



THE EVOLUTION OF MOTIFS ON TRADITIONAL
MALAY WOOD CARVING IN THE ISLAMIC ERA

BY

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Malay wood carving constitutes an essential art form that projects the rich tradition of the Malay culture. The dwindling appearance of traditional Malay houses means that the art of crafting wood carved panels is in decline. Inside the Malay homes, the traditional Malay biscuit moulds and coconut graters made from wood and decorated with beautiful engravings have been completely replaced by plastic ones. As Malaysia is rapidly modernizing and industrializing, the slow disappearance of traditional ornaments and their intricate and meaningful motifs has largely gone unnoticed. These wood carved artefacts from the past display typical motifs that were being transferred from one tradition to the other. After the advent of Islam, its religious teachings impacted on the motifs, which changed in their style and shape. The first objective of this study is to identify the traditional Malay wood carving motifs in the 19th and 20th century. It also examines the style of the motifs on the traditional Malay wood carvings produced during this period. The third objective is to examine the evolution of motifs on traditional Malay wood carving in the 19th and 20th century. The aim is to investigate the evolution of motifs as well as styles that dictates these motifs. The study employed the formalistic analysis method and identifies the evolution and style of motifs found on the selected wood carvings. The wood carvings from Kelantan and Terengganu were obtained from the International Art Museum Malaysia, Muzium Seni Asia, Muzium Terengganu and *Akademi Nik Rashiddin*. Apart from the field study and formalistic analysis method, interviews were conducted with academicians, curators, and wood carvers. The researcher interviewed the founder of the *Akademi Nik Rashiddin*, the senior assistant of the Muzium Terengganu, the senior curator of the Muzium Seni Asia, the Head of the Department Wood Craft of the Institut Kraf Negara, and the operation manager of Inakraf Wood Carving who is also a renowned wood carver. This study goes beyond the usual scope of studying architectural panels by including daily domestic items, boat accessories, traditional games, religious products, tools, traditional music, weapons, and furniture. A total of 74 artefacts dating from the 19th and 20th century was analysed in order to identify the motifs and examine their styles. The results reveal that floral, geometrical and Arabic calligraphy governs the selected wood carvings and that the dominating motif is floral. The findings of this study show evidence of evolution in the depiction of various motifs on the traditional Malay wood carving even though these changes are very subtle. Through analysis of the artefacts from this period it is found that the depiction of the motifs was highly stylized in order to avoid a direct representation of nature as prohibited in Islamic art. This study suggests that all the wood carving motifs produced in the 19th and 20th century should be properly recorded and safely stored in a digital database format before their complete disappearance. The motifs on the wood carvings that are being produced today tend to be increasingly modern, while the traditional motifs are being discarded. Once these traditional motifs have been stored and preserved, future artisans and craftsmen will be able to rediscover them and apply them on any structure or surface for embellishment. The traditional Malay motifs are part and parcel of the traditional Malay heritage and deserve to be preserved.

الخلاصة

تشكل عملية نحت الخشب الماليزي التقليدي شكلاً فنياً جوهرياً يبرز التقاليد الغنية للثقافة الماليزية. غير أن التناقص المستمر في عدد بيوت الملايو التقليدية يشير إلى أن فن نحت الألواح الخشبية في تراجع ملحوظ. فالملاحظ في البيوت الماليزية على سبيل المثال أنه قد تم استبدال قوالب صنع البسكويت الماليزية التقليدية وآلات بشر جوز الهند المصنوعة من الخشب والمزينة بالنقوش الجميلة بأدوات بلاستيكية. وهذا يعني أنه مع عملية التحديث المستمر والسريع في ماليزيا، فإن الاختفاء البطيء للحلي التقليدية وزخارفها المعقدة وذات المغزى لم يلاحظه أحد. إن تلك القطع الفنية الخشبية المنحوتة من الماضي تعرض زخارف نموذجية تم توارثها من جيل إلى آخر. وبظهور الإسلام في ماليزيا، نجد أن تعاليمه الدينية قد أثرت على طبيعة تلك الزخارف، حيث تغيرت في أسلوبها وشكلها. إن الهدف الأول من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد الزخارف الخشبية التقليدية التي تعود إلى القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين. وذلك من أجل دراسة عملية تطور تلك الزخارف بالإضافة إلى الأنماط الفنية التي احتوت أشكال تلك الزخارف. تتبنى هذه الدراسة منهج التحليل الشكلي من أجل رصد عملية تطور أشكال الزخارف الموجودة على المنحوتات الخشبية في العينات المختارة. تم الحصول على المنحوتات الخشبية من كل من ولايتي كلانتن، وترنغانو، من متحف الفن الدولي في ماليزيا، وكذلك من متحف (سيني آسيا) ومن أكاديمية (نك راشدين). وبجانب الدراسة الميدانية وطريقة التحليل الشكلي، تم إجراء مقابلات مع كل من الأكاديميين وأمناء المتاحف وكذلك نحائي الخشب. وقد أجرت الباحثة مقابلات مع كل من مؤسس أكاديمية (نك راشدين)، وأحد المسؤولين الكبار في متحف ترنغانو، وأحد كبار الأمناء في متحف (سيني آسيا)، ومدير إدارة المنحوتات الخشبية بالمعهد الوطني للحرف اليدوية، وكذلك المدير التنفيذي لمؤسسة (اينكاراف) والذي يعد أيضاً أحد مشاهير النحت الخشبي. وتتجاوز هذه الدراسة نطاق الدراسات المعمارية المعتادة لتتناول نماذج من أدوات محلية ذات استخدامات يومية وإكسسوارات للمراكب وألعاب تقليدية ومنتجات ذات خلفية دينية وعدد آلات موسيقية تقليدية وأسلحة وأثاث. وقد ضمت هذه الدراسة 74 قطعة أثرية يرجع تاريخها إلى القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين بغرض تحليلها وتحديد أنماطها الزخرفية. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن تلك النماذج من المنحوتات الخشبية قد تنوعت زخارفها بين الأشكال الزهرية والهندسية بجانب زخارف الخط العربي. غير أن النموذج الغالب فيها هو الزخارف الزهرية. وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أدلة على حدوث تطور في أشكال الزخارف المحفورة على المنحوتات الخشبية التقليدية الماليزية على الرغم من أن التغيرات الحادثة نتيجة ذلك التطور دقيقة للغاية. ومن خلال تحليل نماذج المنحوتات الخشبية من تلك الفترة وجد أن تصوير الزخارف كان دقيقاً ومنمناً للغاية من أجل تجنب التمثيل المباشر للطبيعة كما هو محظور في الفن الإسلامي. وتقتصر هذه الدراسة أنه ينبغي وبشكل آمن تخزين المنحوتات الخشبية المنحدرة من القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين وعمل قاعدة بيانات إلكترونية لها تحتوي على بياناتها التفصيلية وذلك قبل أن تفقد بشكل كامل. إن أشكال الزخارف المحفورة على المنحوتات الخشبية الحديثة يغلب عليها صفة الحداثة، في حين يتم التخلص من الزخارف التقليدية. وتأمل هذه الدراسة أنه بمجرد تخزين هذه الأشكال التقليدية وحفظها، سيتمكن الحرفيون في المستقبل من إعادة اكتشافها وتزيين الهياكل والأسطح بها. إن الزخارف التقليدية الماليزية جزء من التراث الماليزي التقليدي وتستحق الحفاظ عليها.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Fadzillah Binti A Rahim

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I dedicate this work to my dearest ata and amma, M.A. Abdul Rahim and S. A. Zunaitha Begum and my siblings, especially Aishah who were there throughout my struggle. Also, to all my closest friends who has always been forced to make dua so that I submit the thesis successfully and on time, despite the many obstacles.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Wood carving constitutes one of the earliest forms of art in Malay culture. Wood carving is an art that involve a method of reducing the wood by using a carving tool assisted by skilled hands (Haziyah Hussin, Zawiyah Baba, Aminuddin Hassan and Aishah@Eshah Haji Mohamed, 2012) . The carving technique produced is usually based on two forms, that is the two dimensional wood or three dimensional wood. In the tropics wood could be found in abundance and was put to various uses. Since wood was regarded such a valuable commodity in traditional Malay society, trees played an essential part in their community life. The tree became a symbol of protection. Forts, palaces and houses were built using solid wood which served as a reliable means of protection against anything strange and unfamiliar, threatening and hostile. The wooden walls kept the strange and the unfamiliar away.

Daily working tools, home utensils, carts and waggons and weapons were also made of timber. Apart from its functional use in daily activities, carved wood also satisfied the aesthetical sense of the Malays. In the past, wooden tools were patiently, skilfully and beautifully carved. The carvings added a decorative and subtle look to the tools and transformed the solid wood into a delicate and fine piece of art. Some of these old tools are still highly valued and prized by their owners. These embellished every-day

tools allowed function and beauty to co-exist and enter the public sphere of the traditional Malay society.

The pre-industrialized societies of the past reflected a genuine respect for the nature around them. As elaborated in chapter three of this thesis, the Malays practiced certain rituals before cutting down the tree they deemed suitable. They also choose certain months in which to enter the forest and look for the right tree whose wood would serve their particular purpose. The Malays of old loved and respected the forest as a provider of these trees. Unlike today where the jungle is being ruthlessly and mindlessly decimated to make way for new projects, the Malays of the past entered it with caution and reverence. The chosen trees were then cut down and let afloat in the river to be sent to the workshop of the carpenter. The wood was kept at a place for a certain period of time until the carver knew it was 'ripe' and ready to be carved. Such was the loving and mindful care given to the wood.

This traditional and long-lost respect for nature is further manifested in the embellishments that decorate the houses and the daily utensils. However, things have changed considerably. In today's industrialized society, Mohamad Tajuddin (2010) laments the fact that structures are no longer ornamented. He grieves over the loss of identity reflected in the plain contemporary buildings in Malaysia. Nursuriani Shaffee and Ismail Said (2013) further emphasize on the lack of traditional wood carving materials and motifs on modern buildings, even on renovated traditional Malay homes.

Mohamad Tajuddin (2010) refers to 'motif' as 'ornament' but disagrees with Oleg Grabar (1995) in respect to the definition. According to Grabar, 'ornamentation' refers to

any decoration on the surface of an object that does not have any connection outside of the object except for the method of creating that decoration. He specifies that ornamentation enhance the object or the surface it covers. Referring to the Muslim culture that predominantly applies ornaments on bulidings, fabric, utilitarian tools and paintings, he observed that the design, the motifs are found in other tradition. However, the design appears to be exclusively of the Islamic world. He was referring to the pattern on Iranian book illuminations, Ottoman rugs, tile work in Alhambra, and many more. Meanwhile Burkhardt (2009) is of the opinion that one can connect with the Divine through ornament. The remembrance of God is not portrayed in imagery rather through all the repetitive and harmonious components on a tile work in a mosque.

Tajuddin (2010) understands ‘ornament’ as a tool of architectural communication. A motif is a figure or design that stands alone or repeated to create a pattern on a surface of an object or fabric. Traditional motifs which appear on Malay crafts display an intellectual and cultural integration of the multi-cultural society. He claims that motifs are often embedded onto crafts as a reminder to men about their Creator. The motifs thus possess a distinctively spiritual dimension and go far beyond mere surface decoration.

According to Hamdzun Haron,(2014) from the perspective of Malay art, motif acts as a reminder to the Malay society. It reminds the society of certain code of conduct. For example, the motifs on an *awan larat* panel always prompt the society to behave well with each other in the community. It reminds one should not be arrogant instead tolerate and live harmoniously in a community. The motifs found on traditional Malay wood carvings reflect the Malayan identity and are closely related to nature. Most motifs consist

of modified versions of plants found in the surrounding compound of the carver's household (Haziyah Husin et al, 2012).

Apart from motifs inspired by local flora, the motifs are influenced by the cosmos, stylized versions of animals, geometric motifs and Arabic and *Jawi* calligraphy. The motifs are composed on a wood panel in line with the traditional Malay philosophy of beauty (more on this in chapter three). The motifs emphasize the notion of balance and harmony in the society by which also the compositions of the traditional Malay wood carvings are governed. One is also able to observe harmony and balance within a wood carved panel which consists of different elements. This notion of balance and harmony existing among the different members of society is said to be the basis of etiquette in the traditional Malay society.

As years passed by, the motifs on traditional Malay wood carving also under goes changes. There was one study by Nursuriani Shaffee and Ismail Said (2013) which looked on evolution of motifs on the structures of Kelantan and Terengganu in which they traced slight changes to the physical aspect of the motif. From their study, it is understood that evolution is changes in the form of physical (form and shape) appearance.

Change is inevitable and evolution is the gradual change of something. Throughout the history, the art scene in the West has witnessed changes in the artform and subject. Kathryn Coe (2003) implies that when cultures meet, and competitiveness arise among artists, changes occur. As a result from this change, we can observe the new styles as well. Style can categorize a certain work of art according to its physical characteristics. According to an online article, style is characterized according to the