

Wood Carving Motifs in Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan

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Received Date: **01.03.2024**; Accepted Date: **15.08.2024**; Available Online: **21.08.2024**

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ABSTRACT

The sustainability of Malay wood carving motifs in the present era is at stake. The lack of effort to identify and document the motifs led to the weak preservation of this national heritage. This indirectly poses a threat to the Malay identity that has existed since a long time ago. Thus, this research aims to provide additional documentation on Malay wood carving motifs through the observation in Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan. This mosque was chosen because there is minimal research on wood carving motifs in the southwest coast states of Malaysia. The study's objective is to identify the motifs of wood carving and its categories. This research employed a qualitative method that involved data collection from site observation, in-depth interviews with six selected respondents, and library research. As a result, the findings have identified 16 motifs, 12 inspired by the element of flora, one from fauna, one from calligraphy, one from geometry, and one from still life. This research recommended that more in-depth wood carving studies should be carried out especially in the southwest coast states of Malaysia to promote the Malay identity and to prevent this national heritage from being overwhelmed by contemporary trends.

Keywords: *Flora, Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Motifs, Negeri Sembilan, Wood carving*

INTRODUCTION

Malay Heritage Mosque is one of the significant Malay architectures in Malaysia. Some of the mosques were decorated with unique wood carving motifs to enhance the value of the beauty of the building. These motifs created by the past Malay craftsmen have added cultural value not only to the mosque but also to the Malay community itself. Abdul Halim (2016) believed that these traditional motifs cannot be challenged by the modern generation as the quality produced is high.

The Malay people carved applied motifs in the mosque as a medium to express ideas and feelings. These ideas were generated from meticulous observation of the surrounding landscape elements (Ismail,

2001). Syed Ahmad (2007) mentioned that geometry, flora, living creatures, calligraphy, and cosmic are the famous elements applied in Malay wood carving. This design is also inspired by the Malay lifestyles such as norms, customs, beliefs, and values. Among other elements, the motifs that refer to flora are the most famous motifs used in Malay heritage mosques. This is because Malaysia is a tropical country that is rich in plant species and therefore the flora element became the primary source of inspiration for the Malay craftsmen.

The tradition of Malay carvings was inherited from one generation to one generation. Besides Malay traditional houses, the heritage mosques also became the targeted building for the Malay community to promote the culture of wood carving motifs and this culture has expanded to many Malay heritage mosques in Malaysia. Hanita et al. (2021) emphasized that these motifs should be identified and documented to prevent them from being vanished. Therefore, this research will play a significant role in identifying the wood carving motifs found in Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

The Malay heritage mosque in Negeri Sembilan was chosen because there is a scarcity of the study of motifs in the southwest coast state of Malaysia. Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin which is located in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan was selected due to some peculiarities such as the uniqueness of Seri Menanti as a royal town, this mosque was gazetted as National Heritage by Akta Warisan Kebangsaan and constructed by Raja Melewar who is the first Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan. Since the left verandah has a proper entrance design, this study only concentrated on the two pillars of this space. Thus, the motifs decorated on these pillars were taken as the research samples.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malay Wood Carving Motifs

A motif is an arrangement of decorative elements that form a pattern (Muhammad Afandi, 1995) while wood carving is an activity utilizing tools such as chisels and knives to tear off the surface of wood (Hamdzun et al., 2014). Mohd Nasrulamiyazam and Asyaari (2018) claimed that Hinduism influenced the formation of original Malay motifs during the ancient Malay kingdom. After the advent of Islam, the motifs were carved based on the value of Islam. Malay wood carving motifs are created using the stylization approach, which was adopted by the Malays as a means of appreciating beauty. The fundamental components in Malay carving motif designs such as the roots, stems, leaves, fruits, and flowers were employed to create an ornamental variety. These elements can be stylized in various forms as long as the aesthetic standard is upheld (Norhaiza Noordin, personal communication, November 01, 2023).

Malay motifs exhibit many styles from Malay lifestyle, religion, belief, the surrounding environment, climate, and topography. The craftsman himself can creatively interpret the motif design to comply with the demands of the community as well as their own needs. Regardless, this design must comply with Malay customs and laws (Mohammad Nazzri, 2016). The patterns in wood carvings also interacted with the thoughts and personalities of the wood carvers. The expressions generated from the carvers' pure hearts aimed to convey any kind of message that no one would likely be able to fully comprehend. Thus, beauty emerged as the central idea and flora served as the prominent motif in Malay carvings (Norhaiza Noordin, personal communication, November 01, 2023).

The Elements in Malay Wood Carving Motifs

According to Mohammad Nazzri (2016), the design of Malay carvings developed from the customs, environment, religion, topography, and climate. It is also inspired by plants, animals, calligraphy, cosmos,

and geometry (Abdul Halim, 2016). In Malay heritage mosques, Ismail and Ahmad Saifuddin (2001) claimed that the motifs of plants, calligraphy, and geometry are the most popular motifs found. Table 1 shows the elements in Malay wood carving motifs.

Table 1. The elements in Malay wood carving motifs

No	Element	Description
1	Flora	The motifs of flora in Malay Heritage Mosques are dominant. This is due to the abundance of plant species grown in Malaysian forests (Abdul Halim, 1986) and the influence of Islam which limits the imitation of animals (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009). Flora motifs frequently imbued the creeping and flowering plants. <i>Ketumbit, Ketam Guri, Labu, Kerak Nasi, Seroja, Bunga Tanjung, and Peria</i> are some synonymous flora motifs (Abdul Halim, 1986).
2	Fauna	Fauna motifs imitate the positive behavior of animals such as roosters and a group of ducks to deliver moral values (Abdul Halim, 1986). Before the attendance of Islam, flora motifs were highly preferred by the Malay craftsmen, but after they adhered to the principles of Islam, the action of copying the image of living creatures like animals was strictly prohibited. As a result, fauna motifs were abstractly carved. Some fauna motifs still can be seen today are <i>Itik pulang petang, Ayam berlaga, Badak mudik</i> and <i>Kuda laut</i> (Abdul Halim, 2016).
3	Calligraphy	The calligraphy motif applies the verses from the Quran, Arabic words, and <i>Jawi</i> script as the subject matter. The calligraphy was manifested by the artists into wood panels written in Arabic styles (Ismail, 2002). This motif is sometimes engraved together with flora, cosmos, and geometry to devote a story's lesson, advice, reminder, rules, and laws (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009).
4	Geometry	Halim Nasir (1986) mentioned that geometric motifs refer to shapes with pointed features and borders. It also can be identified in the form of straight, diagonal, and horizontal lines (Zuliskandar et al., 2014) and common shapes such as triangles, squares, and circles (Khairul Azhar, 2017).
5	Cosmos	The Cosmos motif is a representation of the hill, mountain, star, moon, and sun. It is the least visible motif in Malay carvings (Khairul Azhar, 2017). This motif is usually decorated on a roof front cover, and it was creatively consolidated with the element of flora (Hamdzun et al., 2014) and calligraphy (Mohammad Nazzri, 2016).

Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan (Figure 1) was built in 1892 and it is located in Kampung Tanjung Beringin with lot number 2450 (Azizul Azli, 2015). Ibrahim Abd Latif (personal communication, 08 December 2023) claimed that the mosque's land was initially equipped with wild forest, and it was owned by a villager. The ownership of the land was then handed over to the king. In the past year, this heritage mosque carried out many activities such as social gatherings and *Adat Bersiram* which is a traditional event to crown a Yang di-Pertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan.

Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin portrays an image of a Malay heritage mosque through a tiered, *meru* roof, and square layout in its design. Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan (personal communication, 08 December 2023) claimed that this mosque began its construction with only the main prayer room and a mihrab before it extended to the verandas to promote large social activities. The original entrance of the mosque also faced the river instead of an existing paved road (Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan, personal communication, 08 December 2023). Figure 2 shows the original plan of Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin

that comprised five spaces namely, a) back veranda, b) right veranda, c) left veranda, d) main praying room, and e) mihrab.

The mosque was supported by 10 fully carved pillars. Six pillars are located on the outside and four on the inside. The pillars consist of three different parts namely, top, middle, and bottom, and each part is carved with different wood carving motifs (Ruslinda & Hasnira, 2022). The four pillars in the main prayer room are called *Soko Guru* (Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan, personal communication, 08 December 2023) and it was brought from the Bakar Mosque (Ibrahim Abd Latif, personal communication, December 8, 2023).



Figure 1. Front view of Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin
(Source: Author's personal collection)

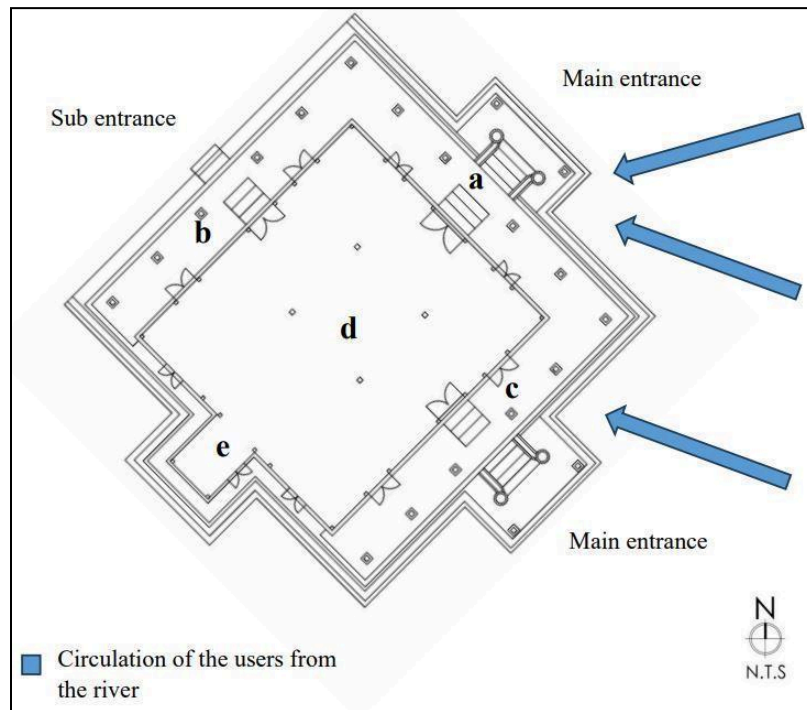


Figure 2. The original floor plan of Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin
 (Source: Author's personal collection)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopted the qualitative approach to collect the data as it can provide a wealth of information to understand people's beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and interactions (Pathak et al., 2013). An observation of Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan was carried out to collect all the wood carving motifs found. These motifs were captured through an iPhone 13 Pro. Face-to-face scheduled interviews with Adiguru Norhaiza Noordin (wood carver) and Adiguru Abd Muhaimin Hasbollah (wood carver) and an online interview with Drs Bentrizal (academician and wood carver) from Kota Padang, Minangkabau was organized to verify the motifs observed. Another face-to-face interview was arranged with Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan (academician), Ibrahim Abd Latif (Resident of Seri Menanti since 1959), and Abdullah Salleh (The head of Kampung Tengah, Seri Menanti from 2001 to 2018) to garner the history of Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, and Negeri Sembilan. The data from the interview was analyzed using thematic analysis with constant comparison. This research also employed library research as the secondary data to support the literature study. Library research helped the researcher in triangulating the findings from observation and interview sessions conducted. Table 2 provides the list of selected informants in this research.

Table 2. List of informants

No	Name	Profession / Position
1	Adiguru Norhaiza Noordin	Woodcarver
2	Adiguru Abd Muhaimin Hasbollah	Woodcarver
3	Prof Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan	Academician
4	Abdullah Salleh	The head of Kampung Tengah, Seri Menanti from 2001 to 2018
5	Ibrahim Abd Latif	Resident of Seri Menanti since 1959
6	Drs Bentrizal Sutan Bagindo	Woodcarver and academician

FINDINGS

In the traditional era, the position of the left veranda and back veranda was close to the river, and these spaces directly acted as the main entrance to welcome the attendance of the users. In this regard, the motifs found in these spaces were considered special and more unique compared to the motifs seen on the right veranda. However, this research only highlighted the motifs carved on the two pillars on the left veranda. Figure 3 shows the location of wood carving motifs taken as the research samples. The right pillar was labeled as Pillar 1 and the left pillar was labeled as Pillar 2.

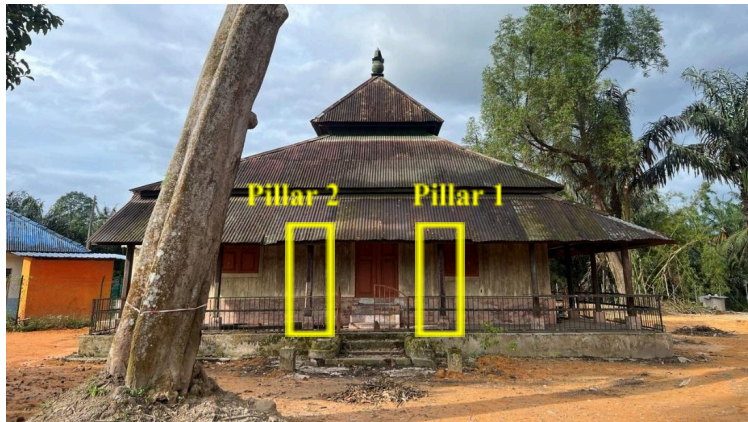








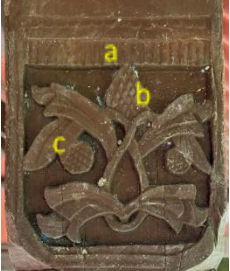
Figure 3. The location of research samples at the left veranda
(Source: Author's personal collection)





The Motifs in Pillar 1

Table 3 shows the names of motifs and their categories found in Pillar 1.

Table 3. The motifs in Pillar 1 and their categories

Motif	Image	Name of motif	Category
A		a) <i>Bunga kiambang</i> (Verified by Informant 2) b) <i>Bunga lada</i> (Verified by Informant 6)	Flora Flora
B		a) <i>Bunga kiambang</i> (Verified by Informant 2) b) <i>Sulur kacang</i> (Verified by Informant 2)	Flora Flora

C		<i>Benih and Sulur kacang</i>	Flora
D		<i>Dokoh</i> (Verified by Informant 1)	Still life
E		<i>Sulur kacang</i>	Flora
F		<i>Sulur kacang and benih</i>	Flora
G		a) <i>Corak garisan</i> (Verified by Informant 6) b) <i>Buah cemara</i> (Verified by Informant 1) c) <i>Sulur kacang</i>	Geometry Flora Flora



H		<i>Jawi script</i>	Calligraphy
I		<i>Sulur kacang and benih</i>	Flora
J		a) <i>Bunga ketumbit</i>	Flora
K		<i>Bunga keladi</i> (Verified by Informant 2)	Flora






L		<i>Sulur kacang</i>	Flora
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The Motifs in Pillar 2


Table 4 reveals the names of motifs and their categories found in Pillar 2.

Table 4. The motifs in Pillar 2 and their categories

Motif	Image	Name of motif	Category
A		a) <i>Bunga kiambang</i> (Verified by Informant 2) b) <i>Pucuk rebung</i> (Verified by Informant 2)	Flora
B		<i>Daun bayam peraksi</i>	Flora

C		<p>a) <i>Corak garisan</i> (Verified by Informant 6)</p> <p>b) <i>Corak dedaun</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p> <p>c) <i>Bunga kemunting cina</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p>	<p>Geometry</p> <p>Flora</p> <p>Flora</p>
D		<p><i>Bunga kemunting cina</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p>	<p>Flora</p>
E		<p><i>Bunga ketumbit</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p>	<p>Flora</p>
F		<p>a) <i>Corak garisan</i> (Verified by Informant 6)</p>	<p>Geometry</p>
G		<p>a) <i>Corak dedaun</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p> <p>b) <i>Bunga kemunting cina</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p>	<p>Flora</p> <p>Flora</p>

H		<p>a) <i>Daun sayap</i> (Verified by Informant 2)</p> <p>b) <i>Buah cemara</i> (Verified by Informant 2)</p>	<p>Flora</p> <p>Flora</p>
I		<p><i>Bunga tanjung</i> (Verified by Informant 5)</p>	<p>Flora</p>
J		<p>a) <i>Corak garisan</i> (Verified by Informant 6)</p> <p>b) <i>Tumbuk lada</i> (Verified by Informant 1)</p> <p>c) <i>Corak dedaun</i></p>	<p>Geometry</p> <p>Still life</p> <p>Flora</p>
K		<p>a) <i>Rama-rama</i></p> <p>b) <i>Bunga lada</i></p> <p>c) <i>Corak garisan</i> (Verified by Informant 6)</p>	<p>Fauna</p> <p>Flora</p> <p>Geometry</p>
L		<p><i>Sulur kacang</i> (Verified by Informant 2)</p>	<p>Flora</p>

M		a) <i>Corak garisan</i> (Verified by Informant 6) b) <i>Benih and Corak dedaun</i>	Geometry Flora
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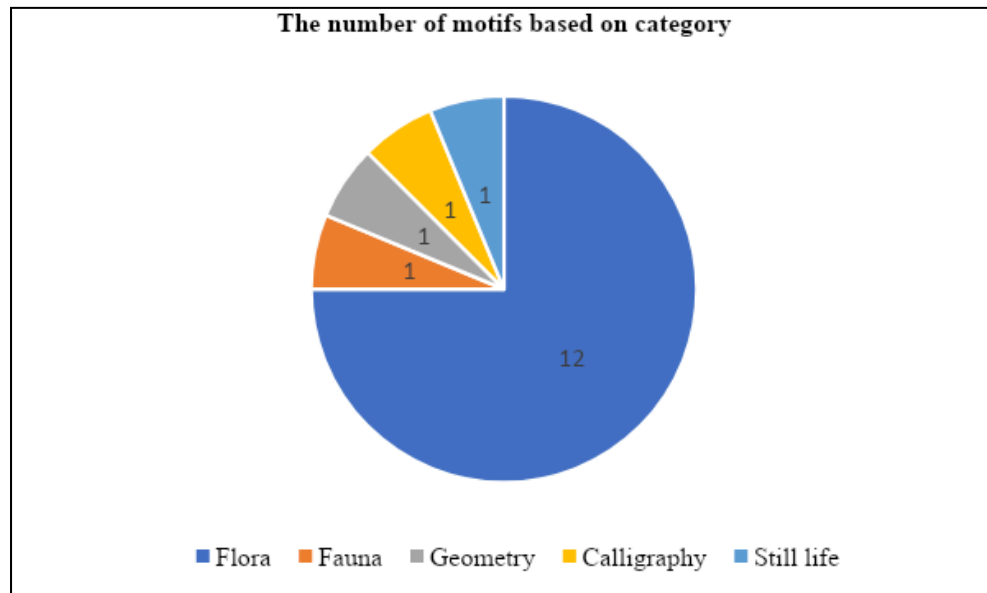


Figure 6. The number of motifs based on category

Based on Figure 6, the total motifs of wood carving found are 16. Out of the total number of motifs, 12 were inspired by the element of flora, one from fauna, one from geometry, one from calligraphy, and one from still life. This finding shows that flora acted as the primary source of inspiration for the traditional Malay craftsmen to develop their ideas for designing the motifs. This finding is also indirectly justified by the results made by the previous researchers which mentioned that flora motifs are dominant in the art of wood carving in Malay heritage mosques.

CONCLUSION

Wood carving is synonymous with the life of the Malay community. This art has been around for a long time and has been passed down from generation to generation. To appreciate this traditional Malay art, wood carving has been made as one of the national heritages. However, the lack of effort to identify and document the Malay motifs is one of the issues that could jeopardize the sustainability of this heritage art. As a solution, the researcher has chosen Masjid Lama Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan as a starting effort to record the Malay motifs. 16 wood carving motifs have been identified and these motifs are categorized into five categories namely flora, calligraphy, geometry, fauna, and still life.

Among all the categories, motifs inspired by flora have dominated the overall motif design in this mosque and it directly justified the intimacy of plant species with ideas and expressions of the Malay craftsmen in the traditional era. This research recommended that more in-depth wood carving studies should be explored especially in the southwest coast states of Malaysia to promote the Malay identity and to prevent this national heritage from being overwhelmed by contemporary trends.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express his gratitude to Dr Arbaiyah Ab. Aziz for guiding and helping him to write this journal. This appreciation is also directed to Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, and the informants.

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