

The Cultural Significance of Malay Woodcarving Motifs: A Case Study of Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the Malay woodcarving motifs displayed at Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur, a distinguished Malay heritage house currently located in Politeknik Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The study utilised qualitative research methods such as site observations, photographic recording, and analysis of secondary data to document and assess the wood carving motifs found on the wooden structure. The house had been moved and restored in order to preserve its cultural significance. The investigation uncovered that the woodcarvings of Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur prominently featured floral motifs, with geometric and combination designs also being prominent. This study not only recorded the visual qualities of the carvings but also analysed their symbolic meaning, revealing the interdependent relationship between artistic representation and cultural heritage in the practice of Malay woodcarving. Concentrating on this singular, historically significant residence of Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur, the study underscored the significance of Malay woodcarving in vernacular architecture in Negeri Sembilan. It emphasised the imperative for continuous documentation and conservation of the intangible cultural heritage represented by Malay woodcarving motifs and Malay traditional houses.

Keywords: *Motifs, Traditional Malay houses, Negeri Sembilan, Woodcarving*

INTRODUCTION

The art of Malay woodcarving has been instrumental in producing highly detailed and skillfully crafted masterpieces, which serve as a testimony to the creativity and expertise of Malay artists across various periods of time. Woodcarving is a form of decoration that adds visual appeal to different items and architectural features through a unique style of ornamentation and elaboration. Skilled artisans utilise refined carving techniques to convert ordinary surfaces into exquisite pieces of art, embellishing them with beautiful themes, patterns, and textures (Sumardianshah Silah et al., 2021). Whether embellishing furniture, door panels, religious objects, or architectural elements, woodcarving bestows a sense of elegance, opulence, and cultural or spiritual significance upon the final product. Thus, style of ornamentation not only beautifies the object but also reflects the creativity, craftsmanship, wisdom, and cultural heritage of the artisans who create it by using diverse types of techniques, as cited by Neha and co-authors in 2007 (Irfan Ullah, 2018).

The philosophy aspect of Malay woodcarving lies in its deep connection to the divinity, spiritual symbolism, cultural beliefs, and traditional values. Malay woodcarving often conveys philosophical concepts of life and spiritual connection with the Divine who is the master of the Universe and beyond such as harmony with nature, reverence for ancestry, and the interconnectedness of life (Mohd Sabrizaa et al., 2019). Additionally, the process of woodcarving itself is often regarded as a meditative process, embodying patience, and a deep respect for the material being worked upon (Zumahiran Kamarudin et al., 2020). Thus, Malay woodcarving facilitates not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a mean to reflect and contemplate upon deeper philosophical ideas embedded within Malay culture.

There appears to be a multifaceted connection between Malay woodcarving and vernacular architecture. Woodcarving operates as a significant decorative element in traditional Malay vernacular architecture, enhancing the aesthetics of various structural components such as beams, pillars, door frames, and window panels. Moreover, the motifs and patterns carved into wood surfaces often harmonise the overall architectural style, creating a cohesive and visually captivating environment (Iryani Abdul et al., 2024). However, recent circumstances indicate a gap in the research and analysis of Malay woodcarving heritage, particularly in traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan. Scholars have engaged in dialectic debate about Malay woodcarving motifs in relation to vernacular architecture since the 1960s, but there has been minimal subsequent documentation or follow-up in this regard, particularly in Negeri Sembilan. Therefore, this article aims to analyse, identify, and categorise wood carving motifs that are still preserved at Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur (RWHK). RWHK was built in 1902, and it is one of the oldest traditional houses found in Negeri Sembilan. RWHK was formerly located in Kampung Chembong, Rembau but due to its dilapidated state and cultural significance it has, the house was dismantled, relocated, and refurbished at the Politeknik Port Dickson campus in Port Dickson.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malay Woodcarving Motifs

Traditional Malay woodcarving is the elaborate woodcarving technique used by Malay cultures within their cultural framework. It comprises an extensive array of inherited methods, aesthetics, and themes passed down through the generations, frequently expressing the Malay people's cultural heritage, values, and beliefs. This type of woodcarving usually requires the expert manipulation of several carving tools to create complex patterns, motifs, and designs on wood surfaces. Customary Malay woodcarving is renowned for its delicate artistry, exacting mindfulness, and application in various architectural components, furnishings, utilitarian items, and religious objects, including mosques. Its aesthetic appeal

and cultural significance make it an indispensable Malay identity component. In their 2023 research, Siti Aisyah et al. referenced Noorhaiza's hypothesis concerning the essence of traditional carving, which revolved around the processing of six core components: the origin or source, design, motif, decorative style, technique, and philosophy.

Aida Kesuma et al. (2021) define Malay woodcarving as a distinctive style characterised by curvilinear fretwork. Typically found in architectural components, these carvings draw inspiration from natural elements, particularly flora. The definition further suggests that Malay woodcarving embodies a philosophical aspect, with motifs and designs carrying cultural or symbolic significance within Malay culture. Additionally, the authors emphasise the meticulous filling of motifs from end to end, reflecting every carver's aspiration to achieve visually cohesive and balanced designs within the architectural space. In design and art, a motif is a recurring element, pattern, or theme used consistently throughout a composition or artwork. While motifs are typically associated with two-dimensional designs, Malay woodcarvers, with years of expertise, often accentuate carvings in three-dimensional forms, allowing observers to view them from all sides and angles. Nur Amalina et al. (2022) postulated that specific motifs elicit thoughts or memories that are important for both the artist and society. Furthermore, admiration is evoked when motifs are selected to include in the design. Prior research has identified five essential woodcarving patterns: calligraphy, flora, animals, geometry, and the cosmos (Hanita Yusof et al., 2021; Ismail Said, 2019). The overwhelming grandeur of the surrounding environment has highlighted the deep respect Malay carvers have for the natural world, its perfection, and its beauty, allowing carvers to create a far more replicable abstractive visual exegesis of human life by incorporating their interpretations into the motif designs.

Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan

The architectural style of the traditional Malay house is not just aesthetically pleasing, but it also serves a purposeful function with each structural element. In their 2018 study, Misnat and co-authors highlighted that the unique architectural identity of specific local communities, including the traditional Malay houses, is intricately moulded by a diverse array of cultural influences (Noor Hayati et al., 2021). These influences, such as deeply ingrained beliefs, religious practices, customary traditions, and communal activities play a pivotal role in shaping the overall house design, its individual segments, and even the woodcarvings that adorn the structure.

Negeri Sembilan distinguishes itself from other cultures in the region due to its long-standing adherence to a 3000–4000-year-old custom known as the matrilineal system (Noor Hayati et al., 2021). This system, known as *Adat Perpatih*, is one of the world's oldest surviving matrilineal systems. Two prominent characteristics of this tradition are the transmission of property and inheritance exclusively through the female lineage. As a result, daughters are the recipients of riches, land, and property instead of sons, and family ancestry is traced through the maternal line. The traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan are designed to cater to the demands and provide comfort for the house owners, particularly the women and families who reside there. Therefore, the house's architecture incorporates economic and social endeavours, ceremonial philosophy, religious beliefs, and cultural factors.

The architectural style of traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan is the fruit of the confluence of two cultures: the Minangkabau and the Biduanda (*Jakun*) communities, as noted by Masri in 2012 (Nor Syawallina et al., 2022). Discernible characteristics of the architecture include several layout typologies such as the *serambi* (verandah), *rumah ibu* (the main house), *loteng* (attic), and *rumah dapur* (kitchen). However, the most prevalent characteristic that has always been the subject of numerous study studies is the slight curving roof at both ends, which serves as a symbol to convey the regional identity of Negeri Sembilan (Mohamad Hanif et al., 2022; Noor Hayati et al., 2021; Rohayu Daud et al., 2021). Therefore,

we can summarise how, over the years and through successive generations and adaptation, cultural influences, architectural features, and symbolic elements have converged to shape the identity of traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilising primary and secondary data sources. The primary data was gathered through a site visit at Politeknik Port Dickson (PPD), facilitating observation and visual documentation of the carving motifs at Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur (RWHK) and their placements. Details such as the owner's name, the construction year of the house, and its current address were also recorded during the visit. Secondary data, comprising earlier research and scholarly discourses, supplemented the primary findings. The primary objective of this study was to identify and categorise the carvings discovered at RWHK, aligning with the qualitative methodology adopted.

Initially situated in Kampung Chembong, Rembau, the house had deteriorated and was abandoned. However, with the assistance of special funding from the Civil Engineering Department of UNESCO, the Architecture Unit at PPD took on the task of dismantling and relocating the house. It was successfully moved from its original site for historical and educational preservation. The house was built sometime in 1902, and it now serves as a cultural hub dedicated to Malay heritage, notably highlighting the unique *Adat Perpatih* tradition of Negeri Sembilan. While adorned with carvings throughout, the *serambi* and *rumah ibu* sections display particularly intricate designs.

FINDINGS

Homeowner	Year	Address
Rosnah bt. Ahmad	1902	Politeknik Port Dickson

Findings of Motifs at Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur



Figure 1. Motifs of the fascia boards on Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur

(Source: Author's personal collection)



Figure 2. Motifs on the gable end and fascia boards
(Source: Author's personal collection)

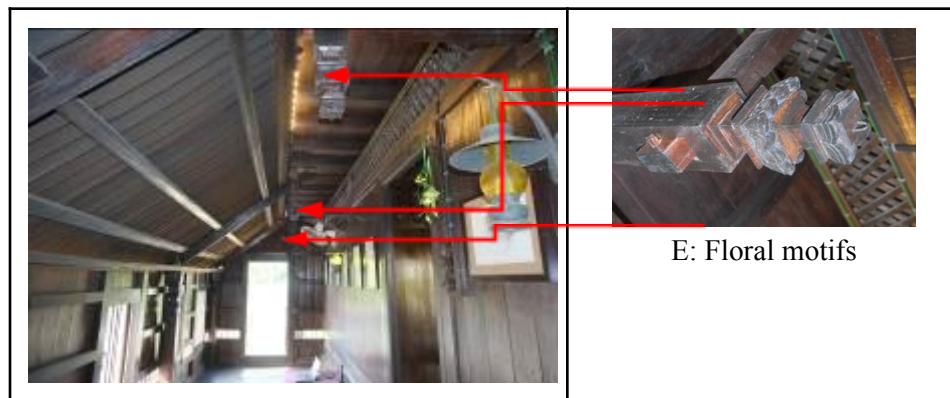


Figure 3. Motifs of the buah buton in the serambi area
(Source: Author's personal collection)



Figure 4. Motifs of the pillars by the entrance area
(Source: Author's personal collection)



Figure 5. Motifs on the buah buton and tiang seri in the rumah ibu area
(Source: Author's personal collection)

Analysis of Motifs at Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur

Table 1. Motifs on the fascia boards


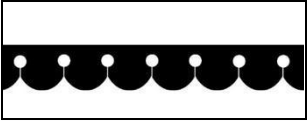
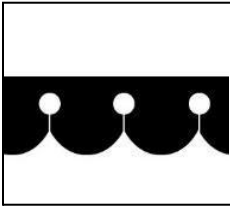
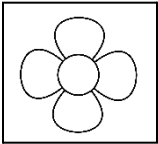


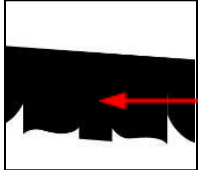
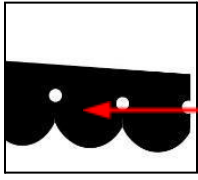
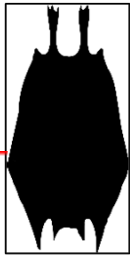
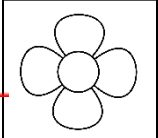

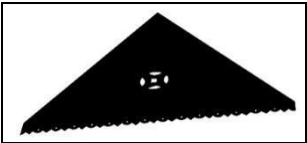
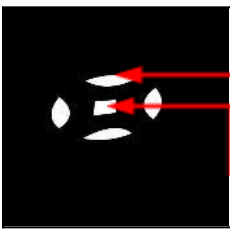

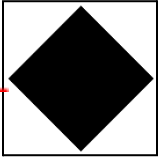
Picture	Illustration	Illustration	Motif
 <p>A: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>1) Potongan bunga</p>
 <p>B: Combination motifs</p>		 	 <p>2) Kelawar bergantung</p>  <p>3) Potongan bunga</p>

Table 2. Motifs on the gable end and fascia boards

Picture	Illustration	Illustration	Motif
 <p>C: Geometry motifs</p>			 <p>1) Diamond</p>  <p>2) Oval</p>


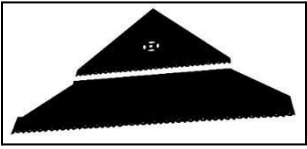
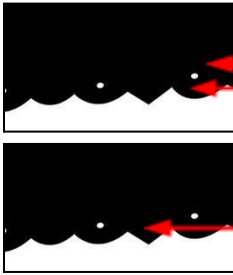
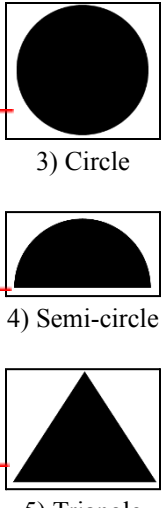

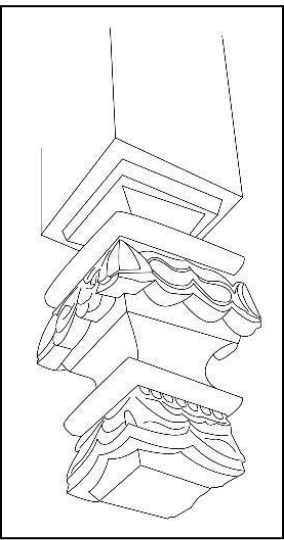
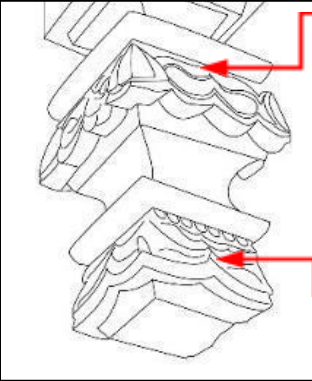


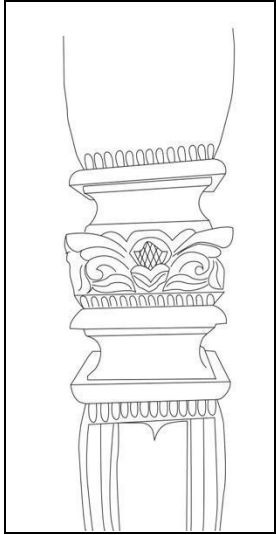
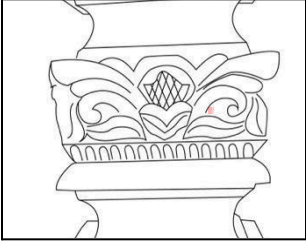


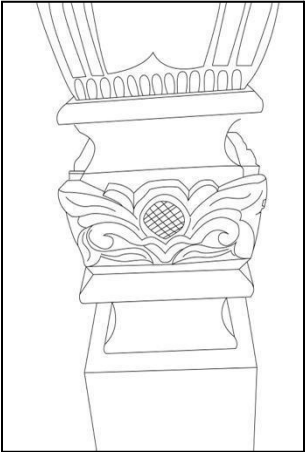
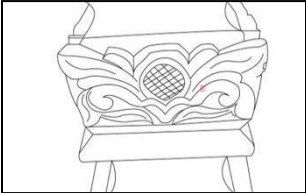


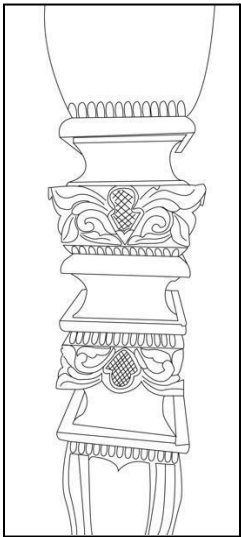
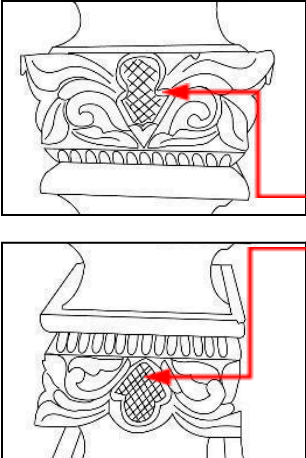

 <p>D: Geometry motifs</p>			 <p>3) Circle</p> <p>4) Semi-circle</p> <p>5) Triangle</p>
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Table 3. Motifs on the *buah buton*(s) and poles in the *serambi* area

Picture	Illustration	Illustration	Motif
 <p>E: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>1) <i>Sulur</i></p> <p>2) <i>Jantung pisang</i></p>

 <p>F: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>3) Bunga teratai (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/affan-basal-amah/2545366106)</p>
 <p>G: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>4) Bunga teratai (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/affan-basal-amah/2545366106)</p>
 <p>H: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>5) Bunga teratai (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/affan-basal-amah/2545366106)</p>


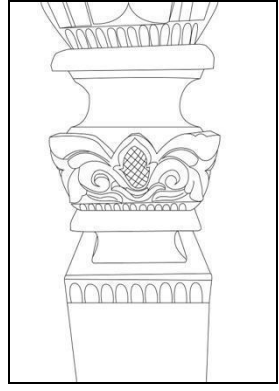
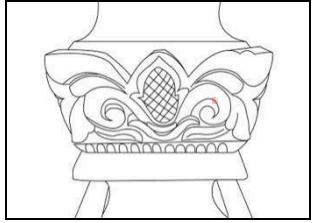


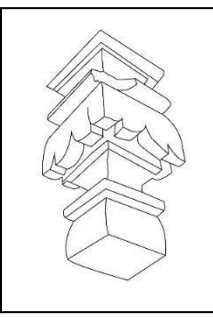
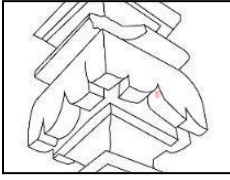


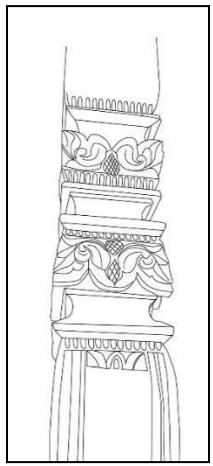
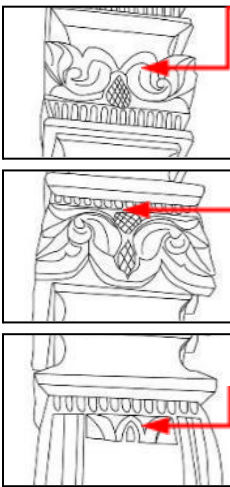



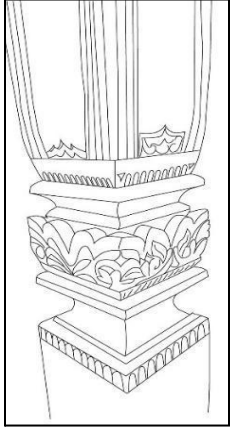
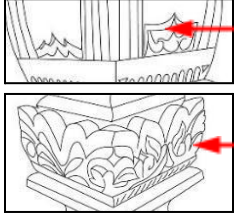


 <p>I: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>6) Bunga teratai (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/affan-basal-amah/2545366106)</p>
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Table 4. Motifs on the *buah buton* and central pole in the *rumah ibu* area

Picture	Illustration	Illustration	Motif
 <p>J: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>1) <i>Jantung pisang</i></p>
 <p>K: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>2) <i>Bunga teratai</i> (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/affan-basal-amah/2545366106)</p>  <p>3) <i>Bunga pecah tiga</i> (Source: https://www.istockphoto.com/id/foto/bunga-kelopak-tiga-gm13)</p>

			12753431-40145962 6)
 <p>L: Floral motifs</p>			 <p>4) <i>Sulur</i></p>  <p>5) <i>Bayam peraksi</i> (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ethnoflora/418984463)</p>

DISCUSSION

Table 1's data indicate three significant motif categories: combination, geometry, and floral motifs. The primary locations for these themes were the fascia boards, gable end, *buah buton*, and various *tiang* (pillars). Simple motif designs, like geometric patterns and combinations, embellished the outside portions of the house, namely the fascia boards and gable ends, giving rise to discernible observations. On the other hand, the central pole, *buah buton*, and poles in the *serambi* and *rumah ibu* parts display more detailed patterns.

The first category is the floral, which was chiefly discovered in RWHK. The fascia board on the front porch, depicted in Figure 1, showcases a series of recurring motifs known as *potongan bunga*, characterised by stylised floral patterns or floral cutouts. This technique uses only a portion of the petal to fashion repeated designs on the fascia board. In the *serambi* area, it was discovered that the composition of the *tiang* (poles) and *buah buton* were decorated with distinctive floral motifs. Among these motifs found on the *buahbuton*, as seen in Figure 3, were the *sulur*, characterised by its twisting and intertwining foliage, vines, or tendrils, and the *jantung pisang*, inspired by the heart-shaped leaves of the banana plant. *Sulur* motifs exhibit flowing, organic forms, often as decorative elements in woodcarvings and architectural features.

On the other hand, the *jantung pisang* showcases the exterior shape of the plant as chosen and designed by the carver. Functioning as part of the *tanggam* system, a traditional construction technique in Malay architecture, the *buah buton*, depicted in Figure 3, is integral to the structural integrity of traditional Malay houses. Unlike modern construction methods relying on nails or fasteners, the *tanggam* system uses an interlocking structure created by matching pegs and holes to strengthen and stabilise the building. While the primary purpose of the *sulur* and *jantung pisang* motifs is aesthetic enhancement,

their presence on the *buah buton* not only beautifies and enriches the structure's overall appearance but also contributes to its stability and durability.

As illustrated in Table 4, the floral motifs known as *bunga teratai* or lotus flower, scientifically classified as belonging to the genus *Nelumbo nucifera* within the family Nelumbonaceae, are prominently highlighted on the poles near the entrance in the *serambi* area, as depicted in Figures 4 and 5. The motifs of the *bunga teratai* have been stylised and abstracted to integrate into the design of the poles. Despite the simplification of the carvings, the essential shapes remain intact. *Bunga teratai* holds cultural significance in Malay society and vernacular architecture. Beyond its visual appeal, the lotus flower symbolises resilience and the ability to thrive in adverse conditions. In a study conducted by Mohd Zaki Mahmud et al. (2021), the researchers explored Abdullah Mohamed's insights into the philosophy and mindset of the Malay, particularly concerning the cultural significance of the *bunga teratai*. They highlighted the lotus flower's significance as a symbol in Islamic teachings and the concept of divinity. Their findings suggest that the Malay people frequently integrate the symbol and metaphor of the lotus flower into various aspects of their culture, especially in traditional crafts, and even in the design of Malay houses and mosques' motif carvings. The notion of the lotus flower suggests that the origins of the Malay people are intertwined with the initial creation by Allah SWT, who brought everything into existence with the command "Be" (*Kun*), thus aligning with the divine will. Additionally, their research highlights the concept of Divinity and Universal Knowledge reflected in the symbolism of the *bunga teratai* in the Malay world.

The rumah ibu area, where the *tiang seri* is situated, is revered as the heart of the house. The motifs identified in this area include *bunga teratai* and *bunga pecah tiga* on the pole's upper part, and *sulur* and *bayam peraksi* motifs were observed on the lower part. The inspiration behind the *bunga pecah tiga*, or three broken flowers, is referred to as any flower that has three petals, mainly for aesthetic purposes. As for the *bayam peraksi*, it refers to a type of weed that is quite fragrant. Usually, *bayam peraksi* has been used as a secondary motif to complement the central or more pivotal flowers as the centrepiece. Nevertheless, it is being used to highlight the prevalence of its minor yet significant design for the *tiang seri*, as displayed in Table 5.

The second category is geometry. As depicted in Table 3, the geometry motifs identified include diamonds, ovals, circles, semi-circles, and triangles. The portrayal of geometrical carvings found on the gable end and fascia boards is mainly more straightforward to carve, and the patterns' repetition imparts a sense of balance and harmony. In addition to improving ventilation and letting natural light into the house, the geometry motifs on the gable end also create beautiful shadows in the daylight. Combination is the final category. Combining various motif types into a single design is known as the combination category; Table 2 provides instances of this, including hanging bats or *kelawar bergantung* and *potongan bunga*. Collectively, they create individual designs shaped onto the fascia board.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study contributes to the conservation and comprehension of Malay cultural heritage by investigating woodcarving themes at Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur. The study documents the wide range of patterns discovered at this heritage site, highlighting the prevalence of floral, geometric, and combination motifs that adorn various architectural elements of the house. These motifs not only enhance the visual appeal of the architecture but also encapsulate the nuanced cultural traditions and philosophical foundations of the Malay culture in Negeri Sembilan. The results underscore the significance of ongoing recording and conservation endeavours to protect this intangible cultural asset. It is imperative given that traditional behaviours and tangible representations of culture, such as Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur and

any other traditional heritage Malay houses, remain at risk due to ongoing industrialization and deterioration.

Moreover, the study illuminates the mutually beneficial connection between artistic expression and cultural identity, emphasising the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness to preserve a legacy. This research highlights the broader significance of cultural preservation in Malaysia by concentrating on a specific historically significant site. It also has the potential to serve as a blueprint for similar studies in other areas. Future studies should build on this foundation by further exploring the many hidden treasures of Malay carving motifs in traditional houses throughout Negeri Sembilan. Researchers could employ interdisciplinary approaches, combining art history, anthropology, and architecture, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of these motifs and their role in shaping Malay identity. By continuing to document and study these traditions, we can honour the legacy of Malay woodcarving and contribute to the ongoing conversation about the importance of cultural heritage preservation in Malaysia and beyond.

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