Research Proposal

Zumahiran Binti Kamarudin
PhD Candidate (PB073023), Faculty of Built Environment
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
zumahiran@iu.edu.my
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Supervisor: Ismail Said
Department of Landscape Architecture
ismailbinsaid@gmail.com

Research Topic: Iconography, Meanings and Significance of the Placement of Woodcarvings in Malay Houses

Research Aims: The aim of this study is to investigate the iconography of woodcarving motifs and placement of carved components in vernacular houses which denotes its significant use.

Research Objectives
The research attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify visual attributes of Malay woodcarving placed in timber houses in Kelantan and Terengganu vernacular architecture.
2. To analyze the uses, styles and pattern of regularity of Malay motifs in woodcarving placed in timber houses.
3. To find the intrinsic meaning or content that can be symbolically as having religious, cultural or other connotations.

Assumptions
There is an existence of pattern of regularity in the composition of woodcarving and placement of carved components in Malay houses.

Research Questions
The questions of this research are divided as follow:

Woodcarving
1. What is the visual attributes of Malay woodcarving placed in timber houses in Kelantan and Terengganu vernacular architecture.

2. Why do craftsmen apply nature as principal motifs in woodcarving?

3. Why and how do the craftsmen transform the plant motifs that barely resemble their real-life image?

4. Do all motifs depicted in decorative wood carving contain symbolic meaning?

5. What are the uses, styles and pattern of regularity of carving motifs developed in Malay woodcarving?

6. Do the placements of the ornamental carved components as building decoration reflect the craftsman's adherence to the specific style of Malay architecture?

7. Do Malay craftsmen use the compositional principles, which provide them with structural guidelines for the ordering and treatment of visual elements (motifs) so that a predefined audience recognizes and understands the message idea or intent of the woodcarving?

Craftsmen

1. What are the contents of motifs depictions that are applied in woodcarving?

2. Do the craftsmen understanding of the Malay aesthetic philosophy determines the distinct characteristics and features of woodcarving?

3. Do craftsmen produce the woodcarvings in relation to its significant functions?

4. Do Malay craftsmen use the compositional principles, which provide them with structural guidelines for the ordering and treatment of visual elements (motifs) so that a predefined audience recognizes and understands the message idea or intent of the woodcarving?

5. Do the level of artistry and technical skill of the craftsmen determines the distinct characteristics and features of woodcarving?

6. Do the craftsmen produce the carved components for the particular reason?

7. Do the differences in the forms of carved components and the deployment and depiction of motifs reflect the craftsmen’s individual interpretation and translation?

8. Are the iconographical representations in harmony with the Malay’s philosophy of beauty and aesthetics?
Problem Statement

The art of woodcarving is inseparable from the art of vernacular architecture since both belong to the same field and have been practiced by the Malays throughout the ages. Vernacular architecture represents the architecture of the common people that is an embodiment of common characters, materials and aesthetic value of a particular region (Gokhan, 2002). Woodcarving is an item which is strong in definition of the character of the vernacular type which should be kept as it is. Furthermore, the art of woodcarving is a form of handicraft that has long existed in parallel with the Malay design (Muhammad, 1995). It is observed that each carved components relates well with the house form and elements which indicate that there is an inherent order and principles of design that is expressed in a particular fashion. Thus a detailed study could be conducted to find out the compositional principles used in the woodcarving. The visual organizational principles are used to construct the relationship among the visual elements of form, the compositional elements, and the intended meaning (Wallschlaeger and Busic-Snyder, 1992).

The art of woodcarving serves as an evident of human expression and ways of communicating their thoughts. Bear (1998) has offered the question of whether ornament does communicate either explicitly or implicitly. In her chapter on the meaning of ornament, she has suggested that the proper understanding of their meaning can only be reached by detailed studies not only of the formal and technical aspects of these decorations, but also by considering the regional, social and religious variations of the people who created and beheld them.
The woodcarving is a traditional art that reflects the local traditions and customs which should be kept and strengthened especially in the current exposure to the threats of rapid changes and developments of the modern architecture. The remains are considered to be part of our invaluable heritage and they are of lasting historical and cultural importance. Recent trend has indicated that modern Malay houses are changing to the use of non-traditional elements and building components. These changes in the Malay houses lead to the disappearance of its genuine qualities and traditional values. The changes, scarcity and elimination of traditional arts and crafts from the present setting would lead to a massive loss for the Malay society. Consequently, this scenario would create an environment deprived of its genuine Malay identity. Hence this research intends to investigate the visual attributes of woodcarving in vernacular houses in order to revitalize and build up an appreciation of the traditional heritage. Indeed, these traditional arts and crafts do not accept interruption but require constant protection. Lately, this tradition has been thought to be on the edge of eradication (Farish and Khoo, 2003). As such, it is vital to conduct a study on the design forms and characteristics of Malay woodcarving in vernacular architecture as well as its significances and meanings.

In recent years, the craftsmanship of woodcarving has lost much of its pre-eminence. Because the present generations live in the era of fast technological development, regional identity will soon disappear. Hence there is a need to restore the richness of the vernacular heritage. The traditional creations and knowledge could be eventually marginalized and forgotten by the modern generations including craftsmen if the modern trend of creations came into being. Today, these creations and knowledge are all but lost except to the handful of experts and masters of the traditional craftsmanship. Cultural elements have influenced the design philosophy of woodcarving (Abdul Halim, 1987), which has significant
relationship with the design of Malay woodcarving. The study that would be carried out is very timely as many aspects of traditional values have attributed to the woodcarving craftsmanship has yet to be studied into. It is interesting to investigate how this art form was transformed and undergone the making processes with specific technical skill, mechanism and design principles. These factors influence and determine the level of artistry and creativity, style and identity of Malay craftsmanship (Jamal, 1994). They reflect the artistic tradition of the Malay craftsmen. Hence, this explanatory as well as exploratory research would be carried out to investigate the philosophy of craftsmen, iconography of wood carving motifs and placement of carved components prevalent in timber houses which denotes its meanings and significant use. The objective of iconography is primarily concerned with the attributions of works of art or with dating as well as aesthetics (Straten, 1994). This study hopes to gather some valuable representative samples so that the beauty and craftsmanship of the woodcarving can be referred for the future development. This art has vernacular values with their own identity and aesthetic which are indispensable. These values of vernacular which can be transferred to the next generations should be analyzed and revealed.

**Theoretical Framework of Woodcarving**

Art is the mirror of a culture and its worldview. This statement directly applies to the art of the Malay, as mentioned by Othman (1995). He has suggested that the splendid achievements of any civilization are reflected in the brilliant forms of art. Physical and spiritual aspects of art have largely influenced the pattern and lifestyle of the Malay society, especially after the acceptance of Islam. Zulkifli (2000) has averred to the fact that these designs were probably influenced by a number of factors related to Malay customs, religious beliefs, the natural environment and the artistic skills of the Malay craftsmen. (Rosnawati,
(2005) posits that six basic rules that guide wood-carving design form are: (1) radiating from the source, (2) the natural rhythmic growth of lines, (3) decoration follows nature, (4) harmony in contrast, (5) decoration as an integral part of construction, (6) balanced distribution of surface decoration. The diagram of principles of composition is shown in Figure 1.0.

![Diagram of Principles of Composition in Malay Woodcarving](image)

Figure 1.0: Principles of composition in Malay woodcarving posited by Rosnawati (2005).

Syed Zulflida (2004) postulates six basic principles of Malay aesthetic to describe, analyze and evaluate the craft products produced by Malay artisans. The six basic principles including (1) affinity to nature, (2) utility of craft, (3) unity, (4) contrast, (5) symbolism, (6) harmony and balance. Nature has been a source of inspirations for Malay craftsmen. The crafts created by the artisans are a reflection of their observation of beauty, form and possibilities of living nature. The most objective of a craft is functional and useful. The shape and forms of an object are in accordance with its basic function. Unity is an important principle in the art of Malay craftsmanship. In woodcarving, the vines and foliage intertwine
around a flower and the whole vegetal motifs are in harmony and united thus creating a center of attraction and accomplishing a pleasing and satisfying composition. Symbols are used to determine the unity between shape and content. The craftsman derives his symbols from the phenomena of nature and harmonizes them in his craft. The Malay artisan sees the quality of harmony and balance in nature and become the characteristic of his crafts. The Malay artisan considers using the five physical elements in any analysis of aesthetics including: (1) the rhythm of lines, (2) the massing of forms, (3) the use of space, (4) Light and shade, (5) the spectrum of colours. Zakaria (1989) highlights the six principles that constitute the Malay concept of the beautiful: (1) the principle of refinement refers to the sense of refined sensitivity, (2) the principle of flexibility refers both to the actual process and approach to art making as well as to artistic sensibility, (3) the principle of balance connotes the notion of an ideal composition and sense of order, (4) the principle of unity seeks to integrate the various elements within a framework and turned into orderly structure, (5) the principle of functionality stresses on practical function of the artifact defines its beauty, (6) the principle of symbolism relates to the use of symbol to express religio-spiritual perception of ultimate reality. The principles and elements of aesthetic contribute to the understanding of meaning of woodcarving. Thus promote the aesthetic pleasure which are based on creativity, logic and intuition of Malay craftsmen. The summary of the interrelationship of these components are shown in Figure 2.0.
Indicator of Logic and Intuition

Indicator of creativity

PRINCIPLES OF AESTHETIC:
- Affinity to nature
- Function
- Unity
- Contrast
- Symbolism
- Harmony and balance
(Syed Zulflida, 2004)

ELEMENTS IN ANALYSIS OF AESTHETICS:
- Rhythm of Lines
- Massing of Forms
- Use of Space (Architectural Composition)
- Light and Shade (Relief, Fenestration)
- Spectrum of Color.
(Syed Zulflida, 2004)

AESTHETIC PLEASURE

MEANING OF WOODCARVING

PRINCIPLES OF MALAY CONCEPT OF BEAUTY
- Refinement – e.g. keris hilt
- Flexibility – e.g. flow of pattern
- Balanced – e.g. symmetry and asymmetry visual weight
- Unity – e.g. interrelationship
- Symbolism – e.g. archetypes of motifs
  – e.g. original model Bakawali and Ketumbit in Kelantan and Terengganu carving motifs.
(Zakaria, 1989)

Figure 2.0: Summary of Interrelationship diagram of the principles and elements of aesthetics
Scope of Study and Research Parameters

This investigative study is confined to woodcarving components found in Malay timber houses. The traditional houses represent the skills and aesthetics of the traditional craftsmen and builders which have been passed down from generations to the following ones (Lee, 1987). The houses are normally decorated with excellent carvings with distinctive feature such as the ones at the external walls, over doors and windows to provide ventilation as well as decoration, and fascia board of gable end (Abdul Halim, 1987; Lee, 1987; Ismail 2002; Mohamad Tajuddin et al., 2005). Hence, the unit of analysis for this study is the traditional Malay woodcarvings in a form of architectural carved components, which are found in the East Coast houses located in Kelantan and Terengganu. There are plenty of carved components with inherent visual composition placed on the Malay timber houses from this region. Although some house designs are almost similar, the carving motifs and patterns of carved components found on the houses show the distinct character. Ismail (2001) postulates that three types of carved building components including structural, elemental and ornamental. These components are the observable carving components that characterize the architecture of this region. Several reasons determine the selection of the houses for this study. First, the Malay Carvings from the East Coast exhibit a wealth of woodcarvings and have obtained high levels of artistry and technique (Jamal, 1994). Second, Abdul Halim Nasir (1989) in his book highlights that the carvings from the East Coast do show marked differences from those found in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. This is due to the
fact that the traditional Malay woodcarvers from the East Coast states were strongly influenced by cultural values related to their traditional philosophies, which were inherited over the ages. Third, the art of carving has a special privilege in the East Coast buildings due to the significant number of skillful craftsmen who are still active in this craft industry (Hanafi, 2000).

The parameters to be measured are the attributes of woodcarvings and philosophy of craftsmen with particular emphasis on the carving motifs, placement of carved components, significance of the motifs and its contents. The selection of craftsmen for collecting information is limited to Malay background because the application of woodcarving itself involves the philosophical view based on Malay beliefs system.

**Significance of Study**

- The study would fill in the gap of knowledge regarding the existence of Malay woodcarving in timber architecture, especially in discovering its forms, uses and content.
- It is hoped that the study would reveal the importance of woodcarving as Malay heritage for art authorities in Malaysia as well as for the people who are concerned with the conservation of local arts especially Malay woodcarvings.
- In design perspective, the findings would also reveal the pattern of regularity in woodcarving to be utilized by the related disciplines and for future reference.

**Research Design**

The planning of this study is based on the background of the problem. Hence, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is thought to be appropriate to achieve the research
aims and answer research questions. The research will be carried out in four operational stages. The overall research structure is shown in Figure 3.0. The first stage involves the historical and theoretical review on placement of carved components in vernacular building, iconography of motifs, symbolic meanings and philosophy of craftsmen. Theoretical review covers basic understanding of the research parameters. Second stage requires the author to investigate the attributes of woodcarvings in Malay timber houses including motifs, shapes of components, compositional principles, types of incision and perforation, types of depictions, pattern of motifs, principal forms and design qualities. This is achieved by reviewing measured drawings from KALAM’s collection belongs to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). This will lead to a certain understanding of the attributes, placements of carved components on identified houses, significances and meanings of motifs. The drawings will be analysed according to the aforementioned components by using visual analysis matrix. The sample of the matrix is shown in table 3.0. Stage 3 requires the author to triangulate the materials gathered from the second stage by interviewing the selected craftsmen and observing their works. During the in-depth interview the author will use a template that indicates the attributes of woodcarving. The template is used as an aid for the identification of woodcarvings by the craftsmen. This will facilitate the process of interview and field observation so that more materials could be gathered from the craftsmen. The sample of the template is shown in table 4.0. Stage 4 involves data analysis of the materials gathered in stage 3. Further analysis of the data using content analysis will elicit findings. Stage 5 concerns documentation of the findings.

**Expected Findings**
The study reveals the most frequent patterns, popular form and design, and visual properties of woodcarvings that were used in a form of decorative as well as functional elements in the timber houses. Thus this study indicates the existence of pattern of regularity in the composition of woodcarving.

References


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## Proposed Research Schedule

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Table 1.0: Proposed research schedule
Wood Carving
Ornamentation: Embellishment of Surface
Meanings

Interpretation of Motif:
- Meanings, Belief
- Symbols, Art
- Hypothetical Message

Description of Motif:
- Flora
- Fauna/Abstract
- Calligraphy
- Geometry
- Cosmos

Iconography (Straten, 1994)

Philosophy of Craftsman

Placement of carved components

Ornamentation: Embellishment of Surface

Vernacular Building

- Cultural Values
- Timber Architecture
- Social Status
- Historical Links

Figure 4.0: Research Parameters Diagram
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<tr>
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<th>IDENTIFIED AREA/DISCIPLINE</th>
<th>PARAMETER</th>
<th>POTENTIAL STUDY</th>
<th>SUGGESTED AREA OF STUDY</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Abdul Halim (1985)</td>
<td>Malay architecture Heritage study</td>
<td>Traditional house form</td>
<td>Forms of mosque, palace and building Elements and components</td>
<td>Relationship of Building components and ornament</td>
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<td>Abdul Halim (1987)</td>
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<td>Forms of traditional woodcarvings in traditional buildings (Mosque, palace, houses)</td>
<td>Factors influence the woodcarving, carving techniques and instruments, craftsman</td>
<td>Philosophy of craftsman and meanings of woodcarving</td>
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<td>Malay architecture Heritage study</td>
<td>Traditional house form</td>
<td>Forms of mosque, palace and building Elements and components</td>
<td>Relationship of Building components and ornament</td>
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<td>The art of Craftsmanship</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Farish and Eddin (2003).</td>
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<td>Detail study on Formal and Technical aspects of woodcarving on Malay art and architecture</td>
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<td>Gallop (2005)</td>
<td>Islamic and Malay art</td>
<td>Style of Manuscript (East Coast and Pattani)</td>
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<td>Pattern of distribution of East Coast style on Malay woodcarving</td>
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<td>Vernacular Architecture</td>
<td>Effecting Factors and Values of vernacular architecture in Turkey, Education</td>
<td>Vernacular values and characteristics in interior architecture, urban design and applied art ad design</td>
<td>Vernacular values and characteristics in Malay art and architecture</td>
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<td>Detail study of carved components with respect to Technical aspects, placement, iconography, contents and meanings as well as philosophy of craftsmen Placement of carving in modern urban dwellings as functional element</td>
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<td>Concept, symbolism in architecture and woodcarving (techniques, types of carvings and motif) of traditional Malay houses or buildings in Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and ect.</td>
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<td>Detail study of crafts with respect to its functional and technical value.</td>
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<td>Detail study Langkasuka motifs in architectural carved components</td>
<td>Detail study Langkasuka motifs in architectural carved components of timber buildings</td>
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### Table 4.0: Research Questions

<table>
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<th>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Woodcarving</strong></td>
<td><strong>Craftsmen</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Do Malay craftsmen use design principles other than aforementioned as regulating factors in woodcarving?</td>
<td>1. Do the craftsmen produce the carved components for the sake of art, or for the sake of society or for showing one’s submission to God?</td>
</tr>
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<td>2. Do they use the same principles for the placement of the woodcarving components in the vernacular buildings?</td>
<td>2. Do the Malay craftsmen have certain mechanism that helps them transform nature (amorphous) into the art of woodcarving, which are unique and with high quality of craftsmanship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Do Malay craftsmen use the principles of organization, which provide them with structural guidelines for the ordering and treatment of visual elements (motifs) so that a predefined audience (beholder) recognizes and understands the message idea or intent of the woodcarving?</strong></td>
<td>3. Is it due to his individual style, creativity, sensitivity, and understanding/thought of nature or aesthetic consideration and experience?</td>
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<td>4. Do Malay woodcarvers also use or depend on their intuitive sense of visual order without the help of organizing principles or other organizing tools?</td>
<td>4. Do the level of artistry and technical skill of the craftsman determines the distinct characteristics and features of woodcarving?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Do the applications of plant motifs in the traditional Malay woodcarving as decorative components reflect the craftsman’s preference of this elements since they are suitable and easily formed and styled according to the discretion and creativity of the craftsman?</strong></td>
<td>5. Does their strong affiliation to the traditional practice contribute to the distinct style and identity of the contemporary woodcarving?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do the different house forms determine the similarities and differences of carving embellishment on traditional houses?</td>
<td>6. <strong>Do the craftsmen understanding of the Malay aesthetic philosophy determines the distinct characteristics and features of contemporary woodcarving?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Why carved components are found more on non-structural building components and usually with intricate design?</td>
<td>7. <strong>Do Malay craftsmen use design principles other than aforementioned as regulating factors in woodcarving?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do Malay craftsmen select certain motif or design that is related to certain function?</td>
<td>8. <strong>Do Malay craftsmen use the principles of organization, which provide them with structural guidelines for the ordering and treatment of visual elements (motifs) so that a predefined audience (beholder) recognizes and understands the message idea or intent of the woodcarving?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Is there any other factor or factors besides those mentioned by the author that govern the physical form of woodcarving?</td>
<td>9. Are these organizational or compositional principles perceived and practiced by the craftsman due to their logical thinking and intuition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do the placements of the ornamental carved components as building decoration reflect the craftsman's adherence to the specific style of Malay architecture?</td>
<td>10. Do Malay woodcarvers also use or depend on their intuitive sense of visual order without the help of organizing principles or other organizing tools?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. What are the hidden meanings of repeated use of the same motifs?</td>
<td>11. <strong>Do the applications of plant motifs in the traditional Malay woodcarving as decorative components reflect the craftsman’s preference of this elements since they are suitable and easily formed and styled according to the discretion and creativity of the craftsman?</strong></td>
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<td>12. Do all motifs depicted in decorative wood carving contain symbolic meaning?</td>
<td>12. Do the differences in the forms of carved components and the deployment and depiction of motifs reflect the craftsmen’s individual interpretation and translation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Why and how do the woodcarvers transform the plant motifs that barely resemble their real-life image?</td>
<td>13. Do all motifs depicted in decorative wood carving contain symbolic meaning?</td>
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<td>14. Does the craftsman’s expressive use of tools in their works signify an</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<td>15. Do the applications of wood carving as building decoration reflect the</td>
<td>craftsmanship's preference to the specific building elements and shapes?</td>
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<td>16. Does the use of design principles in the making of woodcarving reflects</td>
<td>the craftsmen’s genius and creative mind?</td>
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<td>17. Why and how do the woodcarvers transform the plant motifs that barely</td>
<td>resemble their real-life image?</td>
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<td>18. Why do Malay craftsmen produce woodcarvings that have different degree</td>
<td>of complexity or simplicity?</td>
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<td>19. Are the iconographical representations in harmony with the Malay’s</td>
<td>philosophy of beauty and aesthetics?</td>
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