



The philosophy in the creation of traditional Malay carving motifs in Peninsula Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper explains how the concept of the creation of Malay woodcarving motifs is associated with the ancient Malay kingdom of Langkasuka which came under the influence of Hinduism. However, since the coming of Islam, the philosophy of creating Malay carving motifs had undergone discernable changes. The motifs created have been found to be adapted to avoid contravening Islamic principles and values. Generally, the creation of traditional Malay carving motifs has its own guiding principles which differentiate it from carving traditions elsewhere. Basically, traditional Malay carving motifs can be categorised into decorative motifs or patterns which have been inspired by early or ancient Malay motifs such as the design pattern with floral motifs, stalks of leaves and tendrils (*awang larat* which literally means meandering clouds) which are found in the environment of Malay society as well as motifs inspired by the imagination of early carvers. This paper concludes with an explanation on the philosophy of selecting traditional Malay wood carving motifs based on Malay carving techniques.

Keywords: Hindu influence, Islamic influence, Kingdom of Langkasuka, Malay wood carving motifs, nature motifs, philosophy of motif creation

Introduction

Historically, Hinduism had a major influence on the development of culture in the Malay world. This distinctive influence in the socio-cultural formation of Malay society had remained from the Hindu period (*"periode Hindu"*) that began during the first century. Elements of Hindu culture which had a deep and lasting effect on the socio-culture of Malay society encompassed literature, religion and beliefs. It is believed that the development of handicraft, particularly wood carving in the Malay world, was influenced by Hindu culture. Apart from that, the most obvious influence in respect of the social structure of Malay society is the feudal system. Under this system, the social structure of Malay society was segregated based on social status. This system had also influenced Malay social structure in a traditional way by dividing it into two main dominant groups which are the aristocracy in the palace comprising of royalty and court officials; and the commoners who live in the villages, the fringes of the seaside and in the jungle (Siti Zainon, 1986).

The palace and aristocracy were those who have used craft, particularly the art of carving as a symbol in administration. (Farish A. Noor & Eddin Khoo, 2003). The beautiful carvings produced at the palace are associated with the status symbol of an administration and indirectly had accorded recognition to the art of traditional Malay woodcarving under this system (Abd.Halim Nasir, 1987).

Originally, the wood carving produced was part of a craft activity for recreational purposes only. Circumstances changed when wood carvings were accorded a special place in the palace. Talented and highly-skilled craftsman in the arts were usually designated "Royal Artists" (*Seniman diraja*). As a result, traditional wood carving which was conceptually based on symbols and culture of Malay society soon found a special place in the palace (Kraftangan, 2009). The Golden Age of traditional Malay wood

carving began when the Sultans and aristocracy became the patron and owners of the arts. The age of brilliance of the art of Malay wood carving began when this group raised the status of the artisans to that of palace artists (Mohd. Affandi Hassan, 1992). Carvings produced for the palace usually emphasized a number of aspects including aesthetics and meaning. Aesthetically, the art of carving normally emphasized the artistic value and status symbols of the palace, while in respect of meaning, attention is focused on the obvious and hidden meaning in the art of the wood carving being created. The motifs and patterns specially designed for the palace indirectly had its own significance and philosophy which differentiates the ruling class from the ordinary people.

Influence on carvings after Islam

The coming of Islam to the Malay world had eroded the influence of Hinduism in the lives of the Malay people. Their faith in the of Islam had influenced all of their activities, particularly wood carving which was produced guided by principles of Islamic teachings. Consequently, Islamic values began to be embedded in carvings, particularly in the selection of wood carving motifs. Motifs of living things which had previously been important began to change to plant motifs in stylized forms and also carvings on Islamic calligraphy (Abdul halim Nasir, 1986).

Since the coming of Islam, nature motifs or *arabesque*ⁱ was a style that did not conflict with Islamic teachings. The *arabesque* style was introduced as Islam forbade designs based on depiction of living things such as man and animals. From the perspective of the philosophy of creation, the motifs produced are for ornamental purposes and at the same time for the purpose of monotheism (*tauhid*). In this regard, Islam had an important influence, to the extent that the carvings produced had developed a relationship between man and his creator in an abstract form while at the same time creating aesthetic values (Ismail Said & Ahmad Sifudin Abdullah, 2001).

Faith in Islamic principles accorded the religion of Islam a special place. Motif produced in wood carving was often associated with nature which gave meaning in religion. Usually, motifs created in wood carvings are composed in the form of plants such as the *setanduk* leaf in stylized form. This motif is produced to symbolize the nature of the Malay personality which is characteristically inclined towards humbleness and subservience as a mark of respect to others and also in submission to Allah (Kraftangan, 2009).

Sources of motifs such as *kala*, *makara*, *gunungan* (Mountain), *pohon beringin*, *stupa*, *padma/teratai* and *geroda/jentayu* are influences by Hindu cultural which are which are entrenched in Malay culture and are reflected in Malay carving skills and expertise. However, this motif has been changed by Malay carving specialists to elements which fulfils Islamic values as follows:-

Influence of Hindu Cultural	Influence of Islam	Symbol and Meaning
Kala ⁱⁱ	Foundation of carved flower	Source of the carved flower
Makara ⁱⁱⁱ	<i>Sulur Bayur</i>	Tendrils
Mountain/Cosmic mountain	Head	Anything triangle at the top
Bodhi tree	Beringin tree	Tree which is associated with Buddhism
Stupa	Stupa	The top triangular shape
Padma/teratai	<i>Tanjung</i> , a fragrant flower	Beauty
Naga	Not used in the motif	Not applied
Geroda/jentayu	<i>Petala Indera/Gagak Sura</i>	Mythical bird/mitos

Islam has been successful in motivating designers to produce motifs which are appropriate with Islamic values. Although living elements can still be found in carvings, they are for decorative purposes only. For example, the carved heron in the carving at the bow of the fisherman's boat of the past is said to bear certain values of beliefs, but its function has changed to merely decorative by incorporating plant motifs in it. Thus, motifs selected based on this change are related only to the socio-cultural aspects of Malay society and not associated with beliefs.

A large number of animal (*fauna*) motifs have been omitted from Malay woodcarving motifs but have been replaced by plant motifs. Plant motifs selected for carving are usually from the plant category closest to the carver's environments. The motifs selected are the type of plants which has significance in Malay society such as its edibility, medicinal values and aesthetics (beautifully-shaped leaf) and fragrant scent. The category of plant motifs which are related to traditional nutritional or medicinal values include *ketumbit* (*Leucas Lavandulifolia*), a common herbaceous plant, *kacang laut* (*Vigna marina*) a kind of herbal plant, *kangkung* (*Ipomoea aquatic*), an edible aquatic flowering plant and *daun sayap* or *daun Melayu*, a winged-like leaf evolved from Langkasuka motif or *daun dewa*. The category of plant motifs which has aesthetic values and fragrant scent include *bayam peraksi*, a kind of weed, *dala*, (*Crataeva macroparpa*), a creeper, *bunga kenanga* (*Canarium Odoratum*), a tree with fragrant green flowers, *bunga cempaka* (*Michelia Chempaca*), a sweet-scented flowering tree and *bunga cina* (*Gardenia augusta*), a tree with white or yellowish (off white) fragrant flowers.

The creation of motifs in wood carving is not only focused on natural sources or definitive sources of plant motifs (nature motifs). Based on the creativity of Malay carvers, plant motifs are usually changed and interpreted according to their appropriateness consistent with Malay culture and values and which are not in conflict with Islamic values or beliefs.^{iv}

Early Malay wood carving motifs

Early Malay traditional wood carving motifs were produced in three forms, which are Motif Melayu Langkasuka (*kelopak dewa*) circa sixth century: old Malay floral motif (*kelopak maya*) - circa 1600) and Malay living leafed motif (*kelopak hidup*) – circa 1800. All three early motifs or traditional motifs in the art of Malay wood carving have their own philosophies in keeping with the era in which they were created.

The first motif is “the motif *Melayu Langkasuka* /Malay Langkasuka motif (*kelopak dewa*)”^v circa 6th century. It is also known as “*lidah api* (literally fire tongue). This motif is associated with the Siamese motif during the kingdom of Ayuthia and the Majapahit motif in Java. This motif is more inclined towards leaf motif and living flowers (*bunga alami*) or motifs which originated from nature sources or living plants. However, this motif is more closely associated with elements in the earth's energy such as earth, water, fire and wind.

The second category is “the motif *bunga Melayu tua*/the ancient Malay motif (*kelopak maya*)”^{vi} which was produced around 400 years ago, that is circa 1600. This motif is a transformation of the Langkasuka motif, evolving from changes that it had underwent but retaining its original identity. It is believed that this motif had been influenced by foreign motifs such as from China and India. At the same time artists also experimented with new techniques in their creations. The philosophy of motifs produced in that period had resulted in the use of more than 40 percent of natural plant elements or nature motifs, while the rest are based on the artists' own inspiration and imagination.

Finally, the *kelopak Melayu daun hidup*/ the Malay petals within the living leaf (*kelopak hidup*)^{vii}. This motif is produced circa 1800 and is more associated with the art of carving in Pattani, south Thailand and Kelantan, Peninsula Malaysia. Different from ancient Malay motif, this motif incorporates mostly, that is more than 70 percent natural elements or nature motifs and the rest are based on motifs inspired by the carver himself.

Sources of motifs and pattern composition

Basically, inspiration for compositions in the art of wood carving is inspired from five plant sources namely leaf, stalk, flower, fruit and tendrils. Leaf compositions usually composed from the odd numbers of one, three, five, seven and so on depending on the surface of the carving. The type of leaf selected in ordinary carving usually comprising of leaves split into two, three and five. The two-part broken leaf category consist of the crocodile claws leaf (*daun jari buaya*) of the aloe plant family and the daun *dala*, a kind of tree that has unique three-edged leaves, while the three-part leaf category consist of *petola leaf*, a kind of climbing plant providing edible gourds and *peria* leaf also from the bitter gourd plant. Finally, an example of the five-edged leaf is the *sekun leaf*. To produce carving which appears soft, a leaf is usually carved in a in a curved manner as in the character of the shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*)^{viii} (Kraftangan, 2009).

The second most important element in a carving is the stalk. The stalk is the backbone or basis of the carving structure. Usually the stalk being carved is outlined to ensure that it is balanced before the design is complemented with flowers, leaves and tendrils. This source motif is usually from plants which are vital in Malay society. Plants selected in the outlining (*likaran*) of the stalk are those which have aesthetics, medicinal and also nutrition values. Examples of plant motifs of stalk are *sesayap leaf*, *telinga kera* (*Henslowia umbellata*), a kind of climbing plant, *telipot*, a kind of water or lotus plant, *kerak nasi* (*polianthes tuberosa*), a kind of herbal plant, *ketam guri* which are flowers and leaves of a common grass, *bayam peraksi*, a type of weed and *geroda motifs*, which are based on the mythical mount of the Hindu god Vishnu. These motifs are then complemented with leaves, flowers and tendrils in stylized form until it becomes a complete piece of wood carving.

In the art of wood carving, the preliminary philosophy of wood carving is based on how it begins with the source of the carving or how the carving is created from plant sources. It is related to how the wood carving is inspired by nature sources, particularly plants. The fundamentals of wood carving are also associated with the original source or the beginning of a growth. The term plant source (*tumbuhan berpunca*) symbolizes a particular creation which originates from the same lineage. From this, it is apparent that the visual of every artistic creation of Malay traditional wood carving in Peninsula Malaysia is based on plant sources. The origin of this plant source is based on six forms, which are seed source, flower pot source, earth source, flower source, secret source and land source. In introducing each wood carving, usually the base or foundation (*tapak*) begins with a story that is appropriate with life's philosophy, which has a beginning and an end. In this respect, it means that each carving is inspired by five plant sources which are leaf, stalk, flower, fruit and tendril which should first begin at the foundation or base.

Selection of motif based on technique

In wood carving, motif produced is not only focused on or emphasized the aesthetic aspects only. Before carving, usually the carver will consider the motif which will be created based on the technique that is suitable for the type of wood also the part that is going to be carved. The technique of carving is a method of reducing the wood by using a carving tool assisted by skilled hands. The carving technique produced is usually based on two forms, that is the two dimensional wood or three dimensional wood.

The philosophy of two-dimensional wood carving is usually associated with the motif produced in a flat or shapeless form. In this regard, the motif carved can be seen from one angle only. Usually two-dimensional motifs are wall decorations, door-leaf, grill and the louvered screens (*tebar layar*) of timber houses in the east coast. Different from two-dimensional forms, the philosophy of selecting three-dimensional motif form emphasizes the forms which can be appreciated from all angles. This motif is usually found in sculpture, agricultural implements, household equipment, *congkok* (game) and row of posts (*tiang larik*) in traditional Malay houses.

It should be emphasized here that most Malay traditional wood carvings require skills in carving *silat* in the carving process in order to enhance the beauty of the carving produced. In carving terminology, *silat* refers to delicately undulating bends and twists. It also refers to the expression *liuk lentuk* or stylized movement (not stiff). With regard to technique, there are several types of carvings produced by Malay carving specialists, which are relief carving without *silat* (*ukiran timbul tanpa silat*), relief carving with *silat*, (*timbul silat*), direct piercing or fully pierced with *silat* (*tebuk tembus* or *tebuk tembus bersilat*). The first technique is the production of relief carving without undulating curves (*ukiran timbul tanpa silat*) which refers to the whittling of the wood's surface to produce a motif or pattern. This technique can produce motif or patterns in a flat surface without bends or undulating curves.

The second technique is the curved relief carving which is almost similar to the first. The difference is in the *silat* motif or pattern of the carving. The motif or pattern on the bas relief with *silat* carving is merely by adding the *silat*. Both the bas relief carving without *silat* (*curve crossing*) and the bas relief with *silat* are suitable for door leaf, wall, gable ends of timber houses, window and furniture.

The fully pierced carving without *silat* is quite similar to the first carving technique that is the relief without *silat* carving. The difference is that the wood is carved right through creating gaps or holes in the carved wood. Even though the wood is carved through, the motif or pattern produced is even, without bends or curves. This technique is suitable for grills (*kekisi*), fenced enclosure on the ship's bow (*pagar musang*), partition (*sekatan ruang*), furniture and *cucur atap* (the decoration at the edges of the roof). The motif produced uses the pierced carving with *silat* (*tembus bersilat*) technique which displays the living motif in the case of the four layered *silat* (*silat empat lapis*). The ordinary fully pierced four-layered carving (*tebuk tembus empat lapis biasa*) is produced in a similar manner to the nature motifs (which displays the flower and leaf in almost the same form as its natural form). Complex carvings such as these are normally found in palaces or in the homes of Malay aristocracy.

Summary and conclusion

Islamic influence in Malay society in Malaysia has succeeded in determining or influencing the selection of motifs so it does not contravene Islamic values. To a large extent, the plant motifs or nature motifs were selected for wood carving due to the fact that plants have many uses in life such as source of food, medicinal values and so on. The environment surrounded by plants also encourages appreciation of plants in inspiring the art of traditional Malay wood carving.

It cannot be denied that the creation of plant source motifs is very important in carvings, however, living motifs which are incomplete and unique (bat's elbow and sea-horse) cosmology motifs (sun, stars, clouds and mountains) are also produced as an appreciation of the beauty and uniqueness of life and the natural world. The original philosophy in the art of wood carving is found not to be in conflict with Islamic values as the concept of production is based on appreciation only. Islamic influence in Malay society also led to the development of geometric motifs in Malay wood carving.

The palace circle and aristocratic society were a major influence in the development of the art of Malay traditional wood carving. The palace played a role in raising the profile of traditional Malay wood carving products and indirectly this was the beginning in the development of the art of craft, particularly traditional Malay carvings from peninsula Malaysia. From the beginning, handicraft work was intended to occupy free time but has since developed to specialized skills in the palace. It was from here that craft with the concept of symbols and culture of Malay society first began to gain recognition, particularly in the palace. Clearly, during that era, a large number of culture villages were established in close proximity to the palace compound. For example, in Kuala Kangsar Perak and Penambang in Kelantan, and a number of crafts in Peninsula Malaysia are associated with and are in close proximity with the palace environment of the time.

Wood carvers are skilled artists. With the skill of reducing the wood assisted by the appropriate tools, Malay craftsman have been able to produce various attractive carvings techniques such as two and three dimensional wood carvings. The pioneering philosophy in wood carving by Malay craftsman is aimed at

producing the most unique techniques to achieve aesthetic values appropriate with Malay culture. The philosophy of Malay carvings clearly views original source or godliness and world of nature which are associated with the original sources of creation.

We can conclude therefore that philosophy in the traditional art of wood carving is a reflection of the beauty of the soul and culture of Malay society which can be discerned from the arrangement and composition of the leaf, stalk, flower, fruit, and tendrils in a particular carving. The ornaments found in carvings are also connected with particular meanings and stories associated with the carvings themselves. The beauty in wood carving also represents what can be appreciated in the art of wood carving in the past, namely the Kingdom of Langkasuka which some parties claim did not exist.

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APPENDIX

Informant 1: Encik Latif Long
Carver
Kelantan Wood Carving
Pasir Tumbuh, Kota Bahru,
Kelantan.

Informant 2: Encik Norhaiza Nordin
Carver
Sri Bakawali
Besut, Terengganu.

Informant 3: Wan Mustafa Wan Su
Carver
Yayasan Pembangunan Usahawan Terengganu
(Foundaton for the Development of Entrepreneurs Terengganu)
Besut, Terengganu.

End notes

ⁱ Arabesque is also in stylised form. This term is also associated with the *awan larat* (literally meandering clouds) motif

ⁱⁱ The motif influenced by the creature from Hindu mythology, whose face is feature, albeit often subliminally, in carving. It is a symbol of protection.

ⁱⁱⁱ The motif associated with sea monster originating from Hindu mythology. It is a symbol of protection, especially for fisherman.

^{iv} According to Norhaiza, a carver from Besut, Terengganu, and the art of Malay traditional woodcarving can be categorized into four styles based on artifacts and on historical sources. The Malay kingdom of Langkasuka was said to be one of the earliest Malay kingdom based on hilts of the keris *tajung*, carved panels from old mosques, carved motifs from grave stones, and oral stories from ancient times.

^v Motif Melayu Langkasuka (kelopak dewa)

^{vi} Motif bunga Melayu tua (kelopak maya)

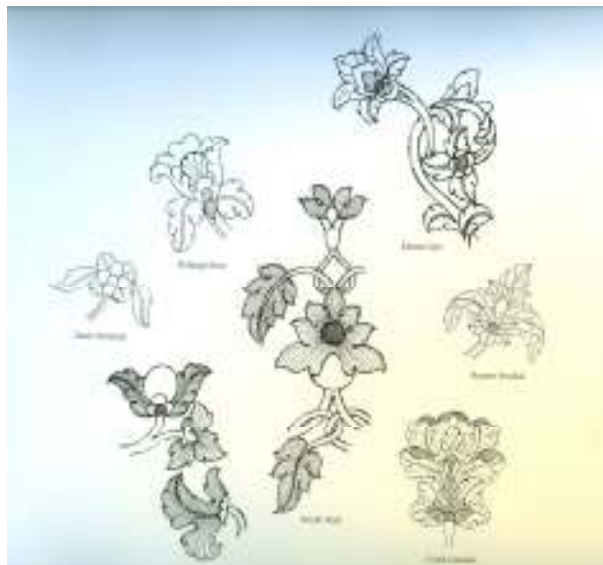
^{vii} Motif Melayu daun hidup (kelopak hidup)



^{vi} Motif bunga Melayu tua (kelopak maya)



^{vii} Motif Melayu daun hidup (kelopak hidup)



^{viii} Plant sources of motifs are *daun sesayap*, *belinga kera*, *telipot*, *kerak nasi*, *ketam guri*, *bayam peraksi* dan *corak garuda*.

Daun Sesayap - *Sesayap* leaf

Belanga kera - Monkey's cup

Telipot - *Telipot*

Kerak nasi - Creeper plant with flowers like rice scrapings

Ketam guri - Flower or leaf of common grass

Bayam peraksi - A type of weed

Corak garuda - Patterned on the mythical mount of the Hindu God Vishnu