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Application of Nature in the Motif of Malay Traditional Jewellery in Malaysia

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Abstract

The application of nature in traditional Malay jewellery motifs has been practiced since time immemorial as the main element of decoration and design variations. In this study, the traditional Malay jewellery chosen is *dokoh*, one of the favourite jewelleries worn on the neck with kebaya. This study aims to identify the application of natural elements in design motifs in Malaysia. Qualitative research involving observation, description, and composition analysis is applied using a formal analytical approach. This research helps to preserve Malaysia's heritage and become a reference for future generations regarding extrinsic and intrinsic values.

Keywords: Dokoh; Motif; Malay, Traditional Jewellery

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1.0 Introduction

This research showed that natural objects had been used in traditional jewellery designs. These are evidenced by the presence of flora and animal motifs in various shapes and forms relevant to Malay traditional society's life, which is inextricably linked to the environment. The main parts of floral such as shoots, fruits, seeds, leaves and calyxes, became the primary motives to create patterns. Apart from that, goldsmiths also prefer to combine motifs from fauna and cosmos in a design.

Since ancient times, women especially wore various types of neck adornments. The design is of multiple precious metals and gems. The use of jewellery is a common practice practised by all societies worldwide. Jewellery is also a complement to everyday wear and entertainment and symbolic of identity and culture. Bonny Eddy (2019) said women and jewellery were inseparable, where every woman would wear at least one beautiful piece of jewellery on their limbs.

Dokoh is one of the traditional accessories worn on the neck with three or more plate shapes made of precious metals such as tin, copper, brass, silver, and gold. According to Mohd Kassim Ali (2008), *dokoh* has been popular for two hundred years on the East Coast as a pendant type. He also explains *dokoh* is a chest decoration consisting of one large and several smaller pendants joined by a chain. Based on history, the *dokoh* is a native of India brought by merchants Sumatra in the 18th century and the 19th to the islands of Indonesia. The design of the *dokoh* was then modified according to the tastes of the Malay community. In the days of the Malacca Malay Sultanate, this jewellery was used only by the royal family and dignitaries. Now, ordinary people can afford to own and wear them. *Dokoh* is now a trend in Malay women's fashion compared to the old days, which were limited to *baju kurung* and *baju kebaya* in Malay culture. *Dokoh* is associated with Malay cultural rituals such as weddings and is mainly used to highlight the bride's dress.

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Very little research has been carried out on Malay traditional jewellery due to its exclusivity as an elitist item. Therefore, the lack of literature documentation at hand. This paper presents an initial opinion on the study of form and motifs found in the Malay traditional *dokoh* design. The objective is to establish the application of nature in the motif of Malay traditional jewellery and categorise the motif designs accordingly. The analysis focuses on the patterns that decorate the *dokoh* design surface.

2.0 Literature Review

In this research, traditional Malay jewellery is part of the Malay community's culture, lifestyle, and history. Jewellery is traditionally related to the wearer's status and position (DBP, 1998). Morton (1970) explains that traditional jewellery comes from the past world. Jewellery is an intensely personal form of art, and the wearer is worn to look attractive, enhance and decorate it (Galton, 2012). For thousands of years, humans have decorated their bodies with the beauty of natural objects. Primitive people wore necklaces made of the animal's bones, claws, and teeth. The original meaning of jewellery refers to ornaments worn on clothing or body parts usually made of precious materials such as gold and silver and decorated with gemstones such as earrings, pins, chains, pendants, rings, and bracelets, and more.

According to Zubaidah Sual (2021), Siti Zainon Ismail (2006) and Geddie (1961), in Malay culture, jewellery is a complement to clothing and beautify the appearance. As an example of a kebaya with accessories such as body ornaments (brooches), neck jewellery (figures), hand ornaments (bangle) and head ornaments (*cucuk sanggul*) as displayed in several museums in the country such as in Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, and also the National Museum. Abdul Karim's Jamalluddin Hashim, Hasanulddin Mohd (2014) in his statement the *dokoh* is also a pendant (lion tin) in the form of pieces with beautiful motifs and gemstones in the middle. Usually, the jewellery is extensive, comprehensive, gold and silver, with chains on the left and right. Effendy Tenas (2004) describes the *dokoh* as a necklace worn, the length of the chest covering the chest to the stomach. In the old days, *dokoh* gave different meanings to the wearer's status, such as the one layer of *dokoh* for the general public. The two layers and one chain *dokoh* for the rich people, while the three layers *dokoh* and two-piece chains are for the aristocratic. Furthermore, the *dokoh* has more than three layers and the joined by three chains for the king's son (Figure1).



Figure 1: A *dokoh* fabricated from gold decorated with gemstones and a floral motif in the centre, shaped like a large brooch worn by His Royal Highness the Queen during the coronation ceremonies

Source: <http://sultan.perak.gov.my/index.php/informasi-kesultanan-tepi/alat-kebesaran-negeri-perak>

Today, the use of these three layers *dokoh* is often used by the *raja sehari* as a symbol of the bride in the wedding ceremony. Usually, designs are round for men and resemble crescents for women (Siti Zainon Ismail, 2006). The two-layer and three-layer *dokoh* is made of thin metal sheets and not too heavy, compared with the one-piece *dokoh*, usually in a three-dimensional shape to allow the liquid resin to be poured into it solid and heavy (Mohd Kassim Ali, 2008).

Nowadays, many changes have been made in the design of the *dokoh* from traditional to modern and make the *dokoh* more marketable. However, classic features are still preserved. According to Mohd Zaidi (2017), this *dokoh* is an amulet worn as a necklace by the royal family. There is still a demand for traditional jewellery such as bracelets, rings, and *dokoh*. Regarding the design, Mohd Zaidi (2017) explained *dokoh* in ancient times was the influence of Hinduism, which replaced the flower panicles before the advent of Islam in the Malay world.

As an amulet, every design and motif used has symbolic meaning, and the goldsmiths at that time translated the beliefs in animism into jewellery. Mohd Zaidi also stated that the king's craftsmen used the eagle's fauna motif to design the centrepiece, the tiger's nails, the seeds of the dates, and the *pitih* as design inspired (Figure 2). According to Mohd Kassim Ali, the centre part of *dokoh* is inspired by *sukun* leaf. Meanwhile, floral motif such as *bunga kenanga* is used as decoration on the surface of the *dokoh*. Effendy (2004) explains that the symbolic meaning of wearing the *dokoh* as an amulet eliminates the feeling of nervousness, thump, and disgrace and avoids the mystique.

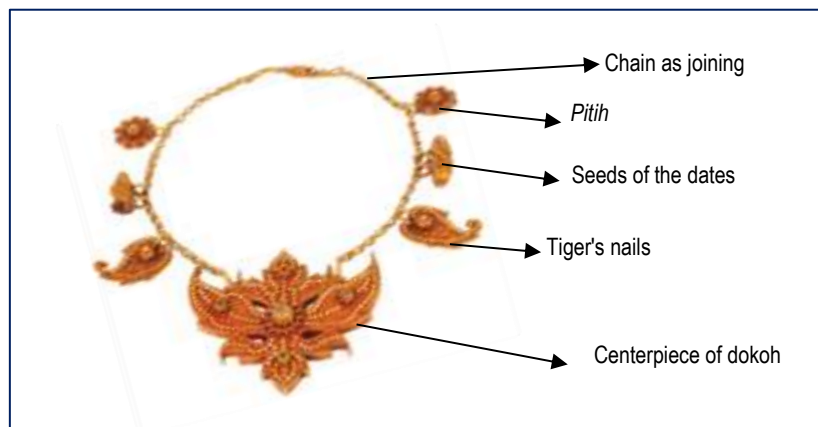


Figure 2: *Dokoh* as an amulet worn as a necklace by relatives of the king
Source: National Museum, Kuala Lumpur

1.2 Motif in Malay Culture: Definition and Philosophy

The motif is a decorative image or design, especially a repeated one forming a pattern used in some works of visual art or tangible product. In other words, to create a custom, the motif will be repeated or combined with different motifs (Nazirah M.Ba'ai, 2002). A motif is a crucial element in the style of producing a pattern on jewellery product surfaces. This statement is agreed by Hamdzun Haron (2014); a motif is the essential art element in creating a design motif on Malay traditional craft surfaces. According to the creator's soul, the beauty of a Malay motif is in its shape, pattern, evolution, and philosophy.

The motif also serves as a medium for the artist's thought since it contains the implied meaning, purpose, and philosophy that can help the Malay society. In ancient times, there were two teaching methods verbal and visual reminders to children. Syed Ahmad Jamal (1993) states that oral communication is like mediation, *pantun*, writing, and ethical novel. By optical transmission, motifs on craft product's shape and surface design serve as a reminder and a lesson to people when they see them.

In addition to being an intermediate medium that conveys the thinking of goldsmiths, motifs also contain symbolic elements related to people's spiritual life. According to Khairulnazrin Nasir, Muhammad Syafee Salihin Hasan (2018), in his statement, living nature, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena also have a spirituality or spirit element. Malay people believed that motives from nature sources had the magical power to prevent the interruption of spirit or magic where the invisible energy will bring disaster to humanity. In addition to worshipping, they also made symbols, motifs, and pendants from animal teeth to drive away evil beings (Mohammad Ahmad, 2009). Belief in animism existed and was inherited by ancient Malays before the arrival of Islam to Malaya. Aris, A., Nawawi, N. M., & Ibrahim, S. (2018) supports this statement that the natives of the Malay world had strong beliefs in spirits and the supernatural.

Therefore, it shows that the motif and pattern are related to producing an ornament. The motifs that have always been derived are from sensitivity to the environment, particularly plants, animals, geometrics, and cosmic elements, which are subsequently modified into patterns with high aesthetic values.

Through Malay traditional art motifs, the transmission of moral values such as honourable manners, gentleness, and politeness are the behaviours emphasised in the Malay society culture. In traditional jewellery in Malay, a symbolic motif mainly comprises fauna and celestial believed in providing peace of mind, joy in life, and a reminder of God's goodness which created the universe. For example, the motif of '*Awan Lara'* shows the fineness of the character of a human, while the curved leaves represent the politeness of Malay. Also, the motif symbolises the nature of Allah, which has no beginning or end. The motif of '*Sulur Bayung'* is the centralisation of a powerful and high force (Hamdzun Haron Harun (2014); Mohd Sabrizaa Abd Rashid (2008); S.A. Jamal (2007), Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (2000).

Generally, motifs in jewellery production, such as *dokoh*, are created in many ways and depend on gold, silver, or copper materials. Appropriately appropriate techniques, equipment, and materials are essential to ensure excellent, good, and high-quality work. Some of the most common methods used by goldsmiths in ancient times are filigree, chisel (Repoussé and chasing), engrave and stone setting, which is still used today.

This *dokoh* reflects Malay craftsmen's beauty, creativity and skill in producing quality jewellery, categorized as body decoration. Aesthetics is traditionally a branch of philosophy concerned with the concept of "beauty" (Chick & Micklethwaite, 2011). Therefore, this beauty outlines several beauty principles: unity, harmony, balance, and contrast. Although conceptions of beauty have evolved, aesthetics remains a synthesis of philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Aesthetics is concerned with creative qualities of shape and attempts to understand the origins of art interactions and the interaction between art and other facets of culture (Zulkifli Md. Yusoff, D'zul Haimi Md. Zain (2013); Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone, and Cayton, 2006).

Meanwhile, aesthetic morphology describes the various forms of materials used in art objects to evoke aesthetic experiences. The goal of aesthetic morphology is to distinguish between these different forms in terms of elements, descriptions, components, materials, ideas, and other materials, as well as how they are interrelated with each other (Zulkifli Md Yusoff and D'zul Haimi Md Zain, 2013; Beardsley and Schueller, 1967). The shape is a method of arrangement that involves the physical structure of the Malay traditional jewellery (*dokoh*).

2.0 Research Methodology

The methodology of this research is a qualitative method. An object-based research method is applied to observe, describe and analyse the motif design of *dokoh* (Fleming, E.M. 1974). This paper refers to the formal analysis approach to defining and assessing Malay traditional jewellery's visual and material appearance (*dokoh*). Mostly, the data collected through interviews with the goldsmiths, the old generation experiencing the *dokoh*, and the expert in the field, such as costume collectors and jewellery entrepreneurs, are both traditional and modern. The visual data of *dokoh* was obtained from the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur, an individual and costumes collector. This research emphasises the Malay material culture in Malaysia and focuses on the motif of *dokoh* design.

2.2 Data Collection

Pictorial data of 32 designs of *dokoh* was gained from the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur, Kelantan, Perak Terengganu, and the collector of Malay traditional jewellery. The design motif of *dokoh* was from varied types of *dokoh*, such as one-tier *dokoh*, two-tier *dokoh*, and three-tier *dokoh*. Generally, most measured drawings were displayed in black and white 2D images and then digitised into a single line pattern using illustrator. This method aims to use pictorial data to analyse visual patterns. Unstructured interview sessions further verified these findings.

2.3 Data Analysis

Based on interview information and literature, the pictorial data are tabulated and classified into (1) reasons for visual analysis of the form (Figure 3) and (2) visual description of the *dokoh* motif based on the interview data and literature (Figure 4). Data through an interview session with the goldsmith were transcribed and categorised into factors influencing the design of the *dokoh*. The researcher has made triangulation through sketching and recording data. The next session will discuss the result of this study. Therefore, the analysis of the two data types should complement and integrate to identify and categorise the *dokoh* motif from flora, fauna, and geometric or cosmic.

3.0 Results and Discussions

The research focuses on implementing nature as a source of motifs in *dokoh* design categorising the form and motif (pattern on the surface) of *dokoh* design.

3.1 The Floriated Form and Shape of Dokoh

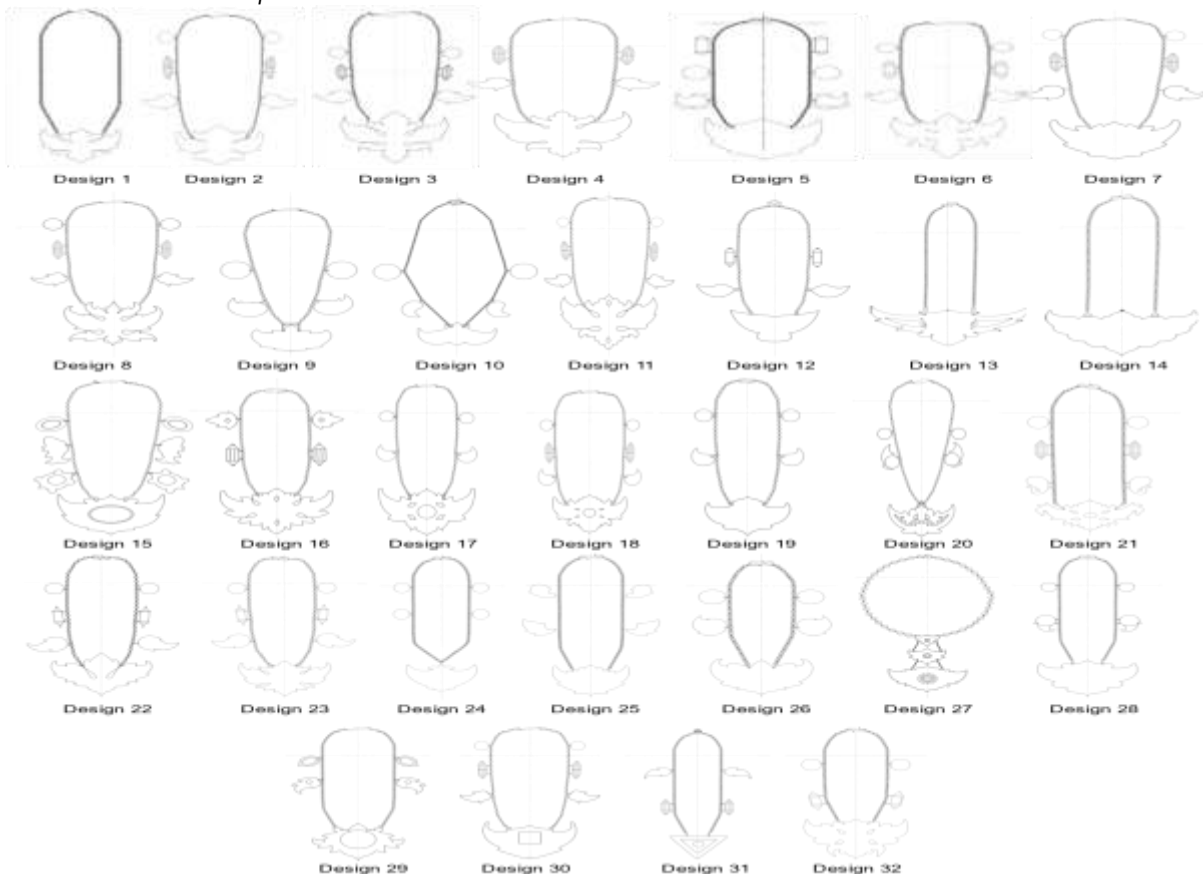


Figure 3: The 32-piece variation of *dokoh* of Peninsular Malaysia. Kelantan State Museum, Terengganu State Museum and National Museum, Kuala Lumpur, Source and drawing by: Nazirah Mohamad Ba'ai

Traditionally, the creation of *dokoh* began with the shape of *sukun* leaf and joined with various chain styles (Figure 3). From the simple form of *dokoh* it evolved to more complex with motif patterns on surface decoration. Over time, Mohd Zaidi (2017), the jewellery company owner, has explained that the *dokoh* design style has become much more commercial and now plays an essential role in catering to people's demands and lifestyles as a complement to Malay costumes.

Based on the observation, Peninsular Malaysia's *dokoh* was primarily inspired by flora and fauna. That statement is supported by Mohd Zaidi (2017), In an interview stating that goldsmiths used to and now really like to use nature as a source of inspiration in producing jewellery motifs and designs. Following Islam's teachings, goldsmithing turned the design of the fauna elements into flowery shapes such as the nails of the tiger, turtles, and fish mixed with *sukun* leaf at the centrepiece. However, the form of the abstracted animal did not correspond to any particular species. For example, the charm part of the *dokoh* goldsmith was abstracted like a leaf from the tiger's claw.

3.2 The Motif Categorisation of Dokoh

Malay traditional jewellery has subtlety and several elements in the *dokoh* design, such as designs, motifs, and pattern compositions. Through the interview with goldsmith Muhammad Ihsan Zakaria (2017), the researcher obtained the arrangement of *dokoh* showing motifs in Figure 4. According to the principles of harmony, balance, reflection, contrast, parallelism, and space, this arrangement can see in the selection of gemstones as elements of contrast and pattern structure that fill the surface of the *dokoh*. Illustration (a) shows the outline of the complete figure, and illustration (b) shows the composition of the motif on the *dokoh* surface as surface decoration. According to Natalie Kimani (2017), design elements are the basis of any visual method to convey and develop a message optically. Nature has taught goldsmiths to be more creative in processing natural resources to produce beautiful motifs as surface decoration on jewellery products that become complementary objects to Malay women's clothing.

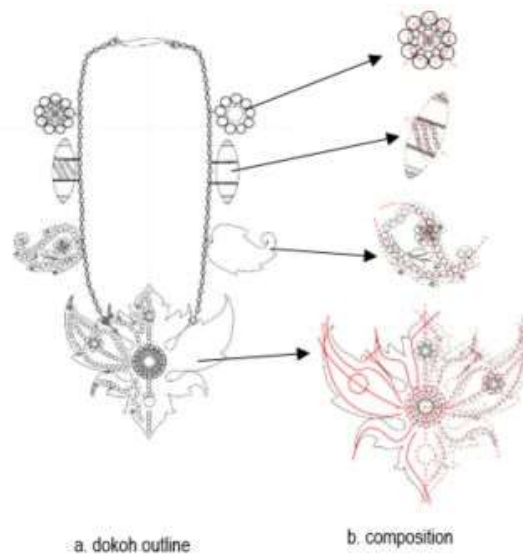


Figure 4: The illustration of *dokoh* motif composition of elements and principles of design
Source and drawing by: Nazirah Mohamad Ba'ai

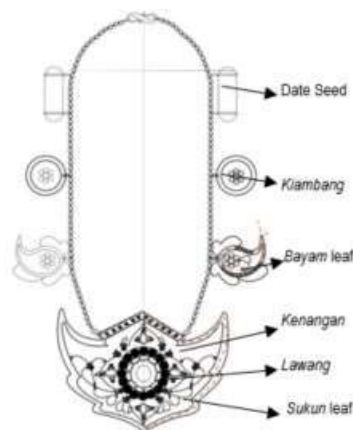


Figure 5: The illustration of *dokoh* motif inspired by floral
Source and drawing by: Nazirah Mohamad Ba'ai

Based on the analysis, three sources refer to the natural motifs used on the surface of the *dokoh*, the subject flora (plants), fauna (animals), and cosmic (universe). The ancient goldsmiths interpreted their surroundings without abandoning the subject's identity. The motif on the *dokoh's* centrepiece reflects the beauty, ingenuity, and skill with which Malay goldsmiths create jewellery. The *dokoh's* pattern appears essential, yet it truly depicts a high level of creativity in a delicate jewellery object. Goldsmiths use animal elements in plants without creating compositional conflicts with a combination of exciting animal, cosmic and plant forms as the surface patterns of jewellery.

From observation, the combination of design elements of nature such as flowers, animals and cosmic cannot stand alone and interconnected as the function of this jewellery as a complement in Malay women's clothing. In addition, this is also a symbol of appreciation for the environment of God's creation (refer to Figures 5, 6 and 7).

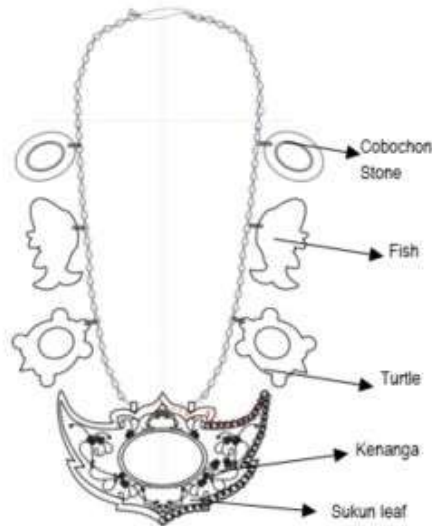


Figure 6: The illustration of *dokoh* motif inspired by floral with fauna
Source and drawing by: Nazirah Mohamad Ba'ai

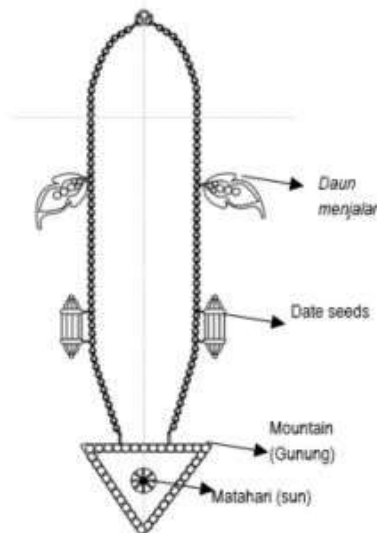


Figure 7: The illustration of *dokoh* motif inspired by cosmic
Source and drawing by: Nazirah Mohamad Ba'ai

5.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the research established the application of nature in Malay traditional jewellery. The use of motifs and patterns from nature in the design of the *dokoh* clearly shows the identity of the Malay culture. From the analysis, the researcher successfully categorizes the motifs of *dokoh* into three categories: the subject flora (plants), fauna (animals), and cosmic (universe). The motifs of flowers, plants and fauna, and cosmic show the close relationship between the environment and the Malay craftsmen. Malay jewellers have successfully produced various attractive designs from traditional techniques to modern technology by maintaining the Malay identity. The design of

motifs on *dokoh* as traditional Malay jewellery adheres to the principles of Malay art by using nature as inspiration. *Dokoh*, representing cultural objects illustrates the finesse, delicacy and uniqueness of Malay art and craft. Therefore, various measures need to be taken to maintain and continue the continuity of this historical heritage so that it does not disappear with the times and modernization.

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