

# Woodcarving in Malay Architecture: Patterns, Structures, and Cultural Significance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cultural, functional, and spiritual roles of woodcarving in traditional Malay architecture. It investigates how historical, cultural, and spiritual factors shaped the selection of materials, motifs, and carving techniques. Key architectural elements like *Tunjuk Langit* and *Sisik Naga* are highlighted for their aesthetic, functional and symbolic contributions. While Malay woodcarving's symbolic and decorative aspects are well documented, integration into contemporary architectural is less explored. The study adopts a conceptual review approach, synthesising historical, cultural and architectural literature and analysing recurring motifs, techniques and applications through a thematic lens. The paper also discusses the challenge of preserving these traditional elements in modern architecture, offering insights into how they can be adapted while maintaining cultural significance. The findings highlight woodcarving's enduring relevance, positioning it as a framework for sustainable and culturally rooted architecture.

## INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asian countries have a tangible legacy that includes the art of traditional wood carving, which can be seen in the region's traditional homes, mosques, and palaces (Ahmad et al., 2024). Woodcarvings were not only a visual element but also conveyed religious, cultural, and philosophical meanings. Since the 14th century, woodcarving has been an essential craft in the vernacular architecture practised by Malay craftsmen in Peninsular Malaysia (Abu Bakar et al., 2022). Among Malay decorative arts, traditional woodcarving holds an unparalleled position in terms of cultural significance. The artistic creations of Malay woodcarvers are deeply influenced by their religious, moral, and ethical principles, with their work considered an act of surrender to God (Tohid et al., 2015).

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Malay woodcarvings typically employ one of three techniques: relief carving, perforation, or a combination of both (Said, 2012b; Wahid et al., 2021). On the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, woodcarving is seen as an integral component of traditional Malay architecture. Traditional wooden structures are adorned with carved motifs representing flora, fauna, geometry, calligraphy, and cosmic symbols, meticulously executed on hardwood according to predetermined patterns. The craft of woodcarving is passed down through an apprenticeship system, where the apprentice initially replicates the work of their master, gradually making subtle modifications to the motifs and eventually developing their distinctive style. This evolving design becomes the woodcarver's signature, reflecting their unique approach to construction and creation. In Peninsular Malaysia and Southern Thailand, woodcarvers consider three key factors when selecting wood species: the availability of timber, its physical properties and durability, and the spiritual significance of the wood species (Said, 2005). This study aims to bridge historical documentation with contemporary architectural practise by synthesising knowledge on motif evolution, symbolism, and functionality.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The review focuses on the historical, cultural, symbolic, and architectural dimensions of Malay woodcarving to provide a systematic synthesis of current knowledge and identify research gaps. This conceptual review synthesises existing literature on Malay woodcarving within architectural and cultural contexts. The methodological framework consisted of three steps:

### Literature Selection:

- (i) Sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals, books, and heritage documentation published between 2000-2025
- (ii) Keywords included “Malay woodcarving”, “traditional Malay architecture”, “Hindu-Buddhist influence”, “Islamic motifs”, “cultural heritage”, and “historical evolution”.
- (iii) Both qualitative descriptive and case study research were included to capture historical, symbolic, and functional dimensions.

### Analytical lens:

- (i) A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify recurring motifs, symbolism, regional variations, and applications in traditional architecture.
- (ii) Historical, religious, and socio-cultural influences were categorised to trace evolution and contextual meaning.
- (iii) Comparative cultural analysis was applied to examine state-level variations in Malay woodcarving traditions.
  - Morphological analysis: assessment of motif shape, form, and structural elements.
  - Symbolic interpretation: exploration of cultural meanings and spiritual significance.
  - Historical contextualisation: tracing regional influences and evolution patterns.

- Regional classification: categorisation of motifs by geographical origin and state-level identity.

Conceptual synthesis:

- (i) Findings were mapped to three overarching dimensions shown in Fig 1:
  - Historical and cultural evolution,
  - Symbolic and functional significance, and
  - Contemporary scholarship and research gaps.
- (ii) This framework guided the identification of research gaps and the discussion of potential integration of woodcarving in modern architectural practice.

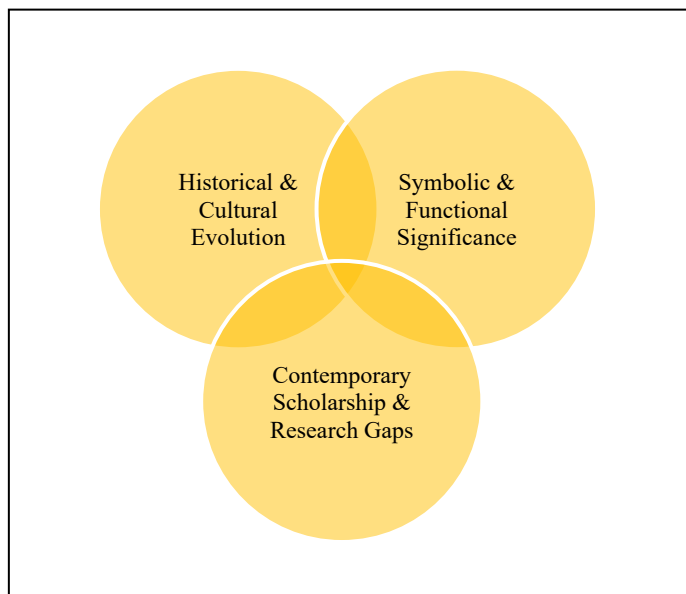


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Findings on Malay Woodcarving.

Source: Authors (2025)

This methodological approach ensures a structured synthesis of literature while critically examining the continuity and adaptation of Malay woodcarving in architecture.

### Historical Evolution of Malay Woodcarving

Malay woodcarving tradition, initially shaped by Hinduism, underwent significant transformations with the arrival of Islam (Abu Bakar et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2012). Early woodcarvings in the region often included Hindu-inspired designs, followed by the introduction of Langkasuka motifs. After that, the pre-Islamic period (15th century) was followed by the Islamic period (15th -17th century) introduced new symbolic vocabularies and geometric patterns that were integrated with existing traditions. The colonial

period (18th -20th century) brought both challenges and opportunities, with European influences introducing new aesthetic concepts while cultural preservation efforts began to document and protect traditional practices. The post-independence era (1957-present) has renewed interest in cultural heritage, leading to systematic documentation and revival movements.

### Hindu-Buddhist Influence

Before the spread of Islam, Malay woodcarving was heavily influenced by Hindu-Buddhist culture, as evidenced by the presence of mythical animals and floral motifs in early carvings (Abu Bakar et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2012). Hinduism has had a profound influence on Malay culture, dating back to at least the first century. Early interactions between Indian traders and the Malay world, particularly in Melaka, established a foundation for cultural exchange. Hindu traders settled in Melaka, fostering cultural integration through intermarriages and trade (Chittys, 2009; Ravichandran, 2009). The influence of Hinduism permeated various aspects of Malay culture, including religion, language, and philosophy. Hindu-Buddhist impact on Malay woodcarving is evident in motifs such as Kala Makara, Gunungan, Stupa, Garuda, and Naga, which were commonly found in early carvings, as shown in Fig 2. Following the arrival of Islam, these motifs were gradually modified to adhere to Islamic laws and restrictions, with many representations of *Kala* and *Makara* being replaced or altered to feature floral elements (Yusof & Mohd-Nor, 2021). This historical layer adds a rich diversity to the motifs seen in traditional Malay woodcarving.



Fig. 2. The 211-Year-Old Mimbar at Masjid Losong Haji Mohd Features a Lotus Flower Motif on its *Gunungan*.

Source: Bernama (2021)

### Islamic Influence

The arrival of Islam in the 14th century significantly reduced the influence of Hinduism on the Malay people's daily lives, including their woodcarving traditions. Islam had a profound effect on various aspects of Malay culture, guiding artistic expressions in line with Islamic principles. This transformation is most apparent in the shift of woodcarving motifs. Previously, carvings depicting living creatures, such as animals and humans, were common, but over time, these were replaced by stylised plant motifs and elaborate Islamic calligraphy (Nasir, 2016). The introduction of Islam also brought a new artistic direction, based on the concept of Tawhid, which emphasises the oneness of God. As a result, one of the most iconic symbols in traditional Malay homes, the "*Awan Larat*," emerged, symbolising the connection between humanity,

the universe, and the Creator (Faiz Sabri et al., 2021). However, despite the strong influence of Islam, traces of Hindu-Buddhist culture remain visible in Malay woodcarving. Traditional Hindu-Buddhist motifs continue to appear in the carvings, reflecting the enduring Hindu-Buddhist legacy in the art. Thus, Islamic aesthetic did not erase Hindu-Buddhist elements entirely but reshaped them into forms acceptable under Islamic law. The findings in Table 1 (Hussin et al., 2012) highlight how Malay woodcarvers adapted certain motifs to comply with Islamic principles:

Table 1: Alterations in Wood Carving from Hindu-Buddhist to Islamic Influence.

Hindu-Buddhist influence	Islamic Influence	Symbols and meaning
<i>Kala</i>	The foundation of carved flowers	The source of the carved flower
<i>Makara</i>	<i>Sulur Bayur</i>	Tendrils
<i>Gunungan</i> (Mountain/ Cosmic Mountain)	head	Anything triangular at the top
<i>Bodhi tree</i>	<i>Beringin tree</i>	The tree is associated with Buddhism.
<i>Buah Buton / Stupa</i>	<i>Buah Buton / Stupa</i>	newel of stairs or gate
<i>Padma/Teratai</i>	<i>Tanjung, a fragrant flower</i>	beauty
<i>Naga</i>	-	-
<i>Geroda/Jentayu</i>	<i>Petala Indera/Gagak Sura</i>	Mythical bird/myth

Source: Hussin et al. (2012)

### Colonial and External Influences

As trade with the Chinese grew, the influence of Buddhist motifs became prominent. Langkasuka motifs, originating from the early Malay kingdom of Langkasuka, were characterised by spirals and intricate designs. These motifs evolved through stylistic changes influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions, as well as local creativity and technical expertise (Khan, 2016). With the arrival of Western colonisers, Malay woodcarving was further impacted by colonial designs, eventually leading to the development of a distinctly "Malay motif," heavily influenced by Islamic artistic principles.





### Symbolism and Motifs

The motifs in Malay woodcarving serve as more than just aesthetic elements; they are deeply embedded in the cultural, historical, and philosophical context of the Malay people. These carvings are typically executed as reliefs, perforated designs, or a fusion of both, allowing for intricate and dynamic artistic expressions. The motifs themselves are influenced by both Hindu-Buddhist traditions and Islamic principles, evolving to fit the changing cultural landscape of the Malay world.

One of the most significant aspects of Malay woodcarving is how the art form preserved many Hindu-Buddhist symbols, albeit transformed to adhere to Islamic aniconism. For instance, the Garuda motif, once depicted in a more anthropomorphic form, was adapted into an abstract representation, focusing on elements such as wings, thus avoiding direct depictions of living beings (Sudarwanto et al., 2019). This shift in representation highlights how Malay woodcarvers navigated the balance between maintaining cultural heritage and adhering to the religious principles of Islam (Sanusi & Legino, 2015).

The principal forms of Malay woodcarving include several key symbols that hold both aesthetic and symbolic significance. Some of the most common motifs are:

Table 2: Principal Forms of Malay Woodcarving.

Symbols	Types and meanings
	<p><i>Buah buton / Stupa</i></p> <p>The roof tie beam's tenon-and-mortise junction is hidden by the kingpost. It's the sole volumetric component that's carved to beautify the interior. Stupas (3-5 levels) and lotuses are common Buah Buton themes.</p>
	<p><i>Gunungan</i></p> <p>A mountain or tree of life silhouette, a status symbol. A house's Gunungan gateway is intricately carved. This form is also used for ventilation panels and door leaves.</p>
	<p><i>Makara</i></p> <p>Pattani and Kelantan's sea-monster legends centre on the makara. The Terengganu bargeboards represent Makara to enhance the building's façade. This distinguishes Terengganu houses from Perak and Negeri Sembilan.</p>
	<p><i>Lotus</i></p> <p>A lotus is a sign of purity and is used on door leaves, fascia boards, ventilation panels, and Buah Buton. The form is also carved on tombstones and kris hilts.</p>

Source: Said (2012b)

A central theme in Malay woodcarving is *Awan Larat* (Basaree et al., 2015), which translates to "stretched clouds" and holds deep Islamic and philosophical meanings. This motif is often used in traditional Malay homes to symbolise growth, transformation, and the connection between life and nature. *Awan Larat* is depicted in three main forms: *Awan Larat Melayu*, *Awan Larat Jawa* (cross pattern), and *Awan Larat Jawi* (Yusoff & Zain, 2013). Woodcarvers are highly skilled in translating abstract philosophical and natural ideas into tangible artistic forms. The training process, deeply rooted in apprenticeship, involves learning how to adapt motifs from past masterpieces to create new, contextually relevant works. In places like Terengganu, floral motifs featuring native plants such as *Ketumbit*, *Getam Guri*, and *Kerak Nasi* are commonly carved into the ventilation panels of traditional homes. Similarly, in Perak, cosmic themes are interwoven with floral designs like sunflowers and *Ketola*, further solidifying the connection between art and nature.

In Islamic woodcarving, while figurative representations are generally avoided, abstract representations of animals are still employed. Roosters, ducks, and lizards are commonly represented in a stylised, abstract form and are chosen for their positive symbolism of beauty and nobility. Moreover, calligraphy plays an essential role in Islamic woodcarving, often appearing in ventilation panels and other carved elements, with many pieces featuring Arabic translations of Quranic verses. This transition from Hindu-Buddhist to Islamic motifs illustrates the adaptive nature of Malay woodcarving, as traditional practices evolved while maintaining a connection to both past heritage and present religious and cultural demands. This syncretism reflects the broader Malay experience, wherein continuity and change coexist, preserving local heritage while integrating new cultural and artistic influences (Lee-Niinioja, 2011).

## Regional, Social, and Cultural Context

### *Regional Variations and Heritage*

The motifs and styles of woodcarving can vary significantly across different regions in Malaysia. For example, the woodcarvings in Negeri Sembilan and Kuala Pilah feature a mix of flora, fauna, and geometric motifs, reflecting local cultural influences and the need for preservation amidst urbanisation (Ahmad et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024). In the region historically known as Langkasuka, which includes areas like Terengganu, Kelantan, and Patani, the quail trap (*Jebak Puyuh*) became a refined form of art, as depicted in intricate panels, often mounted on the gates of these traps, were crafted by woodcarvers. These panels, sometimes resembling the Gunungan motif, were typically used for ceremonial entrances. Some designs incorporated upturned crockets (*Sulur Bayung*), reminiscent of the architecture found in mosques and palaces, thus blending religious and cultural influences in the woodcarving tradition. Efforts to document and preserve traditional woodcarving motifs are crucial for maintaining cultural heritage. Studies emphasise the importance of continuous documentation to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage represented by these motifs (Ahmad et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024).



Fig 3. Kelantan Quail Trap, 19th Century

Source: Noor & Khoo (2012)

### *Socioeconomic and Feudal Influence on Carving Usage*

The feudal system has significantly influenced the structure of Malay society, creating clear divisions based on socioeconomic status. This system shaped the traditional social hierarchy, with the aristocracy, including royalty and court officials, at the top, while commoners lived in villages, along coastlines, or in the forests. Art forms, especially woodcarving, were historically associated with the nobility. Intricate carvings were used to decorate the palaces and homes of the elite, signifying their status and authority. For instance, the *buah Buton* motif was reserved for the residences of customary leaders, symbolising leadership and social hierarchy within the community (Maamor et al., 2023). Carving, along with other forms of craftsmanship, has long served as a symbol of power, employed by the palace and nobility to assert their

dominance (Noor & Khoo, 2012). The grandeur of carvings on palace exteriors emphasised the role of traditional Malay woodcarving in the power structure. Traditional Malay palaces, such as Istana Balai Besar, are adorned with woodcarvings that symbolise the king's status. These carvings include motifs like flora, geometry, cosmos features, and Arabic calligraphy, which are strategically placed to convey power and authority (Muhammad & Rosdi, 2023). The intricate and detailed designs, such as those found at Istana Tengku Long (Muhammad & Rosdi, 2023), as well as Istana Kenangan in Fig 4, reflect the influence of Islamic principles and the socio-cultural values held by the Malay royalty. The evolution of Malay aristocratic ornamentations, including woodcarvings, highlights the influence of external forces such as colonization, which introduced new stylistic developments while maintaining traditional elements (Ali et al., 2019).



Fig. 4. Istana Kenangan, Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

Source: TanganKraf (2023)

### ***Comparative and Symbolic Analysis Across Malaysian States***

Beyond their decorative appeal, Malay woodcarving motifs demonstrate significant regional diversity, reflecting the interplay of history, environment, and cultural values. A comparative analysis highlights how different Malaysian states developed distinctive vocabularies while maintaining shared cultural principles.

Table 3 summarises the comparative analysis across states, highlighting dominant motifs, cultural influences, unique characteristics, and symbolic emphases that distinguish each region's tradition.

Table 3: Comparative Framework of Malay Woodcarving Motifs across Malaysian States

State	Dominant Motifs	Cultural Influences	Unique Characteristics	Symbolic Emphasis
Kelantan	Floral, Geometric, Calligraphy	Islamic, Thai, Royal Court	<i>Pucuk Rebung</i> , Complex ventilation panels	Religious devotion, Royal status
Terengganu	Floral, Maritime, Geometric	Islamic, Seafaring, Scholarly	Wave patterns, Boat motifs	Maritime heritage, Islamic scholarship

Johor	Labu Maya, Islamic panels	Bugis, Trade, Islamic	Systematic placement, multi-piece panels	Commercial identity, religious principles
Negeri Sembilan	Fauna, Flora, Geometric	<i>Adat Perpatih, Minangkabau</i>	<i>Buah Buton</i> , Status symbols	Customary law, Community hierarchy
Perak	Nine decorative elements	Royal, Local heritage	State-specific terminology	Heritage preservation, Local identity
Pahang	Royal emblems, Jungle flora	Sultanate, Inland Forest	Mythical creatures, Ceremonial designs	Royal authority, natural harmony
Kedah	Agricultural, Lotus	Hindu-Buddhist, Siamese	Rice cultivation symbols	Agricultural prosperity, ancient heritage

Source: Author (2025)

### ***Historical and Symbolic Development***

The historic formation of Malay woodcarving motifs reflects pre-Islamic (Hindu-Buddhist) visual vocabularies subsequently adapted under Islamic aesthetic and Malay worldview; motif selection follows guiding philosophical principles tied to nature and cultural norms. Research tracing motif philosophy links early Langkasuka/Hindu influence on later Islamic adaptations that shaped acceptable representational rules and motif categories in the peninsula (Hussin et al., 2012).

- (i) Origins and philosophy: Hindu antecedents influenced early motif forms (flora, tendrils, *Awang Larat*), while post-conversion Islam shaped motif choices to align with religious principles and decorative abstraction.
- (ii) Nature as source: Many motifs are stylised representations or composite imaginings of local flora and fauna, used as culturally legible symbols rather than literal representations (Rashid et al., 2018).
- (iii) Placement and function: carving placement (ventilation panels, doors, gables) is functional, aesthetic, and symbolic. serving ventilation or light needs, signalling space hierarchy and religious roles (Ismail & Zumahiran, 2009).
- (iv) Divers of change: Motif complexity and composition evolved with building type, patronage, state or political context, and carver skill changes are contextual rather than uniform across states (Shaffee & Said, 2010).

### **Application in Traditional Architecture**

The application of woodcarving in Malay architecture is a testament to the harmonious integration of material, craftsmanship, and cultural significance. The abundance of tropical hardwood species in the region has played a pivotal role in the proliferation of woodcarving, with these durable woods being favoured for constructing a wide range of structures, including homes, mosques, palaces, tombs, pavilions, gateways, and even boats. This preference is largely due to the resistance to decay, protection from pests like fungi and termites, and the overall longevity of the wood (Said, 2005).

### **Timber Species Selection**

Key timber species such as *Cegal*, *Seraya*, and *Merbau* have been traditionally used in Malay woodcarving. These species possess unique qualities that make them highly suitable for both structural and decorative elements in buildings and other carved items. Species like *Cegal* and *Merbau* are chosen for their exceptional durability and resistance to decay, making them ideal for enduring harsh environmental conditions. *Cegal* is known as the most used heavy hardwood in Malay woodcarving, admired for its robustness, resilience, and ability to withstand various environmental challenges (Said, 2012b).

When selecting wood for their carvings, Malay woodcarvers have historically considered three key factors: the spiritual beliefs of the craftsmen, the physical properties of the timber, and the wood's availability, as shown in Table 4. The availability of timber was particularly crucial, as it ensured a steady supply and reduced the cost and effort of sourcing materials. Woodcarvers typically chose species that were abundant in their regions, which made it easier to obtain the necessary wood for carving. For example, in Peninsular Malaysia and Southern Thailand, species like *Cegal* and *Merbau* were commonly used due to their ready availability and exceptional durability (Said, 2012a). The physical characteristics of the wood also played a significant role in selection. Woodcarvers favoured species known for their strength, durability, and workability, as these properties allowed the wood to endure the carving process and last for many years without deterioration. *Cegal* and *Merbau*, being particularly strong and resistant to decay, became preferred choices for both structural and decorative elements in buildings, boats, and other carved items.

Spiritual beliefs and cultural significance also played an essential role in the selection of wood species. Many woodcarvers held beliefs that certain types of timber possessed spiritual properties or symbolic meanings. For example, species like *Kemuning* and *Kenaung* were not only admired for their fine grain and lustrous surfaces but were also believed to carry spiritual power.

Table 4: Three Key Factors that Malay Woodcarvers Historically Considered when Selecting Wood Species.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Description</b>
Availability of Timber	The abundance and accessibility of certain wood species in the region.
Physical Characteristics and Durability	The strength, durability, grain pattern, and workability of the wood.
Spiritual Beliefs and Cultural Significance	The perceived spiritual properties and symbolic meanings of the wood.

Source: Said (2005)

These three factors, availability, physical characteristics, and spiritual beliefs, were interwoven in the selection process, reflecting the Malay woodcarvers' deep understanding of both the practical and symbolic aspects of their craft. Their careful selection of wood species not only ensured the durability and aesthetic appeal of their carvings but also preserved the cultural and spiritual traditions of their community.

### **Architecture and Aesthetic Components**

In traditional Malay architecture, whether in residences or mosques, the inclusion of carved wooden components plays a vital role in both structural integrity and aesthetic appeal. A typical Malay wooden structure features over twenty carved pieces, which are divided into two main categories: architectural and aesthetic components.

## (i) Architectural Components

These are functional elements essential to the structure, such as windows, doors, walls, roofs, staircases, and *tebar layar* (ventilation panels). These parts serve the purpose of the building's function while offering the opportunity for decoration through woodcarving.

## (ii) Aesthetic Components

These decorative features, which enhance the beauty and identity of the building, include elements like *sisir angin* (wind comb), *kepala pintu* (door head), and *tunjuk langit* (finials), among others. Carvings are strategically placed in both interior and exterior settings to create a cohesive visual experience that reflects the region's identity and cultural heritage (Kamarudin & Said, 2008).

According to Mohd Sabrizaa and Sufian (2008), fifteen key aesthetic features are commonly found in traditional Malay homes, which are outlined in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Aesthetic Features of Traditional Malay Wooden Architecture

No.	Feature	Description	Reference
1	<i>Tunjuk Langit</i> (Finials)	Decorative elements located at the roof's apex, symbolizing a connection to the divine and often featuring intricate carving.	(Firzal, 2011)
2.	<i>Sisik Naga</i> (Dragon Scale)	A motif used in woodcarving, representing protection and strength, often found on roof edges.	(Baharuddin et al., 2019) (Rashid et al., 2018)
3	<i>Salur Bayung</i>	A floral motif that symbolizes growth and prosperity, commonly used in wall and door carvings.	
4	<i>Ande-ande</i>	Decorative panels that enhance the visual appeal of walls and ceilings, often featuring geometric patterns.	
5	<i>Kayu Pemeleh</i>	A type of carving that serves both aesthetic and functional purposes, often used to enhance ventilation.	
6	<i>Kepala Cicak</i> (Lizard Head)	A symbolic motif representing agility and adaptability, typically found on door frames.	
7	<i>Tiang Gantung</i> (Hanging Pillars)	Decorative pillars that are both structural and ornamental, often featuring elaborate carvings.	
	<i>Lebah Bergantung</i> (Hanging Bees)	A motif symbolizing industriousness and community, used in various decorative elements.	
9	<i>Kekisi</i> (Lattice)	Intricate latticework that provides privacy while allowing airflow, often used in windows and doors.	
10	<i>Gerbang</i> (Gate)	Ornate entrance gates that serve as a welcoming feature and symbolize hospitality.	
11	<i>Gerbang Pintu Sesiku Keluang</i>	A specific type of gate design featuring angular motifs, representing strength and stability.	
12	<i>Pagar Musang</i> (Fox Fence)	A decorative fence design that symbolizes protection and vigilance	
13	<i>Kepala Pintu</i> (Door Head)	Elaborate carvings above doorways, often featuring symbolic motifs that convey cultural values	
14	<i>Kepala Tingkap</i> (Window Head)	Decorative elements above windows, enhancing the aesthetic appeal and often featuring floral or geometric patterns	

15	Ekor Itik (Duck Tail Gables)	A unique gable design that adds a distinctive silhouette to the roofline, symbolizing grace and elegance	(Abdul Razak & Sabil, 2024)
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Source: Author (2025)

## Contemporary Scholarship and Research Gaps

Existing scholarship on Malay woodcarving is extensive in its descriptive scope but limited in its theoretical and practice-oriented depth. Much of the scholarship focuses on documenting motifs, panel typologies, and symbolic meaning in traditional houses and heritage structures (Ahmad et al., 2024; binti Mohamad Gazali et al., 2018). Studies also emphasise the transmission of craft knowledge through master carvers, highlighting the risk of cultural loss and the importance of safeguarding efforts (Kamarudin et al., 2020).

However, critical reviews note that contemporary applications often fail to translate the original philosophies of woodcarving into modern design practice, resulting in superficial ornamentation (Abdul Halim Choo et al., 2024; Nila et al., 2012). Utaberta (2014) argues that the absence of sustained discourse on ornamentation within modern post-modern architectural frameworks further limits integration. Although some recent works explore adaptation for sustainability, passive ventilation, and regional identity (Abdul Razak et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024), these remain case-based and prescriptive rather than systematic.

Overall, the literature reveals three key research gaps: (1) inadequate theoretical framing of woodcarving within architectural discourse, (2) limited empirical evaluation of its functional performance in contemporary contexts, and (3) insufficient design guidelines to support meaningful integration in practice. These gaps suggest that while documentation of motifs and heritage is robust, systematic, and performance-oriented investigations into integrating Malay woodcarving with modern architecture remain understudied.

## DISCUSSION

The integration of woodcarving in traditional Malay architecture serves as both an aesthetic and functional element, with significant cultural and spiritual implications. This study delves into the historical and contemporary relevance of Malay woodcarving, emphasizing its influence on architectural components, material selection, and adaptation in modern designs. Based on the data, the following points emerge as key areas of discussion:

### Regional Symbolism and Identity

Malay woodcarving motifs reflect distinct regional vocabularies shaped by geography, culture, and history, while still adhering to shared philosophical principles. For example, Kelantan's use of *pucuk rebung* and complex ventilation panels highlights its royal and religious heritage, while Terengganu emphasises maritime motifs such as waves and boat patterns that reference its seafaring culture. In Johor, systematic placement of Labu maya and Islamic panels conveys both commercial identity and religious symbolism, whereas Negeri Sembilan incorporates *buah buton* and Minangkabau-inspired motifs to express communal hierarchy under *Adat Perpatih*. These regional variations demonstrate how motifs are not static but dynamic, encoding local identity and adapting to historical influences, including Hindu-Buddhist traditions, Islamisation, and colonial contact. Recognising this distinction enriches our understanding of Malay woodcarving as a diverse yet unified cultural practice.

## Woodcarving as Socio-Spatial Language

Beyond ornamentation, Malay woodcarving functions as a symbolic and spatial language that communicates status, spirituality, and social values. Placement is never arbitrary: ventilation panels regulate airflow while signalling openness, *tunjuk langit* at roof apices mark a divine connection, and carved door heads (*kepala pintu*) embody hospitality and cultural identity. These carvings encode social hierarchy, distinguishing aristocratic residences from commoner houses through motif complexity and placement. Symbolically, abstracted flora, fauna, and calligraphy convey cosmological and ethical principles, embedding philosophy within the built environment. Woodcarving thus operates as an architectural text, one that integrates functional, aesthetic, and spiritual roles into a coherent socio-cultural system.

## From Ornament to Function: Adaptive Lessons for Modern Design

A key challenge for contemporary practice lies in translating these traditional principles into modern architectural contexts without reducing them to superficial decoration. Functional motifs such as *kekisi* (lattices) and *kayu pemeleh* (ventilation panels) offer passive strategies for daylighting, privacy, and thermal comfort, aligning with sustainable design principles. At the same time, symbolic motifs such as *sisik naga* (dragon scales) and *gerbang pintu sesiku keluang* (angular gates) remind us that ornamentation once carried layered cultural meaning. Contemporary approaches from parametric reinterpretations to façade shading systems provide opportunities to reimagine woodcarving as both an ecological and cultural design tool. However, thoughtful adaptation requires cultural literacy, technical innovation, and community engagement to ensure that the essence of Malay woodcarving is not lost in translation.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study highlights how Malay embodies an interplay of regional identity, socio-spatial symbolism, and adaptive functionality. Rather than viewing woodcarving as static ornamentation, the analysis positions it as a living cultural practice that encodes philosophical principles and environmental wisdom into architecture.

Key insights include:

- (i) Regional variations demonstrate how local contexts and histories shaped distinctive carving vocabularies while maintaining shared cultural values.
- (ii) Woodcarving serves as a socio-spatial language that communicates hierarchy, spirituality, and ethics through placement and motif selection.
- (iii) Functional carvings reveal adaptive lessons for sustainable and climate-responsive design, suggesting pathways for integration into contemporary architecture.

For future research, greater theoretical framing is needed to position Malay woodcarving within broader architectural discourse, particularly in relation to heritage conservation, sustainability, and cultural continuity. Comparative studies with other Southeast Asian traditions could further clarify shared principles and distinctive evolutions. Ultimately, the preservation and reinterpretation of Malay woodcarving offer opportunities not only to safeguard intangible heritage but also to inspire innovative and culturally rooted approaches to modern design.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Noor Roziana binti Abdul Rahim contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, writing, and overall preparation of the manuscript. Szabó Péter contributed through manuscript review, technical verification, and editorial support.

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