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Unveiling the Intricate Tapestry: Malay (Melayu) Wood Carving Patterns of Southern Thailand as Reflections of Muslim Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

The art of Malay wood carving is considered an exquisite craftsmanship and is considered a cultural heritage that represents the uniqueness of Muslims in southern Thailand. These meticulously crafted carvings are used to decorate various spaces, in architecture, religious buildings, furniture, and other decorations. This work of art is considered to be a profound expression of Islamic ideas, beliefs and values in the region. Expert craftsmen have passed this woodcarving craft form down from generation to generation. Each piece is decorated with symbolic meaning and cultural significance as well as responding to everyday use. This research aims to study the design of patterns found in these wood carvings, and interpret the meaning of beauty and symbolism. The corner focuses on understanding aesthetics and artwork that is connected to and understands the value of the cultural identity and beliefs of Muslim communities in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces. It can be said that Malay wood carving is influenced by Islam. The culture of the people in the area to create products that are consistent with their traditions, way of life and reflect the abundance of local resources. Malay carvings in southern Thailand feature distinctive elements inspired by nature, such as geometric shapes. Vegetation pattern and Arabic calligraphy from the Quran and various animal patterns. The design is according to Islamic principles. The design has elements based on religious beliefs. Use words that convey humility. The composition of the pattern consists of the main motifs from which it is often inspired. Or imitate local plants with stems, flowers, leaves, and additional intricate patterns. The arrangement follows the principles of symmetry, repetition, focus and harmony. Malay wood carvings are a long-standing artistic heritage of the region, and reflects the harmonious coexistence of faith, culture and artistic expression.

Keywords: Cultural symbolism, Islamic art, Malay motif, Malay wood carving, Southern Thailand.

The art of wood carving has been a valuable tradition among various cultures for a long time serving as a channel for artistic expression, storytelling, and preservation of cultural heritage (Vallibhotama 2017). In the southern region of Thailand, the Malay Muslim community has developed rich and intricate wood carving patterns that reflect their distinct cultural identity and

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beliefs. These exquisite carvings adorn architectural elements, furniture, and decorative objects, incorporating refined designs and patterns with symbolic meanings deeply rooted in the region's Islamic traditions (Farish A. Noor 2012). Delving into the origins of the patterns, it can be said that Malay (Melayu) patterns, although stemming from the same cultural roots, have interesting differences due to geographical, ethnic, and influences from other cultures. Malay patterns are heavily influenced by Islamic art, as the majority of Malays are adherents of Islam. Islamic art is characterized by the use of geometric and vegetal patterns, avoiding depictions of living beings to respect the teachings of the religion (Seyyed Hossein Nasr 1987). As a result, Malay patterns emphasize the use of geometric shapes, curved lines, and floral motifs, reflecting beauty and faith in religion

Malay wood carving patterns in southern Thailand It is a handicraft that is outstanding, unique and has cultural value. Pitipat (2012) stated that Malay wood carving patterns in southern Thailand are a testament to the skill and artistic ingenuity of local craftsmen. Each sculpture is a carefully crafted narrative. It reveals an intricate tapestry of cultural symbols and artistic expressions. These patterns not only adorn the physical structure. But it is also a visual representation of the region's rich cultural heritage. which reflects the values, beliefs and worldviews of the Muslim community (ICOMOS Thailand 2019)

From the importance above Malay wood carving craftsmanship is highly regarded for its cultural significance. Malay wood carving patterns from the similarities, it is widely understood that Malay pattern and Malay pattern It's the same thing. That was the starting point for a survey to know the true identity or characteristics of Malay patterns in southern Thailand (Wibisono 2009; Hayeesamae 2007). It is stated that Malay patterns, although much studied, are still Further exploration and documentation of the symbolic meanings embedded within these complex designs is needed. By examining the intricate designs and patterns that appear in these carvings. Researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic representation of Muslim cultural identity and beliefs.

In the way of life and culture of the Malay people, now called Muslims, in southern Thailand. It often appears that wood carving permeates every aspect of life. It is a handicraft that has been passed down and developed continuously. Ismail (2016) states that these wood carvings are not just static inventions. But it is also found and used in the daily life of Muslim communities in southern Thailand. They decorate various aspects. of daily life from architectural elements to functional objects. It serves as a constant reminder of the region's cultural heritage. Exploring these everyday encounters and uses can provide valuable insights into the role these carvings play in preserving and passing on cultural traditions from generation to generation. Nowadays, in the midst of rapid changes in modernity and globalization. There is increasing concern to preserve and protect these traditional wood carving practices. According to Hosney (2020), conservation efforts are being undertaken to preserve these intricate forms. This is important to ensure that these patterns are sustained. Because this rich cultural heritage has been passed down to future generations.

As a researcher and interested in art and design, I took the initiative to study Malay patterns appearing on woodcarving handicrafts in southern Thailand. This research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by unveiling the intricate tapestry of Malay wood carving patterns in southern Thailand and their role as reflections of Muslim cultural identity. Through a comprehensive analysis of the designs, motifs, and symbolic representations, as well as an investigation of their encounters and everyday uses, this study seeks to unravel the cultural narratives woven into these carvings. Additionally, it will explore the conservation efforts aimed at safeguarding these traditions, shedding light on the rich tapestry of Islamic traditions and beliefs that have shaped the artistic expressions of the region's Muslim communities.

The Art of Wood Carving with Malay (Melayu) Patterns in Southern Thailand

The art of wood carving with Malay patterns in the southern part of Thailand is an important cultural heritage that showcases the intricate craftsmanship and artistic traditions of the area. This art form is significantly influenced by Malay culture, with Malay wood carving being

particularly prominent in Thailand's southern provinces such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (Phirumruen, 2018). These areas are well-known for their diverse local textile production, with the majority of the population being Muslim. Their cultural traditions, including art and architecture, are influenced by Islamic art, which has been influenced by Malaysia and Indonesia. The patterns often include geometric shapes, flora, and Arabic letters. Research has found that the preferred woods for carving include teak, rubberwood, cedar, and rosewood, due to their hardness and ease of carving locally. The resulting products, such as furniture, picture frames, souvenirs, and home decorations, are popular among tourists and art enthusiasts. The art form is passed down from generation to generation, with skilled craftsmen meticulously creating each piece, imbued with symbolic meanings and cultural significance.

Carving art of the Malay people of southern Thailand There is a mix of cultural landscapes in two areas: the seaside area, namely Narathiwat, Pattani, and Sai Buri, will have more carvings. And has intricate, intricately carved patterns. In the past, most artisans came from the Malay or Java state. As for the inner land area Surrounded by mountains, there are the cities of Rangae, Raman, and Yala. There is no emphasis on intricate carvings patterns. It is simple but strong. Emphasizing the use of local materials and craftsmen. (Jiravatkulkul 2020). The Malay wood carving patterns of southern Thailand are a testament to the skillful craftsmanship and artistic ingenuity of the local artisans. Each carving is a meticulously crafted narrative, unveiling the intricate tapestry of cultural symbolism and artistic expression (Ismail et al. 2019). These patterns not only embellish physical structures but also serve as visual representations of the region's rich cultural heritage, reflecting the values, beliefs, and worldviews of the Muslim communities (Zakaria et al. 2016).

From studying and collecting data, it has been found that Malay patterns have been influenced by Islam and the art of the region. Eshma & Chaisart (2015) stated that Malay patterns are an expression of art that reflects the identity and lifestyle of the Malay Muslim community in the southern part of Thailand. These patterns are rooted in ancient Malay culture, blended with the influence of Islamic traditions, created with inspiration from nature and the surrounding environment. The distinctive characteristics of Malay patterns include intricate geometric designs, natural motifs such as foliage and flowers, and sometimes incorporate Arabic calligraphy, all of which symbolize the cultural and religious beliefs of the Malay Muslim community. The distinctive features of Malay patterns include:

1. Geometric Patterns: Patterns composed of geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, and squares, representing the concepts of balance and the perfection of nature.

Figure 1: Geometric Patterned Wooden Mold for Casting Concrete



2. Floral Patterns: Designs resembling flowers, leaves, and stems, showcasing an appreciation for the beauty of nature and its abundance.

Figure 2: Wooden Vents Carved with Floral Patterns



3. Quranic Calligraphy: The incorporation of Arabic calligraphy from the Quran into the patterns, demonstrating respect and devotion to the Islamic faith.

Figure 3: The Wood is Carved with Quranic Calligraphy Patterns



4. Animal Motifs: Although the depiction of living beings is discouraged in Islamic art, Malay patterns often feature stylized representations of animals, such as the mythical Bird, mythical naga serpent.

Figure 4: Wood Carvings of Mythical Bird for Use in Rituals



Malay patterns adorn architecture, everyday utensils, clothing, and various handicrafts, highlighting the integration of art and the way of life of the Malay-Muslim community. These

patterns are not merely decorative elements but also reflect the beliefs, philosophies, and cultural identity of the community.

Malay woodcarving is a craft that distinctly represents the identity of people in the southern border region. Woodcarvers create intricate carved patterns and incorporate them into the everyday objects and utensils of the local Malay community:

1. **Architecture:** Carved wood is used to decorate Muslim houses and buildings. It can be found in traditional homes, adorning gable ends, bargeboard, ventilation panels, door leaves, and ceiling patterns, among others.
2. **Food:** Carved wood patterns are used as molds for sweet desserts called "Khomko" or "Tuapungputu," consumed during ceremonies and as everyday treats, often accompanied by tea. Carved wooden coconut graters are also common.
3. **Entertainment and Games:** Carved wood decorates bird cages for bulbuls and parrots. Musical instruments are also adorned with carvings. Additionally, carved wooden boards are used for the mancala game.
4. **Rituals and Religion:** Carved wood depicting the Panka bird is used for dagger handles, while naga serpent patterns adorn boat prows. Islamic calligraphic carvings grace religious buildings, and carved wood lecterns hold the Quran.
5. **Textiles:** Carved wooden blocks are used for printing intricate patterns on fabrics.

The incorporation of Malay woodcarving into these diverse aspects of life highlights its significance as a representation of the local Malay-Muslim identity and cultural heritage in southern Thailand. The skilled artisans imbue symbolic meanings into the intricate patterns they carve.

Unraveling the Beauty of Malay Patterns in Wood Carvings

Islamic art is a rich artistic tradition that emerged under the influence of Islamic beliefs and principles. It can be categorized into two main types: 1. **Religious Islamic Art:** Created to glorify and commemorate the teachings of God. These works aim to evoke a sense of reverence and devotion. 2. **Islamic Art for Daily Life:** Crafted to adorn everyday objects and utensils, reflecting the integration of Islamic values into various aspects of life. Islamic art is created within the framework of Islamic beliefs, culture, and traditions, while adhering to certain guidelines set forth by the religion. One notable restriction is the avoidance of depicting human and animal forms, as it could potentially lead to idolatry. This has given rise to a unique artistic language that emphasizes abstract patterns, calligraphy, and geometric designs. The use of floral motifs derived from local flora is also a prominent feature, imbuing the art with a connection to nature. The beauty in Islamic art is deeply rooted in its connection to God and the philosophical concepts of the faith. The artistic principles of Islamic art stem from the belief in the oneness of God (Tawhid) and the pursuit of spiritual perfection. According to Institute of Islamic Art (Thailand) (n.d.) and Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (n.d.) the fundamental principles guiding Islamic art include:

1. **Unity of God (Tauhid):** The belief in the absolute oneness of God, recognizing God as the sole creator and sustainer of the universe, free from any imperfections.
2. **Beauty:** Aesthetic beauty that aligns with religious teachings and cultural traditions, without contradicting Islamic principles.
3. **Avoidance of Prohibited Elements:** Refraining from depicting human or animal forms, as mandated by religious scriptures and teachings, to prevent the risk of idolatry.
4. **Good Intentions:** Engaging in artistic endeavors with pure and noble intentions, as guided by Islamic teachings.
5. **Responsibility:** Artists and interpreters must take responsibility for their creations and interpretations, acknowledging that they will be held accountable by God.

As Islamic art spread across various regions, it assimilated local cultural influences, resulting in a diverse array of artistic expressions while retaining its core Islamic principles and aesthetics. (Wijdan Ali 2022).

The "Malay Patterns" found in the southern border provinces of Thailand exemplify this cultural fusion. These intricate designs, passed down through generations, are deeply rooted in the local Malay-Muslim community's traditions, beliefs, and philosophies (Piromruen 2018). Initially influenced by Hindu and Buddhist cultures, the patterns evolved to conform to Islamic guidelines, avoiding depictions of living beings and embracing abstract and geometric motifs. The beauty of Islamic art lies in its ability to transcend mere aesthetics and convey profound spiritual and philosophical meanings. It serves as a visual representation of the harmonious coexistence of faith, culture, and artistic expression, reflecting the rich diversity of the Islamic world.

Deciphering the Artistic Code of Malay Patterns: Exploring Design Principles and Visual Splendor

The design of Malay patterns is not just about creating beautiful, delicate, and flowing patterns, but it must also be done with an understanding of the principles and beliefs of Islam, so as not to deviate from traditional customs and culture. If we compare Malay patterns to a way of life and traditions, they are teachings prescribed by religion, derived from faith and belief in the principles of Islam. Thus, these patterns have characteristics that do not conflict with religious teachings, specifically the Islamic prohibition on portraying God or animate beings. In other words, there is no expression related to emotions, singing and dancing, drawing, or sculpting human or animal forms, as this would involve imitating the Creator, which is considered shirk or blasphemous idolatry (Blair & Bloom 2003). This is why we do not see Islamic art depicting human stories or figures, whether men, women, children, or the elderly. Even animals are depicted in a modified, simplified form without realistic details. Most expressions in Islamic art are therefore in the form of stories or representations derived from nature, especially local flora, geometric patterns, and calligraphic scripts. The components of the images are all stylized decorative forms that do not resemble nature in a literal sense, or what is called abstract or non-figurative art.

Thought Process and Starting Point

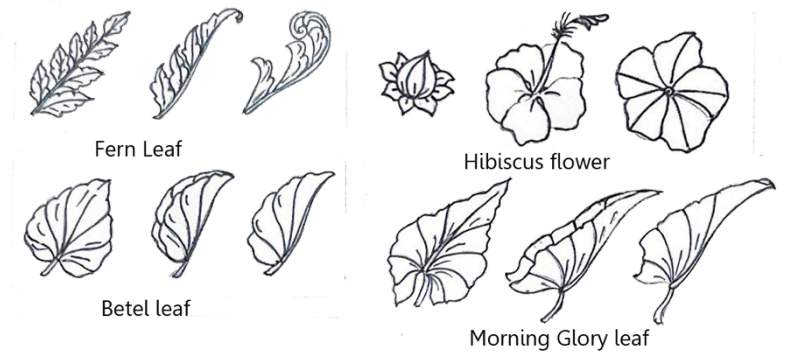
Design often begins with a geometric framework that serves as the basic structure. This geometric base is then combined and altered with plant patterns or stylish calligraphy. To create a softer, more delicate and flowing pattern, and to be consistent with the concepts and practices of Islam. The pattern is therefore humble, rounded, curved lines, c lines, and s lines are therefore very popularly used. In addition to circles and semi-circles, they are also very commonly seen in the pattern.

Figure 5: Round, Curved Lines, C Lines, and S Lines



The plant motifs are derived from local flora, reflecting the connection between human life and reliance on nature. Different regions have different native plants, so the plant motifs vary based on the location and plants familiar to the artist. Distinctive features of local plants are adapted into vine-like patterns, highlighting their unique characteristics. Sometimes just certain details of the plants are extracted. However, the designs must conform to Islamic guidelines - pointed tips or sharp edges of leaves or petals must be rounded, and tips must curve downwards rather than up in a flame-like shape.

Figure 6: Sketch of Local Plants.



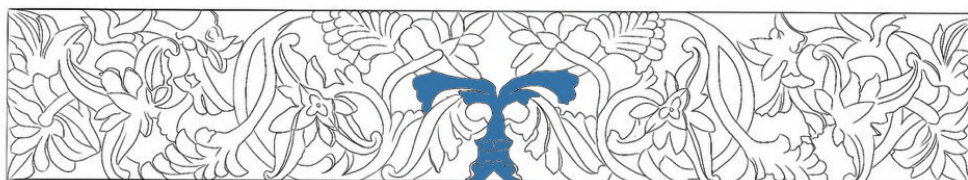
Characteristics and Structure of the Pattern

The space in which the pattern is filled determines the appearance of the pattern. Whether it is a square, triangle, circle, which will be related to the area where the pattern will be decorated. The pattern is a plant pattern. The pattern is based on plants or vines in nature. The structure of Malay patterns consists of the following main components:

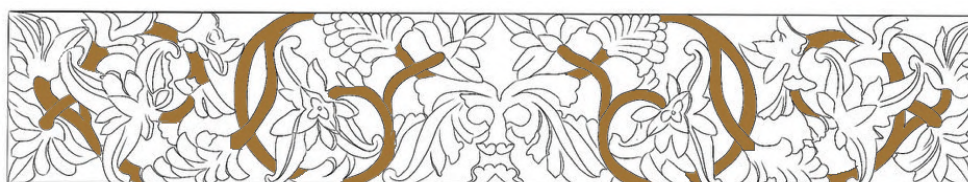
1. Main Motif -This is the central element of the pattern, which may be a floral motif or a plant motif that is iconic of that particular local region.
2. Stem Motif -This is a vine-like curving pattern that intertwines to form the underlying structure supporting the main motif.
3. Floral Motif -These are patterns of flowers or petals that are incorporated into the main motif or stem motif.
4. Leaf Motif -These are patterns of leaves that are combined with the floral and stem motifs.
5. Supplementary Motifs -Additional motifs such as geometric patterns, vegetal patterns, or stylized calligraphic scripts may be added to enhance the beauty.

By skillfully combining the main motif, supporting stem motifs, floral elements, leaves, and supplementary decorative elements while adhering to religious guidelines, the Malay craftspeople create intricate yet fluid patterns embodying their artistic heritage.

Figure 7: Pattern Structure of Malay Carved Woodwork



Main Motif



Stem Motif



Floral Motif



Leaf Motif



Supplementary Motif

There are 2 types of pattern creation: 1. Patterns that consist of curves that branch out from the center in a symmetrical pattern, called " Patterns formed from a balanced center point " and; 2. Patterns that are created by Send a pattern from one corner It's an asymmetrical pattern, called " Pattern formed from asymmetrical angles ", but most patterns found from the central axis are more balanced. The pattern is usually enclosed in a frame or space for the pattern. which are geometric shapes such as circles, squares, curves, triangles, etc., for use in decorating various parts of architecture or empty space in handicrafts.

Figure 8: Characteristics of Pattern Formation



Patterns formed from a balanced center point



Pattern formed from asymmetrical angles

Arrangement of Pattern Elements

Most of the Malay patterns are found within a closed shape or enclosed pattern, contained within a geometric frame. However, a small number of pattern designs are presented in open shapes or open patterns. The composition of these patterns follows the principle of symmetry in their arrangement. The layout of the patterns can be categorized into three types:

1. Repetition in a row: Patterns are repeated continuously in a linear row. The patterns may be rhythmically alternated to create visual interest and variation.
2. Creating a Central Focal Point: Patterns are used to define and accentuate the center of the design, serving as a focal point and a prominent feature within the overall pattern.
3. Creating Unity: Patterns are planned and arranged in a harmonious and cohesive manner. The details within the pattern are interconnected and related to one another, contributing to a unified design.

Figure 9: Characteristics of the Composition of the Pattern



Repetition in a Row



Central Focal Point



Unity

This structured arrangement of pattern elements, whether within closed geometric frames or through strategic repetition, central emphasis, or unified composition, plays a crucial role in the overall aesthetic appeal and visual impact of Malay patterns.

To conclude, the art of wood carving with Malay patterns has a deep-rooted tradition in southern Thailand, where it is an integral part of the cultural heritage of the region's Muslim communities. These intricate carvings adorn architectural elements, furniture, and decorative objects, serving as visual representations of the region's Islamic traditions and beliefs. The Malay wood carving patterns are particularly prominent in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, where skilled artisans meticulously craft each piece, imbuing it with symbolic meanings and cultural significance (Piromrueen 2018; Pitiphat 2012).

Malay patterns are an artistic expression that reflects the identity and way of life of the Malay-Muslim community in southern Thailand. These patterns blend ancient Malay cultural influences with Islamic traditions, drawing inspiration from nature and the surrounding environment. The distinctive features include geometric patterns, floral patterns, Quranic calligraphy, and stylized representations of animals.

The design of Malay patterns adheres to the principles and beliefs of Islam, avoiding depictions of human or realistic animal forms. Instead, they feature stylized representations derived from nature, geometric patterns, and calligraphic scripts (Institute of Islamic Art (Thailand). n.d.; Ismail 2016). The structure consists of a main motif, stem motif, floral motifs, leaf motifs, and supplementary motifs, skillfully combined while following religious guidelines. The composition follows the principle of symmetry, with patterns repeated, used to create a focal point, or arranged harmoniously for unity.

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