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Empowering Local Mind  
In Art Design & Cultural Heritage

# 3rd ISME International Colloquium 2016

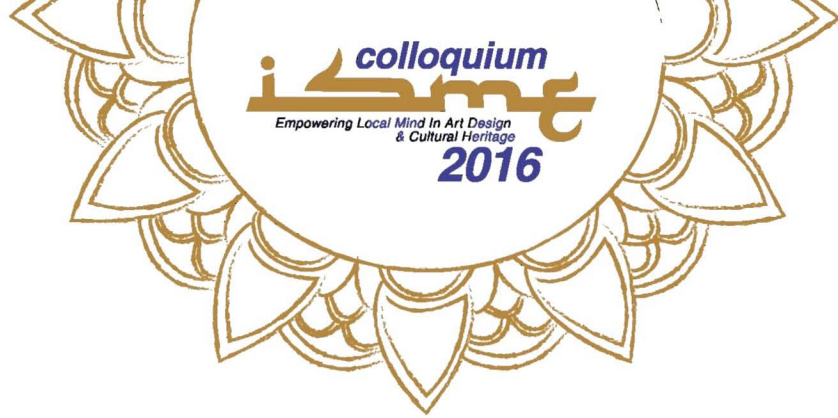
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In Art Design & Cultural Heritage

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# Study On Symbolism Of Malay Islamic Cultural Heritage In Malaysian Visual Arts : Found In Syed Ahmad Jamal Artworks

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**Abstract**— This critical analysis is about the study on symbolism of Malay Islamic cultural heritage in Malaysian visual arts found in Syed Ahmad Jamal artworks particularly on the *Sirih Pinang* (1982), *Tulisan* (1961) and *Mandi Laut* (1957). The reason why this particular painting was chosen as the medium for a critical analysis was because of Syed Ahmad Jamal's profound involvement in pioneering the Abstract painting movement in Malaysia with brilliant employment of symbolism of cultural elements in his works. He can be considered as one of the earliest Malaysian painter between the era of 1960s and 1970s to masterfully use the symbolism elements in translating metaphors and professing intrinsic meanings in his artwork (*Syed Ahmad Jamal Sempena Malam Anugerah Seni Negara*, 1995). This research is looking at the meaning behind the symbol of cultural heritage employed by the artist on his art work. It is hoped that this research would reach out to the public and further provide a bridge linking the public's understanding with matters related to the visual arts, enlightening the meanings behind an artist's effort and encourage public appreciation and understanding on the context of cultural heritage in visual arts. The research would also try to reflect and convey to the public on the nature of an artwork created from the symbol of Malay Islamic cultural heritage elements, when being further analysed would profess intrinsic and insightful meaning.

**Author Keywords:** *Symbolism, Malay Islamic Cultural Heritage, Malaysian Visual Art*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This critical analysis is about the study on symbolism of Malay Islamic cultural heritage in Malaysian visual arts found in Syed Ahmad Jamal artworks particularly on the *Sirih Pinang* (1982), *Tulisan* (1961) and *Mandi Laut* (1957). The reason why this particular painting was chosen as the medium for a critical analysis was because of Dato' Syed Ahmad Jamal's profound involvement in pioneering the Abstract painting movement in Malaysia with brilliant employment of symbolism of cultural elements in his works. He can be considered as one of the earliest Malaysian painter between the era of 1960s and 1970s to masterfully use the symbolism elements in translating metaphors and professing intrinsic meanings in his artwork (*Syed Ahmad Jamal Sempena Malam Anugerah Seni Negara*, 1995).

Besides that, according to Siti Zainon Ismail (1985) in her book '*Getaran Jalur dan Warna*' she laments: "*Alangkah baiknya jika unsur-unsur simbolik ini benar-benar dapat difahami oleh generasi sekarang, tidak sekadar meniru dari apa yang pernah dihasilkan oleh orang yang terdahulu.*"

"Wouldn't it be wonderful, if symbolic elements developed by our painters are duly appreciated and understood by today's generation instead of them blindly copying the symbols and integrate it in their work"

From this statement alone, the author understood the importance of content derived from symbols and forms found in an artwork. The worries expressed by Siti Zainon on today's generation attitude towards symbolism were twofold. The first, being the potentiality of the language of symbolism developed by local artists in the era of the 60's and 70's fades to oblivion, where the exclusive cultural symbolism was lost in its form and meaning. Second, would be on the danger of applying symbolism freely without any concern on its intrinsic and expressive meaning or the complete lack of employing symbolism in the work.

This research is looking at the meaning behind the symbol of Malay Islamic cultural heritage employed by the artist on his art work. It is hoped that this research would reach out to the public and further provide a bridge linking the public's understanding with matters related to the visual arts, enlightening the meanings behind an artist's effort and encourage public appreciation and understanding on the context of Malay Islamic cultural heritage in visual arts. The research would also try to reflect and convey to the public on the nature of an artwork created from the symbol of Malay Islamic cultural heritage elements, when being further analysed would profess intrinsic and insightful meaning.

## 2. SYMBOLISM IN VISUAL ARTS

Symbols can be clarified as having close connection with thought or *reference* and was further moulded into becoming a definitive form. Symbols must have the process of being meaningful that be able to spark deep, intensive and analytical thinking. Furthermore, symbolism brought the significance of motion, rhythm and others. It was to function and to invent and to show something different (Siti Zainon Ismail, *Getaran Jalur dan Warna*, 1985).

Therefore, symbols had the different significance and filled with irony meaning which is woven from its origin physical form. So, facing the element of symbols does not means faced with an inanimate things which did not had sense but it exhibited to knowing the analytical meaning behind the symbolism form.

Furthermore, symbolism is significantly important to religion. Religious oracles are considered divine because of their abilities in interpreting symbols. Max Weber described religion as a system of sacred religious symbolism. Moreover in Pierce concept had defined that symbols was as a signs to be directed on specific forms which was not based on its physical appearances.

In visual arts creation, although on (fine art) forms or applied art, the symbolism images was interpreted through elements of fine arts which are represented by form, color, line, space, value and texture. Arnheim Rudolf in his writing states that:

“Language symbols alone are not enough, even for highly literate people...the abstract power objective reality as an art form.”

(*Visual Thinking*, 1970)

Moreover, through the visual arts activity, the three forms which the pictures, symbols and signs was important elements in application of something image in art works. This applications was depends on an ability to create, compose the whole imagination, emotion experience and intellectual. Besides that, through elements of fine arts artists can give an inspiration toward something image with application of symbolism features and the marks in something meaning that wish to deliver. In realism visual art, artists did not illustrate the symbols with external form, but more emphasis towards the function of color and composition of form.

For example, Picasso in *Blue Period* filled full of blue color which gloomy and sobbing. After that, in a few year later, Picasso produced the painting name *Pink Period* with bright scenery that symbolize his soul which is represent the joy and happiness compare with using the symbol of blue color in last period. Hear, Picasso had utilizes using the color's symbols as the sign of agreement which is had general characteristics (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1985).

Besides that, in Charles Chadwick statement about symbolism say that, ‘The

ideal flower, he must not to draw too clearly the specific image of a rose or lily, but must confuce the two images so that the essence of them both maybe perceived (*Symbolism*, 1971). Again, the purpose of symbols is to idiomatic the images and artists creativeness in creating an arts works.

Looking towards the symbolism of cultural heritage in Malaysian visual arts had many elements of tradition crafts. The example of Malay tradition crafts was wood curving, *pucuk rebung* motif and others. Therefore, the elements of symbolism will be analysis and identify in Syed Ahmad Jamal art works, named *Sirih Pinang* (1982), *Tulisan* (1961) and *Mandi Laut* (1957).

### 3. ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 *Sirih Pinang*, 1982



Identification towards this art painting titled *Sirih Pinang* and was produced in year 1982 had brought the symbolism of Malay Islamic cultural heritage discloses the artist through understanding of the intellectual influence that he had assimilated while study in oversea. The western style influence of Cubism ideologies is noticeable in the conscious structuring of geometric form in these artworks. It should be noted that Syed Ahmad Jamal had also applied his strong expressive brushstrokes with selected warm colors such as red, orange, and yellow. The warm colors were duly complemented in this painting in order to make this work achieved highly aesthetic result.

The symbolisms of Islamic cultural heritage elements in Malay traditional arts clearly can be analysed through the stylization varying surface of wood carving or even the varieties of flora and fauna motif in woodcarving. It is also illustrated through colors and shapes. From identification, there are several type of geometric form that artist applied in this artwork which is triangle, square and the Islamic geometric form. These geometric forms have been display in flat space with intrinsic compositions. The identification form and content that show in this art painting has represented the intricacy and delicacy of Islamic cultural heritage context.

Besides that, from observation also it reveals form such as *pokok pinang*, the sky, the star and motif flora. These forms that artist applied in his work of arts which represent the sensitivity attitude towards the nature. D’Zul Haimi Hj Md Zain in book Syed Ahmad Jamal: Pelukis say that:

*The plants, the sky and the earth, the stars, the mat and the changing time form parts of the imagery in Sirih Pinang.”*

(D’Zul Haimi Hj Md Zain, 2009)

Manifestation through this art painting also had shows that Syed Ahmad Jamal had brought the element of Malay cultural heritage base on the motif flora. The study that had been done had justified that the motif flora in the foreground of this art painting represented the motif of wood carving which is *Bunga Ara*. Nakula say that, “*Motif ‘Bunga Ara’ melambangkan sifat-sifat Jamal dan sifat-sifat Jalal Tuhan yang turun dan naik, silih berganti yang disebut ‘awan larat’*”(Abdullah b. Mohamed, 1990)”.

This element can be as medium to bring up the traditional Malay heritage to the world. In the same time, it can become an education medium to young generation to know the traditional culture.

Plate 2.:  
The founding of four triangles form



Plate 3.:  
The founding of Islamic geometric form

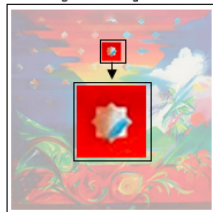


Plate 4.:  
The founding form of the sky and *pohon pinang*

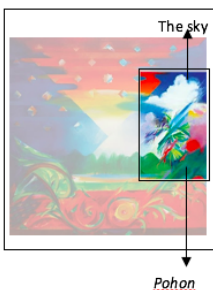
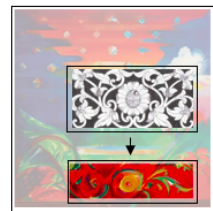
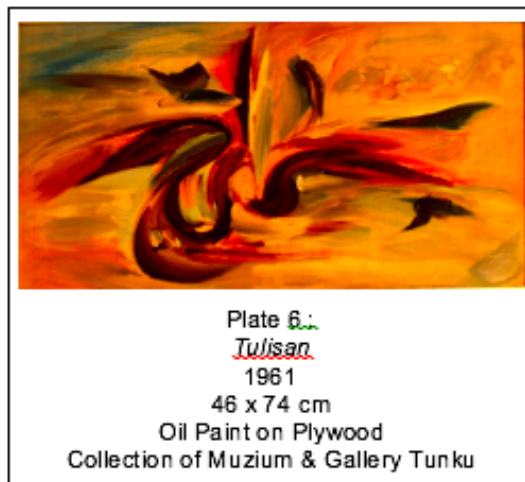


Plate 5.:  
The founding form of wood carving motif



### 3. 2 *Tulisan*, 1961



Art painting by Syed Ahmad Jamal title *Tulisan* have been select in way to study the symbolism of Malay Islamic cultural heritage element that artist added in his development process of work of art which can reflect to the look of Malaysia visual art. The reason this artwork was choose because it has applied two different styles in development of painting which is Islamic approach and the Abstract Expressionist influenced. These two approaches have their own aesthetic quality and by adding to the process development of the art product make it more flexibility, balance and harmony. In this art work was also used as another approach towards the enrichment effort in creating expressive calligraphy of Jawi origin theme that neither connotes ideological nor iconographical which is true to Islamic influence. These *Jawi* Script motifs are solely for aesthetic dispositions and surface treatments (Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman, 2008).

In *Tulisan*, by Syed Ahmad Jamal, one can trace the old brushstroke which is based on the three *Jawi* letters, namely Shin (or S), Alif (or A) and Jim (or J). The simplicity of his initials in *jawi* on this painting is the strength of his stroke as an abstract expressionist (Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman, 2008). Based on that, it can be assumed that the phenomenon of modern visual art in Malaysia has been very much thriving and this is proven from Syed Ahmad Jamal exploration in seeking the new approach for Malay Islamic arts scene in interpreting the universe. It show that artist have search for a Malay-Islamic identity by attempted the two different aesthetic approach which is Islamic calligraphy and the abstract expressionist brushstroke to the canvas.

This transformation of style and concept of visual art were the beginning for a new direction of modern visual art in this country. This situation can be seen in

*Tulisan* (1961) where Syed Ahmad Jamal apply the Expressionist and Abstract Expressionist influence, but didn't abandon the traditional and Islamic approach. Based on that, it shows artist had highlights the symbolism of Malay cultural heritage elements which is Malay-Islamic ideology in his art painting.

Plate 7.: The founding of Malay-Islamic Calligraphy approach

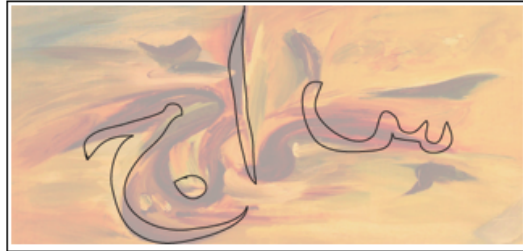
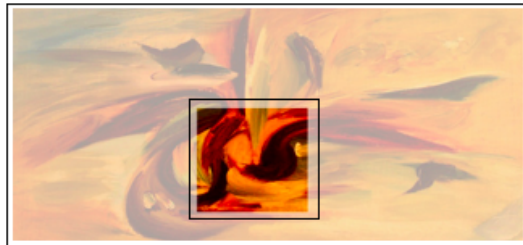
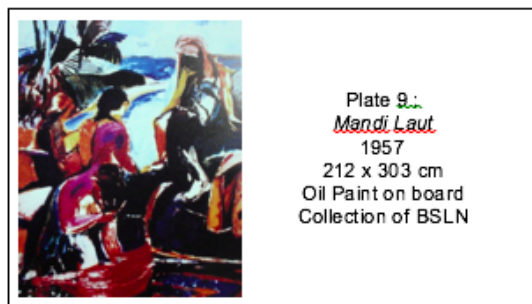


Plate 8.: The founding of Abstract Expressionist approach - brushstroke



### 3. 3 *Mandi Laut*, 1957



The symbolism of Malay Islamic cultural heritage reveals the aesthetics meaning of certain objects. In that context, Malay traditional arts do not only function physically but it also embodies certain meanings related to history, culture and belief of the Malays. According to Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, she stated that:

*“Simbol merupakan wahyu dari tahap yang tertinggi, wujud dalam tahap yang rendah dan melaluinya manusia dapat dibawa kembali ke alam yang tinggi itu. Untuk memahami symbol, seorang itu harus menerima hakikat struktur susun lapis alam dan keadaan kewujudan yang berbilang.”*

(Sharifah Fatimah  
Zubir, 1984)

*Mandi Laut* reveals how far this artist's art had evolved in his search for a personalized expression through the chosen theme of shy young Malay women bathing amongst the rocks. The work shows that it was inspired by the traditional moral values among Malay girls where culture, etiquette and good manners are placed as their top priority and to observe these good manners were simply natural. The painting indirectly were also suggesting to the viewer that these women dare not expose themselves in swim suits and let the public watch them lying on the open sandy beaches. The artist's theme in this particular artwork revolves around the shyness of Malay women at that particular era as opposed to the western women and this 'shyness' was aptly symbolized in *Mandi Manda*. The painting clearly show his interpretation on the figures where all of them were lowering their head while bathing. Furthermore, the interpretation result found that they also prefer to enjoy themselves in seclusion rather than to overrules the taboo of their customs. They also not only wrap themselves neatly, to cover their torsos down to the knees with *Sarung* ; they even bathe among themselves behind huge rocks (Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman, 2008).

The sarong was one of the Malay traditional customs. The word sarong is from the Malay word for covering. The sarong is a traditional garment of Java and the Malay archipelagos, consisting of a length of fabric wrapped and tied around the body at the waist or arms. This identification, clearly show this art painting had inspired by the Malay cultural heritage elements and civilizations. The taboo customs which is breast-cloth (*berkembangan*) with sarong can bring us to the phenomena of Malay ladies at village area in the past era. Besides that, Mohamed Najib Ahmad Dawa in his writing about the structure and the symbolism element in sarong say that:

*“Sehelai kain sarung jika ditaksirkan mengisahkan metamorphosis manusia dari awal kejadian iaitu benih, alam kanak-kanak (pembesaran) hingga kea lam dewasa”*

(Mohamed Najib Ahmad Dawa, 2008)

There are six element of sarong which is tubuh, gunung, tepi gigi, tali air, kepala kain and pengapit kepala kain. This element had brought significant to the Malay cultural heritage. Looking to the *kepala kain (pucuk rebung)*, this element has similar with the Malay aphorism '*melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya*'. From this



element also show the harmonious flora motif of Malay traditional arts. Moreover, from observation through the sarong found the batik with crackle effect.

Besides that, from analysis also found the Malay bamboo shoot (*pucuk rebung*) motif in Syed Ahmad Jamal artworks. As we know, *pucuk rebung* is an original Malay motif that had been used for long time ago and still applying it as a traditional Malay Motif. Based on this identification showed that artist Syed Ahmad Jamal had interpreted the ideology of Malay traditional element to his artwork with artistic and intrinsic method. This clearly shows *Mandi Laut*, 1959 had become one of media to record the Malay elements and also the historical of Malaysia batik industry. Looking through of his choices of color, the warm color which is yellow, orange and red emotes the amazingly cheerful mood that the young Malay women were having whilst bathing amongst the rocks. The cool colors which are green, blue, black and white was used by the artist to emphasize the beautiful scenery of the ocean. Nowadays, the bathing in the public scenario of Malay women today are very much different from the past. The traditional values uphold by Malay women are pretty much scarce. In today's society, men wear their sarongs with a checked pattern only when attending Friday prayers at the mosque. On the other hand, women in Malay customarily wear their sarongs every day.

Plate 10 : The founding of figures where all of them were lowering their head while bathing

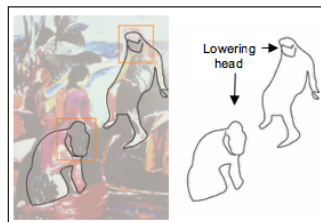


Plate 11 : The founding of breast-cloth (*berkemban*) sarong with the crackle effect

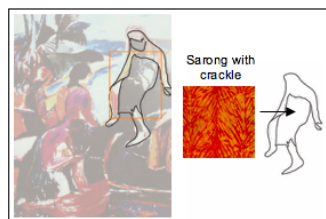
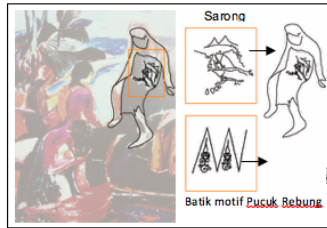


Plate 12 : The founding of *pucuk rebung* motif



#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the symbolism of Malay Islamic cultural heritage found in Syed Ahmad Jamal art works especially *Sirih Pinang* (1982), *Tulisan* (1961) and *Mandi Laut* (1957) possess high analytical and intrinsic meanings that land-marked a significant contribution to the Malaysian Art history. From this context, Syed Ahmad Jamal intention was to invite the Malaysian society to think in a different light particularly in intellectualizing the way the general public would react to the significant meanings found in his artworks. The application of the element of symbolism made by Syed Ahmad Jamal following the abstract expressionist ideology managed to evoke a new and unique expression of Malay Islamic art / eastern art which is very colossal of an impact to Malaysian art. From this context, Syed Ahmad Jamal intention was to invite Malaysian society to think in a different light particularly in intellectualizing the way the general public would react to the significant meanings found in his artworks. Besides that, from this research, it was established that Syed Ahmad Jamal artworks employed elements of Malay heritages and Malay-Islamic influence specifically involving the theme, form, shape, color, composition, space, line and texture. These elements were presented in a solid and harmonious arrangement. It was not a surprise that most of his works became permanent collections of National Art Gallery.

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