

## Natural Motifs in The Terengganu Heritage of Wood Carving Art

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### Abstract

The wood carving art in Terengganu has preserved the traditional culture throughout the years. The creation of each carved design is intricately linked to the natural elements present in the Malay community's surroundings. The visual elements displayed in a wood carving artwork encompass not only a diverse array of decorative patterns that increase the aesthetic appeal and value of the engraving but also the underlying message that the sculptor intends to communicate through the wood carving. Nevertheless, the broader public remains unaware of its underlying significance. Therefore, it is fitting for this study to impart knowledge on the subject to the community. This study employs an ethnographic methodology, with opt-in observation and interview approaches serving as the primary means of data gathering during fieldwork. Furthermore, to enhance the credibility of this study, data obtained is subjected to document analysis procedures employing NVivo software for reliable analysis. The findings indicated a strong correlation between the motives found in wood carving and the cultural characteristics of the Malay population. The choice of natural motifs is derived from natural elements that contribute to the well-being of society, such as plants with medicinal properties, plants with visually pleasing aesthetics and pleasant fragrances, and plants that serve as essential sources of sustenance for humanity. The wood carving pattern incorporates elements of nature, with a lantern symbolizing philosophical significance. This lantern serves as a means for the older generation to pass information about divinity and humanity to the next generation. Traditional wood carving art is a decorative element with significant cultural and educational messages intended to be passed down to future generations within the Malay community.

**Keywords:** Nature Motifs, Wood Carving, Traditional Culture, Nature, Malays

**Introduction**

The creation of Malay wood carving designs is linked to the ancient Malay kingdom of Langkasuka, which Hinduism influenced. Nevertheless, with the emergence of Islam, the ideology behind the creation of Malay carving themes has experienced substantial transformations. The motives that emerged during the rise of Islam have been modified to align with the teachings of Islam to avoid any contradiction with its principles and values. In general, the creation of traditional Malay wood carving motifs adheres to specific rules and guidelines that set them apart from carving traditions seen in other regions. The traditional Malay carving motifs can be classified into two categories: decorative motifs or patterns that draw inspiration from early or ancient Malay motifs, such as floral motifs, leaf stalks, and tendrils commonly found in the community, and as well as motifs that originate from the sculptor's imagination (Haziyah et al., 2012).

The fundamental carvings originating from Hinduism encompass mountains, *makara*, stupas, and *teratai*. Presently, these forms continue to be utilized. However, animal and god images have predominantly been substituted with flora and calligraphy designs. The motif is carved using a contemporary carving technique and arrangement, distinct from the traditional Old Langkasuka style. The complete stupa form is readily identifiable, as most of it is seen on the *butong* and the gate of the home, which are already emblematic of the architectural components of the Malay traditional house. The mountain in question exhibits a distinctive morphology like a pinnacle or a tree, popularly referred to as a tree of life, which serves as a well-recognized emblem of prestige. Typically, it is positioned on the pulpit, palace entrance, grave, and crown worn by the dancers in the Mak Yong performance (Ismail & Ahmad, 2001).

Following the establishment of Islamic civilization in Malaya, particularly in Kelantan and Terengganu, the creation of exquisite wood carving art has acquired a profound philosophical significance. Additionally, it is accompanied by various additional dispositions, including patience, resolve, ingenuity, aesthetic worth, sensitivity, and proficiency. These principles are evident in a skilled sculptor who creates artworks influenced by nature. The sculptor's etiquette significantly influences the expression of their emotions when creating high-quality wood carving designs (Farish & Eddin, 2003).

Terengganu is renowned for its exquisite and distinctive carved themes, adding to the state's fame and beauty. Flora, geometric, and calligraphy motifs are the predominant motifs in carving, as stated by Azreena and Nangkula (2013), surpassing other motifs in frequency. This art has also become a standard by which the native architectural identity of Peninsular Malaysia is measured. Furthermore, it is shown that the motivation and arrangement of engraving art are not arbitrary but rather adhere to a predetermined discipline and plan. Each motif that is created also possesses its distinct significance and purpose. These motifs not only showcase the exquisite craftsmanship of carving art but also serve as a medium to convey the essence of life via artistic expression.

The researcher chose the art of carving in Terengganu because seeing the art of wood carving in Terengganu is more likely to highlight the natural motifs that parallel society's life. In this regard, the researchers will explore the nature motifs in Terengganu more deeply.

**Methodology**

The researchers opted for qualitative research approaches to accomplish the predetermined study objectives. The fieldwork involved engaging with the community of traditional wood carving sculptors and experienced individuals in this domain in the state of Terengganu, as

well as visiting key authorities. The primary goal of this fieldwork is to gather firsthand data that will serve as the main dataset for this research. Secondary data is acquired from sources such as journals, books, and previous studies to bolster the primary data gathered via fieldwork and further elucidate the examined issues. The researchers employ the ethnographic approach to conduct firsthand research with the informant, encompassing various aspects such as activities, events, characteristics, and values. This approach aligns with the primary focus of the study, which pertains to the traditional art of wood carving in Terengganu. The study primarily relies on opt-in observation techniques and interview approaches to gather information, constituting the main body of primary data. The data obtained from observations, interviews, and document studies, including previous studies, journals, books, and others, are examined to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied, specifically the underlying motif of wood carving art in Terengganu. The research utilizes NVivo software to facilitate the data analysis process by enabling researchers to categorize all acquired data according to thematic analysis.

## Findings

### Types of natural motifs in the art of wood carving

Wood carvings are affected by various factors, such as the diverse range of wood available for constructing buildings, ships, weapons, and ornaments. The diverse array of plants in the sculptor's surroundings serves as a source of inspiration for sculptors, prompting them to create a multitude of shapes and motifs in their carving endeavours. The selected plant motifs are typically found in proximity to residential areas, riverbanks, coastal beaches, wetlands, lakeshores, rice field boundaries, foothills, and nearby forests. These traditional carving motifs are prevalent in Malaysia and each state including Terengganu, does not have a distinct motif. This information was acquired through an interview with the IR 1 source.

"These traditional carving motifs are commonly used in all places. There is no specific motif for the state of Terengganu. In Besut, the motifs always used are motifs of *ketam guri*, *ketumbit*, and *asam paya*."

(IR 1)

According to the *Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia* (2009), generating a flora motif in art differs from creating one in the real world. The carving artist utilizes his ingenuity to convert and interpret these plants into carvings based on their appropriateness and align them with the traditional values and perspectives of the Malay community. According to the study's results, each sculptor's motif pattern is distinct, although having the same motif type. This is because the shape of the motif depends on the creativity of each sculptor himself, and what determines the type of motif depends on the movement of the engraving figure (Azreena & Nangkula, 2013). This is also supported by IR 2 informants.

"The outward appearance of a carving does not necessarily reflect its true essence. While the motif may have the same name but, the actual shape of the flower can vary depending on the sculptor's creativity. However, what remains consistent is the sculptor's movement, which ultimately determines the type of motif."

(IR 2)

According to a Malay carver, Norhaiza, the carving motif refers to the root or main element that is the filling in each design. Motifs worked out with a solid foundation will make the engraving a reference for future generations. This is because the traditional carving motifs

produced by the Malays are closely related to the elements of life. Each element of the stem, leaves, bud, flowers, fruit, and tendrils is sculpted and worked out in a space that forms a variety of ornaments, and each part of the engraving has its own meaning through the symbol of natural life (*Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009*).

Meanwhile, according to another Malay carver, Wan Mustapha Wan Su, also known as Wan Po, the selection of natural motifs in wood carving art depends on several specific purposes. It depends on the type of nutritious plants with aesthetic value. Plants that delicately provide human benefits or nutrition belong to plants that function as traditional medicinal substances. Trees of choice include *ketumbit, bayam peraksi, kerak nasi, kangkung, ketam guri, kapal terbang, uju-uju, kacang laut, daun sayap, senduduk* and others. These plants cure food poisoning, diabetes, fever, diarrhoea, hypertension, and others. Apart from that, the selection of motifs also depends on plants that have a positive meaning in figurative language and according to their suitability. The selection of carving motifs influenced by this nutritional element commemorates the plant's benefits in human life (*Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009*).

In addition, the choice of motif is based on its aesthetic value, such as selecting plants that release a pleasant fragrance or have visually appealing flowers. It may also be chosen to commemorate the delicacy of the fruit or in memory of the daily food of the community. Examples such as *sukun, peria, ketola*, and others are selected due to their status as traditional food sources for the ancient Malay society. Flowers with a pleasant aroma, such as *tanjung, melur, tikam seladang, kenanga*, and others, are renowned for their ability to enchant human emotions. It is believed that their fragrant essence enhances the beauty of a carving. The motifs that rely on the aesthetic appeal of flowers found on plants encompass *bunga mas, hibiscus, kenerak, misai kucing, rama-rama, tahi ayam, teratai*, and others (*Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009*). This is also supported by informants IR 1 and IR 2.

“Each flower has its benefits. As a medicine, it is beautiful or smells good. Flowers that are useful in life are carved for us to remember the names of trees and their benefits. In other words, when we look at the motif, we see that it is a source of healing.”

(IR 1)

“The characteristics of the plants determine the selection of motifs. For instance, fragrant plants like *ylang-ylang* and *jasmine* are chosen. Plants with visually appealing flowers, such as *hibiscus* and *teratai*, are also considered. Additionally, plants that offer medicinal benefits, like *kangkung* and *peria*, are used. Furthermore, plants that serve as food sources are utilized as motifs to preserve their significance. In ancient times, these plants were depicted through carvings, as they were crucial sources of sustenance.”

(IR 2)

Furthermore, there are also themes designed to commemorate an event, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. The plant's form is immortalized in intricately carved designs to commemorate the events that inspired it. For instance, a sculptor selects a motif based on his affinity for a certain plant and, after that, preserves its essence through the art of wood carving. Furthermore, certain themes are solely driven by the individual's mind, commonly referred to as imaginary flower motifs. An imaginary motif refers to a theme that is created solely by the engraver's mind. The engraver also chooses a name for the motif

based on their preferences, as it does not exist in the real world. The selection of each motif is intended to remember the advantages or benefits of the plant in human existence, as stated by the *Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia* in 2009. Informant IR 2 has explained this matter.

“There is also a selection of motifs intended to commemorate an event. For example, my grandfather liked this flower, so he immortalized it in the form of carvings to commemorate it. In addition, there is also an imaginary floral motif, which is a motif based on the sculptor's own imagination. The motif's name is also designed by itself because imaginary flowers are only in our imagination and not in real nature.”

(IR 2)

Within the realm of the Malay carving motif, it is more equated with floral elements. The word '*motif bunga*' is used to encompass all the features present in wood carving panels despite the absence of actual floral motifs, instead, these panels solely utilize a combination of stem and leaf elements. This terminology is derived from the oral transmission of knowledge passed down from past ancestors. The term '*bunga*' is employed to denote the delicacy and aesthetic appeal of the skill of carving. For instance, within the framework of *bunga rampai*, both *bunga manggar* and *bunga telur* are artificially created but are considered equivalent to natural flowers utilized during celebratory events. Another instance of *bunga bahasa* is found in *bunga tari* and *bunga silat*, where individuals employ graceful and modest gestures to convey the concept of softness and beauty (*Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia*, 2009). Hence, most of the patterns elaborated upon in the subsequent part are referred to as '*bunga*' due to their status as a significant artistic legacy in Malay wood carving.

### ***Bunga ketam guri motif***

The *bunga ketam guri* motif is a Malay decorative pattern that draws inspiration from the *ketam guri* tree, a plant that blooms and grows in the wild. This plant typically thrives in uncultivated fields, open landscapes, and neglected regions. This pattern consists of flowers, tendrils, and leaves that typically embellish the *hulu keris*, furniture, and Malay architecture. Furthermore, it is customary to position this decorative pattern on the walls, doors, and uppermost part of the window, specifically referred to as the wind comb. This motif is not only present in wood carvings but is also incorporated into *batik* themes. It is closely associated with the art of carving since it is one of the primary motifs in wood carving and *batik* painting.

*Ketam guri* was chosen because its leaves contain many medicinal properties. The traditional Malay community uses *ketam guri* leaves to treat boils, ringworms on the head, itchy skin, toothache, shortness of breath, bleeding wounds, stomachache, and many more. It is also used to treat diabetes and has anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties. There are two ways to use *ketam guri* leaves whether soaking the leaves in water and then drinking them or using the leaves as one of the ingredients that will be applied to the affected part of the disease.



Figure 3.1: *Bunga ketam guri* motif

### ***Bunga peria* motif**

The motif of the *peria* flower is derived from the creeping bitter gourd tree, which thrives in relatively damp soil. The bitter gourd tree can be located in the garden, planted along the fence of the village home, or in any other suitable location. The fruit is commonly referred to as a vegetable due to its highly acrid flavour. This decorative pattern is commonly seen on various furniture pieces, such as tables, chairs, and mirror frames. It is also used as embellishments on doors, windows, and gates and may even be found on *bangau perahu*.

Malay individuals commonly employ bitter gourd as a traditional remedy for treating diabetes. Bitter gourd fruit must be finely cut, blended with water, and then drunk. Bitter gourd serves as a medicinal remedy in Malaysia and several East Asian nations, including China, Korea, and Japan. Furthermore, as stated by Mohammad (2016), the bitter gourd plants utilized in traditional carvings by the Malay community possess significant aesthetic worth due to the visually appealing bitter gourd flowers that adorn each sculpture.



Figure 3.2: *Bunga peria* motif

### ***Bunga kerak nasi* motif**

The Malay community created the *bunga kerak nasi* motif because it was inspired by the *kerak nasi* trees that grow around village houses. The *kerak nasi* flower tree is also known as the *tikar seladang* tree or *kesidang* in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia, while on the east coast, it is better known as the *tikam seladang* flower. This tree grows as high as one meter, its leaves have white sap, and its flowers are also white and emit a fragrant smell like the smell of pandanus leaves. Its fragrant smell attracts birds and butterflies. The *kerak nasi* flower motif is an old traditional flower, and the shape is quite difficult to make for carvers who are not skilled. This motif is often found on wall panels, and if this motif is placed on the door, it carries a symbol of welcome.

Malay women and girls traditionally use this flower as a hair bun decoration. *Kerak nasi* flower is also one of the ingredients in the *bunga rampai* and decorate *tepak sirih* that are an ingredient in several ceremonies of the Malay community. In addition, all parts of the *kerak nasi* tree are said to have their own properties for human consumption. The Malay community uses the whole part of the *kerak nasi* tree, whether the stems, leaves, or flowers. This tree can be boiled and drunk to relieve pain and treat health problems related to bone, it can relieve fever, *busung*, remove dirt after childbirth and can stimulate sweat production. In addition, the boiled water of the *kerak nasi* tree can also be used as a tonic to overcome

fatigue and lethargy problems. In addition to its medicinal benefits in traditional society, this plant is also chosen as a motif because of its aesthetic value, which has beautiful yellow flowers.



Figure 3.3: *Bunga kerak nasi* motif

#### ***Bunga ketumbit* motif**

This design draws inspiration from the *ketumbit* tree, a commonly found plant along roadsides, ditches, gardens, residences, forest margins, rubber plantations, oil palm plantations, and other sites with proper soil conditions. The tree can coexist with various plants, and its root structure is capable of enduring periods of drought and hot weather. *Ketumbit* frequently features floral themes, commonly observed on weapons like daggers. Furthermore, this pattern is also seen in domestic implements such as *gayung tempurung*, chairs, tables, wind combs, and traditional games like *congkak*.

This plant serves as a dietary supplement for promoting bodily health. The Malay people traditionally use the *ketumbit* tree as a vegetable in their cuisine. Furthermore, the ancients asserted that its qualities might be employed as a remedy for weariness and cough in young children.



Figure 3.4: *Bunga ketumbit* motif

#### ***Bunga bayam peraksi* motif**

*Bayam peraksi* trees grow wild in large and airy areas or on roadsides and can survive even in conditions of lack of water. The *bayam peraksi* tree has purple flowers and is often slightly prominent, even when growing around clusters of grass or other plants. This motif can be seen on the gate, headboard, and others. However, it is mostly more focused on the wall panels as wall decoration or wind comb, otherwise, it is rarely found on weapons.

It is claimed that this tree can effectively cure dengue illness. Furthermore, the juice is said to enhance blood circulation in the body, apart from its active properties. Furthermore, the traditional Malay community employs *bayam peraksi* as a remedy for flatulence in children, whereby *bayam peraksi* is pounded, crushed, and applied to the stomach.



Figure 3.5: *Bunga bayam peraksi* motif

***Bunga senduduk motif***

The *bunga senduduk* motif is inspired by the *senduduk* tree that grows evenly in the garden bushes, ditch edges and open areas. This tree is branched and shrubby with reddish stems and also with large and wide flowers. *Senduduk* flower motifs are usually found on weapons, household utensils, and games such as *congkak* and wind combs.

This plant is useful in traditional medicine such as being able to treat wounds, stop blood flow, treat diarrhoea, relieve body aches and joint pain, relieve toothache, heal the uterus for women in labour, and able to reduce vaginal discharge problems for women.



Figure 3.6: *Bunga senduduk* motif

***Bunga kenanga motif***

The motif of the *kenanga* flower draws inspiration from the ylang-ylang tree. The Malay population highly favoured this traditional flower in the past due to its delightful fragrance. The motif is chosen for its visual appeal, characterized by a delightful fragrance that is highly favoured by the traditional Malay population. This decorative pattern is frequently encountered on wind combs, doors, windows, wall panels, and other similar architectural elements.

The Malays collected ylang-ylang blossoms and stored them in fabric folds to impart fragrance to their garments and residences. The fragrance of ylang-ylang flowers intensifies during dusk, potentially because it attracts active pollinating insects during that period. The aromatic scent emitted by ylang-ylang flowers has a soothing effect on the mind, alleviating feelings of tension, fear, and rage.



Figure 3.7: *Bunga kenanga* motif

***Bunga bakawali motif***

The tree has a pleasant fragrance and will yield nocturnally blooming white flowers, which wilt during the daytime. This decorative pattern can be observed on intricately carved *rehal*, wall panels, windows, doors, and various other locations as per their appropriateness.

Furthermore, aside from possessing a pleasant fragrance and exquisite blossoms, the *bakawali* tree also serves as a traditional remedy within the Malay culture. It is claimed that the blossoms include medicinal properties that can alleviate eye ailments and injuries, and enhance the skin's appearance. Furthermore, the trunk of the *bakawali* tree possesses medicinal properties that can be utilized for treating hypertension and diabetes. Additionally, the dried blooms of the tree are employed as a tonic to alleviate cough symptoms.





Figure 3.8: *Bunga bakawali* motif

### ***Bunga melur* motif**

This motif created by Malay sculptors was inspired by the jasmine flower tree, a type of shrub and creeping plant. This tree grows by creeping on other plants or on anything that can cling. *Bunga melur* motif can often be found on furniture, wall paragraphs, cupboards, doors, windows, household appliances, wind lattices, and others.

The jasmine tree is utilized as a motif in wood carving due to its association with the therapeutic practices of the Malay culture in traditional medicine. The Malay society utilized jasmine flowers medicinally to alleviate fever and enhance the body's immune system. The root is additionally employed for medicinal purposes.



Figure 3.9: *Bunga melur* motif

### ***Awan larat* motif**

The motif of *awan larat* serves as a source of inspiration for Malay carvers, who draw from the ever-changing and shifting shapes of clouds in the sky. This theme showcases a variety of plant motifs that are organized in a sequential sequence. However, there is also a belief that the *awan larat* motif was derived from the name of a young child named Awang, who transformed the barren lines on the sand into a lovely form. The selection of the cloud motif is also attributed to its advantages, including the clouds' capacity to produce rainfall and provide benefits to all living beings on the planet, including humans, plants, animals, and others.

The *awan larat* pattern comprises sizable blossoms, gently curled stems, and softly folded foliage. This motif exhibits a '*motif ibu*' or '*punca ibu*' that are started from one point of origin to destitute filling the empty space in a controlled and balanced situation. This '*motif ibu*' or '*punca ibu*' is a blooming floral element placed in the centre of the carving space called '*ibu*'. This central flower is larger than the other elements surrounding it per its properties that control the entire space. The '*punca ibu*' is also associated with the symbol of the greatness and love of God, who has poured out blessings and given pleasure to humans, which is the original purpose in life.

Furthermore, this pattern is highly revered as one of the most exalted hues in the admiration of traditional Malay carving. The *awan larat* motif possesses distinct regulations, philosophy, individuality, and style. The *awan larat* motif exclusively comprises natural elements influenced by the pervasive growth of Islam in Malaya. Simultaneously, the method

of depicting the plant patterns in this theme involves transforming the original form into a new one while retaining the distinctive features of the original motif. *Awan larat* are decorative elements that serve as the foundation for carving. When a motif is composed, it will produce a pattern, and each pattern has its name depending on the shape of the motif chosen.



Figure 3.10: *Awan larat* motif

### Discussion

Researchers have put forward ten distinct types of wood carving themes inspired by nature. The carvings encompass several motifs such as *bunga ketam guri* motif, *bunga peria* motif, *bunga kerak nasi* motif, *bunga ketumbit* motif, *bunga bayam peraksi* motif, *bunga senduduk* motif, *bunga kenanga* motif, *bunga bakawali* motif, *bunga melur* motif, and *awan larat* motif. These themes are derived from the creative influence of Malay carvers, who draw inspiration from their surroundings. The selection of each motif is influenced by the characteristics of the plant that was utilized or valued by the preceding Malay culture. Furthermore, the selection process also considers the plant's aesthetic value, including its visually pleasing look and pleasant fragrance. The choice of each carving motif is to honour the environment that is advantageous to humanity by dedicating it to the art of wood carvings.

This study uses the theory of cultural ecology as researchers perceive it to be pertinent for enhancing the investigation of natural adaptation within the realm of handcrafted arts legacy. This idea posits that the natural elements of the environment can exert an impact on multiple facets of culture, including cognition, dietary patterns, attire, housing, language, perspective, awareness, convictions, principles, moral character, establishments, artistic expressions, and more. This corresponds to the production of artisanal goods in the research area, where there is a mutual connection or impact between the local culture and the surrounding environment.

In summary, this study demonstrates a strong correlation between nature and the motifs found in Malay heritage woodcarving. This wood carving reflects the aesthetic and cultural richness inherent in the Malay community. The beauty of the carvings is evident in their intricate craftsmanship, meticulous design, and precise execution. Each carving theme carries its narrative or philosophical significance.

This study makes a valuable contribution to cultural ecology by exploring the complex connection between nature and artistic representation in Malay heritage woodcarving. By applying the cultural ecology theory, this research demonstrates how environmental elements impact the choice and representation of wood carving designs, revealing underlying cultural values and relationships with the environment. Moreover, this research enhances current knowledge by conducting a thorough investigation of ten unique wood carving themes inspired by nature, and it delves into the creative processes and cultural importance associated with each motif. This study highlights the significance of conserving and advocating for ancient artistic activities, such as Malay heritage woodcarving to preserve the aesthetic

and cultural richness of the heritage. Overall, this research contributes to enhancing comprehension of the complex relationship between environment, culture, and artistic expression, improving academic discussion, and aiding in the conservation of cultural heritage in the Malay community.

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