Types of Floral Motifs and Patterns of Malay Woodcarving in Kelantan and Terengganu

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Abstract

For the past four decades, there has been a plethora of research on Malay woodcarving and the preservation of the indigenous traditions, designs, methods and the origin of this woodcarving. The aim of this paper is to present an analysis of 32 carved components from 1840s to 2000s focusing on floral motifs and patterns. This study measured the design attributes of carving motifs including floral design elements, character design elements, compositional pattern, principle design and form. The results suggested that the types of motifs and patterns of carving determine the transformation of floral designs which were influenced by functions, environments and socio-cultural aspects of Malay society.

1. Introduction

Before the arrival of Islam, there was a keen interest in the traditional art of Malay woodcarving (Raja Fuziah and Abdul Rahman, 2000). As early 2nd Century AD, the east coast of Peninsula Malaysia had already been a port of call for traders travelling between India and Far East. Thus, it led to greater civilizations, as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam were introduced into Malay society through these traders (Mohd Nor and Siti Fatahiyah, 2010). Architectural elements were designed intentionally to facilitate and express the respect for Malay culture (Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1986; Jenkins, 2010) through the

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design structure of ornamentation serving as a symbol of high social status of a community (Norhaiza, 2009) and these remained as prominent decorative elements in palaces and homes of wealthy Malays (Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008).

The origin of motif in Malay woodcarving in the Malay Archipelago may date back from the days of the pre-Islamic era that when the Malays were practising Hinduism and Buddhism. The motifs are Kala Makara, Gunungan, Stupa, Garuda and Naga (Farish and Khoo, 2003). With the arrival of Islam, these motifs were altered in accordance with the requirements of Islam with the arrival of Islam at the end 13th Century (Rosnawati, 2005; Norhaiza, 2009). Most of the carvings representing motifs of Kala and Makara were transformed into floral elements. The transformations were also influenced by the craftsman's skill, natural elements, and religious belief and thought (Abdul Halim Nasir and Wan Hashim, 1996; (Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008). Inasmuch as, Lim (1987) found that woodcarving has been depicted in architectural elements in terms of traditional Malay architecture buildings including mosques, palaces, houses and institutional building since the 18th Century.

Malay woodcarving is a traditional ornamental art manifesting the local traditions and customs which should be kept and preserved especially at the age of increasing rate of urbanisation in Malaysia. With this urbanisation, there has been a trend of modern Malay houses or buildings being built, or older houses renovated using non-traditional elements and building components due to the current technological improvement. The application of woodcarving has lost much of its prominence in modern architectural buildings (Mohamad Tajuddin, 2006; Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008). In this study, therefore, investigates the types of motif and design pattern on 32 carved components of Malay architecture built during the period of 1840s until 2000s. The buildings are old palaces, mosques, houses and institutional buildings. The variables of this study were the period when the components were carved, whom they belonged to, whom the creator was and where they were located.

2. Literature review

2.1. Philosophy of Malay woodcarving

After the establishment of Islam civilization in the Malay Peninsula especially in Kelantan and Terengganu, the value of aesthetic became the philosophy in creating the beautiful woodcarving. This value was followed by several different attitudes as such patience, determination, creativity, artistry value, sensibility and technical skill. All these values can be seen in the most talented craftsmen who produced masterpieces mostly inspired by nature (Norhaiza, 2009; Ismail, 2002). Inasmuch as, Ismail (2002) and Farish and Khoo (2003) found that craftsmen’s etiquettes played an influential and significant role in their feelings when producing the best quality of woodcarving designs.

As key motifs originated from Hindu-Buddhism with important symbolic meanings in their context, so did the concept of a flower since early Malay life tradition in Malay ‘Bunga’, has been used to express the physical beauty of a Malay young girl. This is also seen in the aesthetic use of flowering shrubs and trees in the Malay landscape planted as decoration for the houses (Norhaiza, 2009). Apart from the traditions of Malay life, Bunga is applied in Malay art, as the most meaningful of the motifs and patterns depicted on carved components. Zumahiran and Ismail (2010) concurred that the most dominant motif depicted on various carving is that of floral motifs.

2.2. The origin Malay motif of Langkasuka

Langkasuka was founded early in the 2nd Century AD, the first Malay Kingdom located in the neighborhood of modern Pattani (Zamberi, 2009). One of the capital cities of the kingdom has been
described in the 6th Century as being surrounded by a high strong wall with two entrances and minarets, guarded by sturdy warriors (Irons, 2008). The King sat on a three-tiered couch with the background of the carved wooden shrine. He was dressed in rose-colored royal regalia with a chaplet of gold flowers and a necklace of jewels. Special reports written by the Chinese diplomat describes that Hindu-Buddhism was practiced as religious beliefs in the Malay Langkasuka Kingdom (Mubin, 1986). Langkasuka motif known as a spiral motif derived from the Ayuthaya Kingdom of Siam and the Majapahit (Figure 1). This motif was inspired by the process of growth in nature (Rosnawati, 2005) and the Goddess sculptures found in their expression of rituals and customs as it is surrounded by a beautiful arrangement of flower and body (Norhaiza, 2009).

Fig. 1. (a) Motif found on ventilation panel at the Aur Menat Jong Mosque, Pattani; (b) Majapahit decorative earrings

2.3. Characteristic of natural flower as carving motifs

In this study, the carved components were placed in the Kelantan and Terengganu Malay traditional buildings and are seen to represent the skills and aesthetics of the traditional craftsmen which have been passes down from generations. This can also be described as architecture that manifests certain patterns of life, ideas and culture of certain periods. Original and highly expensive, quality woodcarvings from the early establishment still can be seen in Kelantan and Terengganu.

A flower is often portrayed as a central element in the carvings. The characteristics of Malay woodcarving mainly comprises of design attributes as such types of flower, types of leaves, design elements and manifestation into carving (Nursuriani and Ismail, 2011). Craftsmen created floral motifs on carved components that represent different expressions based on their own creativity and artistic style yet maintaining a distinctive beauty. A study of symbolism of the carvings by Mohd Sabrizaa (2008) claims that carving elements can be examined by using ‘method code s’ to translate a certain code into carving language. Norhaiza (2009) described the floral motif also known as Bunga Ukir which consists of a combination of a central flower, branches, leaves, tendrils, twig, flowers buds and fruits (Figure 2).

According to Norhaiza (2009), the types of floral motifs can be categorized into three: Langkasuka, ‘Kelopak Maya’, ‘Kelopak Hidup’ and Contemporary motif. Langkasuka motif or Kelopak Dewa can be found since the 6th Century. It is not symbolized in the form of a flower, but more of a natural energy such as soil, water, fire and wind. Transformation to Kelopak Maya was found during the 16th century after the arrival of Islam into Kelantan and Terengganu. Therefore, it shows local craftsmen were inspired to create a new design and skill while maintaining the Malay identity. Kelopak Hidup was introduced around an 18th Century by craftsmen from Pattani and Kelantan. It typically consists of 70% of natural elements and 30% of non-floral elements.
3. Aim, objectives and scope of the studies

This research identifies the types of motifs and design patterns depicted on 32 carving panels from the period of 1840s to 2000s. It measured the types of flowers and leaves, design character, compositional patterns, principle designs and forms of various carved components such as panels on walls, above doors and windows frequency used in typical Malay buildings in Kelantan and Terengganu including palaces, mosques, houses and institutional buildings. The significance of the selected period is the focus on the design attributes such as types of flower, leaves and design elements which are depicted in the carvings of this period.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data collection

Pictorial data of 32 carving motifs were obtained from the Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM) in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The carvings were from walls, above doors and windows and with varied design attributes. Generally, most of the measured drawings were displayed in black and white 2D images then digitized into a single line pattern using AutoCAD. The purpose of this tool is to utilize visual pattern analysis from pictorial data. These findings were later supported with interview session, through open ended questionnaires and visual templates which were documented in voice record.

4.2. Data analysis

The pictorial data were tabulated and categorized into (1) explanations of visual analysis on digitized motif (2) visual description of the carving motif based on the interview data and literatures. A total 32 sets
of digitized motifs were printed and then analyzed by overlaid with the grids. A grid provides the underlying structure for analyzing the composition and arrangement of shapes (Figure 3a). It is used to record the location of the digitized motifs by grid quadrant (Figure 3b). The recorded words of the craftsmen were transcribed into categories of factors that influenced the design. The two sets of data from measured drawing, from visual template, and from the recorder, were triangulated, and the results are discussed in the following section. Therefore, the analysis of the two forms of data should complement and integrate with each other to establish the connection between design attributes and its influencing factors.

Fig. 3. (a) Visual analysis and digitized motifs by quadrant; (b) Visual description of carving motifs

5. Results and discussions

The design attributes of types of motifs and carving patterns are discussed in three categories: Types of floral motifs, design attributes and influence factors; and manifestation of floral motifs.

5.1. Types of floral motifs

Floral motifs were categorized into three types of motifs: Kelopak Dewa, Kelopak Maya, and Kelopak Hidup (Figure 4). However, the total of 32 carving motifs displayed six different types of floral motifs identified as 16 Kelopak Hidup, 6 Kelopak Dewa, 6 Kelopak Maya, 2 combinations of Kelopak Hidup and Kelopak Dewa and 2 organic shapes found on (1) wall ventilation panel (continuous horizontal), (2) wall ventilation panel (single rectangular), (3) window ventilation panel and (4) door ventilation panels (Table 1). The results suggest that the carving panels from the period 1840s to 2000s illustrated a variety design attributes and floral motifs (Mohd Sabrizaa, 2008) and depict the craftsman’s expression and creativity (Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008; Abas, 2010). This means that the transformation of the floral motif is an indicator in identifying a variety of elements that describe the craftsmen’s aptitudes and competencies in a certain era. Thus, the floral motifs derived from Hindu-Buddhism and transmitted through a process of modification by Malay craftsmen and became the most dominant motifs depicted after pre-Islam.
Table 1. Types of motifs for 32 sets carved components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Motifs</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelopak Hidup</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelopak Dewa</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelopak Maya</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelopak Hidup and Kelopak Maya</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Shape</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Kelopak Dewa* or deity-like leaf and found since the 6th century. The motif can be seen to influence from the Ayuthaya government of Siam, and also Majapahit, Javanese. It is not symbolized as a flower but more to earth’s natural energy such as soil, water, fire and wind (Figure 4a). In addition, Transformation from *Kelopak Dewa* to *Kelopak Maya* was found during 16th Century (Figure 4b). It happened after the arrival of Islam into Kelantan and Terengganu that was introduced by the Chinese or Indian traders. Lastly, *Kelopak Hidup* were introduced around 18th Century by craftsmen from Pattani and Kelantan usually consist of seventy percent of natural elements and thirty percent non floral elements.

5.2. Design attributes and factor influences

The essential design attributes clarify the most prominent design patterns among old palaces, mosques, houses and contemporary residences and buildings in Kelantan and Terengganu. Some of the similarities in design attributes were floral design elements including flowers, leaves, branches, flower buds, stems and fruits; element design characteristic such as winding, overlaps, intertwining, meandering; compositional patterns including complete patterns, single patterns or combinations, principle design; asymmetrical, 2-symmetrical with 1 axis and 2 axes and principal form: single rectangular and continuous panels. The design attributes were associated with character of complexity such as group design elements in the composition, asymmetrical design pattern with embossed piercing; floral pattern in three layers of overlaps; and design character in a floral pattern (Table 2). An example of design attributes is depicted on 2 carving panels out of 32 owned by Haji Mohammad Dobah and Tok Ku Paloh (Figure 5).
Fig. 5. (a) Carving panels of Haji Mohammad Dobah; (b) Carving panels of Tok Ku Paloh

Table 2. Design attributes between two carving panels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Attributes / Buildings</th>
<th>Haji Mohammad Dobah House (Kelantan)</th>
<th>Tok Ku Paloh House (Terengganu)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of flower</td>
<td>Bunga Tanjung (Flower Cape)</td>
<td>Tampuk Manggis (Mangosteen flower)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floral element</td>
<td>Flower, leaves, flower buds, fruits</td>
<td>Flower, branches, leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element character</td>
<td>Windings, meandering</td>
<td>Windings, overlaps,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compositional Pattern</td>
<td>Complete pattern</td>
<td>Complete pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle design</td>
<td>2-symmetry</td>
<td>2-symmetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle form</td>
<td>Single Rectangular (Horizontal)</td>
<td>Single Rectangular (Vertical)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correspondingly, visual analysis found similarities in floral elements, element character, compositional pattern and principle design, which were illustrated by carved components applied to aristocratic houses. There are similarities between the attributes identified by Zumahiran and Ismail (2008) who showed the visual intricacy and complexity in these carving were achieved by the configuration of patterns including windings, meanderings, overlapping characteristic. However, the differences between both panels are types of flower motif and principal form. Norhaiza and Abas suggest that there has been a change in Malay carvings from Hindu-Buddhism era until now. The possible interference of the change period of eras cannot be denied. It may due to the differences of design attributes. According to Mohd Sabrizaa (2008), major changes occurred in Malay woodcarving after Hindu Buddhism and Islam were introduced into the region from the 1st century until the 13th Century by the transformation from the original key motifs into the variations of floral motifs and design patterns. This transformation may have been introduced by Muslim foreign traders from China, India and Middle East. It seems these results are due to varieties of exceptional design attributes which were represented the identity and style of each period.

In addition, the use of design attributes in the carving panels are based on the social classification status; Kings, aristocrats and norm peoples (Abas, 2010; Norhaiza, 2009). This result suggests the embellishment for traditional dwellings was a reflection of social rank and economic status of the owner (Farish and Eddin, 2003). Old palaces in both Kelantan and Terengganu were identified to indicate the differences between mosques, houses and resorts. There are similar claims made by Norhaiza and Abas...
where carving motifs and pattern for palaces were usually disallowed in aristocrats or normal people’s buildings. Apparently, carving panel designed for kings encompassed the utmost design qualities which to symbolize respect and eminence. Compared to carvings owned by commoners, which were usually less elaborate, quite simple and merely carved just for decorations. Different craftsmen employed their own technique and styles. Possibly the techniques they used were different, but the principle of floral motifs in the depiction was the same. Therefore, different levels of skills produced different qualities of carvings (Nik Ismail, 2009). The best quality of carving represents a high level of skill and determines the complexity pattern. Complex pattern shows the manifestation of a specific element character: windings, overlaps, intertwine and meanderings. To create beauty in the carvings, it is important to have most of element characteristic, which is not easy to achieve. The results suggest that the difficulties in carving with element characters reflect the specialization and skills possessed by the craftsmen.

Most of the carved components was depicted with exquisite design qualities found in the different locations in the building (Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008). The most exquisite design patterns were those of the ventilation panels in various places; above doors, door leaves, entrance walls, bedroom walls, and the section’s wall which were located in the dining hall, reception hall, prayer hall, convex hall, entrance house and bedroom wall. In addition, craftsmen designed certain compositional patterns based on suitable functions and the importance of the living space which purposely produced according to the types of space. The main purpose of the placement of carving panel described as decorative function and the natural ventilation become the secondary factor. For example, a carved panel depicted with a special flower motif and located at the entrance door creates a sense of welcoming and focal point for visitors. The placement of a carving at the entrance door suggests a degree of importance of space utilization. Another example found in the prayer room at an old mosque in Kelantan, was a carved panel positioned on the upper side of the wall that divided an enclosed spaces and an open space serving as fenestration on walls that provide a decoration piece. The main purpose of this panel is to serve as a welcoming feature to the person who comes to pray when viewed from the open space. A Chrysanthemum flower motif was used to create a sense of a focal point within the front facade of the mosque. It also enhances the wall facade of the enclosed space by the silhouette when viewed from inside. This type of decoration panel was only placed on the front wall that suggests this area is important in terms of usage.

This result suggests various distributions of carved ventilation panel in the building eventually represented as an indication and function of the space. It is notable that local craftsmen; Norhaiza Nordin and Abas Abdullah responded positively to the factor influences on the similarities and differences of design attributes which are; period of carving, status of ownership, skills of craftsmen and placement of carved components.

5.3. Manifestation of flower as carving motifs

The use of a certain type of flower functions as an indicator of the changes in the floral motifs. Most of the animistic motifs were transformed into flora and vegetation motifs after the arrival of Islam (Mohd Sabrizaa, 2008). Floral motifs were almost always applied by the craftsmen as the principal motif as they were inspired and fascinated by the beautiful elements of flowers and leaves. The preference of plant motif was mainly influenced by Islamic religious teaching. The continuation of floral depiction kept the plant in the variety of carved form (Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008). It is likely that the different depictions of certain floral compositions of the plant were influenced by the development of carving ideas through different eras. Inasmuch as, the application of the same types of a flower as carving motif is apparent in different depiction from one craftsman to another. For example, the flower of bakawali (Epiphyllum oxypetalum) shown in Figure 6 (a) is depicted on Haji Mohammad Dobah’s carving panel can be compared to the one depicted on Seri Bakawali’s as evident in the work shown in Figure 6 (b) and (c).
The main feature of the bakawali flower was apparently transformed according to the creativity and versatility of craftsmen. The actual plant is prominent in character has a distinctive feature (Figure 6 (a)). Thus, the craftsmen personalized and modified the physical character of the flower but maintain its beauty. A type of flower determines the transformation of motifs (Nik Ismail, 2009). Probably, the flower motif could be applied and shaped easily in carving form through the design transformation. As a result, the carving is difficult to be recognized by the viewer. Only the craftsmen could recognize the flower because the work is a product of their artistic expression. Conceivably, the main reason of depiction is to keep the plant as remembering the object in the carving form since bakawali is known as a traditional medicinal plant by the Malays from the past to the present. On the other hand, it is possible that the preference of plant motifs is based on the benefits of the plant itself including for medicinal uses or the attractions of beauty, taste and scent (Mohd Khairul, 2002). Inasmuch as, floral motifs dominate the carved component in Malay vernacular architecture as the beauty of nature gives ideas to craftsmen in producing an astonishing masterpiece.

The selection of floral motifs is based on; appropriateness and composition, characteristic-uniqueness and properties of plants, food and medicinal plants, plant status and spirit of the plants (Mohd Pakarul, 1980; Muhammad Affandi, 1995). These principles have been applied from the early ancestors to the present local craftsmen. Thus, without this important Rukun, any craftsmen would be unable to complete their task in creating such a beautiful decorative art. Apart from possessing a functional and ornamental value, Malay woodcarving also signifies the regional identity, character and the culture of the society, for example, in the design manifestation. For example, an emerging branch of the plant must be featured as appearing from behind or below original branch, which represents the idea that the elderly must be given precedence (Mohd Khairul, 2002). Thus, reflecting the spirit of the people and the era. Generally, more than 20 types of floral motifs had been applied to carved components. These types of plants are normally made up by craftsmen and can be easily found growing in their surrounding (Raja Fuziah and Abdul Rahman, 2000). The valuable plants were applied in carving so that they would be remembered and recognized by the next generation.

6. Conclusion

It is important to know and recognize the role of motif in Malay woodcarving that can allow its existence to prevail for future generation. The design of the carving depicted on a carved component is
influenced by types of flower, floral motif and its pattern of transformation from the master’s original to artistic presentation by another carver. Since Malay woodcarving is an art and cultural value, its motif is associated with the period of carving, status of ownership, skills of craftsmen and placement of carved components in a building.

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