Wall Carving Decoration and Motifs Influences Spatial Social Interaction: Is it Intentional or Accidental?

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Abstract

The woodcarving have considered as an important component in traditional Malay vernacular architecture were meant to perform visual values. This study examined of the wall woodcarving decoration, and it motifs found in traditional Malay house with two research questions. First, does the decoration and motifs influences social interaction of spatial? Second, is it the choice of decoration and motifs applied on the wall of Malay traditional house are intentional or accidental? This study can encourage in the direction of quality of life and sustainability of Malay’s heritage, also identifies best-practices of choosing the proper woodcarving design to the interior space category in the future.

Keywords: Decoration; Motifs; woodcarving; spatial social interaction; intentional or accidental

1. Introduction

Istana Besar Tengku Long (Tengku Long Grand Palace) was built in 1904 as an official resident for the Sultan as a ruler. The palace located at Kampung Bukit Raja, Besut, Terengganu in Peninsular Malaysia. Now, the palace’s building were replaced to the Board of Kuala Terengganu Museum, at Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu. The building relocated due to the conservation and transmission of the Sultan to the new palace, Istana Maziah (Ahmad, 2008).

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Istana Besar Tengku Long is a wooden traditional Malay palace featuring various well-carvings represent fine craftsmanship. Apart from the beauty, perforated carvings allow the sunlight into the building as a natural lighting and penetrate natural ventilation to the house. At night time, the interior space has another additional of beauty as a result of getting silhouettes from indoor light. The living hall has selected as a research area because this space displayed various forms of carving represent fine craftsmanship compared to another space in this palace. ‘Surung’ (anjung) or another name is front living hall were located at the front side of Istana Besar Tengku Long facing the public street. This space is mainly representing reception room intended for receiving and entertaining guests. The living hall carved with a number type of components in the form of floral carving, calligraphy, geometry, fauna and cosmic features. They are depicted according to the specified shape, size and dimension of wall wooden panel to the house.

1.1. Research background

This study is a visual research about the Terengganu’s Palaces of woodcarving decoration and motifs. In this study, the art of woodcarving decoration and motifs are looked at the aspect of its interaction to the house’s spatial. There is an evident that the art of woodcarving is applied in an attempt reflects the phenomenal aspect of reality in a way that might be able to grasp the inner meaning behind the piece of art itself. Each art as applied in an artistic woodcarving has representative significance and the symbols in art play an important role in the design of art. It also believed by having a proper understanding of the significance of these symbols we can have an insight into reality underlying them (Ahmad, Taib & Masri, 2012).

Nasir (1985) and Noor & Khoo (2003) respectively agreed that the configurations and composition found in the most works of Malay arts. These particularly in woodcarving tend to revolve around the dominant theme of man’s creation, animals and environment.

The studies objective is to answer of two research questions. First, does the decoration and motifs influences social interaction of spatial? Second, is it the choice of decoration and motifs applied on the wall of Malay traditional house are intentional or accidental?

Next to answer both of the two questions, the studies have been done with examining the living hall area at Istana Tengku Long. Findings have an interesting evidence on how the woodcarvings decoration and motifs influences the social interaction into the space. As a result, these can encourage in the direction of quality of life to the society and sustainability of Malay’s heritage and then identifies best-practices of choosing the proper wood carving design to the interior space.

2. Literature review

Refer on the issue, understanding the Malay woodcarving with its physical form, features, philosophy, symbolism and meaning in wood carving decoration and motifs is imperative. This understanding is critical as a basis to find the answer about the application of wood- carving decoration and motifs on a traditional Malay house’s wall either it is intentional purposes or accidental.

2.1. Malay woodcarving

According to Shaffee & Said (2013), has claims that the carving motifs and pattern for palace were usually taboo or prohibited in aristocrats otherwise typical people buildings. The carved panel has designed for kings encompassed the greatest design qualities which to symbolize values and status. Carvings owned by ordinary peoples, which were usually, less intricate, rather simple and merely carved just for decorations.

Woodcarving is an essential part of traditional Malay architecture of Peninsular Malaysia. It is among the well-known crafts done by Malays depicting their search for beauty and profound observation of the natural environment and their elements (Said, 2002).

Silah, Basaree, Isa and Redzuan (2012) has claimed that most of us tend to duplicate the motifs without understanding the beauty and meaning of the traditional woodcarving motifs. These might not be any more real woodcarving motifs in the future that contain the real aesthetical value of Malay traditional woodcarving style.
2.2. **Physical form and basic features of woodcarving**

Norhaiza (2005), the well-known woodcarver described that traditional Malay woodcarving is an art component, which is the strong definition of the character and visual form. As significant motifs discovered from Hindu-Buddhism with important symbolic meanings in their context. Then, the concept of a flower since early Malay life tradition in Malay’s ‘Bunga’ has been used to express the physical beauty of a Malay young girl. Zumahiran and Ismail (2010) accepted that ‘Bunga’ the most dominant motif depicted on various carving is that of floral motifs (Shafiee and Said, 2013). The physical form of Malay wood carvings are mostly shown they are characterized by the shape and pattern, composition of motif, pattern of ordering principles onto wooden panel (Noor & Khoo, 2003).

3. **Research methodology**

The methodology of this research is based on a qualitative research, where a significant number of requirement information was gathered as follow (1) understanding space planning and social interaction of Istana Besar Tengku Long. The main focus of research is living hall area. It used for formal activity. (2) an understanding carving (philosophy, meaning and motif). (3) personal measured drawing and reports of Istana Besar Tengku Long at Board of Negeri Terengganu Museum. (4) This research also engages of a literature review with related on issues through books, journals, newspaper and internet articles and (5) conduct the interview with local woodcarvers that carrying out main surveys.

3.1. **Data collection**

Pictographic data of carving decoration and motifs of living hall area were gained from Board of Kuala Terengganu Museum. The carvings analysis were from walls, above doors and windows and with wide-ranging design features. Most of the measured drawings of carving were displayed in black and white 2D images with proper line pattern using Microsoft Window widgets such as Illustrator CS and Adobe Photoshop CS for original drawing adjustment. The purpose of this tool is to utilize visual pattern analysis from pictographic data. These findings were later supported with interview session through open-ended questionnaires and visual templates which were documented in-voice record.

3.2. **Data analysis**

The pictographic data were tabulated and categorized into (1) explanations of visual analysis on proper line pattern of motif (2) visual description of the carving motif based on the interview data and literatures.

3.3. **Research limitations**

The main limitation of this study is to gather the primary data about the carving of Istana Tengku Long. It only could be found to the new generation of Tengku Long and a process for tracking the generation Tengku Long has taken a lengthy time. Second, an understanding of terminology in wood carving decoration between craftsmen and researcher is difficult to translate and very difficulty find a suitable word to describe in writing. Third, this building is not in good condition because some of it parts were decomposed with weather climate of hot and rain through the year. These were met a difficulty when attain a measured survey.
4. Findings

4.1. Patterns of traditional woodcarving

The patterns or decorations in traditional Malay woodcarving involved two main features such as decorative motif arrangement and composition. The patterns of wood-carving are incorporating with other factors related to customs, religion, beliefs, norms and values, beauty, harmony, and other relevant elements.

Malay woodcarving has three basic patterns namely, the ‘single pattern’, the ‘frame pattern’ and the ‘complete pattern’. The visual organization principles are used to construct the relationship among the visual elements of the form, the compositional elements, and the intended meaning (Nasir A.H, 1987) as discussed below:

4.1.1. Single pattern
- Motif
  Its motif is executed in a freestyle, stands on its own and flows discontinuously.
- Element
  The elements of a flower, young fruits, moon, star, sun or the elements of living creatures. The choices of flowers or fruits, plants and herbs that have medicinal value normally found in their neighbourhood also the jungle. Examples, the element of plant are mangosteen calyx, clove, anise and others. The cosmic often found in a single pattern are the moon, stars while living things elements are the hens, ducks, rhinoceros, and birds.

4.1.2. Screen pattern or frame pattern
- Motif
  The motifs used in this kind of pattern are more aesthetic in nature and carry certain meanings.
- Element
  It uses simple elements with the movement is less intertwine or interlaced and usually enclosed in a screen or frame. Examples, ducks back home in the evening, upstream storm and ruin of mangosteen.

4.1.3. Complete pattern or main pattern
- Motif
  It combines all the elements to form a complete configuration, which often inspired by nature.
- Element
  More emphasis on plant elements because of its soft nature part and easy arrangement. It incorporates all parts of the plants are arranged from the roots, stumps, branches, leaves, fruits, flower buds to flower. It is arranged in...
a series of curves, winding, knotting, coiling, interlacing, intertwining or arabesque. Examples, rice crust plant and taro plant breeding.

4.2. *The elements in traditional Malay woodcarving*

Nasir (1987) and Yatim (1989) was claimed that there are five types of woodcarving elements found in a Malay vernacular house namely:

- Elements Of Living Things
- Cosmic Elements
- Geometric Elements
- Calligraphic Elements
- Floral Elements

4.3. *Symbolism and motifs in Islamic Malay woodcarving*

Previous research identified that the Malay understanding of the decorative art in woodcarving through the application of a certain symbol to interpret their culture and the way of life.

4.3.1. *Application of "Meandering Clouds" style in Malay carving*

The uniqueness of traditional Malay carving can be identified throughout the style, patterns and motifs that composed a variety of type and variation. The style about traditional Malay carving can be divided into variety category. “Meandering clouds” of geometrical, calligraphy and mixed were believed origin from the craftsmen’s deeper observation to the universe. Wan Mustapha Wan Su (interviewed, 1999) has strongly claimed that “meandering clouds” is design motifs contain their own specific courteous to be drawn in various form such as following:

- Form of elements – leaves, stem, fruits, shoot, tendril, twigs, seeds, the roots, stumps, branches, flower buds to flower and others. These elements must compose in aesthetic meaning as well as soft and highly beauty defeating all elements in the real world.
- Composition of element – design related with beauty, gently and softness.
- Philosophy – follows the value of beliefs and understanding.

Malaysian Handicraft Development, 2009) has identified the symbolism of this design and motifs of meandering clouds as follows:

- Philosophy symbolism of Malay’s way of life or codes.
- The admonishment and learning.
- Portrays a sensation of emotion, beliefs, and thoughts.
- The manifestation of God.

4.3.2. *The significances type of motif selection*

The motif plays an important role to the carving composition panel comprising a strong attitude of the hermeneutic code of Malay civilization such as following:

4.3.2.1. *Motif derive from flower bud*

This flower bud is significance to:

- an immature stage, inexperience and virginity of a young woman.
- significance to immature livelihood that needed to obtain carefulness and assistance from mature, experience and established individual.
- symbolize of cleanliness and purity.
- medicinal sickness.

4.3.2.2. *Motif derive from blooming flower*

This blooming flower is significance to:
the maturity and experienced of a young woman.
react as symbolism of strong and endurable.
the hiding of a young woman possessing a protection from her parent.
react as a medicinal mixture after boiled of the plant roots for medication to nerve and privy part of the human body.
signify of cleanliness and purity.

4.3.2.3. Motif derive from the leaf
The leaf is significance:
• to signify of protection.
or spiritual healing that this kind of medicinal plant is useful for jaundice (yellow fever) for the early born child and high blood sickness.

4.3.2.4. Motif derive from the fruit
• The fruit motif is significance to mature humankind that can independent and capable to develop more and more generation.

4.3.2.5. Motif derive from the tendril or sprout
• The tendril or the sprout motif is a symbol of the humility of the universe to the God. It always exhibits a softness downward curving and intertwining of tendril as well as a marked for immature stage of young one.

4.3.2.6. Motif derive from the plant/tree
• It is symbolized of “source” representing the God is a mysterious entity.
• Significance for prosperity and fertility.

4.3.2.7. Motif derive from source of universe
• The motif depicts from universe deliberate to the cosmology source of sun, moon and star are significance on believing of God, the creator of the universe.

4.3.2.8. Motif derive from human creation
• The motif of Malay pot represents of status symbol
• The urn – is a symbolized of “source” or “seed” and create the attitude of “Jamal” (Beauty) and “Jalal” (Majesty).
• The “andam” (triangular form) motifs – is the significance of faith and beliefs as well as related with fertility of female (symbol of downward triangle).

5. Discussion

5.1. Activity at living hall
This area is deliberated a formal activity. The activities include administration work; entertain the visitor and rest room for the royal as well as purposeful for custom and ceremony. The royal activity always performed here such as wedding, birthday, anniversary, circumstances, ear piercing, installation of the King, award ceremony, finished reading of Quran and Royal and democracy conference and others.

5.2. Application of wood carving decoration and motifs
Refer to the research, the woodcarvings in the palace of Istana Besar Tengku Long are made out the woodcarving is the type of carved component that depicts several carving elements in a harmonious composition. It created in accordance with the regulated principles and meanings appeared in the perforated wall ventilation and perforated wall lighting panel found at Istana Besar Tengku Long.
The lover of this palace woodcarving come to expect certain arrangements and configurations of motifs and patterns in works of quality. The recurrent motif of seed, bursting forth with life and energy (often depicted in the form of flowering tendrils and/or roots). The ambiguous image of the flowers which reveals its beauty and grace before us while concealing its true hidden nature. Meanwhile, the reversed image of flowing vines in ‘meandering clouds” decoration pattern, that is often reflected upon itself, forming a twin couples that symbolizes both the beauty (Jamal) and the majesty (Jalal) of the divine that very popular theme in Malay art.

5.3. Social interaction definition

The definition social interaction according to Wikipedia Encyclopaedia is a dynamic, changing sequence of social actions between individuals (or groups) who modify their actions and reactions according to those of their interaction partner(s). Several scholarly references to get the appropriate definition in the scope of the relevant issue. There is a related means that the carved decoration to the space is according to a certain law, beliefs and rule that relate to the social of Malay way of life.

5.4. Decoration and motifs influence spatial social interaction

Several factors are determined the selection of carving decoration and motif to the traditional Malay palace of Istana Besar Tengku Long focus on living hall area which includes:

- related to spatial organization social interaction meaning that it linked to the function and interaction between the space. For example; the motif, pattern and the composition of carving relate to the area are reflected to portray the nature of the society in appearance, thinking, pleasant, happiness, independent, good in religious. The most important all of these is related to the Creator of the universe.
- the carving connected to the activity of space; For example, there is the space behind living hall represents a dining hall to the inhabitants. There is non-direct piercing carving motifs at eye-level of wall panel that separated between living hall and dining hall except on top of the door on the same wall. The purpose of this situation is to avoid the stranger looking direct to the inhabitants as well to protect themselves from the evil spirit by using a combination “Al Kafi” verses and “bitter leaves”.
- the intelligence of the woodcarvers allowed the ruler will present the symbolic meaning of carving to establish a social interaction between the society of the internal and external of space.

5.5. Motifs application

The motifs application at the area is widely used a motif of flower, buds and leaf with a composition as following:

- “meandering clouds”, geometrical, calligraphy and mixed/comination.
- Form of elements – leaves, stem, shoot, tendril, twigs, stumps, branches, fruits, flower buds to flower and others. These elements must compose in aesthetic meaning as well as soft and highly beauty defeating all elements in a real world.
- Composition of element – design related with beauty, gently and softness such as:
- Carving frame – defined a boundary in the direction to describes the law and an assistance to man way of life.
- Main stem motif – portrays the principle of freedom on moving except forbidden progress outside from the boundary that specified in the religion and culture.
- Motif – the arrangement of flower symbolized the characteristic of the needs of perfect ability and knowledge or composed orderly characteristic such mixed with the society, self-discipline, soft spoken, attractive appearance and others.
- Style (Sifat) – The embellishment of ideal motif style depicts the aesthetic or beauty as well as portrays the experiences profound to the carver.
- As a previous analysis, the carving at living hall area always represented with the “source” which can interpreting a hidden meaning behind the composition such as:
- Identifying Source
• Unidentified Source
• Secret or The Hidden Source
• On the top of the main door on the same wall placed a direct piercing woodcarving using a combination of plant motif (bitter leave) and “Al Kafi” verses (from Al Quran-Juz 15). According to that verse, Allah reminds the Muslim or His followers as following:
• Faith to Allah;
• The important to pursue knowledge;
• The important the character of politeness and respectful between apprentice or the learner to the governess;
• Allah reminds every ruler to govern for achieving the happiness and prosperously of life, rules the humanity and country.

Table 1. Decoration and motifs of carving application that identified at ‘surung’ wall area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO.</th>
<th>DECORATION AND MOTIF</th>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i.</td>
<td></td>
<td>AD1</td>
<td>• above main entrance door</td>
<td>The calligraphy motif of “Al Kafi” from Quran verses combines with “bitter leaves” believe to protect the house inhabitants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• above main entrance door</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• above window</td>
<td>Carving frame) with “bunga dala” defined as a boundary in the direction of describes the law and an assistance to man way of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AD2</td>
<td>• above interior door • above window</td>
<td>A view of upper part of a gateway shown unidentified source with semicircle base composed a complete pattern of plant buds motif symbolize unidentified the Creator of universe and origin of cosmos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• above interior door • above window</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii.</td>
<td></td>
<td>AD/AW</td>
<td>• above window</td>
<td>The combination of “bunga dala” and geometric motif represented “punca rahsia” (secret source).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• window railing</td>
<td>The form of elements of “bunga dala” contain leaves, stem, shoot, tendril, twigs and the branches design related with beauty, gently and softness These elements must compose in aesthetic meaning as well as soft and highly beauty defeating all elements in real world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>WR1</td>
<td>• window railing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>WR2</td>
<td>• window railing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
vi. **DL**

- Window Door
- Leaves

The form of elements of “bunga dala” with “punca rahsia” related with beauty, gently and softness meaning as well as soft and highly beauty defeating all elements in real world.

vii. **WP**

- Wall Panel

The fenestration of direct piercing technique carving at “surung” wall panel using “sulur kacang” motif react as a penetration medium natural ventilation and natural lighting.

Source: Ahmad, (2008)

Fig.2.(a) The illustration shown spatial organization in accordance to the zoning categories in the Terengganu traditional Malay house – Istana Besar Tengku Long. Fig.2.(b) The illustration shown type of decoration and motifs application into ‘surung’ area – Istana Besar Tengku Long. Source: Ahmad, (2008)
6. Analysis

6.1. Determined woodcarving influences the spatial social interaction and intentional purposes

An understanding of carving symbolism, meaning, philosophy and motif practices in Malay’s woodcarving at living hall has determined there is a social interaction to spatial planning. The research findings that understanding of symbolism, meaning, philosophy and motifs practices in Malay’s wood carving, is given a spatial social interaction in-term of selecting carving decoration to the area through:

- The application of a combination of natural plants and Al-Quran verses such as “Al Kafi” and “Na sr” verses in woodcarvings portrayed a social interaction between a man faith to Allah. These shown that a man needed an assistance from Allah even as possess a difficulty of life.

- The exploit of the natural motif of plant character having a symbolism of a social interaction to the society about teaching a way of proper life in the human being according to their beliefs, knowledge, and culture. It can be seen through the motifs of bowed end leaf that significant of Malay people is has started everyday life with the aim, planning, assiduous of faith and finally designated obedient to Allah S.W.T.

- The composition and the arrangement wood carving decoration contain a social interaction of teaching a good direction on life of doing things. It’s demonstrated by plant motif of composition with overlapping arrangements is always patterned the motif “without any barrier”. This arrangement of motifs in Malay woodcarving always composed with the entity or motif of overlapping, growth continuously with no obstacle and obstruction by the overlapping entity. These were a significance that in the civilization survival whenever someone has given the power, he must use the power without suppression and obstruction to other people.

- The selection of motif in traditional Malay wood carving has an element of social interaction are conveying to area and activity of the space. Most activities at ‘living hall’ area is more related to the ceremonial activities which involved many ranks of people. The craftsman selection of carving motifs is more relating to communication on meeting people. The carvers select the mature situation such a blooming, healthiness, well growth of plants include symbolized with describing of the attitude of the Malay is humiliate, pleasant and compromise identity. The life journey in the civilization required the harmonize, assisting to each other, helping and full of support between them as it describes the members of civilization always need between each other without assess the status. Besides that, in the way of doing everyday activities, every human must always to remember that they have created by God (Allah) and have a responsible to Him.

7. Conclusion

Finally, findings have identified that the choice of carving motifs employed in living hall decoration and adornment is intentional and were never accidental. The woodcarvers were also playing their appointed roles in the complex network of social relations and the value system of the Malays. This research can benefit as a best-practices for architects and designers to choose an accurate motifs and decoration to apply to the appropriate space.

8. Recommendation

Based on current findings, it is an advantage to trace Malay’s civilization that is capable of documented and make reference for future generation. The application of woodcarving has lost much of its prominence in modern architectural buildings (Mohamad Tajuddin, 2006; Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008). This study also giving the direction for designers and craftsmen to introduce a new materials to replace woodcarving in case wood is not available in the market for sustainable Malay’s decoration and motif.

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