

Meanings Behind the Carving Motifs of Traditional Malay Houses

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ABSTRACT

Woodcarving motifs, including Negeri Sembilan, are significant in Malaysian art, bearing ancient knowledge and latent meanings. However, the understanding of Malay woodcarving motifs in Kuala Pilah is relatively limited compared to the east coast. The urgency to study these motifs intensifies as urbanization rapidly changes the landscape, representing not only woodcarvers' skills but also profound cultural symbolism. This paper aims to interpret the meanings within these motifs in traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah, employing qualitative methods such as observation, interviews, photographic records, and secondary data analysis alongside Ferdinand de Saussure's Semiotics Theory for analysis. The cultural and social significance embedded in these motifs is unveiled through signifier and signified analysis. The results revealed the presence of various motifs encompassing geometry, fauna, flora, and still life. The study also uncovered that each motif plays a pivotal role in conveying the cultural and social values of the Malay people in Negeri Sembilan and enhances our understanding of the traditional art form of woodcarving amidst contemporary transformations.

Keywords: Carvings, motifs, semiotics, symbols, traditional Malay houses

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 29 May 2023

Accepted: 06 November 2023

Published: 19 March 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.32.1.13>

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is known to be affluent with its incomparable cultural diversity and wide and distinctive variety of traditions and heritages. The vernacular architecture and woodcarving motifs are composed of incorporated discipline, as Malays have respected them throughout the centuries. The old traditional woodcarving is reputed as one of Malay heritage's authentic and

complex art forms. Malay woodcarving is the amalgamation of skills and wisdom, and it has been inherently linked with the identity and worldview of the Malays since time immemorial. Therefore, it represents the artistic wisdom that signifies Malay art and philosophy. In conjunction with its knowledge, woodcarving is also a form of a visual element with a captivating narrative essence through its conscientious and detailed carvings. Apprenticeship in woodcarving is a mastery handed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, many expert carvers have been unable to have the opportunity to transmit knowledge to younger generations because they are no longer interested in the upkeep of tradition. Hence, their craft is incapable of maintenance, which may lead to deteriorating outcomes sooner or later. At least, specific measures and awareness may provide insights to the public at large into appreciating woodcarving with extrinsic and intrinsic meanings.

Despite the significant research on the design and typology of traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, there is a noticeable gap in the current body of research regarding woodcarving motifs and their inherent symbolism within these houses. This gap becomes even more apparent when considering the extensive documentation of woodcarving research on the East Coast, as highlighted by Yusof et al. (2021). One area that has received limited attention is qualitative research to understand the symbolic significance of woodcarving motifs specific to Negeri

Sembilan. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the meanings attributed to woodcarving motifs found within traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, to bridge this research gap.

In exploring the realm of Malay woodcarving, it is essential to initially grasp the nuanced network of Malay dimensions that form the foundation of this artistic heritage. These dimensions, encompassing symbolic and pragmatic aspects, are intricately linked with the Malay community's surroundings, convictions, and heritage. Malay woodcarvings serve as more than just dimensions; they are windows into the essence of Malay life. By carefully selecting wood, calculating proportions, and incorporating culturally significant motifs, woodcarvers seamlessly weave their surroundings, spiritual beliefs, and cultural heritage into every chisel stroke, creating masterpieces that resonate with the soul of the Malay people. In most artworks, a motif is often identified as a recurring fragment, theme, or pattern that appears in a work of art. Traditional woodcarving is known as decorative art, as stated by Tohid et al. (2015). Ornamental art entails art adorned with ornamentation, most frequently seen in architecture and other art forms or objects such as pottery and furniture. The creations of woodcarving motifs were based on the woodcarvers' morals, ethics, and inspiration, which were enriched by their devotion to Allah SWT (Ab. Aziz, 2021). Due to their attention to detail, they can create precise carving details to produce a complex but

balanced design innately connected to their spiritual evocation emanating from the woodcarvings. Woodcarving is rare for proficiency as the younger generations are oblivious to the unique culture and identity of the vernacular architecture and woodcarving motifs. Such a skill is held only by a handful of experts and masters who have trained for many years on the air tangan (a Malay idiom that implies the result of one's hard work) of carving motifs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview History of Woodcarving

To gain comprehension of the concept of woodcarving motifs on traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, reviews of the history of woodcarving and its pedigrees are essential. Researchers and academicians in the past affirmed that traditional woodcarvings were conceived with the arrival of the Langkasuka Empire, cultivated, and further developed the Malays' cultural evolution (Said, 2019). Historically speaking, Hinduism was an influential catalyst for developing Malay civilization. Eventually, Hinduism had a socio-cultural impact on the Malay world, such as religion, beliefs, worldview, and literature, to name a few (Abd Rahman et al., 2021). Therefore, the Malay kingdom was compelled by the influential force of the Langkasuka empire.

During the Langkasuka empire, the Malay people established a strong belief in spirits and deities that dwell in all living things and nature. Most scholars regarded these natives as animists who believed in the

spirit world and nature (Rashidi et al., 2021). In tandem with this, the Hindu-Buddhism denomination affected the entire foundation and infrastructure of the Malay people's social culture. Malay woodcarvings were densely partial to Hinduism facets, formed prevalently of figural representations of their motifs (Yusof et al., 2021). Hence, before Islam came into the picture and entered Malaya's shores, motifs' patterns were laboriously ornamented with depictions of animals and figurative carvings.

According to Nasir (2016), historically, evidence showed that Arabs, Persians, and Indians brought over the religion of Islam. Eventually, the arrival of Islam helped shape the motifs to become more abstract and align with Islamic values and acceptance. Scholars believe that the progression of vernacular architecture and Malay woodcarvings expanded as early as the 14th century, dominantly in Southern Thailand and the northern part of the Peninsular (Said, 2019). Said (2019) also pointed out that in terms of geographical and historical aspects, the art of woodcarving and architectural vernacular in Peninsular Malaysia extended from the north of Pattani province in Thailand to the Johor region in the southern part. Thus, depending on which state it is, the significance of the woodcarvings is different in varying degrees, whereby they embody woodcarvers' and carpenters' meticulous observation of the universe's form, culture, nature, and beauty. To that degree, the art of woodcarving coalesces with the integrity of Malays' piety, philosophy, and virtues created in the Malay mindset.

Woodcarving: An Overview

Woodcarving is a centuries-old artistic practice that shapes and sculpts wood into various forms and designs. It is a craft that requires precision, creativity, and a deep understanding of the wood's properties. In Malay, woodcarving is translated to "ukiran," which is chiseled or carved on objects (Abidin et al., 2017). Sufiyya (2006) expounded that woodcarvings serve as ornamental components crafted to enhance the aesthetic appeal of an object. Malay woodcarving boasts a rich tapestry of motifs, each falling into one of five fundamental categories: flora, fauna, Arabic calligraphy, the cosmos, and intricate geometric patterns (Said & Abdullah, 2001). These motifs represent the beauty of nature, artistic calligraphy, cosmic mysteries, and intricate patterns, all serving as a canvas to express Malay culture and traditions. Historically, woodcarving has been used for both practical and artistic means. It has been applied to create functional items like furniture, architectural details, tools, and utensils. In Malaysia, woodcarvings are a prominent decorative art on palaces, mosques, surau (prayer houses), and traditional Malay homes (Hassan et al., 2016). At the same time, it has been a means of artistic expression, with carvers infusing their creations with symbolism, cultural motifs, and personal interpretations.

In summary, woodcarving can be termed an artistic practice involving various techniques and motifs. These are meticulously arranged following specific patterns and crafted with designated tools,

all executed on carefully chosen wood. The resulting wood carvings serve functional purposes while seamlessly incorporating aesthetic elements.

Woodcarving Techniques

A woodcarving is an art form that entails partially chiseling wood chunks from planks or boards to create a specific component of shapes, motifs, and patterns, as Said (2019) described. It has long been established among the Malay communities as it is recognized as an ancient art craft. The woodcarvings are similar to carvings on stones and metals due to their compositions. Notwithstanding the similarities, there are differences in the techniques applied to design the motifs on wood. Woodcarvers have continuously used two carving techniques: *ukiran kasar* (rough carving) and *ukiran halus* (intricate and fine carving; Said & Kamarudin, 2009). When it comes to *ukiran halus* or fine carving, it usually gravitates toward relief-type patterns, which can be commonly found on hilts of *keris* (short Malay daggers), frames of bed heads as well as cupboard tops (Nazuki & Kamarudin, 2017). On the other hand, *ukiran kasar* or rough carvings are typically carved on much larger and bigger objects such as pillars, windows, roof eaves, gables, items of furniture, and *tebar layar* or partition panels (walls and doors; Nazuki & Kamarudin, 2017).

Regarding the incision and perforation techniques, there are three types: direct piercing (*tebuk tembus*), semi-piercing (*tebuk separuh*), and embossed-relief piercing (*tebuk timbul*; Nasir, 2016; Noor &

Khoo, 2003). Firstly, direct piercing involves carving or piercing the wood directly to create hollowed-out areas or negative spaces within the wood. It usually functions as an air passage and lighting to certain spaces, primarily found in traditional Malay houses such as window heads or door heads. Secondly, the semi-piercing technique does not produce negative spaces but highlights the beauty of the wood surface that can be found, for example, mosque signs and *rehal* (book rest for Quran). Finally, woodcarvers carve designs into the wood's surface for embossed relief piercing, creating raised patterns or motifs. This technique gives the illusion of the carving protruding from the wood, providing a tactile and appealing texture (Silah et al., 2021). Forming the carvings takes great skill and principle to make precise incisions to create fine details. Careful thought is taken into consideration to ensure the carvings are well-intact and become a complete whole with purpose and meaning. Wallschlaeger and Busic-Snyder (1992, as cited by Kamarudin & Said, 2008) described the principle of visual organization to fabricate the relationship within the art form must require three things, which are "form, the compositional elements, and the intended meaning" (p. 103), and these three elements are consistently reflected in Malay woodcarvings.

Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan

A study by Kamal et al. (2004) described a traditional Malay house as a distinctive architectural wonder characterized by its

structural timber composition elevated on stilts. Masri (2012) echoed a similar perspective in her study, which conveyed that traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan are fundamentally built on stilts supported by high flooring, walls, and a roof, all complemented by a flight of stairs. Nor and Shahminan (2016) pointed out that within the Old Community, constructing buildings on stilts had evolved from a historical necessity into an integral aspect of their identity. Its construction employs a framework of posts and lintels encompassed by bamboo or wooden walls. Their exposition extends to the fact that these houses were strategically situated within expansive compounds to spotlight the Malays' ingenious craftsmanship and harmoniously align with their environmental, socio-economic, and cultural prerequisites. The construction techniques underlying the creation of traditional Malay houses were founded on a foundational design that allows remarkable adaptability. This aspect enables extensions to the house to be effortlessly integrated whenever the need arises.

In Negeri Sembilan, the design of the rooftop serves as a key reflection of a house's character. As multiple researchers have noted, there has been a misunderstanding surrounding the rooftop design of present traditional Malay houses. The commonly assumed representation of buffalo horns in the rooftop's shape, known as "atap," is derived from Riau's visual portrayal of the Lancang, a traditional boat (Masri, 2018). This confusion is understandable due to the cultural influence of Minangkabau

customs and traditions on Negeri Sembilan's society. Traditional houses in Minangkabau typically feature a more pronounced curving rooftop resembling buffalo horns, known as "tanduk kerbau" (Masri, 2018). In the past, the houses in Negeri Sembilan were even identified as Minangkabau houses. However, a study by Shahminan (2007) revealed that these traditional houses are now more commonly recognized as "Rumah Bumbung Panjang Negeri Sembilan" (Negeri Sembilan's long-roofed houses). This transformation underscores that despite their Minangkabau origins, the people of Negeri Sembilan have gradually forged their distinct Malay identity over time.

Aesthetic Configuration in Malay Woodcarving

Jamal's (1992) philosophy on the beauty of Malay art is that what makes Malay art truly exceptional is the way the art has tapped into the creation of the soul. They are interpreted through dreams, aspirations, and sensations while envisaging humanity's harmony with nature. It is impossible to separate the factors of nature and humans as they are faithfully interlinked, creating a synthesis of a harmonious balance between the two. For many years, humans and nature have coexisted with each other. Respectively, when such respect is given, one can provide for the other, as this unspoken bond is metaphysical. In conjunction with woodcarving motifs, Malay woodcarvers and carpenters are given the absolute liberty to convey their feelings, imaginations, and observations of the universe surrounding

them, unravel and create the physical beauty of the universal realm, and manifest that into intricate motifs. The imparted wisdom they have made for the motifs shows the surface of their admiration towards their culture, upbringing, nature, and last but not least, The Mighty Allah SWT. Many traditional Malay houses exhibit simplification and even complex floral motifs since nature is regarded as a definitive element that remains evergreen and ceaseless. Each house is distinctive with floral motifs as they are products that depict florals and foliage that can be acquired in the vicinity. The motifs' visual designs are the by-products sourced from intertwining plants such as flowers, seeds, leaves, and buds.

Furthermore, the visuals of the woodcarving motifs are merely attributes of Malay philosophy and cultural values, indicating that humankind comes from the main true source, Allah SWT. Basaree and Silah (2013) asserted that the designs of the Malay motifs resulted from a gradual alteration or denaturalization of nature in art: the reason for this is to conform to the rules of suitability in producing patterns emphasizing the Malay people's concept of beauty and societal norms. In addition, the carved motifs on traditional Malay houses serve aesthetic and ornamental reasons and provide functionality with different purposes depending on where the designs are placed and carved (Yusof et al., 2021). The beauty principles founded by Ali (1989) highlighted that six aesthetic principles can be found in Malay art: unity, functionality, contrast, refinement, symbolism, and

meaningfulness. Firstly, unity in visual art means blending form and content for clear communication and storytelling. Secondly, functionality refers to the practical or utilitarian aspects of an artwork or design, and it is the extent to which a visual creation serves a specific purpose beyond its aesthetic or artistic qualities. Thirdly, contrast encourages harmonious distinction by blending opposing elements for balance, flexibility, and aesthetic enhancement in art. Fourthly, refinement denotes refined sensitivity coupled with artistic insight and sensibility. Fifthly, symbolism pertains to the use of symbolic representation within art. In forms like woodcarving and architecture, the form and content convey deep symbolic meanings rooted in history, culture, and archetypal beliefs. Finally, meaningfulness signifies the conveyance of hidden, spiritually rooted insights into the profound truth of existence.

The principles mentioned above emulate the sophisticated knowledge and virtues of the Malay-centric worldview that is mirrored in the woodcarvings. The intricate expressions of refinement and artistry vividly showcase the deeply rooted socio-cultural values of the Malay community, seamlessly interwoven with the teachings of Islam. Thus, it is essential to note that it is part of their identity to reflect their sensitivity toward the concept of humility since, in Islam, Allah has fabricated the grandeur of nature to be above everything else, to show His creation to His fellow humanity (Kadir et al., 2018). Therefore, the woodcarvers and homeowners can

only abide by the rules of Islamic values by displaying the physical impressions of splendor and are encouraged to openly show these people's innate intellectuality in the form of woodcarving motifs.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses visual analysis to interpret the woodcarving motifs in the chosen samplings. This study was conducted using a qualitative method and consisted of two data types: primary and secondary. The qualitative method was suitable for this study because it seeks to infer why people have thoughts and feelings that could affect their behavior. Various methods through primary data were implemented to collect relevant data. Observations, site visits, photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain saturated findings.

In 2021, the researchers visited Kuala Pilah, where on-site observations were conducted. During these visits, the researchers collected longitudinal data samples to document the woodcarving motifs in the selected houses and augmented the findings through photographic documentation. The selected houses for this study are Rumah Zuriati bte. Husain and Rumah Tok Su Pangkin Nyai Seni. The criterion for choosing these samplings is to ensure that these houses still consist of woodcarving motifs, are still occupied by house owners, are still in well-kept condition, and can be found in the interior or exterior part of the house to align with the objective of this study. Interviews with the residents

were conducted to obtain information such as their names, the addresses of their homes, and the estimated years the houses were built for documentation purposes. Rumah Zuriati was built between the 1890s and 1900s, while Rumah Tok Su was built in the 1720s. An instrument that played a key role in the observation phase to collect necessary findings in terms of the architectural structure and woodcarvings is a camera for photographic records and to identify where the woodcarvings are placed from different angles of the houses.

The photographs of the woodcarvings were digitized, cataloged, and further illustrated into 2D black and white vector images of single-line patterns with the use of Adobe Illustrator. The method of vectorizing the data into 2D images facilitates the researchers' use of visual pattern analysis from collected pictorial data. The illustrations were classified into distinct categories based on the pattern and theme labeled. The 2D black and white vectors were used to seek verification from interviewees through semi-structured interviews to help identify the motifs found on the two selected houses.

The interviews were done through Google Meet as this study was carried out when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was enforced in 2021. Hence, the interviews had to be done through virtual meetings via Google Meet. The informant(s) are Norhaiza Noordin from Terengganu, who is a well-known and skilled woodcarver who has been practicing woodcarving at an early age under the guidance of the late

Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussein, and another local and expert woodcarver named Ibrahim Abdul Latiff from Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan who is a senior supervisor at Istana Besar Seri Menanti. The researchers employed semi-structured interviews with a pre-determined set of questions but also allowed interviewees to further add information in terms of identification and meanings of the motifs. Respectively, the two informants helped to verify and validate the data obtained from the site visits. They also facilitated deciphering the motifs and provided knowledge concerning the Malay philosophy of woodcarvings found in the two houses. Moreover, within the construction site of conversations with the woodcarvers, tacit knowledge takes shape, facilitating its transformation into tangible insights that propel the advancement of expertise in this domain (Toom, 2012). Additionally, using qualitative methods further empowers the researchers to delve deeper into the intricacies of personal experiences, enriching the researchers' comprehension within this field (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Therefore, this study acquired information through the woodcarvers' knowledge through interviews to retrieve relevant data regarding philosophical and socio-cultural aspects of the Malay community. Through a series of interviews, information was garnered, meticulously recorded, transcribed, and systematically analyzed. This process not only preserved the invaluable insights shared by the interviewees but also enabled the extraction of pertinent data, revealing discernible

themes linked to the identified motifs. In addition to direct observation and in-depth interviews, the research drew upon secondary data sources, such as pertinent journals and books delving into symbolism, to fortify the research findings and enhance the depth of information gathered.

Saussure's Theoretical Approach to Research

Semiotics is a field of study that deals with symbols and signs and their significance in society. Semiotics explores the relationship between a signifier, which can be a word, image, or object. On the other hand, the signified refers to the abstract idea it represents, which is perceived by interpreters and influenced by the denotations and connotations of the sign. Many scholars, researchers, and authors have explored and defined semiotics, including the renowned Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roman Jakobson, Charles Morris, Roland Barthes, and Umberto Eco. Yakin and Totu (2014) defined semiotics as epistemologically, the study of the actuality of signs in societal life. A study by Abdullah and Abdillah (2021) clarified that semiotics embody a visual symbolism accessible to the human eye. Additionally, semiotics is like a symbol-rich field that reflects how each person understands and uses their knowledge.

Eco's (1976) book "A Theory of Semiotics" proposed that semiotics is a discipline that encompasses all possible signs that can be interpreted and understood. It includes all semiotic narratives that can

be constructed from signs. C.S. Peirce's book *Selected Writings* described semiosis as the relationship between a sign, an object, and a meaning (Buchler, 2014). Hashim et al. (2018) explained symbols as messages conveyed through representation typically associated with something people recognize. Humans associate symbols with their daily experiences, as symbols and their meanings are closely connected. Eco (1980) suggested that symbols on buildings have been present ever since the introduction of human understanding of architecture. It implies that woodcarving motifs on buildings such as mosques and traditional houses have existed for centuries, providing specific cultural values to specific communities. To boot, woodcarving motifs have served as a dynamic medium for expressing a diverse array of concepts and messages. Within the Malay community, using semiotics through visual woodcarving motifs becomes a means to communicate their philosophies and lifestyles. This practice resonates with Saussure's notion that a sign amalgamates an object with an image, underscoring the significance of the interplay between the signifier and the signified. The employment of signifiers and signified within woodcarving motifs mirrors the cultural ethos within the Malay community, as these motifs stand as cultural emblems of paramount importance and meaning to the Malay people.

Table 1 is a comprehensive overview of the analytical tools employed by the researchers in their study, carefully selected from Saussure's semiotic theory.

Table 1
Saussure's tools of analysis for this study

| No. | Tools of analysis by Ferdinand de Saussure |
|-----|--|
| 1 | Sign: Anything that conveys a meaning |
| 2 | Signifier: Sign's physical form or things that give meaning (a word or image) |
| 3 | Signified: The meaning or idea expressed by a sign and evoked in the mind (mental concept) |

Saussure's approach was deemed the most fitting for the task at hand, as it provided the ideal framework for unraveling and interpreting the meanings embedded within the woodcarvings, given its primary focus on studying signs and symbols. A symbol is a type of sign, and it is a representation of an idea, concept, or object that carries meaning through association, convention, or agreed-upon cultural significance (Ibrahim & Sulaiman, 2020). Within this theoretical framework, three pivotal elements—namely, the sign, signifier, and signified—proved instrumental in enhancing the researchers' grasp of the symbolic significance at play. At its core, a sign is a fusion of a tangible, material form and an abstract mental concept. The signifier encompasses the material aspects or markers, exemplified by the identifiable woodcarving motifs meticulously selected for analysis in this context. Conversely, the signified encapsulates the realm of meaning or the mental concept linked to a particular sign. Alternatively, one could consider the signified as the essence, concept, or meaning associated with the signifier. When discussing visual elements, patterns such as woodcarving motifs can become symbols when they acquire specific cultural

or societal implications. Therefore, when the researchers analyze the motifs, cultural context is analyzed in tandem to help establish relevance to understanding how a symbol fits the specific culture's belief system or social practices, which is crucial for proving its symbolic meaning.

By delving deeper into the woodcarving motifs, their signified dimension encapsulates cultural attributes and Malay philosophies deeply ingrained within the Malay community's collective consciousness because the signified layer of these motifs draws from the language of communication, Malay customs, and enduring values. Saussure aptly illustrated that sign systems are not mere abstractions but integral elements of the real world, fundamentally contributing to constructing the perception of reality (Yakin & Totu, 2014). This concept is epitomized by the interplay between the signifier and the signified, a connection Saussure termed 'signification.' By unraveling the signification within the woodcarving motifs, the researchers gained insight into symbolism's crucial role as a descriptive and visual communication tool when viewers observe these motifs. Drawing on Peirce's semiotic framework, he categorized signs into three distinct

classes: index, icon, and symbol (Buchler, 2014). Symbols are inherently subjective, guided by convention and cultural context. In the case of the woodcarving motifs under examination, they align most closely with symbols, given their connection to signs and meanings. Thus, the motifs are emblematic of how symbols serve as vital conduits for conveying cultural nuances and insights to those who engage with them visually.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers explicitly collected and chose Kuala Pilah houses in Negeri Sembilan. The houses consisted of woodcarving motifs while maintaining the architectural state of a traditional Malay house. The selection of these houses for data collection is shown in Table 2. Moreover, they align with the

objective of this research, which is to interpret the meanings of the woodcarving motifs. The motifs identified on the houses encompass geometry, fauna, and still life.

In Rumah Zuriati’s house, four figures depict various motifs discovered within the architecture. Figure 1 illustrates the front view of the bargeboard, adorned with geometric patterns such as circles, semi-circles, and triangles. Moving to Figure 2, motifs on the front view of the gable ends feature ovals and diamond shapes. On the side view of the fascia board, as shown in Figure 3, fauna motifs such as hanging bats (*kelawar bergantung*) are displayed. Lastly, Figure 4 highlights the rearview motif of the sky pointer, also known as *tunjuk langit*, characterized by its rounded shape design.

Table 2
Selected houses

| No. | Homeowner | Year | Location |
|-----|--------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. | Zuriati Bte. Husain | 1890-1900s | Kampung Tanjung Beringin |
| 2. | Tok Su Pangkin Nyai Seni | 1720s | Kampung Parit Seberang, Kuala Pilah |

Meanwhile, Rumah Tok Su Pangkin Nyai Seni’s house presents another set of four figures illustrating discovered motifs. Figure 5 displays the front view of window rails adorned with geometric patterns, including ovals, cylinders, and rectangles. In Figure 6, the roof rafter at the porch’s front view features a symmetrical motif of *naga berjuang* (fighting dragons).

Figure 7 exhibits the front view part of the door head in the *serambi* (main room) area, adorned with the *awan larat* motif, which incorporates florals such as *bunga ketumbit* and *daun ketumbit*. Lastly, Figure 8 illustrates floral motifs on the front view of the gable end, presenting four broken flowers (*bunga pecah empat*).

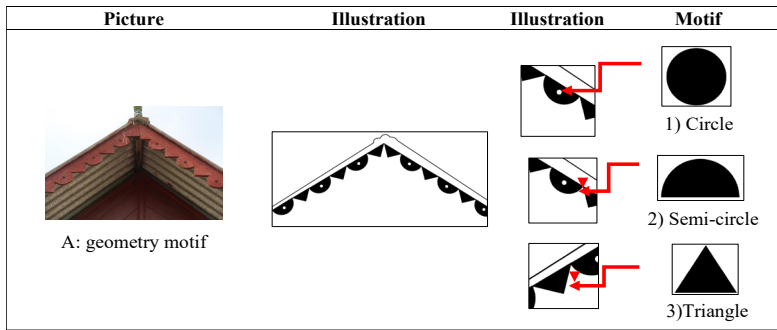


Figure 1. Front view: bargeboard (*papan layang*)

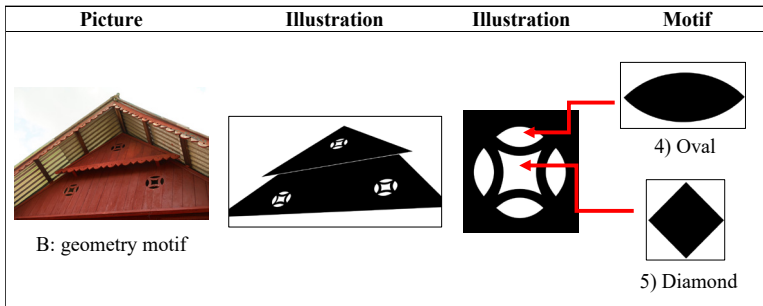


Figure 2. Front view: gable ends (*tebar layar*)

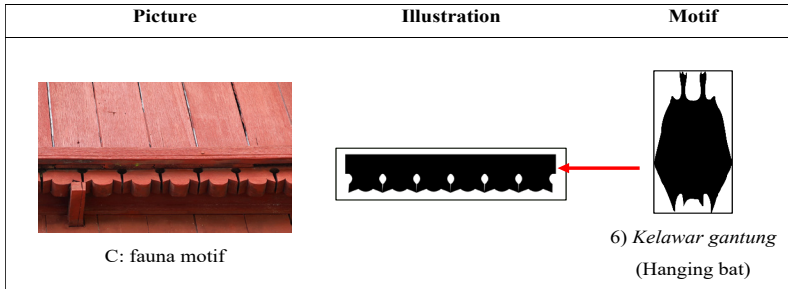


Figure 3. Side view: fascia board (*papan manis*)

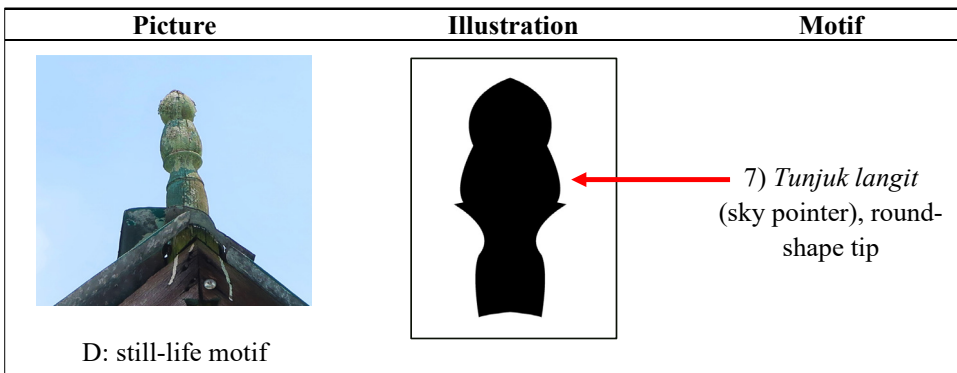


Figure 4. Rearview: king post

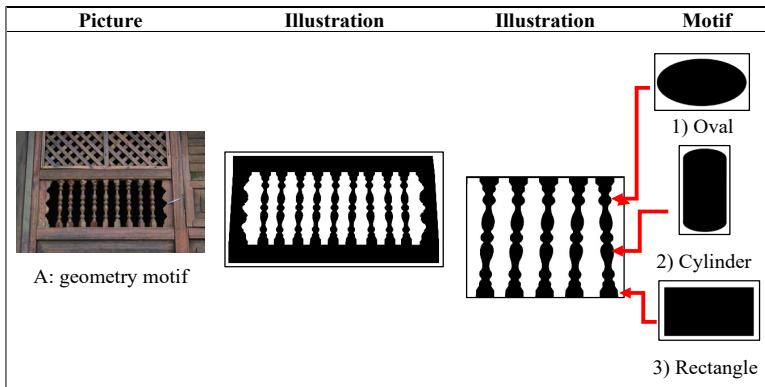


Figure 5. Front view: window rails (*kisi-kisi*)

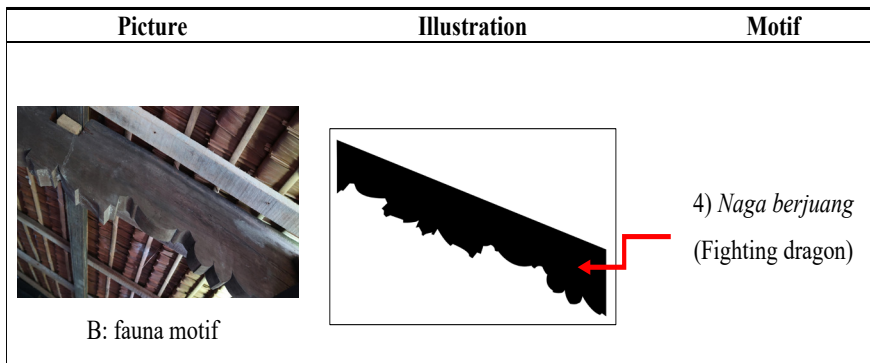


Figure 6. Front view: porch, rafter (*kasau*)

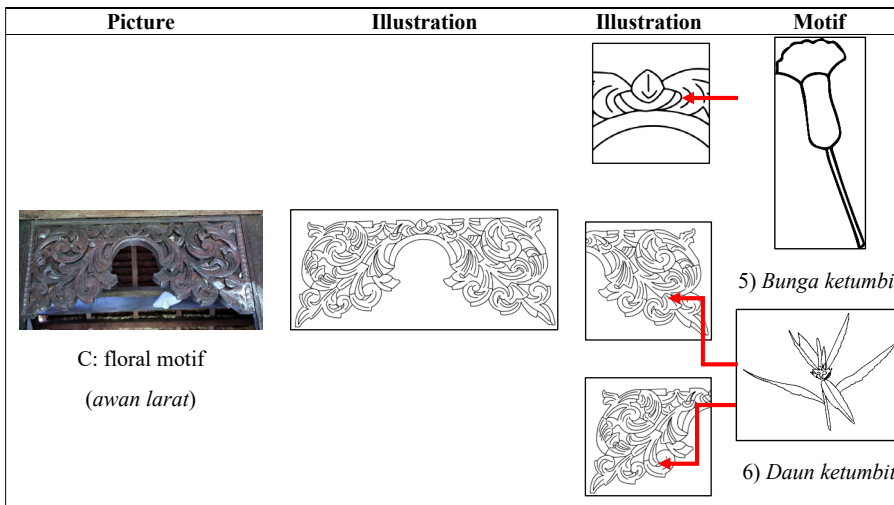


Figure 7. Front view: door head (*kepala pintu*) in the interior

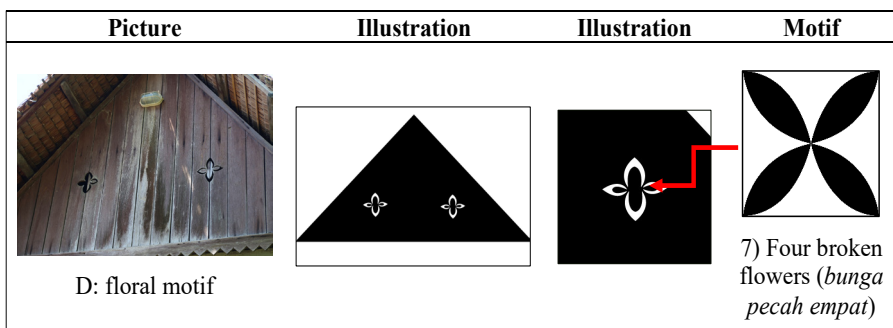


Figure 8. Front view: gable end (*tebar layar*)

Table 3 shows the descriptions of the meanings of the woodcarving motifs identified on Rumah Zuriati Bte. Husain and Rumah Tok Su Pangkin Nyai Seni's houses with the application of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. The detailed descriptions of the meanings were referenced from published sources such as books and journals, and analyses obtained

from the interviews to support the findings of meanings. The woodcarving motifs were decoded using any material or physical form that signifies, and a signified is a concept that a signifier refers to. Together, the signifier and signified make up the symbols of the woodcarving motifs that have been identified.

Table 3
Geometry motifs

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|-----|-------------|--|
| 1. | Circle | The circle is a universal symbol that represents the notions of totality, wholeness, original perfection, idealism, the sense of self, the infinite, eternity, timelessness, all cyclic movement, and God is a circle whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Based on the researchers, a circle can symbolize completion and closure. When a circle represents a task or a phrase of life, it suggests that something has come full circle or reached its conclusion. |
| 2. | Semi-circle | The semi-circle has its symbolic significance in Islamic culture. The crescent moon, essentially a semi-circle, is often associated with the lunar calendar, marking the beginning of Islamic months such as Ramadan and Eid. Interviewee I. A. Latiff (personal communication, June 20, 2021) illuminated that the semi-circle is usually used as a <i>gunungan</i> motif on doorways but can also be found on <i>papan manis</i> . According to the researchers, a semi-circle symbolizes the state of mind of consciousness. The human mind often operates cyclically, transitioning between states of consciousness and unconsciousness, as well as alternating between periods of awareness and non-awareness. This pattern occurs regularly during the day and night. Throughout the daytime, individuals exhibit a state of mindfulness, awareness, and wakefulness, which can be attributed to the functioning of two distinct cognitive hemispheres (Migueis et al., 2021). |

Table 3 (Continue)

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|-----|-----------|--|
| 3. | Triangle | The equilateral triangle, with its three equal sides, can symbolize balance and harmony in consciousness. It can suggest an equilibrium between opposing forces or aspects of the self. Based on the researchers, it sometimes resembles the shape of a bamboo shoot or <i>tumpal</i> motif, which is considered to be a symbol of fertility. Triangles can be associated with the appearance of bamboo shoots, mountains, or banyan trees and stupa, which is the appearance of many shapes found in the traditional design of the Malay community and the traditional cosmological iconography of the Malay Archipelago (Zakaria et al., 2018). Typically, it reflects the concept of Malayness or regionalism. |
| 4. | Oval | As per the research findings, the oval shape, akin to a circle, represents a sense of wholeness and unity. Its elongated form signifies inclusivity and openness, symbolizing the importance of embracing diversity and recognizing the uniqueness of each individual's thoughts and ideas. This emphasis on diversity aligns with the concept that rounded shapes, like ovals and circles, evoke positive emotions, eliciting a deeply emotional response. The inherent completeness and graceful curves of ovals are particularly relevant in the context of Islamic woodcarving motifs. Islam, as a religion, is often seen as a holistic and complete way of life. Its messages are imbued with grace and harmony, reminding people to coexist harmoniously with one another (Silah et al., 2021). In this light, the symbolism of the oval shape mirrors the teachings of Islam, emphasizing the importance of unity, grace, and the integration of diverse perspectives within the Muslim community. |
| 5. | Diamond | In Islamic culture, the diamond can represent purity and clarity of heart and intention. It signifies the idea of maintaining a clear and virtuous heart while navigating life's challenges. The diamond's multifaceted nature may be seen as a metaphor for spiritual growth and development (Zakaria et al., 2018). The diamond shape can signify an individual's ability to withstand challenges and pressure, emerging stronger and more polished. |
| 6. | Cylinder | According to the researchers, from an Islamic perspective, the cylinder, a three-dimensional geometric shape, holds a profound symbolism as a spiritual ascent. Within the sacred architecture of mosques, the act of ascending a cylindrical minaret or dome serves as a powerful metaphor for the believer's journey toward God, a spiritual ascent that signifies the pursuit of higher consciousness, found in a similar study by Mahmud et al. (2021). As one climbs upward, they symbolically ascend towards a deeper connection with the Divine. Additionally, this cylindrical form beautifully mirrors the concept of growth and development, which is highly valued in the Malay community. Just as each section of the cylinder represents a distinct stage of personal development, constant reminders of growth and self-improvement are essential for the well-being of individuals and the entire community (Kamarudin et al., 2020). This perspective emphasizes that personal growth contributes to well-being and the collective welfare of the Malay community. |

Table 4
Fauna motifs

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|-----|---|--|
| 1. | <i>Naga berjuang</i> (Fighting dragon) | The term 'naga berjuang' is personified as powerful and mystical creatures with benevolent and malevolent attributes. This characterization is consistent with the findings of Badaruddin et al. (2020) and Jaffar et al. (2017). The term 'naga' has its etymological origins in the Malay word for 'dragon' and is frequently used in Southeast Asian literature to describe mythical beings imbued with celestial power (Eslit, 2023). According to the researchers, the cultural belief in dragons in the Malay Archipelago precedes the introduction of Hindu-Buddhism influence. Following the establishment of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms and the subsequent arrival of Islam, the local population continued to evolve the depiction of the dragon, incorporating religious and cultural beliefs into its representation (Sanusi & Legino, 2015). |
| 2. | <i>Kelawar gantung</i> (Hanging bat) | Bats are primarily nocturnal creatures known for their echolocation abilities. Researchers have drawn parallels between these animals and the symbolism of good luck and prosperity. Bats' exceptional skill in navigating through the darkness serves as a metaphor for triumphing over life's challenges and forging a path even in the most adverse circumstances. Moreover, bats exhibit qualities of wisdom and fairmindedness, characteristics that resonate with the values deeply ingrained in Malay culture (Ab. Aziz, 2018). |

Table 5
Floral motifs

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|-----|---|---|
| 1. | <i>Bunga pecah empat</i> (four broken flowers) | <i>Bunga pecah empat</i> motifs are commonly found in traditional Malay houses. Its scientific name is <i>Ixora coccinea</i> , and it is from the <i>Rubiaceae</i> family. According to A. A. Aziz (2018), the <i>bunga pecah empat</i> does not refer to flowers of any specific kind of flower. The <i>bunga pecah empat</i> is characterized by its representation of abstract floral structures consisting of four petals, signifying simplicity and equilibrium, as elucidated in a study conducted by Redzuan et al. (2022). The authors explained that the <i>bunga pecah empat</i> holds a distinct place as a floral emblem in the Malay community. Within Malaysia, specific four-petal flowers may hold cultural or traditional significance, and their symbolism can be tied to local customs and beliefs. According to Hamdan (1998), <i>bunga pecah empat</i> is a traditional Malay symbol encompassing four cosmological elements: earth, fire, wind, and air. Similar to findings by Ab. Aziz (2018), in Malay medicine, the four elements require balance in the natural order of things as they are made from these four components. |

Table 5 (Continue)

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|-----|--|--|
| 2. | <i>Bunga ketumbit</i> and <i>daun ketumbit</i> | <i>Bunga ketumbit</i> and <i>daun ketumbit</i> provide inspiring factors for the Malay woodcarvers since they are often applied as part of the <i>awan larat</i> 's compositional design depicting tenderness and softness. Additionally, <i>bunga ketumbit</i> and <i>daun ketumbit</i> are herbal plants known for their medicinal benefits among the Malay community, as demonstrated in a study by Jasmani et al. (2019). These plants are commonly used to treat conditions such as sore throats, malaria, and minor wounds (Yusri & Chee, 2022). |

Table 6
Still-life Motifs

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|-----|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. | <i>Tunjuk langit</i> (sky pointer) | The <i>tunjuk langit</i> that points upwards signifies the light of Islam, which devotes the magnificence of Allah SWT (Ab. Aziz, 2018). The researchers' findings suggest that the concept of 'tunjuk langit,' which involves looking upwards, signifies a spiritual connection between individuals and the divine. In addition, it is associated with the house's structural integrity, particularly the ceiling and roof. This correlation is in line with the observations made in a study conducted by Isahak et al. (2022). |

With the implementation of Saussure's theory of semiotics, the meanings of each motif were decoded for the findings based on the objective of this study. From the observations, the two traditional Malay houses of Rumah Zuriati and Rumah Tok Su Pangkin Nyai Seni revealed various motifs enveloping geometry, fauna, floral and still-life. Each theme will be discussed further based on the tables above to analyze the inherent meanings behind the motifs identified.

Geometry Motif

Geometrical shapes are primarily easier to carve. Geometry is the most highly sought-after pattern because it requires the human mind to enhance creativity through

mathematical thinking with repetition and symmetry (Basaree & Silah, 2013). In our study, the woodcarvings of geometrical shapes are rooted in the teachings of Islam to demonstrate that the production of woodcarvings must adhere to the principles of design as prescribed by Islamic norms and philosophy. The research studies conducted by Azmin et al. (2021) and Basaree et al. (2015) have established a correlation between symmetrical and repetitive shapes and their association with the Divine concept. This connection holds particular significance within the religious and cultural framework of the Malay-Muslim community. The findings shown in Figures 2 and 5 additionally indicated that the geometric patterns present on the gable

ends and window rails facilitate airflow and allow natural light to permeate the inside of the house. Firstly, the decorative patterns embellishing the bargeboard, as demonstrated in Figure 1, add to the aesthetic appeal of the external façade, with the roof section serving as a framing element for the overall appearance (Surat, 2018). Secondly, the motifs on the window rails can cast visually appealing shadows into the house's interior, which is consistent with the findings of Yusof et al. (2020) and Abidin et al. (2014).

Placing motifs in Malay woodcarving is essential for both functional and symbolic purposes. Geometric motifs are visually appealing and hold their values and meanings. The symbolic and aesthetic aspects of the motifs are further enhanced by their repetitive placements, which creates a sense of rhythm and harmony in design, consistent with the findings by Kamarudin et al. (2020). For instance, the universal symbol, which is the circular pattern, signifies that God is at the heart of this eternal circle, where creation begins, ends, and perpetually unfolds, as shown in Table 3. This result complements a study by Hesar et al. (2015), suggesting that the circle serves as a basis of a geometrical shape but also signifies the cosmos, enlightenment, and perfection. Another further illustration may be observed in the depiction of the triangle, which is occasionally interpreted as symbolizing the “pucuk rebung” (bamboo shoot) or a mountain in various cases of woodcarving. According to previous studies conducted by Ghassany and Santoso (2020)

and Zakaria et al. (2018), it has been shown that the utilization of “pucuk rebung” is analogous to a triangular configuration. Additionally, within the context of Malay woodcarving, the triangle's apex symbolizes the utmost power and represents Allah's divine essence, as elucidated by Ab. Aziz (2015). The utilization of triangular shapes in Malay motifs carries thoughtful importance, as indicated in Table 3, deeply founded in the rich design legacy of the Malay community, symbolizing and encapsulating the core essence of Malay identity.

Fauna Motif

Fauna motifs are a common theme in Malay woodcarving. They reflect the rich natural environment and cultural significance of animals in Malay culture. The discovered fauna motifs in these two houses, as shown in Figures 3 and 6, maybe inconspicuous to most people. According to woodcarver N. Noordin (personal communication, June 16, 2021), the hanging bat (see Figure 3) and *naga berjuang* (see Figure 6) found in Rumah Zuriati and Rumah Tok Su have been entirely abstracted and stylized to conform to the teachings of Islam. Norhaiza added that the concept of the *naga berjuang* is dragons symmetrically facing each other, even though it does not form the real shape of a dragon. Previous researchers, such as Badaruddin et al. (2020) and Jaffar et al. (2017), have discussed the *naga* motif in Malay society and culture, as indicated in Table 4, emphasizing its symbolism of strength and power. However, with the arrival of Islam in the 14th century,

the transformation of the *naga* motif has evolved over time due to the avoidance of figurative elements, a phenomenon supported by the study conducted by Sanusi and Legino (2015).

While the hanging bat and *naga berjuang* findings exhibit curvilinear lines, Malay craftsmen were allowed the creative freedom to abstract animal motifs, using them to convey daily life lessons. This outcome aligns with earlier studies conducted by Ab. Aziz (2015) and Haron et al. (2014), where the authors emphasized the positive meanings that can be derived from animal motifs, particularly in the context of Malay cultural significance and symbolism. Moreover, local Kuala Pilah woodcarver I. A. Latiff (personal communication, June 20, 2021) elaborated that adorning the house with the hanging bat motif enhances its aesthetic appeal but also carries reflective symbolism. As stated in Table 4, the hanging bat signifies wisdom and righteousness represented by the Malay people (Ab. Aziz, 2018). The hanging bat motif is also a prevalent decorative element in traditional Malay houses, inspired by the presence of bats that frequently enter these homes (Gazali et al., 2018). However, it is imperative to investigate a more representative range of samples to yield more generalizable findings, as the documentation pertaining to the hanging bat motif in woodcarving remains limited.

Floral Motif

The floral motif is the most distinguished

in Malay woodcarving. The floral motifs such as *bunga pecah empat* (see Figure 8), *bunga ketumbit*, and *daun ketumbit* (see Figure 7) contain symbols innately linked to the Malay culture. As stated in Table 5, the *bunga ketumbit* and *daun ketumbit*, for instance, are medicinal and valuable to the Malays. The *bunga ketumbit* and *daun ketumbit* are herbal plants that are found in local villages which serves as an inspiration for local craftsmen, and it has been discovered that the use of *bunga ketumbit* and *daun ketumbit* are prevalent in woodcarving designs due to its remedial usage for the local community (Yusri & Chee, 2022).

The *awan larat* (Figure 7) consists of a central motif known as ‘punca’ or ‘ibu,’ which symbolizes the emergence of plants, which is in line with previous findings by Yusoff et al. (2016) and Sabri et al. (2021). The *awan larat* motif is typically accompanied by leaves, flowers, and tendrils, creating a balanced symmetry along its axis. This motif holds spiritual and religious significance in Islam, as it often represents a continuous cycle with no clear beginning or end, a concept detailed in the study by Kamarudin et al. (2020). Furthermore, the *awan larat* motif has been a subject of discussion among researchers seeking to understand its underlying philosophy. The central position of the ‘punca’ within the design symbolizes radiance, vitality, and enduring qualities in every creation of woodcarving art, as highlighted in studies by Bakar and Utaberta (2013) and Harun and Samsudin (2022). The ‘punca’ serves as the

primary source for additional woodcarving leaves and tendrils, contributing to the overall balance and symmetry of the design.

Still-Life Motif

Still-life motifs are relatively rare in traditional Malay woodcarving. However, there are instances where certain elements of Malay socio-cultural symbolism have been integrated into Malay woodcarvings, often as part of a larger narrative, design, or emphasis on the overarching theme of Malay identity. The still-life motif, such as the *tunjuk langit* found at Rumah Zuriati (Figure 4), the rounded shape of a sky pointer, is an architectural element that establishes the identity of the home and house owner, consistent with a finding by A. S. Aziz and Olalere (2013). 'Tunjuk langit,' which translates to 'pointing to the sky' in English, is a motif that typically features what appears to be a hand with an extended finger pointing upwards, often toward the sky or heaven. As explained in Table 6, this motif holds deep significance in Islam, symbolizing the concept of the oneness of God (Tawhid), the importance of monotheism in Islamic belief, and the light of faith, as discussed in studies by Ab. Aziz (2015) and Isahak et al. (2022). A similar observation was made by Choo et al. (2022), referencing Nakula's work from 1985. They also underscored the *tunjuk langit's* role in symbolizing *Tawhid*, representing the unity of Allah SWT and acting as a reminder for observers. 'Tunjuk langit' serves as a visual and spiritual symbol of faith and devotion within the context of Malay culture and

Islam while also playing a definitive role in the identity of the house owner.

The findings reveal that each motif in Negeri Sembilan's woodcarving closely reflects Malay culture, religious values, and philosophy, embodying a unique and distinctive Malay identity. By applying semiotic theory for this study, signification involves decoding and understanding the meanings and symbolism associated with various woodcarving motifs. The results emphasize that these motifs' signification is not arbitrary or universally understood but is culturally and contextually situated. The process of signification entails interpretation influenced by cultural, social, and historical contexts, which may vary among different groups. However, the common signification of the analyzed motifs reflects the essence of Malay identity, as Malay woodcarving symbols are imbued with religious, cultural, and philosophical significance.

These signs and symbols facilitate interaction, comprehension, mutual compliance, and acceptance (Ab. Aziz & Abd Aziz, 2021). For example, the 'awan larat' signifier, as found in our research, is represented with floral and plant elements comprising 'bunga ketumbit' and 'daun ketumbit.' The primary signified of the 'awan larat' is associated with Islamic spirituality, symbolizing perpetuity and an endless cycle, aligning with previous research findings. Upon analyzing the 'awan larat' pattern, distinct flowers were observed, introducing additional connotations. Specifically, 'bunga' ketumbit' and 'daun ketumbit' were found to possess therapeutic properties

valued among the Malay community. Thus, the signifying process involves interpreting multiple layers of supplementary meanings and connections symbols may possess, as cultural settings primarily shape semiotics.

Furthermore, the meanings are mainly derived from their surroundings, as nature is one of the central stimulants of natural beauty for woodcarvers. Woodcarvers must possess extensive skills honed through years of practice to transform elements of their natural surroundings into abstract physical designs while adhering to Islamic teachings that strictly prohibit the depiction of human and animal figures. Simultaneously, woodcarvers express their admiration for the sacred beauty of the natural world, attributing it to the Creator of the Universe, Allah SWT. In old Malay communities, nature is deeply respected, including the characteristics of plants, animals, and even inanimate objects. The diverse forms found in nature hold the tacit knowledge of Malay history and the principles by which people have lived. Furthermore, the motifs carved onto houses often remind homeowners to live harmoniously with their neighbors, align with the natural world, and maintain a balanced coexistence. The Malay saying, "*Alam terkembang menjadi guru,*" translates to the vast natural world of being a teacher. Natural elements serve as a guiding inspiration for the intended meanings behind each carver's creation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study was to interpret the motifs found in Malay woodcarving,

particularly those prevalent in the samples from Kuala Pilah. These motifs encompassed various categories, including geometry, fauna, flora, and still life. This study also employed Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory to unravel the symbolism embedded within these motifs and understand their cultural significance. The study's findings have illuminated the cultural and symbolic meanings encapsulated within Malay woodcarving motifs. Through the lens of semiotics, the study provided insights into how these motifs convey messages related to Malay culture, beliefs, and philosophical aspects. It became evident that nature is a pivotal source of inspiration for Malay woodcarvers, enabling them to manifest their aspirations, devotions, and stylistic skills. These woodcarvings, rich in symbolism, serve as cultural tokens representing significant importance in Malay vernacular architecture, conveying meaningful messages about history and socio-cultural identity. The choice of woodcarving material reveals both tangible and intangible aspects, contributing to the cultural identity and heritage of the people in Kuala Pilah.

Regarding theoretical implications, this study underscores the unique knowledge gained through applying semiotic theory in interpreting the symbols within woodcarving motifs. The study's undertaking of using semiotics theory not only provides a comprehensive framework of visual semiotics for present analysis but also establishes a basis for future research in related fields of study. Furthermore, the

incorporation of semiotic theory into this study holds the potential to generate progress in visual and cultural semiotics since this research aims to enhance our understanding of the efficient transmission of cultural messages through visual symbols, especially in the context of the Malay worldview. With a firm foundation in the woodcarving motifs of Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, these symbols could impact the formation of cultural identity and artistic expression within this regional framework. In addition to its academic importance, this research has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the conservation and documentation of the cultural legacy of Negeri Sembilan. Identifying and documenting the cultural symbolism woven into woodcarving designs in Negeri Sembilan could guarantee the acknowledgment, commemoration, and preservation of this significant facet of the local heritage for future generations.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the symbols of woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan through semiotics theory, whereby relevant previous studies are scarce and insufficient in documentation. However, it is necessary to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. One notable limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on Malay woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan. This limitation arises from the fact that the research primarily examines a specific regional context, and as a result, the findings and interpretations may not be

easily transferable to other geographical regions or cultural contexts.

Secondly, the subjectivity of semiotic interpretation poses challenges in achieving standardized or universally accepted meanings for signs and symbols because the study's semiotic analysis prioritizes the Malay worldview while examining the carving motifs. Researchers are aware that there is a possibility for variations in interpretation and recognize that different experts may offer different insights into the same set of signs.

Thirdly, the theoretical framework used for this study is built upon the premise that meaning is not directly encoded in signs but is assigned to them by those who use and interpret woodcarving motifs. Therefore, this theory recognizes that interpretation is a complex process influenced by several factors, including culture, religion, individual experiences, and philosophical perspectives.

Fourthly, there is a potential selection bias due to the non-probability sampling method and the limited focus on exterior woodcarvings that were found. Subsequent inquiries should undertake a more extensive examination of the social and cultural surroundings of woodcarving motifs, with particular emphasis on its semiotic implications. This endeavor is crucial to enhance our understanding of the distinctive cultural value attributed to these motifs within the region of Negeri Sembilan. Therefore, this study serves as a valuable starting point for future research to delve deeper into the dynamics of woodcarving

themes and their symbolic representations within the region.

Finally, while semiotics theory offers a valuable lens for interpreting symbols, interdisciplinary collaboration with art history and anthropology experts may be necessary to fully grasp the historical and cultural context of woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan.

Despite the limitations, a call to action for future research is recommended. Future research endeavors could extend studies of Malay woodcarving motifs in the specific region of Negeri Sembilan since documentation is limited, and there is ample room to explore this aspect further. While living in a digital age, research can extend to developing comprehensive databases and digital archives dedicated to Malay woodcarving motifs. It could help facilitate the preservation and accessibility of semiotic interpretations and woodcarving history, especially in the context of Malay motifs in the state of Negeri Sembilan. As a result of the swift growth of urbanization, a significant segment of conventional Malay households has initiated the replacement of timber dwellings with constructions made of slabs and bricks. Consequently, woodcarving themes have been neglected and fallen into disrepair. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize research that focuses on preserving and maintaining woodcarving themes seen in traditional Malay buildings in Negeri Sembilan, as well as their cultural relevance. Exploring techniques to preserve these art forms for future generations can be a worthwhile avenue of inquiry. This

study emphasizes the significance of future research efforts for scholars and researchers to enhance and authenticate the theory employed in this domain while expanding upon the fundamental framework laid out in this investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Malaysia for their support in completing this research. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the reviewers for providing thoughtful feedback and insightful comments during the development of this manuscript.

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