrigation system built to channel water to the paddy fields. It is a symbolic relationship of life continuity where water would be flowed into the paddy cultivation area for the purpose of hosing the paddy files, the staple food of the Malay community. There is a section named *tali air* or *apit* woven on the *songket*. It is situated between the head and the body parts, with another one situated at the end of the cloth sandwiching the head part of the *songket*. This motif is a symbol of fertility. This complements suiting the need of irrigation in allowing water to be fill the paddy field to ensure a healthy vegetation.



Figure 5: Motif *tali air* on songket inspired by irrigation at paddy field

### b. Motif inspired by flora

Certainly, the encompassing flora available in the surrounding environment of their residence is those which most inspired the East Coast craftsmen to decorate their craft work. The motifs chosen reflected the universal nature of the Malay world, let alone the East Coast bounded mountains, surrounded by forests and animals with the ocean far as the eye can see. Floral motifs that appear in the East Coast arts are *sulur kacang*, *bayam peraksi*, *pepulut*, *tampuk buah kesemak* and *tampuk manggis*, *bunga cengkih*, *pucuk rebung lawi ayam* (Terengganu), *buah cermai* (Kelantan), *kiambang bertaut*, *bunga teratai*, and *bunga matahari*.



Figure 6: Bean stalk inspired in motif *sulur kacang*



Figure 6: *Pepulut* plant and carved wood with *pepulut* motifs

### c. *Motif inspired by fauna*

Despite being constantly reminded about the prohibition of using life figurine in their artworks, the intelligentsias have manipulated subject matters from the fauna without inhibiting self-creativity, at the same time abiding to their beliefs. The fauna inspired the craftsmen but they no longer implement mimesis in designing the motif. Sometimes, the motifs are extended from simple denaturalization or stylization and achieved a transcendental level. Those motifs are *itik pulang petang*, *bangau*, *lebah bergantung*, *semut beriring* and *papan cicak*. However, not all motifs could suit any medium of art, for instance *lebah bergantung* only appeared on architecture and not textile.



Figure 7: Duck inspired motif of artwork and duck motif on boat.

## CONCLUSION

Art in the East Coast of Malay Peninsula is close to its nature. The craftsmen made use of all the natural resources around them to produce beautiful artworks adored by the local and foreign consumers. This is due to their unique identity and design which showed excellent workmanship and creativity of the Malay craftsmen there. The lavish selection of materials, colours and designs enhanced the philosophy and the beauty of the artistic works from the East Coast of Malay Peninsula. The decorative motifs inspired from cosmos, flora and fauna were close to the lives of the Malay community especially the craftsmen. The destruction of nature will directly cause damage to the Malay art and heritage.



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