Available online at
https://journal.uitm.edu.my/ojs/index.php/IJAD/index

e-ISSN: 2710-5776

International Journal *of* Art and Design 10(2) 2026, 89–104

International Journal *of* Art and Design

Cultural Influences in the Wood Carving Motifs of Malay Houses in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan

Juliana Adlin Ahmad[1*], Arba'iyah Ab Aziz[2], Nor Azlin Hamidon[3]

[1]*Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Malaysia*
[2,3]*Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor Malaysia*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received XX Month Year
Revised XX Month Year
Accepted XX Month Year
First online
Published XX Month Year

Keywords:
Influence
Malay Houses
Malay Woodcarving
Motif
Negeri Sembilan

DOI:
10.24191/ijad.v10i2/0z9v2c80

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses specifically on the woodcarving motifs of Malay houses in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, by categorising their themes and identifying the cultural influences that shaped them. Several methods were employed as primary data collection methods, including observation, site visits, and photographic documentation. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with woodcarving experts were conducted to gain further insights and information on woodcarving motifs, supplementing the primary methods. The study identified several categories of motifs, including floral, cosmic, faunal, natural, and combined forms. These categories reflect the woodcarvers' choices in ornamentation, as well as their cultural influences and perceptions. The findings reveal the presence of the Malay world and Chinese cultural aesthetics within the motifs. It demonstrates that although these cultural influences coexist in the designs, the values and meanings of the motifs remain distinct in relation to culture, tradition, and belief. This study contributes to discussions on cultural transmission in vernacular art by examining how recurring visual forms and variations in motif design reflect processes of cultural transmission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Woodcarving maintains an important place within the historical development of Malay art. It is one of the most complex and progressive art forms in Malaysia, and scholars have acknowledged it as part of Malay material culture due to its aesthetic merits and the quintessence of the iconographic system that conveys a breadth of meanings within the organism of Malay art. From an anthropological perspective, Malay communities regard woodcarving as a cultural practice in which the shaping and chiselling of wood transcend mere technical skills or ornamentation. Influences play a crucial role in

[1*] Corresponding author. *E-mail address: juey973@gmail.com*

shaping the woodcarving motifs, reflecting the woodcarvers' lifelong quest for beauty and meaning. Additionally, influences in woodcarving services aim to enhance the ability of fellow craftsmen to convey their unique stories and personal allegories through their work. The conceptual influences on motifs are a means of communication, where patterns and designs combine to create a visual language that embodies a community's collective memories, social values, and spiritual teachings.

In recent years, scholars have focused on woodcarving traditions in Malaysia, with studies examining their typological classification, placements, decorative patterns, and techniques across multiple states (Farah et al., 2018; Hanita et al., 2023; Muhammad Uzair et al., 2024; Nur Aisyah et al., 2022; Nurdiyana et al., 2014; Sumardianshah et al., 2021). However, despite the growing body of research, studies on the influences of Malay motifs in Negeri Sembilan remain limited, especially when compared to the extensive scholarship focused on Kelantan and Terengganu (Hanita et al., 2021). Much of the existing literature has concentrated on broader aspects of architectural forms, with comparatively little attention given to the motifs or the factors influencing their development in Negeri Sembilan's Malay houses. Consequently, the cultural and artistic influences that informed the formation and conception of woodcarving motifs in this region have yet to be comprehensively examined or documented.

Therefore, this study focuses on the documentation and analysis of woodcarving motifs in Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, with particular attention to the cultural influences that shaped their formation in the district of Rembau. Despite increasing scholarly attention to Malay woodcarving in other regions, systematic documentation of motif-based heritage in Negeri Sembilan remains limited. This gap is significant as architectural woodcarving forms part of intangible cultural knowledge that is increasingly vulnerable to loss due to the fragile structures and changing building practices. By documenting and analysing these motifs, this study contributes to the preservation of Malay vernacular heritage and provides a structured account of how cultural influences are reflected in material form.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Motifs in the Woodcarving of Negeri Sembilan Malay Houses

A motif is visually treated as a thematic component or a repetitive shape in a pattern or design (Wallschlaeger & Busic-Snyder, 1992). Syed Ahmad (1992) has described woodcarving as a visual expression primarily employed in Malay houses to beautify and enhance the physical structure through measured patterns maintained within limits. Consequently, the carvings in Malay houses serve not simply as decoration but as a unified visual language where aesthetic qualities converge with practical functions and cultural values. This understanding provides a foundation for examining woodcarving traditions in Negeri Sembilan.

Existing studies on Malay woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan have approached the subject from different analytical directions. Some scholars emphasise symbolic and philosophical synthesis, particularly in relation to Malay, Minang, and Islamic elements (Nur Aniswati et al., 2025), suggesting that motifs function as cultural amalgamations. In contrast, other studies foreground social and hierarchical meanings, where motifs such as *buah buton* within the Luak Tanah Mengandung area are interpreted as indicators of status and authority within traditional settlement structures (Herwandi et al., 2024). This difference suggests that motif interpretation is dependent on the analytical emphasis implemented, either favoring symbolic-philosophical readings or socio-structural readings.

Building on this foundation, recent studies have examined Malay woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan from multiple viewpoints. For instance, Muhammad Zulkarnaen and Arba'iyah's (2024) recent research into mosque woodcarving in Negeri Sembilan divulged a variety of motif categories, thereby extending the scope of woodcarving studies beyond domestic contexts. Correspondingly, other studies have classified motifs into five categories−floral, faunal, geometric, cosmic, and calligraphic (Mohd Nur & Mohd Samsudin, 2022; Muhammad Uzair et al., 2024). While these

classifications provide a useful structural framework, they tend to prioritise categorisation rather than probing the underlying cultural and contextual factors that shape motif formation.

Applying these categories to Malay houses reveals unique interpretations by woodcarvers, allowing them to express reverence for nature through carved design. Between these categories, floral motifs are the most favoured by woodcarvers. Similarly, Siti Aisyah and Normaisarah (2023) presented that floral motifs are the most ubiquitous in Malay woodcarving. This dominance is associated with Malaysia's tropical climate, where vegetation and flowers thrive throughout the year, providing a continuous stimulus for woodcarvers. While this finding highlights environmental influence, it places greater emphasis on natural abundance rather than on the cultural or rather symbolic considerations underlying motif selection.

Furthermore, faunal motifs represent depictions of animals that have progressively been stylised, although their essence remains perceptible (Nur Aisyah et al., 2022), signifying a process of transfiguration into more abstract rather than direct imitation. Calligraphic motifs, by contrast, typically consist of Arabic scripts or Quranic phrases, and these symbolise respect and devotion to the Islamic faith (Jaisuda, 2024). Cosmic motifs appear less frequently, yet they remain significant. Studies have identified representations of the sun, moon, and stars in both Malay houses and mosques, symbolising the connection between the cosmos and human life (Nur Faezah et al., 2023; Fakhrur & Basitah, 2020). This indicates that, although less prevalent than other categories, cosmic motifs are selected based on their symbolic and philosophical meanings. It also suggests the motif selection is based not just on visual preference but leaning towards cosmological and religious connotation.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the importance of typological classification and symbolic perspectives in Malay woodcarving studies. However, they also reveal a fragmentation between categorisation-based approaches and interpretive approaches, where the relationship between motif form and cultural influence has not been fully integrated. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into how external and internal influences shape motif development, particularly within the context of Negeri Sembilan Malay houses.

2.2 Influences on Malay Woodcarving

The influences of Malay woodcarving transpired in different stages, each developing progressively across historical periods and continuously reshaping the region's religious, cultural, socio-political, and identity landscape. Accordingly, Nur Aisyah et al. (2021) mentioned that animism was among the earliest belief systems practised by the ancient Malay people, developing between the 2nd century and the early 16th century (Rosnawati, 2005). In contrast, Muhammad Uzair et al. (2024) and Zuliskandar (2012) highlighted that the earliest prevailing Malay woodcarving motifs emerged during the introduction of Buddhism in the 4th century, followed by Hinduism in the 11th century. While these studies differ in emphasis, they collectively suggest a transition from indigenous animistic expressions to externally influenced religious frameworks. They further noted that, although Buddhism exerted a stronger influence than Hinduism, both were selectively adopted and assimilated, gradually transforming earlier animistic carvings rather than completely displacing them.

Building on this perspective, Mohd Sabrizaa and Azizul (2008) argued that the Malay Peninsula and its archipelago, positioned between the Chinese and Indian civilisations, experienced sustained external influence through political and trade networks under kingdoms such as Funan, Langkasuka, Srivijaya, Majapahit, and the Sultanate of Malacca. This position facilitated continuous cultural exchange, suggesting that Malay woodcarving did not develop in isolation but was shaped through ongoing interaction with external civilisations. While such studies emphasise external influence as a dominant force, they also imply a degree of local adaptation, where imported elements were reinterpreted within existing cultural frameworks.

Along the way, in the 13th century, Islam began to influence the Malay world, introducing a shift from figurative representations towards more abstract and philosophical expressions (Raja Fuziah & Abdul Rahman, 1997). The

expansion of architecture and religion occurred through economic interactions between Arab merchants and local communities, gradually establishing a shared spiritual and cultural orientation (Mohd Jamil, 1992; Noor Hafiza et al., 2024). This transition is often interpreted as a transformation in visual language, where earlier figurative and Hindu-derived forms became increasingly abstracted and replaced by foliage-based designs. However, this shift should not be understood as a complete rupture, but rather as a reconfiguration of existing forms in accordance with Islamic principles.

At the heart of Malay woodcarving is the notion of *tawhid*, or the Unity of Allah, which informs the philosophical orientation of artistic production. Sulaiman (1993) argued that the Islamisation of the Malay world reshaped not only the content but also the structural and conceptual foundations of traditional Malay arts. Several studies further indicate that Islamic teachings guide woodcarvers to derive their motifs from three primary sources: the natural environment, cultural values and customs, and spiritual devotion (Jaisuda, 2024; Nur Aisyah et al., 2022). While these studies emphasise the centrality of Islamic influence, they also suggest that earlier cultural layers continue to persist within the motifs, indicating a process of adaptation rather than replacement.

From these perspectives, the influences of woodcarving motifs should be further explored, as existing studies tend to present cultural influences as sequential historical stages rather than examining how these influences coexist and interact within specific regional contexts. This is particularly evident in the case of Negeri Sembilan, where the interplay between inherited traditions and external influences remains insufficiently examined.

3. METHODOLOGY

Preliminary fieldwork was conducted on fifty Malay houses across Negeri Sembilan to establish a broader visual and contextual understanding of woodcarving practices. From this initial survey, four houses located in the Rembau district were purposively selected for in-depth analysis. The selection was based on three criteria: (i) presence of well-preserved carvings, (ii) accessibility for documentation, and (iii) motif composition in various placements.

This selection follows a purposive sampling strategy, where cases selected for their depth of information are used to enable detailed qualitative inquiry rather than statistical generalisation (Patton, 2000). Such an approach is fitting for interpretive studies, as it allows for in-depth analysis of motif characteristics and cultural influences within a focused context.

Table 1. Details of houseowners

No	House owner	Year	Location
1	Kompleks Warisan Lanjung	1920s	Jalan Tanah Datar, Kampung Gadong, Kota, Rembau
2	Hjh. Rafeah bt. Hj. Abdul Samad	1930s	Kampung Padang Astana Raya, Rembau
3	Awa bt. Ismail	1950s	Kampung Pulau Besar, Rembau
4	Nurshila bt. Mahsor	1957	Kampung Legong Ulu, Kampung Tanjung, Rembau

Qualitative research is employed to examine perceptions, experiences, and social phenomena through detailed and context-sensitive data (Mohajan, 2018). This approach is appropriate for the present study, as it facilitates an in-depth interpretation of woodcarving motifs beyond their visual form, addressing their cultural meanings, symbolic associations, and woodcarving knowledge. Given the interpretive nature of motif analysis, qualitative methods allow for a nuanced understanding that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures.

The research was conducted in three stages to align data collection with the study's objectives of categorisation and interpretation. In the first stage, observations and site visits were carried out in Rembau to identify and document selected Malay houses, followed by photographic recording of architectural elevations and carved elements to locate and isolate motif compositions. In the second stage, the documented motifs were digitised into 2D vector illustrations, which standardised the visual data and enabled systematic comparison, facilitating the classification of motifs into thematic categories. The third stage involved semi-structured interviews with woodcarving practitioners, namely Norhaiza Noordin and Zakaria Daud from Besut, Terengganu, and Mohd Shah from Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, in order to obtain insights into the symbolic references and and cultural influences associated with the motifs, thereby augmenting the interpretive analysis.

The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling based on their recognised expertise in Malay woodcarving practice. They provided validation in motif identifications, interpretations and contributed practitioner-based perspectives grounded in experiential and tacit knowledge. Secondary sources, including books and peer-reviewed literature relevant to the study, were used to contextualise and support the interpretation of the findings. Fig. 1 shows the stages of this study's analysis.

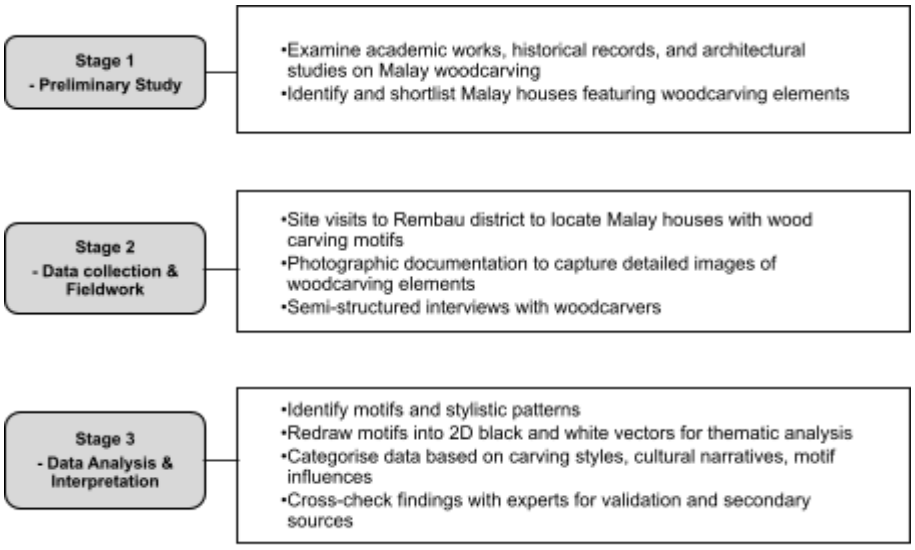


Fig. 1. Stages of this study's analysis

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

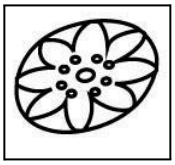
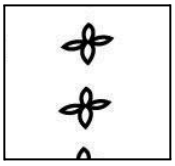
The results from four selected samples are presented below, detailed in Tables 2 to 5. The tables classify the motifs observed in each house and indicate their corresponding influences. To support the analysis, each table is accompanied by photographs and 2D illustrations, enabling a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the motifs within their respective categories.

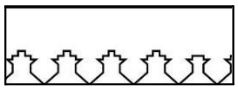
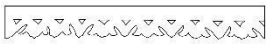
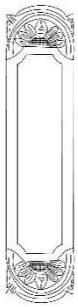


Fig. 2. Front view of Rumah Kompleks Warisan Lanjung
Source: Author's personal collection

Fig. 2 shows the front elevation of Rumah Kompleks Warisan Lanjung and is in the architectural style of *Rumah Bumbung Panjang*. The house is also named Baitul Rahmah, an Arabic word roughly translated as "love". The house was constructed sometime in the 1920s, and Haji Abu Bakar and Hajah Lanjung originally owned it. The Taat Foundation later repurposed the house. The Taat Foundation is a non-profit organisation committed to funding charitable initiatives. The house now serves as a facility for welfare and religious education, mainly for Quran recitation for students. The woodcarvings were primarily located on the external components of the house, specifically on the gable end, the floor slab side panels, the fascia board, and the window panes. The motifs were categorised as floral and faunal themes.

Table 2. Motifs of Rumah Kompleks Warisan Lanjung

No	Image	Motif Illustration	Category and Influence
1		 Motif A  Motif B	Motif A Category: Floral (*Bunga kesidang*) Malay culture influences the *bunga kesidang, and* the state of Melaka recognises the flower as a state flower. *Kesidang,* in the context of Malay culture, symbolises the personality and modest character of the Melaka community, and they emphasise being friendly and courteous. In addition, the design of the *bunga kesidang* displays Chinese influence due to its distinctive carving style. Motif B Category: Floral (*Bunga pecah empat*) The *bunga pecah empat* refers to flowers that consist of four petals. The flower is analogous in both the Malay and Chinese cultures. Malay culture uses the *bunga pecah empat* to represent the elements of earth, wind, fire, and water. In traditional Malay medicine, these components are believed to exist within our bodies to function and maintain balance. This motif also indicates Chinese influence because in Chinese culture, there is a flower that is significant and contains four lobes: the osmanthus. Osmanthus can come in various numbers of petals, but in their culture, the osmanthus symbolises nobility, value, and personal achievement.

2		 Motif C	Motif C Category: Floral (*Daun bergigi tajam*) The *daun bergigi tajam* refers to any leaf that is serrated or jagged. This one reflects the Malay world and Chinese culture. In Malay woodcarving, leaves are often portrayed as supplementary characters. They are frequently the protectors that protect the flowers that bloom. Symbolically, the leaf can also signify protection and sacrifice in the Malay context. However, a leaf is often represented as a symbol of the Buddha's wisdom in Buddhism. According to their old belief, a Brahmin had once used a leaf to test the Buddha, demonstrating his deep understanding of the universe. Metaphorically, the leaf is used as the Buddha's insightful knowledge.
3		 Motif D	Motif D Category: Faunal (Hanging bat) In the Malay context, the hanging bats are symbolised as wisdom and signify the aspiration to venture beyond their familiar boundaries. In Chinese, the word for "upside down" is "*dao*", which is homophonous with the word "arrived". Consequently, an upside-down bat means "blessings have arrived". Bats are regarded as a symbol of good fortune in Chinese culture.
5		 Motif E	Motif E Category: Floral (*Bunga emas*) The *bunga emas* is considered a prevalent flower in Malay culture in Malay woodcarving. The flower is typically characterised by bright yellow petals, often with eight petals. In Malay culture, the *bunga emas* is regarded as a symbol of prestige, elegance, high status, and beauty. Similarly, yellow flowers symbolise prosperity, good fortune, and wealth in Chinese culture.

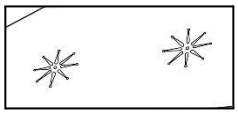
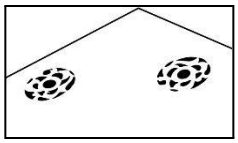
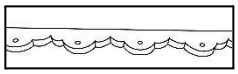
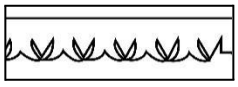
4.1 Findings of Woodcarving Motifs at Rumah Hjh. Rafeah bt. Hj. Abdul Samad



Fig. 3. Front view of Rumah Hjh. Rafeah
Source: Author's personal collection

Fig. 3 is the front view of Rumah Hjh. Rafeah. The house owner mentioned that the house was built sometime in the 1930s and is in the traditional Rumah Limas style. The woodcarvings were located on the exterior, specifically on the gable ends and fascia boards, and comprised floral, natural, and faunal categories.

Table 3. Motifs of Rumah Hjh. Rafeah bt. Hj. Abdul Samad

No	Image	Motif Illustration	Category and Influence
1		 Motif A	Motif A Category: Floral (*Bunga lawang*) *Bunga lawang* is one of the many spices that has many applications. Star anise is one of the key ingredients in Chinese Five Spice, a blend that also includes fennel, cinnamon, peppercorns, and cloves. It has significant uses in Chinese and Ayurvedic (Indian) medicines.
2		 Motif B	Motif B Category: Floral (*Bunga cina*) Bunga cina, scientifically known as *Gardenia jasminoides*, has a long history of use in traditional Chinese medicine, where it is also referred to as *zhi-zhi.* It is often used as an application to treat jaundice, reduce oedema and swelling, and alleviate high fevers (Zhou et al., 2011). In addition, people traditionally even used the petals in tea for their sweet aroma. At the same time, the seeds surrounded by the pulp act as a valuable source of yellow-scarlet dye applied in confectionery and textile production (Jarvis et al., 2014).
3		 Motif C	Motif C Category: Nature (Clouds and raindrops) Elements of nature are an important aspect in both Malay and Chinese cultures. In the Malay community, clouds help deliver rain for growing crops. It also inspires Malay woodcarvers to create a diverse range of *awan larat* motifs, which are an integral aspect of Malay woodcarving. On the other hand, clouds are quintessential in traditional Chinese culture because they symbolise divine favour and blessings. In Buddhism, the clouds are signified as the radiance of enlightenment.
4		 Motif D	Motif D Category: Faunal (Hanging bats) The hanging bats are carved upside down and are measured as a positive symbol, as in Chinese culture, where hanging upside-down bats means one's blessings have arrived (Muhammad Asif & Majid Ali, 2019).

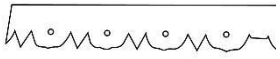
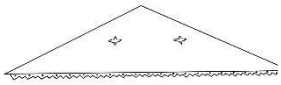
4.2 Findings of Woodcarving Motifs at Rumah Awa bt. Ismail



Fig. 4. Front view of Rumah Awa bt. Ismail
Source: Author's personal collection

Fig. 4 is the front view of Rumah Awa. It was built in the 1950s in the architectural style of *Rumah Bumbung Panjang*. Awa inherited the house from her mother. The motifs are located on the external parts of the house, mainly gable end, and fascia boards. The categories include fauna, and cosmos.

Table 4. Motifs of Rumah Awa bt. Ismail

No	Image	Motif Illustration	Category and Influence
1		 Motif A	Motif A Category: Fauna (*Kubah kelawar*) In Chinese context, the word "upside down" is "dao, which is homophonic with the word "arrived". Thus, an upside-down bat signifies that blessings have arrived and is considered an auspicious symbol in Chinese culture (Muhammad Asif & Majid Ali, 2019).
		 Motif B	
2		 Motif B	Motif B Category: Cosmos (Four-pointed stars) In Chinese cosmology, people perceive stars as part of the *Tian* (heaven), which reflects the divine order. In an Islamic context, the stars serve as guiding lights for sailors navigating land and sea. The same goes for Malay sailors in the past, who relied primarily on celestial navigation to manoeuvre through rough seas.

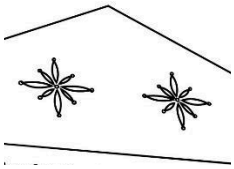
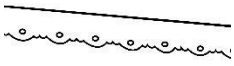
4.3 Findings of Woodcarving Motifs at Rumah Nurshila bt. Mahsor

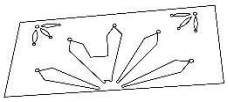


Fig. 5. Front view of Rumah Nurshila
(Source: Author's personal collection)

Fig. 5 shows the front elevation of Rumah Nurshila. Nurshila shared that her father had built the house in 1957. The house follows the architectural style of *Rumah Bumbung Panjang.* The motifs were located on the gable end, fascia board, and window head, which were all found on the external components of the house. The categories of motifs include floral, nature, and combination.

Table 5. Motifs of Rumah Nurshila bt. Mahsor

No	Image	Motif Illustration	Category and Influence
1		 Motif A	Motif A Category: Floral (*Bunga lawang*) For thousands of years, practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine have utilised star anise due to its medicinal properties. In traditional Chinese medicine practices, people would steep star anise in water to brew a tea-like beverage and treat respiratory diseases, constipation, nausea, and other digestive issues.
2		 Motif B	Motif B Category: Nature (Clouds and raindrops) Clouds and raindrops are symbols closely associated with Malay and Chinese communities. For the Malay community, clouds provide rain, which helps them sustain their crops. Water is a necessity for the Malay people because they can use it for spiritual cleansing, such as performing ablution. According to the researcher, water is represented as a symbol of purity and continuity in Malay thought. In the context of Chinese philosophy, water is often symbolically regarded as a wisdom-bearer in ancient Chinese thought. The theme of water in ancient Chinese wisdom often represents human nature, enlightenment, and benevolence (Jiang-guang, 2019). Clouds and raindrops also represent auspiciousness and happiness (Zhang, 2024).

3		 Motif C	Motif C Category: Floral and cosmos (*Bunga pecah tiga* and sun) *Bunga pecah tiga* refers to flowers with three petals. However, the form of the flower motif most likely resembles that of the Chinese lily, for which the name of the white lily in Chinese is called "*baihe*", symbolising both the unity of spirits and 100 years of love. It is also a meaningful symbol representing harmony, family love, and a life of abundance. The sun is associated with yang, the opposite of yin, within the concept of yin-yang. Yang represents the sun, fire, and rational thought, while yin represents the moon, darkness, and passivity.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion on the Categories of Motifs

Table 6. Motif Categories

Categories	Motifs
Floral	1) *Bunga kesidang* – 1 2) *Bunga pecah empat* – 1 3) *Daun bergigi tajam* – 1 4) *Bunga emas* – 1 5) *Bunga lawang* – 2 6) *Bunga cina* – 1
Faunal	1) *Kelawar bergantung* – 2 2) *Kubah kelawar* – 2
Nature	Clouds and raindrops – 2
Combination	*Bunga pecah tiga* and sun (floral, and cosmos) – 1

In Table 6, the analysis reveals four types of motif categories: floral, faunal, natural, and combination patterns. The results demonstrate the commonality among the houses, where the woodcarvers decorated many external components with motifs. Firstly, the researchers' findings suggest that the placements emphasise the visual expression meant to engage outwardly. Resultingly, allowing the motifs to function both practically and ornamentally, for communal appreciation. Due to their practicality, these motifs operate in unison with the airflow and the natural light. In turn, this supports the aesthetic and practical qualities of the woodcarvings. Hence, motif placements play a crucial role in woodcarving, ensuring that the woodcarvings are intended for both ornamental and practical purposes.

Secondly, the selection of motifs, as noted by Norhaiza (personal communication, March 7, 2024) and Zakaria (personal communication, March 9, 2024), was carefully determined by the carvers. These motifs were not arbitrary but influenced by their immediate surroundings, reflecting their daily lived environment. For example, the *bunga cina* (Chinese flower) of Motif B (Table 3) is widely found in Malaysia, blooms throughout the year, and is characterised by its white colour and sweet fragrance. Another example is the *bunga kesidang* (bread flower) of Motif A in Table 2, which, according to Mohd Shah (personal communication, July 24, 2024), is the official flower of Melaka. Since Rumah Warisan Kompleks Lanjung is located in Rembau, near the Melaka border, this suggests a geographical link influencing motif selection. This finding indicates that the motif choice reflects the carvers' attentiveness to their immediate environment and its spatial context.

This further reveals an intercultural aesthetic process in which environmental observation is translated into visual expression. Motifs in these Rembau Malay houses reflect both natural surroundings and culturally informed interpretations of place.

Another example can be found in the nature category, which is represented as clouds and raindrops of Motif C (Table 3) and Motif B (Table 5). Norhaiza (2024) highlighted that the woodcarvers imitate these motifs in such a way that they could mimic a transient natural phenomenon−to be designed and crafted on wooden surfaces, much like preserving a moment through a photograph. This interpretation suggests that woodcarving can channel and transform a fleeting moment into a visual and physical manifestation. Another explanation for the choices of clouds and raindrops as motifs is due to their underlying connotations.

In Malay culture, water symbolises sustenance and life, which is reflected in the agricultural dependence, as Malay communities rely on water for survival and cultivation. From an Islamic perspective, raindrops are highly regarded as a blessing from Allah SWT, which signifies divine mercy and purification. Therefore, this demonstrates how carvers were influenced by both the natural and spiritual dimensions, simultaneously, capturing the ephemeral aspects of their environment and imbuing them with meaningful symbols that can resonate culturally and religiously.

These observations suggest that woodcarvers create forms influenced by both natural elements and lived experiences, which serve as the impetus for motif design. This spatial orientation indicates that woodcarving aesthetics are linked to environmental responsiveness, highlighting a design heritage expressed through the integration of visual communication and functional efficiency. In this context, woodcarvings function as an embedded cultural logic within the vernacular architecture of Negeri Sembilan.

5.2 Discussion on the Influences of Motifs

This section discusses the influences that are identified in the motifs pertaining to their characteristics. The researchers frame the analysis, which centres on stylistic features, and the significance of cultural ties of the motifs adopted into woodcarving. The findings illustrate that Malay and Chinese influences are present in these houses. While they share certain similarities in motifs, they remain distinguishable in terms of culture and belief. The first aspect concerns the stylistic features. According to Mohd. Shah (2024), the carving style points to Chinese influence and is ascribed to the houses' geographical location. He explained further that there was a period when Chinese woodcarvers were in high demand for their acute skill and craftsmanship. Historically, Negeri Sembilan had retained close ties with Melaka, a state that attracted many Chinese traders and migrants. As a result, Chinese craftsmen from the border regions of Melaka contributed significantly to the construction of Malay houses and the production of motifs in Rembau. Such involvement suggests that certain elements, such as precision, symmetry, and the technique of carving repetition, reflect a craft that is derived from Chinese influence.

The second aspect concerns the significance of the motifs. Each motif is imbued with cultural, philosophical, and spiritual values and beliefs linked to Malay and Chinese influences. Both cultures share certain similarities in most motifs, yet each contains distinctive symbolism tied to respective belief systems. For example, the shared characteristics of the *bunga lawang* (star anise) and elements of nature and cosmic bodies are significant in both Malay and Chinese cultures. Star anise is widely used in culinary and traditional medicine and is regarded as an important ingredient for promoting well-being. However, the star anise carries different meanings in both societies. In Malay culture, it symbolises refined outward behaviour and moral conduct rooted in inner virtue, where courtesy reflects individual dignity and communal honour. In Chinese culture, star anise has been used for over 3,000 years in cuisine and traditional medicine, forming part of the five-spice tradition valued for its sensory and medicinal qualities. It is also associated with auspiciousness, particularly when the fruit displays eight points, a number considered to signify good fortune and protection.

This symbolism does not form a unified system but instead functions through parallel cultural elucidations within the selected houses. The motifs therefore highlight intercultural aesthetics and influences, where meanings are constructed through culturally specific interpretations within a shared visual language.

Prior to the arrival of Islam, animism moulded many aspects of life, including woodcarving motifs. Buddhism and Hinduism emerged later, influencing their religious beliefs by introducing new motifs among the people while retaining old traditions. This religion, in turn, inspired their motifs in the forms of zoomorphic designs with inherent connotations. After the arrival of Islam, a range of zoomorphic motifs were transformed into more abstract forms that aligned with Islamic teachings. The hanging bat is another instance where the two cultures intersect. In Malay culture, bats are often associated with wisdom and intelligence. Malay people view wisdom as a way of living fruitfully, often grounded in broad ideas or a far-reaching vision. In Chinese culture, living creatures are regarded as protectors and purveyors of good fortune. Therefore, bats are believed to symbolise longevity, happiness, and prosperity.

The concept of the cosmos is a central element in both Chinese and Malay cultures, particularly in relation to seafaring and navigation. In the past, Malay and Chinese people were deemed as skilled navigators as they were civilisations that viewed seafaring and trading as a means of their livelihood. For example, before the invention of the compass, the celestial elements, such as the stars and the moon, were their means of navigating the seas.

Nature is another category where both cultures intertwine. According to the researchers, water represented the fluidity and continuity of Malay thought. The Malay people have been known for their courage. A Malay proverb, such as "*Air dicincang tidak akan putus*," translates to "chopped water will not break." Essentially, it is a metaphor for unbreakable bonds and strong kinship for one another. In Chinese philosophy, water is considered a bearer of wisdom in ancient thought. Chinese people view water as a theme that represents human nature and enlightenment. Furthermore, in traditional Chinese culture, water is an important source of objects because it is a key cultural symbol in Chinese philosophy and thought.

Therefore, it can also be interpreted that the Malay world and Chinese influence have symbolism and meanings that adhere to their respective cultures, beliefs, and traditions. The findings also highlight the stylistic feature of adopting symmetry, precision, and repetition techniques, alongside motifs carrying valuable meanings. This demonstrates how external cultural influences were adapted into local traditions while maintaining their symbolic weight.

6. CONCLUSION

From the findings, the houses exhibited various motif categories, including floral, cosmic, faunal, natural, and combination of these themes. These categories are significant for understanding the perspectives of the woodcarvers during that period and their careful choices in selecting motifs to apply to wooden ornamentations. The results have also demonstrated the Malay world and Chinese influence on the houses' motifs regarding their respective cultural aesthetics. More importantly, this assimilation did not compromise the Islamic principles that continued to guide Malay woodcarving traditions. Furthermore, while Hindu-Buddhist elements historically shaped aspects of woodcarving, the study shows how Islam gradually transformed these motifs to correspond more closely with the values and philosophy of the Malay community. Since this study remains an ongoing endeavour, the preliminary findings will be further analysed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the influences shaping motifs in Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan. Future research may expand the scope to comparative studies across other districts in Negeri Sembilan or different states to examine whether similar intercultural motif patterns persist or vary regionally. In addition, the application of digital reconstruction methods is recommended to support the documentation, preservation, and visual analysis of woodcarving motifs, particularly for heritage conservation purposes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/ FUNDING

The authors express their deep appreciation to the informants whose time, knowledge, and expertise were vital to the development of this study. The support of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, is gratefully acknowledged, as is the contribution of the International Journal of Art and Design in facilitating the dissemination of this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Juliana Adlin Ahmad: Conception of the manuscript, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.
Arba'iyah Abd Aziz: Contribution to the discussion, overall project supervision, and critical review of the manuscript. Oversaw the integrity of the final manuscript and approved the version for publication.
Nor Azlin Hamidon: Contribution to manuscript review, and overall project supervision.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research did not involve human or animal subjects.

REFERENCES

Fakhrur Razi Maamor, & Basitah Taif. (2020). Buah buton as a non-structural evidence of Adat Perpatih houses in Luak Tanah Mengandung, Negeri Sembilan. *Jurnal Kesidang Kesidang Journal*, *5*(2020), 168–179.

Farah Wahidah Mohamad Gazali, Arba'iyah Ab. Aziz, & Norwani Md. Nawai. (2018). Woodcarving Motifs at Melaka Traditional Houses: Kampung Morten. *The Journal of Social Sciences Research*, (SPI 1), 321–330. https://doi.org/10.32861/jssr.spi1.321.330

Hanita Yusof, Azmal Sabil, & Amalina Hanapi. (2023). Typology of woodcarving motifs in Johor traditional Malay houses. *International Journal of Sustainable Construction Engineering and Technology*, *14*(2), 139–152. https://doi.org/10.30880/ijscet.2023.14.02.015

Hanita Yusof, Izudinshah Abd Wahab, Nangkula Utaberta, Azmal Sabil, & Nur Amalina Hanapi. (2021). Islamic influence on woodcarving motifs in Johor traditional Malay houses. *Journal of Islamic Architecture*, *6*(4), 313–320. https://doi.org/10.18860/jia.v6i4.13028

Herwandi Herwandi, Fakhrur Razi Maamor, Sabzali Musa Kahn, Indirawati Zahid, & Basitah Taif. (2024). Leadership characters: the interrelation of natural context with social life based on the meaning of three-dimensional carving. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, *32*, 105–127. https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.32.S2.06

Jaisuda, T. (2024). Unveiling the intricate tapestry: Malay (Melayu) wood carving patterns of Southern Thailand as reflection of Muslim cultural identity. *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, *26*, 146–156. https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.26.2024.309

Jarvis, C. E., Duval, A., & Crane, P. R. (2014). Gardenia Jasminoides: A traditional Chinese dye plant becomes a garden ornamental in Europe. *Curtis' Botanical Magazine*, *31*(1), 80–98. https://doi.org/10.1111/curt.12052

Jiang-guang, W. (2019). Water philosophy in ancient society of China: connotation, representation, and influence. *Philosophy Study*, *9*(12). https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5313/2019.12.005

Mohajan, H. (2018). Qualitative research methodology in social sciences and related subjects. *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, *7*(1), 23–48.

Mohd Jamil Mukmin. (1992). *Sejarah perkembangan Islam*. Nurin Enterprise.

Mohd Nur Shafiq Harun, & Mohd Samsudin. (2022). The aesthetic value the beauty of motifs and patterns of wood carving art of rumah limas Belanda in Terengganu. *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences*, *5*(1), 36–51. https://bitarajournal.com/index.php/bitarajournal/article/view/266

Mohd Sabrizaa Abdul Rashid, & Azizul Azli Ahmad (2008). The form and symbolism of minbar design in the Malay world. *International Forum on Islamic Architecture & Design (IFIAD 2008)*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322568549

Muhammad Asif, & Majid Ali. (2019). Chinese Traditions Folk Art, Festivals and Symbolism. *International Journal of Research Chinese Traditions Folk Art, Festivals and Symbolism Article in International Journal of Research-GRANTHAALAYAH*, *6*(1), 1–21. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330289156

Muhammad Uzair Ismail, Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria, & Zuliskandar Ramli. (2024). Traces of Turco-Persian influences in Malay woodcarving motifs on vernacular buildings in Terengganu. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04173-0

Muhammad Zulkarnaen Mohd Zaine, & Arbai'yah Ab. Aziz. (2024). Wood carving motifs in Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan. *International Journal of Art & Design*, *8*(2), 106–119. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24191/ijad.v8i2.2819

Noor Hafiza Ismail, Hamdzun Haron, Nor Afian Yusof, Raha Jaafar, & Azizan Othamn. (2024). Exploring wood carving motifs: the minbar of ULUL Albab mosque. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *14*(7). https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v14-i7/21961

Nor Aniswati Awang Lah, Khairul Anwar Mohamed Khaidzir, Mohamad Hanif Abdul Wahab, & Nasbahry Couto. 2025). "Alam takambang jadi guru" philosophy in Minang-Malay vernacular ornamentation wisdom. *Asian Journal of Environment-Behaviour Studies*, *9*(29), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.21834/aje-bs.v9i29.455

Nur Aisyah Safwa Rashidi, Noor Hayati Ismail, & Nurul Syala Abd Latip. (2022). Typological study of woodcarving in Malay traditional house. *The Malaysian Journal of Islamic Studies*, *34*(02), 64–71. https://doi.org/10.33102/uij.vol34no02.482

Nur Aisyah Safwa Rashidi, Noor Hayati Ismail, & Nurul Syala Abdul Latip. (2021). Development of Malay Wood-Carving Motifs from Islamic Perspectives. *E-Prosiding Seminar Antarabangsa Islam Dan Sains (SAIS 2021)*, 601–611.

Nur Aisyah Safwa Rashidi, Noor Hayati Ismail, & Nurul Syala Abdul Latip. (2021). Development of Malay wood-carving motifs from Islamic perspectives. In Anita Ismail, Shahirah Sulaiman, Mohd Nizwan Musling, Siti Rubaini Mat, Azman Ab Rahman, Hussein 'Azeemi Abdullah Thaidi, & Nuradli Ridzwan Shah Mohd Dali (Eds.), *E-Prosiding Seminar Antarabangsa Islam dan Sains* (Number September, pp. 601–611). Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. https://oarep.usim.edu.my/jspui/handle/123456789/14524

Nur Faezah Hashim, Arba'iyah Ab Aziz, Mohamad Kamal Abd Aziz, & Lalu Riskyan Hakiky. (2023). Mimbar design motifs in pre-independence mosques in Ipoh Perak. *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, *8*(SI16), 147–156. https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8isi16.5231

Nurdiyana Zainal Abidin, Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan, & Fawazul Khair Ibrahim. (2014). Woodcarving placements in traditional Malay houses of the wealthy and the commoners of Negeri Sembilan. In Prosiding Muafakat Minang (Ed.), *Conference: Diaspora Minang: Simposium Muafakat Minang 2014* (Number March 2019, pp. 1–8). Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331571556_Woodcarving_Placements_in_Traditional_Malay_Houses_of_the_Wealthy_and_the_Commoners_of_Negeri_Sembilan

Patton, M. Q. (2000). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, *34*, 1189–1208.

Raja Fuziah Raja Tun Uda, & Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi. (1997). Malay arts and crafts: Islamic inspiration in creativity. In Mohd. Taib Osman (Ed.), *Islamic Civilization In The Malay World* (pp. 1–443). Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Kuala Lumpur.

Rosnawati Othman. (2005). The language of the Langkasukan Motif. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, *33*(96), 97–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810500281898

Siti Aisyah Muhammad, & Normaisarah Mohd Rosdi. (2023). Ingenuity incision in traditional Malay wood carving calligraphy motif. In BIO Web of Conferences (Ed.), *5th International Conference on Tropical Resources and Sustainable Sciences* (Vol. 73, pp. 1–8). EDP Sciences. https://doi.org/10.1051/bioconf/20237305018

Sulaiman Esa. (1993). The reflowering of the Islamic spirit in contemporary Malaysian art. In *Pameran Manifestasi Jiwa Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman*. Balai Seni Lukis Negara.

Sumardianshah Silah, Ponimin, Taswadi, & Dwi Retno Sri Ambarwati. (2021). The beauty of Malay woodcarving motif ornamentation. *KnE Social Sciences*, 81–89. https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v5i6.9181

Syed Ahmad Jamal. (1992). *Rupa & jiwa* (1st ed.). Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.

Wallschlaeger, C., & Busic-Snyder, C. (1992). *Basic visual concepts and principles: for artists, architects and designers* (Illustrated). McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

Zhang, Y. (2024). The evolution and contemporary expression of traditional Chinese patterns: water patterns and cloud patterns as examples. *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, *2024*(1), 1167. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10604209

Zuliskandar Ramli. (2012). *Proses akulturasi budaya India dan transformasi ilmu masyarakat Kedah Tua berdasarkan data arkeologi dan kajian saintifik*. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-ND) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).