CARVING MOTIFS IN TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGGANU: SUSTAINING MALAY ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

Ismail Said and Zumahiran Binti Kamarudin
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation
Hiroshima University
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Introduction

- Malay traditional timber houses are normally decorated with excellent carvings with distinctive features such as on external walls, over doors and windows and fascia board of gable end to provide ventilation as well as decoration.

- Woodcarving is considered as an integral component to the vernacular Malay houses in the northeastern states of Peninsular Malaysia, namely Kelantan and Terengganu.

- Carving motifs of flora, geometry, Arabic calligraphy and cosmic features are depicted on carved panels of doors, walls, railings and ventilation components in different shapes and sizes.
Aims of the Study

• To highlight the visual interpretation of the carving motifs which were applied in the house components. This study provides a significant pattern of carving motif and its application in the carved components of the timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu which were built in the years of 1850s to late 1940s. Its configuration and distribution in the building fabric were also examined.

• The pattern of architectural embellishment could serve as a framework which could be considered as part of invaluable Malay heritage and they were indeed of historical and cultural importance. The woodcarving was a traditional art that reflected the local traditions and customs.
Research Questions

1. What are the types of carving motif and contents of carved elements found in the traditional timber houses?

1. What are the uses, styles and pattern of regularity of carving motifs that signify the regional identity?
Methods of Research

The required data was gathered from the following three research methods:

(1) Measured drawings and reports of timber houses from the Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM) at the Department of Architecture in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). House plans, black and white plan view drawings, elevations of the houses and detail drawings were referred for visual descriptive and interpretive analysis. A total of 100 carved components from the thirteen houses (9 from Kelantan and 4 from Terengganu) were reviewed and analyzed which served as pictorial data.

(2) Personal interviews with two prominent woodcarvers for purpose of obtaining their verification on the installation of carvings in the traditional Malay architecture in general and application of motifs in particular including reasons of selecting the motifs.

(3) Reviews of literature.
Figure 1: Location of the traditional houses in Peninsular Malaysia

- Mohamad Dobah’s, Nik Salleh’s, Hasan’s, Hasan Yusof’s, Wan Hussain’s, and Wan Sulong’s houses
- Lebai Ali’s and Tok Yakub’s houses
- Mariam’s, Abdul Rahim’s, Biji sura’s and Wan Embong’s houses
The Analysis

- The measured drawings were analyzed in four attributes of carving: (1) Motifs and patterns, (2) perforation and incision, (3) Shapes of panels and (4) Size and layout.

- The method of visual analysis matrix was used to provide information on the pattern of distribution of carved components for each house in relation to the attributes of carving.

Review of Reports and Measured Drawings from KALAM

Identification of Data
(Gathering of Determinative Evidences)
From 15 houses (Terengganu and Kelantan traditional houses)

Organization of data (facts)
(Compiling and categorizing of facts from reports and measured drawings of the 15 houses)

Methods of analysis
• Systematic Identification
• Categorization
• Interpretation

Descriptive analysis

Visual Matrix

Diagrammatic analysis of layout/placement of CC

Summary or categorization in tables (matrices)

Interpretative analysis

Content Analysis
• Chronology of date of house built
• Types of carved components
• Description of motifs
• Composition, shape and form
• Principles of ordering
• Placement and layout of CC in the house
• Purpose of carving
• Relationship to elevation and to spaces of the house
• Suggestive evidence the significance of carvings to the architecture
• Detail diagrammatic analysis of each CC.

Diagrammatic analysis of CC

Written Analysis

Diagrammatic/detail analysis of CC

Figure 2: Research tactics involves in the review of documents from KALAM archives
The analysis revealed that there are 12 different types of architectural carved components with distinctive visual forms. They are ventilation panels of window, door and wall, railings of verandah and staircase, wall panels, leaves of door and gate, roof eaves, brackets and gable end panels.

They were produced in relation to the architectural elements and the house forms. The carved components were fabricated with specific visual attributes: (1) carving motif and pattern, (2) types of perforation and incision, (3) shape of panel, and (4) size and layout.

Compositions of the carving motifs on the specific panels were according to specific layouts and regulated by the specific ordering principles.
**Figure 3:** The layout of carved components at the front facade of Wan Sulong's house

- Gable end panels
- Continuous wall ventilation panel
- Ventilation panel on top of window
- Wall panel
Distribution of the Components in the Timber houses

**Figure 4**: Railing at serambi and cared ventilation panels fitted above the interior wall of Abdul Rahim’s house.
## Types of Motifs used in the Carved Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Types of motif</th>
<th>Carved Components</th>
<th>Quantity (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>Wall ventilation panel (PWVP) Railing at <em>serambi/Sorong</em> (RP), Window railing (WRP), Wall ventilation panel (PWVP) (S), window ventilation panel (WVP), Gable end (GEP), Door ventilation panel (DVP), wall panel (WP)</td>
<td>55 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>Wall ventilation panel (PWVP) (S), Door and window ventilation panel (DVP), railing, gate and wall panels</td>
<td>27 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td>Ventilation panels above walls (PWVP), railing panels</td>
<td>14 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Door ventilation panel (DVP)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of Motifs used in the Carved Components

Flora

Geometry

Combination
Discussion

• The specific arrangement of compositional elements in meandering or spiraling pattern, locally known as *awan larat* (meandering cloud) contributed to the individual character of the carved components found in the houses.

• Floral composition serves as one of carving archetypes originated from this region.

• Ability to apply the traditional concept in carving works is vital apart from having logical thinking and creativity.

• Understanding of the knowledge by the craftsmen is significant because their levels of artistry and technical skill could determine the distinct characteristics and features of woodcarving which are considered as regional identity.
Suggested Framework to Sustain Carving

Sustainability of Malay heritage

Purchasing groups (Clientele)
- Government, private and individual patrons

Supporting groups (Patronages)
- Government agencies
- Local authorities
  - Organizations

Production and promotion groups (Key Actors/Players)
- Woodcarvers
  - Architects
- Housing developers

Figure 5: Proposed framework on the sustainability of woodcarving as architectural heritage
Conclusion

- The carved components were not objects crafted in a simple way but deeply anchored to the traditional principles which have been recognized from older traditions.

- These works are manifestation of artistic qualities and skillfulness possessed by the traditional craftsmen.

- Woodcarving is an item which is strong in definition of the character of the vernacular type which is in harmony with the regional identity. However the idea of work should evolve and develop instead of remaining as static and homogenous in character.

- The advancement and development of this product should be guided and kept within the prescribe framework. This has been practiced by the Malay craftsmen throughout the ages as evident in the woodcarvings produced during the middle nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.
THANK YOU