

## DEVELOPMENT OF MALAY WOOD-CARVING MOTIFS FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES

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### Abstract

*Wood-carving arts in Malaysia started out in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with Animism and then the Hindu- Buddha influence. The motifs and patterns were mostly flora and fauna based. But with the rise of Islam in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the art was basically resurrected with appearance that is accordance to the Islam Law. Though, there might be a slight issue in knowing the difference of motifs between the eras and why certain motifs are no longer used now. Carving is one of the branches of art that the Malays have as a traditional legacy. High level of skill and techniques are needed in the art of wood-carving as it is both a decoration, an art form as well as a display of symbolic carved elements. That is why rather than totally abandoning the art form, to comply with the Islamic rules, it is evolved into something beautiful and at the same time showing obedience to the creator, Allah SWT. For that, it is important to understand the evolution of Malay wood-carving motifs before the rise of Islam and after it is implemented. After conducting a research on multiple past papers, the reasons and proof on why there are woodcarving motifs that are forbidden and some are allowed, were found. This article will discuss some aspects in traditional wood-carving concepts, history and after the emergence of Islam.*

*Keywords: Wood-Carving, Animism, Islamic Influence, Tanah Melayu.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is our nature as human being to be attracted to beautiful things in life, whether if it is from the nature or man-made. Including their homes and abodes, multiple form of decorations was made and put into the building design, some even became the identity of a culture. Islam has its own clear sets of rules and boundaries in decorating one home that leads to welfare and keeps mankind away from destruction. The Malaywoodcarvers were guided by the teachings of Islam, which highlights the love of nature, to seek beauty from the surrounding, which offers a wide variety of plants with a different shape of shoots, leaves, flowers, and fruits (Basaree & Silah, 2013).

The concept of art according to the perspective of Islam is to guide people towards oneness and also an act of obedience to Allah SWT. The art itself is formed to encourage people to be a good and civilized human being. Furthermore, art should be an educational process that brings benefits, and it should never deviate from Islamic law's limitations (Shuid, M. et al, 2003).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has also been done in the field of art in Islam. Nor Adina et al. (2018) has studied the a few aspects of carvings, including its history, concept and motifs. The research data is collected by analysing the past studies related to the topic. It is found that the emergence of Islamic carvings started out in the land of Arabs, followed by Persia India and spread to the whole country of Tanah Melayu by the merchants.

It is also proven that the motifs of carvings back in the day calligraphy, arabesque motifs, geometric patterns, shapes of nature such as plants, animals, and inanimate objects such as the sun and the stars are frequently incorporated into Islamic carvings. The fauna motifs, however, are less used compared to others as it contradicts the laws of Islam. This case can also be explained why certain findings in Khairul Azhar Azmi (2017) research, showed an obvious attempt to cover an animal motif found in a traditional house by altering its shapes until it is vague. It leads to a theory of progression of the people in obeying the law of Islam through carvings motifs.

## METHODOLOGY

The main research method for this study is literature review from past research. Journals, articles, books and internet searches from reliable sources are collected based on the keywords corresponding to the study. This analysis will review the chronology and development of Malay wood carving motifs throughout the years and give an appropriate review based on Islamic perspective on why the evolution happens through various journals and articles.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### I. Malay traditional house, Mosque and Palaces

In every place where people dwell there will be a decorative element, whether it is big or small, some are meant to be seen even from the outside, while some are hidden but are portrayed only on the inside of the buildings. As there werenot many materials of construction available at the time, most of the

structures are made of wood, same thing can be said about the decorative elements.

With home and palaces adorned with the decorative elements, the same thing can be said with mosques. As the holiest place where the Muslims pray and show their submission to Allah, the Mosque is a vital place for every believer. The mosque has become a symbol of Muslim communities, and the cultural norms that have been adopted indicate the maturity and willingness of Muslim Communities to instill a lifelong tradition in their communities (Utaberta N., et al, 2012).

### **Wood-carving before Islam**

Malay wood carving history goes way back to the beginning of the establishment of the country itself. But with time, it evolves according to the ideology of the people. The first one is animism, followed by, Hindu-Buddhist ideology and thirdly Islamic influence (Daud NIMK, et al, 2012). Before the emergence of Islam, there were three main sources for motifs of nature in Malay traditional craft namely floral (plant), fauna (animal) and cosmic (universe).

### **Animism Influence**

Animism is a form of religion that started way back and usually is said to originate with primeval man. Animism is the concept that everything on this planet, including the sun and moon, has their own spirit (Rahman, 2017). They also believe that they are surrounded by spirits and the supernatural beings. According to animistic religion, everything on this planet has its own soul (A Rahman, F., 2011), thus, they must be respected in order for us to exist in harmony and is belief to be able to assist human in their daily lives. Birth, illness, death, and agricultural rituals are all loaded with animistic symbolism.

Figure 1: An example of a wood-carved ornament with fauna motifs from Thailand.



(Source: Author)

Based on the figure (Refer to Figure 1), where an example of fauna motives, there are an obvious shape and details of an elephant. In Islam, the ones who draw, carved / engraved, or weaved realistic image of a living thing like this is given warnings and is said to be committing a sin that is heavily dislike by God. There are a few hadith that supported these claims such as:

1. Narrated by 'Aisha:  
Rasulullah S.A.W said: *"The makers of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them, 'Make alive what you have created.' Moreover, the angels do not enter a house where there are pictures."*  
[Sahih Bukhari: Volume 7, Book 72, Number 840]
2. Narrated by 'Aisha:  
*Allah's Apostle returned from a journey when I had placed a curtain of mine having pictures over (the door of) a chamber of mine. When Allah's Apostle saw it, he tore it and said, "The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah's creations." So, we turned it (i.e., the curtain) into one or two cushions.*  
[Sahih Bukhari: Volume 7, Book 72, Number 838]
3. Narrated by Ibn 'Abbas:  
*I heard Muhammad saying, "Whoever makes a picture in this world will be asked to put life into it on the Day of Resurrection, but he will not be able to do so."*  
[Sahih Bukhari: Volume 7, Book 72, Number 846]

## Hindu-Buddha Influence



Figure 2: The Gunung Meru motif that incorporates the spiral motif instead of foliage. (Source: Noor and Khoo, 100.)

Before Islam, in the 1st to 12th centuries AD, Tanah Melayu was under the influence of Hindu-Buddhist (Bahauddin, A. B., 1999). In Figure 2 above, the *Gunung Meru* motif refers to the place where the God resides in Hinduism. Gunung can be translated as mountain. Gunung is usually associated with the idea of empire in Southeast Asia since it is considered as a link between the humanity and nirvana (Guntur, G., 2015). This type of motif can be found on top of the door entrance, on the bedpost, the cupboard, the gong holder, the screen and the quail trap (A Rahim F., 2011). The structure of the shape is a triangle only without the base and the lines are carved with lots of foliage.

Even with motifs like this (Mountain) that represents no living form, but the intention of replicating the place where the God of other religion resides is simply forbidden. Even as an inspiration, as Muslims, it is categorized as imitating the behaviour and actions of the disbeliever and should never be done for any reason.

Narrated by Ibn Umar R.A:

*The Prophet PBUH said: "He who imitates any people (in their actions) is considered to be one of them."*

[Sunan Abu Dawud (4031), Ahmad (5114) (5115) (5667), Ibn Abi Syaibah in his Musannaf (19401), al-Tabarani in al-Mu'jam al-Awsath (8327), al-Baihaqi in Syu'ab al-Iman (1154) and al-Bazzar in his Musnad (2966)].

## Wood-carving Art after Islam

Because Islam forbids the portrayal of living things such as man and animals, Islamic design rules were established in the Malay culture. As a result, Muslim artists place a greater emphasis on geometrical patterns and other abstract designs, as these motifs do not contradict Islamic doctrine.

Narrated by Ibn Abbas:

*The Prophet entered the Ka'ba and found in it the pictures of (Prophet) Abraham and Mary. On that he said' "What is the matter with them (Quraysh)? They have already heard that angels do not enter a house in which there are pictures; yet this is the picture of Abraham. And why is he depicted as practicing divination by arrows?"*

[Sahih Bukhari: Volume 4, Book 55, Number 570]

The terms pictures in the Hadiths refers to anything that can be perceived as a form animal or living things. But plants were not included in term of pictures as it is permissible to have ornamentations or pictures that are floral theme or form. In the case where there are old remains of the

abandoned carved ornaments, most of it was somehow altered until the shape becomes vague (Khairul A. 2017).

Narrated by Abu Huraira:

*The Messenger of Allah said, "Jibril (PBUH) came to me and said, 'I visited you yesterday and nothing prevented me from entering except some statues by the door. Order someone to remove the heads of any statues in the house so that they resemble trees."*

[Recorded by Abu Dawud and al-Tirmidhi].

In the verse above, the line where "cut the head of the statue in the house to the shape of a tree..." it explains the detail where as long as it does not resemble living things, it is permissible for a Muslim to own or have the ornaments in the house.

Islamic compliant carved ornaments can also be broadly divided into 3 types of motifs. The three types of carved motifs are often used together. While geometric and calligraphy motifs can always be found in mosques, traditional house are usually adorned with floral motifs, inspired by their own surrounding vegetation.



## Arabesque

As motifs that depicts human animals or any life form is forbidden in Islam, plant-based or arabesque design gained more attention and started being used more. With this, the people have achieved 2 objectives at one time. The first one is, it fulfilled the need of aesthetics values and is pleasing to the eyes. The second one, its compliance to the religion which is also a form of obedience to the one sole Creator (Said, I & Abdullah A.S., 2001).



Figure 3 & 4: An example of a wood-carved ornament in a traditional Malay house.

Based on figure 3 and 4, clear floral motifs can be seen. Floral patterns, or plant-inspired motifs is allowed in Islam. These ornaments can be seen on pillars, upper part of the entrance and even on wall partitions. Most of it is done based on the creativity of the wood carvers and the preference of the owners themselves.

The characteristics of Malay wood carvings now, mainly comprises of design attributes such as various types of flowers, leaves, and design elements that are manifested into carving motifs (Shaffee N & Said, I, 2013). Flora or plants is made to be as a central element in the carvings after the rise of Islam. This indicates the obedience and the effort of Muslims to adapt and live as guided by the Deen.

## Geometric Design

Geometric designs is an arrangement of simple design elements such as straight, angled, and transversal lines that are incorporated into a pattern (Baniyamin N., et al, 2020). Designers and artisans frequently employ the practical applications of geometric concepts to achieve a wide range of geometrical patterns in their work. The organization's design principles are

usually targeted at finding specific solutions for unity, which strive to build a cohesive whole out of disparate elements that result in a balance of harmony and unity (Basaree & Silah, 2013).



Figure 5: Decoration on the walls from the exterior Masjid Jamek Dato' Kelana Petra Sendeng Negeri Sembilan (Source: Adibah Farhani, 2017)



Figure 6: Roof openings with geometric decorations allowing air ventilation (Source: Adibah Farhani, 2017)

In Figure 5 and 6 shows the use of geometric carved ornaments in an old mosque in Negeri Sembilan. These designs are not only pleasing to the eyes, it also act as a daylight filter mechanism. This mechanism helps in controlling the penetration of excessive sunlight, enabling only a certain amount of light to enter the praying hall and keeping the thermal comfort of the place.

## Calligraphy

Calligraphy is a direct impact of Islamic influence on Malaysia woodcarving motifs. Many can be found adorning mosque and traditional houses of a few



states in Malaysia such as Kelantan, Terengganu, and Negeri Sembilan. Calligraphy motifs are used on walls and ventilation panels, either in the form of relief carved, perforated, or a combination of both (Said, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

It is an ongoing and challenging effort to preserve and properly appreciate the history and identity of Malaysia in the form of tangible art. The traditional wood-carving art has been through numerous stages until it comes to what we can see today. Following the guidance of Islam, it gives a beautiful twist to the art and Malay wood-carved ornaments has shifted from the influence of Animism and Hindu-Buddha and focused more on Islamic ideology.

Other than that, the beautiful motifs were discovered to have unique features that made the motifs look harmonious and flexible enough to be implemented in a variety of forms and functions. Islamic compliant woodcarving motifs such as Arabesque, Geometrical design and Calligraphy has come a long way and has become our own identity and should be acknowledged as a heritage that should be protected and preserve. It would be a great loss if failed to be recognized and inherit by the younger generations.

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