

# SIGNIFICANCE OF WOODCARVINGS IN MANIFESTING CULTURAL IDENTITY OF TRADITIONAL MALAY ARCHITECTURE IN KUALA PILAH

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## ABSTRACT

*Malay woodcarving plays a prominent and integral role in Malay traditional art, culture, and architectural heritage. Its unique diversity of motifs is observed across Malaysia's various states. However, a research gap exists in examining woodcarving motifs in traditional Malay houses, particularly in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. This study aims to identify and categorise the motifs within selected traditional houses in Kuala Pilah, a district renowned for its historical preservation of carving traditions and traditional Malay architecture. To achieve this study's objectives, 10 traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah were selected for a preliminary survey based on the presence of woodcarving motifs. Subsequently, an in-depth investigation was conducted on four houses, involving motif identification, analysis, and categorisation. Photographic documentation recorded the locations of the motifs, facilitating comprehensive visual analysis. Expert interviews with experienced woodcarving practitioners were conducted to verify and validate the findings. The results reveal distinct categorisations, including fauna, still-life representations, geometric patterns, cosmic themes, floral designs, and combinations within the selected traditional houses, highlighting the Malay people's cultural identity in Kuala Pilah. This study underscores the local significance and distinctive patterns of woodcarving motifs in these houses, aiming to explore their cultural*

values within the Malay community in Kuala Pilah. The findings also reveal an integration of Islamic artistic principles with local cultural motifs, emphasising a unique blend that contributes to the distinct identity of Malay architectural heritage in Kuala Pilah.

**Keywords:** Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, traditional Malay houses, woodcarving, motifs

## INTRODUCTION

For many years, Malaysia has been enriched with rich cultural diversity, including a wealth of unique traditional heritages. Malay woodcarving and vernacular architecture that stand out as revered legacies passed down through generations. Among the earliest and most meticulously crafted art forms, traditional Malay woodcarving reflects a fusion of skill and cultural essence, embodying significant symbolism in Malay art. Recognised anthropologically as a form of visual communication, woodcarving narrates historical experiences through intricate patterns. In Negeri Sembilan, located on the western coast of the Malay Peninsula, woodcarving is a pivotal aspect of the region's cultural heritage. Influenced by local traditions, customs, and Islamic culture, the distinctive curved rooftops and wooden carvings of Negeri Sembilan's vernacular architecture epitomise its unique identity.

Previous scholars have acknowledged that this conventional mode of artistic expression originated with the rise of the Langkasuka Empire, resulting in significant cultural advancements for the Malays (Rashidi et al. 2021; Yusof et al. 2021). The growth of Malay civilisation was further influenced by Hinduism, which impacted several facets of Malay culture, including literature, religion, and beliefs. The influence of Hinduism had a lasting effect on the development of the Malay kingdom (Rashidi et al. 2022). The ideologies of animism and deities significantly impact the fields of cultural anthropology, the arts, and humanities. As a result, many woodcarvings were primarily designed to include representations of humans and animals. During the early pagan and Hindu-Buddhist period in the Malay Archipelago, several ancient motifs such as *kala* (time or death), *makara* (sea monster), *stupa* (mound), *garuda* (mythical bird), *gunungan* (mountain), and *naga* (dragon) were prevalent, as documented by multiple studies (Noor and Khoo 2003; Said 2008; Choo et al. 2021; Yusof et al. 2021). These ancient motifs and symbols were incorporated into assorted items, including gateway arches, boat embellishments, roofs, smaller objects like cake moulds, and keris

hilts. The practice of wood carving in Hinduism predated the Islamic era. However, during the fourteenth century Islamic period, Malay wood carving reached its highest technological development and extended use. Refined woodcarving techniques evolved over time for both practical and ornamental purposes, with skilled artisans from the region playing a pivotal role in preserving and promoting these cultural traditions (Mohamad Rasdi 2012). The influence of patrons has been credited with the development of Malay woodcarving. Under the influence of Islamic ideologies, the Malay people and those from the Malayan Archipelago rapidly transitioned their motifs from animistic and figurative representations to depictions of plants, Arabic script, and geometric patterns.

Historical records indicate that Islam spread to various regions through the endeavours of traders from Arab, Persian, and Indian backgrounds (Nasir 2016). According to Said's (2008) research, Malay woodcarving experienced significant growth in vernacular architecture, particularly in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia and Southern Thailand, during the fourteenth century. This advancement can be attributed to the flourishing commercial activities of that era. In Nik Abdul Rahman (1998), as cited in Said (2008), it was observed that woodcarving originated from two distinct locations: the southern peninsula of the Srivijaya empire and the Langkasuka kingdom in the north. This research underscored the historical importance of these regions in shaping the woodcarving tradition. Furthermore, Said (2008) proposed that the history of vernacular architecture and woodcarving in Peninsular Malaysia encompassed a geographical and historical span extending from the Pattani province in southern Thailand to the southern part of the Johor region. Consequently, woodcarvings vary across different states due to each woodcarver's interpretation of form, nature, beauty, and cultural influences. Therefore, these carvings are meticulously crafted following the principles of Malay woodcarving and aesthetics, which emerged with the introduction of Islam to the Malayan region.

The advent of Islam to the ancient Malay peninsula brought about a notable and acknowledged transformation in the philosophical development of Malay woodcarving motifs, as noted by researchers (Azmin et al. 2021). When examined from a philosophical perspective, these woodcarvings exhibit a profound depth infused with significant motifs. The designs originate from the creativity and perception of skilled artisans and craftsmen, carefully blending with the natural components of their surroundings. The topics presented in this context symbolise a vast cultural legacy, emphasising the impact of the interaction between creativity and the surroundings.

These patterns reflect the craftsman's skill in imbuing wood with deep meaning, deriving inspiration from the interdependence of nature and artistic sense.

The traditional Malay motifs are created with great diligence by employing stylisation, denaturalisation, and abstraction techniques. These motifs are cleverly generated from various pre-existing materials such as plants, geometric patterns, calligraphy, and cosmic events. The carvers' ability to simplify complicated patterns into stylised depictions demonstrates their aptitude to move beyond mere imitation and delve into the world of artistic interpretation and cultural expression. The complex variety of traditional Malay ornamentations and designs is imbued with moral and ethical principles that reflected the broader perspective of the Malays (Azmin et al. 2021). The process of creativity, which is strongly influenced by cultural beliefs, not only produces beautiful decorations but also nurtures a reflective relationship with the concept of monotheism (*tawhid*). *Tawhid*, a fundamental principle of the Islamic faith, refers to recognising the indivisible unity of Allah SWT. This doctrine is firmly embedded in the traditions of Malay woodcarving.

*Tawhid*'s rules strictly forbid the inclusion of figurative or animalistic depictions in woodcarvings. Nevertheless, this constraint has stimulated innovative reinterpretation. Woodcarvers progressively integrated elements of Islamic art into their craft, transforming the carvings into a means of devotion and worship that included the principles of regulated patterns and symmetrical proportion, which are kept within limits (Sabri et al. 2021). By doing so, the artists show reverence to the Divine, demonstrating their gratitude for the careful craftsmanship with which the Universe has been created. The role of the woodcarver is particularly relevant to the artistic and spiritual undertaking. The woodcarver's craftsmanship is a means of abstraction, surpassing mere manipulation of materials. It expresses the majestic embodiment of Islamic principles and the intrinsic beauty of creation. Essentially, the woodcarvings serve as a visual ode, commemorating the seamless fusion of artistic representation, Malay cultural legacy and individuality, and religious dedication.

The traditional Malay house is distinguished by its raised structural timber construction, supported by stilts, and featuring bamboo or wooden walls within a post and lintel framework (Ahmad S et al. 2022). These houses are typically situated in spacious compounds, demonstrating the Malays' innovative approach to architecture and harmonising with their environmental, socio-economic, and cultural requirements. The construction techniques of traditional Malay houses are intentionally designed to provide

flexibility and adaptability (Ahmad S et al. 2022), allowing for future expansions, modifications or allocations if needed. What sets these traditional houses apart is their exclusive use of resilient and durable wood types such as *merbau* (*Intsia bijuga*), *cengal* (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*), *bacang hutan* (*Mangifera foetida*), and *kempas* (*Koompassia malaccensis*), which are native to Malaysia and locally sourced (Nasir 2016).

The preserved traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan today showcase distinct influences from Minangkabau culture, thereby, emphasising traditional architecture's cultural richness in the Malay Archipelago (Hashim et al. 2017). Similar statements were made in Wahab and Bahauddin's (2019) study, which noted that traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, as shown in Figure 1, are an advanced form of Minangkabau ethnic houses from Sumatra. The architectural designs of Negeri Sembilan traditional houses were developed due to the *merantau* (wandering) process. The *merantau* process refers to a cultural migratory movement practiced by the Minangkabau people (Wahab and Bahauddin 2019).

Negeri Sembilan's traditional Malay houses are distinguished by their elongated roofs, featuring a slight curvature on both sides, marked as their regional identity (Daud et al. 2021). Research conducted by Azman et al. (2022), referencing Masri's (2012) work, explored the complex amalgamation of two cultures, specifically the Biduanda (Jakun) people and the Minangkabau in establishing the authenticity of traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan. Hamka (2021) traced the origins of the Minangkabau group to West Sumatra, noting their arrival in Negeri Sembilan in the early fourteenth century. In contrast, Gullick (2003) claimed that the Biduanda clan were the original inhabitants of Negeri Sembilan.

The traditional houses in Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan share a similarity in that both types of timber houses were constructed through the Minangkabau matrilineal system. This system later assimilated into the local matrilineal practices of Negeri Sembilan, also known as *Adat Perpatih*, resulting in the formation of its distinctive traditional house style. Consequently, the local culture significantly influenced the architectural design of Negeri Sembilan's traditional houses, despite their physical likeness to the Minangkabau traditional houses in West Sumatera. This concise historical account of traditional houses in both Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan emphasises that although the people of Negeri Sembilan may trace their origins back to Minangkabau lineage, they have efficiently constructed a unique and noteworthy Malay identity of their own. Thus, while the architectural roots of Negeri Sembilan's traditional houses are



interwoven with Minangkabau heritage, and the distinct evolution of these structures within the context of *Adat Perpatih* showcases a deeply rooted cultural identity unique to Negeri Sembilan, celebrating both ancestral legacy and regional innovation.



Figure 1: Example of a *rumah bumbung panjang* (long-roofed house) in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan.

Source: Author.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Typology of Malay Woodcarving Motifs in Traditional Malay Houses

Many scholars have discussed Malay woodcarving, a traditional art form that involves shaping and carving wood to create decorative and functional objects. Zainal Abidin et al. (2017) highlighted the unique existence of woodcarving motifs in Negeri Sembilan. However, they noted a significant lack of research on woodcarvings in Negeri Sembilan compared to the East Coast. Despite these efforts, there remains a need for a comprehensive understanding of woodcarving motifs and patterns in traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan. This study aims to bridge this gap by identifying, categorising, and highlighting the cultural significance of these motifs in traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah.

Within this traditional craft, Kamarudin, Jahn Kassim et al. (2020) emphasised the significant role played by motifs, which are recurring shapes or thematic elements in designs. These motifs are symbolic representations frequently encountered in artwork. Tohid et al. (2015) highlighted the

profound regard for traditional woodcarving as a form of ornamental art, where artisans skilfully embellish various objects ranging from small items to furniture, architectural elements, boats, kitchenware, and even grave markers (Said 2008). Furthermore, Halim et al. (2023) posited that motifs serve as a visual medium for expressing societal emotions. Thus, one can surmise that woodcarving motifs exhibit versatility, serving various purposes such as functionality, decoration, and visual expression through symbolism and aesthetics.

The floral motif stands as the most prevalent characteristic of Malay woodcarving. Craftsmen frequently incorporate floral motifs into their artworks, drawing inspiration from the native flowers and plants in their surroundings. One notable example is the *awan larat* (meandering cloud) motif, a common decorative element in the architectural design of traditional Malay homes in Peninsular Malaysia. Previous studies have highlighted the *awan larat* motif's significance due to its philosophical relevance to Islamic teachings (Jasmani et al. 2019; Kamarudin, Mohd Noor et al. 2020, 2021; Yusof et al. 2022).

The *awan larat* consists of elements in the form of vegetative plants and leaves, stylised to resemble cloud-like patterns in adherence to Islam's prohibition of figurative depictions of animals and humans (Sabri et al. 2021). In a study conducted by Azmin et al. (2021), the emphasis was placed on using the *awan larat* motif as a means for Muslim Malay artisans to interpret and communicate messages from the Divine. Furthermore, it highlights positive facets of Malay community values and expresses a fundamental understanding of the realities of the world. These purposes go beyond mere aesthetic production. Jasmani et al. (2019) also specify that the *awan larat* is considered one of the noblest elements of architecture, often placed at elevated locations due to the messages it conveys. Therefore, beyond its aesthetic appeal, the *awan larat* holds symbolic and cultural significance in Malay culture. The continuous and interconnected patterns within the *awan larat* are seen to bridge the gap between the physical world and the spiritual realm.

In contrast, calligraphy motifs in Malay woodcarving derive their significance from the influence of Islamic calligraphy on Malay art and culture. These motifs reflect the transformation of pre-Islamic designs into elements adhering to Islamic rules and regulations, often featuring crafted Arabic and Quranic verses. Abu Bakar et al. (2019) discovered that woodcarvers deliberately choose calligraphy motifs to adorn panels, symbolising spiritual significance as the carvings convey positive messages and reminders. These

motifs also hold social significance within Malay society, signifying a cultural and artistic shift towards Islamic themes that convey spiritual and societal values.

Fauna motifs are less commonly observed in Malay woodcarving due to their contradiction with Islamic tenets. Contemporary Malay woodcarving shifts away from prevalent faunal motifs, favouring alternative design themes such as floral, cosmological, and geometrical patterns. This shift produces cleaner lines and a more minimalistic approach to portraying animal themes. Some classic examples of faunal motifs, such as *ayam berlaga* (fighting roosters) and *itik pulang petang* (ducks returning home at dusk), were widely acknowledged in traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan during earlier times. These motifs are stylised to convey the spirit or symbolism of the animals, abstracted into S-like patterns created from leaves or flowers, adhering to the strict principles of Islam (Daud et al. 2012; Yusof et al. 2021).

Geometrical patterns in Malay woodcarving involve polygons and tessellation shapes that create symmetry, proportion, and repetition. The integration of geometric patterns into Malay woodcarving coincided with the introduction of Islam, reflecting the cultural and religious influences of the region. Malay woodcarvers commonly incorporate geometric shapes as the structural framework for their designs, even when featuring floral or vegetal motifs. Circular motifs, for instance, serve as the foundation for floral arrangements, enabling precision and balance. Woodcarvers have a long history of applying mathematical skills, using geometric processes as references to create beautiful and symmetrical combinations of motifs and patterns. Among these, the arabesque motif stands out, featuring intricate details in a multitude of geometric patterns and shapes. Anuwar's (2013) work, as cited in a study by Sulaiman and Husain (2019), asserted that Malay woodcarving reflects a form of ethnomathematics that has influenced Malay society's thinking and culture. Incorporating geometry and mathematics plays a crucial role in Malay woodcarving, enabling woodcarvers to produce complex yet cohesive patterns that achieve harmonious and balanced overall compositions.

Cosmos motifs encompass celestial elements such as stars, the sun, and the moon, selected through careful observation. Said (2008) noted that cosmic motifs were less common in Malay woodcarving. However, findings by Yusof et al. (2021) show that cosmic motifs are occasionally combined with other themes, including floral, geometrical, and fauna motifs. Harun and Samsudin (2022), citing Singh's (2017) explanation, suggest that cosmic motifs served as symbols in Malay cultural communities during the animistic and Hindu-Buddhist eras.



Malay woodcarving is thus a treasured traditional art form reflecting the mastery of wood crafters. Passed down through generations, it faces challenges in the modern urban landscape, emphasising the need for preservation. Woodcarvers use their craft as a powerful storytelling medium, drawing inspiration from nature and external sources to convey narratives. Malay woodcarving motifs play a crucial role in this art form, weaving together cultural, spiritual, and artistic dimensions, ensuring the legacy of Malay woodcarving endures as a meaningful cultural tradition.

### **Tracing the Evolution of Categories of Malay Ornamentation**

The development of Malay woodcarving motifs is a fascinating journey that mirrors the Malay community's abundant cultural legacy and artistic customs. Over centuries, these patterns have slowly changed, influenced by a diverse array of historical, cultural, and artistic factors. From a broader perspective, "evolution" pertains to analysing the progression or development of ideas, cultures, communities, and other phenomena over time. The categorisation of Malay motifs is a dynamic and evolving process characterised by change and diversity. As new forms have emerged and existing ones were refined, the overall landscape of Malay motifs has evolved. The main elements contributing to this evolution are two significant factors, although not exclusively, to two key influences: the pre-Islamic heritage and the cultural upheavals that occurred after the advent of Islam. Overall, understanding the evolution of Malay motifs provides insight into how they have responded to various influences and forces over time.

According to a study by Muhammad and Mohd Rosdi (2023a), the origins of Malay woodcarving may be traced back to the country's establishment. However, it evolved concurrently with the philosophies of the persons of that era. The carving patterns were prominently discernible due to the consecutive impacts of animism, followed by Hindu-Buddhism and Islamic influence. These transitions were also documented in studies by Said (2002), Hussin et al. (2012), and Azmin et al. (2021). Studies by Yusof et al. (2021) and Muhammad and Mohd Rosdi (2023b) revealed that woodcarvings in the Malay Archipelago during the pre-Islamic era, particularly before the fourteenth century, featured Malay motifs such as *kala*, *makara*, *stupa*, *garuda*, and *naga*. Building on these insights, after the emergence of Islam in the late thirteenth to fourteenth century, the motifs underwent a complete replacement with floral and cosmic patterns per Islamic teachings (Shaffee and Said 2013; Yusof et al. 2021).

Furthermore, findings from a study by Abdul Khalid et al. (2021) shed light on the spiritual significance of calligraphic carvings in Islamic art, emphasised their role in conveying blessings and spiritual messages. In addition, according to a study conducted by Azmin et al. (2021), cosmic carvings employed celestial elements such as the sun, moon, and stars to portray the vastness of Allah SWT. A study by Muhammad and Mohd Rosdi (2023b) asserted that geometrical patterns prioritise harmony, repetition, and equilibrium, leading to enhanced visual coherence. In the same study, they conducted a case study on Istana Balai Besar, where they discovered elements of geometry, cosmos, and combination. The researchers hypothesised that their study's findings revolved around woodcarving, which impacted both architectural and non-architectural aspects. They observed that a floral theme primarily characterised the woodcarving patterns. The floral theme has received the highest scrutiny above all other aspects. Floral patterns arise from the careful observation and recollection of carvers, who draw inspiration from their natural surroundings.

Previous studies repeatedly demonstrated that floral patterns are the dominant feature in Malay vernacular architecture. The pliant attributes of plants represented the reciprocal connection between humans and their natural surroundings, as Malay woodcarver favoured the use of climbing vines and flowering plants because of the symbolic meaning they convey. In a study by Mohd Din et al. (2022), *sulur* or tendrils were highly esteemed and revered as a Malay classical carving technique because the patterns of the *sulur* were believed to evoke sensitivity, beauty, and a sense of controlled form. Several studies by Hamat and Mohd Yusoff (2020), Apandi et al. (2021), Abdul Majid and Ab. Rahman (2022), and Rashidi et al. (2022), corroborated the dominance of floral motifs in Malay vernacular architecture. This preference for floral motifs reflected Malay cultural values such as politeness, tenderness, and courtesy. The concept of incorporating natural motifs underscored the intimate connection between carvers and their environment, as highlighted by Hamat and Mohd Yusoff (2020).

The investigation of Malay woodcarving motifs revealed a multifaceted and dynamic cultural legacy linked with the evolution of artistic expression over centuries. These motifs submitted to a dynamic process of change, diversification, and adaptation, initially influenced by pre-Islamic traditions, and further shaped by the introduction of Islamic culture. The incorporation of geometry, calligraphy, cosmos, floral motifs, and fauna in Malay woodcarving underscored the correlation between art, culture, and the natural world. This fusion of influences not only shaped the visual landscape of

Malay woodcarving but also indicated the Malay people's broader cultural essence and values, enriching our understanding of their heritage and artistic traditions.

However, the aforementioned studies indicate that there is a lack of in-depth research on traditional woodcarvings specific to Negeri Sembilan, particularly regarding the typology and patterns of woodcarving motifs. These aspects need to garner more attention from local scholars (Ahmad J A et al. 2022). Wahab's (2019) study, for instance, examined the broader architectural development of traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, focusing on cultural migration, spatial organisation, typology, and design features. Yet, his work placed little emphasis on the woodcarving motifs integral to these structures. Similarly, Maamor et al. (2022) explored the placement of *buah buton* carvings in the houses of *Adat Perpatih* leaders, but their analysis concentrated primarily on the carvings' association with social status, rather than providing a detailed examination of the motifs themselves.

Moreover, while several researchers have explored the typology of Malay architecture and woodcarvings in states such as Johor, Perak, Kelantan, and Terengganu (Noor and Nasir 2019; Saad et al. 2019; Choo et al. 2020; Yusof et al. 2020; Ismail et al. 2021; Rashidi et al. 2022; Yusof et al. 2023; Mariam et al. 2024), a comprehensive study specifically examining the distinctive patterns and local identity reflected in Negeri Sembilan's woodcarving motifs remains notably absent. The only focused studies on the woodcarvings of Negeri Sembilan are by Zainal Abidin et al. (2017), whose research centred on the placement and influences of motifs in both commoners' houses and those of higher social status.

The lack of detailed research on carving motifs in traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, has left much of this cultural heritage undocumented, risking its loss due to urbanisation and the impermanence of timber structures. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the presence of Malay woodcarving in Negeri Sembilan's timber architecture, particularly its forms, functions, and meanings. The significance of this research lies in the systematic identification and categorisation of woodcarving motifs in these traditional houses. By examining these motifs, this study will offer new insights into how they reflect the cultural values and identity of the Negeri Sembilan community. Additionally, the findings will serve as essential resources for scholars and cultural historians in preserving Negeri Sembilan's decorative woodcarving traditions, especially as traditional timber houses are increasingly replaced by concrete structures in both rural

and urban settings. While urbanisation may be inevitable, documentation remains a crucial first step in ensuring these woodcarving motifs are recorded and preserved for future generations.

## METHODOLOGY

Preliminary analytical research was conducted on ten traditional houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. The origin of these Malay houses may be traced to the 1720s and the 1950s. Table 1 displays the details of the Malay residences, including the owners' names, construction years, and locations.

Table 1: Ten traditional Malay houses selected for preliminary study

No.	Owner	Year	Location
1.	Kahar Siak Bakhi	1902	3, N24, Kampung Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, 71550 Kuala Pilah
2.	Dato' Mohamad Dahalan	1820s	Kampung Tanah Datar, Seri Menanti, 71550 Kuala Pilah
3.	Zuriati bt. Husain	1890–1900	3, Kampung Tanjung Beringin, Seri Menanti, 71550 Kuala Pilah
4.	Tok Su Pangkin Nyai Seni	1720s	Kampung Parit Seberang, Tanjung Ipoh, 71500 Kuala Pilah
5.	Ramlah bt. Sulaiman	1953	15, Kampung Terap, Senaling, 72000 Kuala Pilah
6.	Nurul Ain bt. Sameon	1930s	384, Jalan Tampin, 72000 Kuala Pilah
7.	Mokhtar Ayub	1920s	5, Jalan Taman Bukit Indah, Pekan Lama Kuala Pilah, 72000 Kuala Pilah
8.	Mariam bt. Abu Bakar	1820s	3, Bukit Tempurung, Seri Menanti, 71550 Kuala Pilah
9.	Hajah Zaleha	1918	51, Jalan Seremban Lama, Kampung Parit, 72000 Kuala Pilah
10.	Hajah Salamah bt. Haji Hashim	1920s	102, Kampung Ampang Tinggi, Tanjung Ipoh, 71500 Kuala Pilah

This study employed a qualitative methodology incorporating primary and secondary data sources. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for the research objectives, which focused on identifying and categorising woodcarving motifs within traditional houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. Primary data collection methods included observations, site visits, photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews to ensure comprehensive and conclusive results.

In 2021, the researcher conducted on-site observations in Kuala Pilah through site visits. The study employed purposive sampling to examine traditional Malay houses with decorative woodcarving designs on both the interior and exterior. According to Anaekwe (2002), purposive sampling serves the objective of efficiently selecting a specific sample quickly, and proportional representation is not the primary focus.

The scope of this study was limited to four traditional Malay houses, and the selection of samplings for this study was as follows: (1) Ramlah bt. Sulaiman's house, constructed in 1953; (2) Nurul Ain bt. Sameon's house, constructed in the 1930s; (3) Mokhtar Ayub's house, constructed in the 1920s; and (4) Mariam bt. Abu Bakar's house was constructed in the 1820s. The selection of the samplings was determined by several factors, including: (1) the houses exemplified the architectural design style that originated in Negeri Sembilan; (2) the houses remained intact, featuring distinctive woodcarving themes that had been well-preserved and were still occupied by homeowners; (3) the traditional houses offered an extensive collection of woodcarving elements that were relevant for visual study; (4) the Lembaga Muzium Negeri Sembilan recommended the chosen samplings because Kuala Pilah is one of the oldest districts in Negeri Sembilan that still preserves the architectural structure and decorative elements; and (5) woodcarving motifs could be found in the interior or exterior parts of the houses to align with the objective of this study. For documentation purposes, interviews were conducted with the homeowners to gather pertinent information, such as their names, addresses, and approximate years of construction for the houses. A camera was used during the observation phase to photograph essential information on the architectural structure and woodcarving themes. The camera helped determine the location of these motifs from various perspectives. The photographs of the motifs were catalogued, converted into digital format, and illustrated in 2D black-and-white vector representations of single-line patterns using Adobe Illustrator (Adobe, San Jose, CA). The conversion of the data into 2D patterns enabled the researcher to utilise visual pattern analysis on the gathered pictorial data. The classified illustrations were distinguished into discernible categories based on their thematic patterns. The 2D black-and-white patterns were used to obtain verification and validation from interviewees using semi-structured interviews to discern the motifs derived from the chosen samples.

Personal semi-structured interviews were conducted with two woodcarving experts to obtain information regarding the art of woodcarving. The interviews were conducted through Google Meet, and this study was conducted when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was enforced in 2021.



Two key informants played crucial roles in this study. Norhaiza Nordin, from Kampung Raja in Terengganu, was a renowned woodcarver with experience honed from an early age. Additionally, Ibrahim Latiff, a local woodcarver based in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, was a senior supervisor at Istana Besar Seri Menanti. Each semi-structured interview, which lasted approximately one hour, was conducted using a predetermined set of questions while allowing informants the flexibility to share additional insights into the art and craft of woodcarving motifs. These interviews validated the findings and provided valuable additional information regarding the selected motifs in this study. Moreover, the interactions with the woodcarvers facilitated the transfer of tacit knowledge, contributing to a richer understanding of this field (Al-Qdah and Salim 2013). The informants' tacit knowledge was essential in validating the findings because their insights were experiential and based on subjective experiences, wisdom, and an in-depth understanding of the significance and philosophy of Malay woodcarving motifs gained over the years.

In conjunction with direct observations, site visits, photographic documentation, and interviews, this research drew upon secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journals accessible from reputable websites and book publications. These secondary sources were used as additional information since they involved the work of experts in the field. Hence, to analyse the research findings, similar findings in these sources were used to enhance the understanding of the study related to the same topic. Therefore, the references from secondary data were particularly useful in validating and expanding upon the motifs identified for the visual analysis phase.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings from the selected samples, as shown in Table 2. The woodcarving motifs found in each house are categorised by motif types and their placements within the houses (see Figures 2–11). Additionally, this section includes an analysis of the motifs, accompanied by 2D black-and-white illustrations, to provide a clearer and more distinctive view of the identified thematic patterns.

Table 2: The selected four houses

No.	Homeowner	Year	Address
1.	Ramlah bt. Sulaiman	1953	15, Kampung Terap, Senaling, 72000 Kuala Pilah
2.	Nurul Ain bt. Sameon	1930s	384, Jalan Tampin, 72000 Kuala Pilah
3.	Mokhtar Ayub	1920s	5, Jalan Taman Bukit Indah, Pekan Lama Kuala Pilah, 72000 Kuala Pilah
4.	Mariam bt. Abu Bakar	1820s	3, Bukit Tempurung, Seri Menanti, 71550 Kuala Pilah



Figure 2: Motifs (a) cosmos, (b) geometry, and (c) fauna on the window head, window rails and side panel of the floor slab of Ramlah bt. Sulaiman's house.

Source: Author.

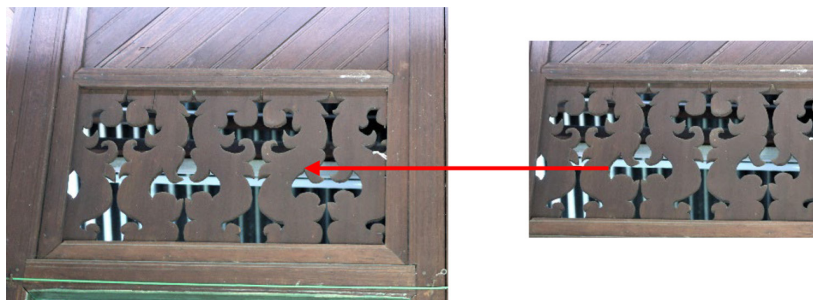


Figure 3: Motif fauna on the door head of Ramlah bt. Sulaiman's house.

Source: Author.



Figure 4: Motifs (a) still-life and (b) fauna on the gable end and fascia board of Ramlah bt. Sulaiman's house.

Source: Author.

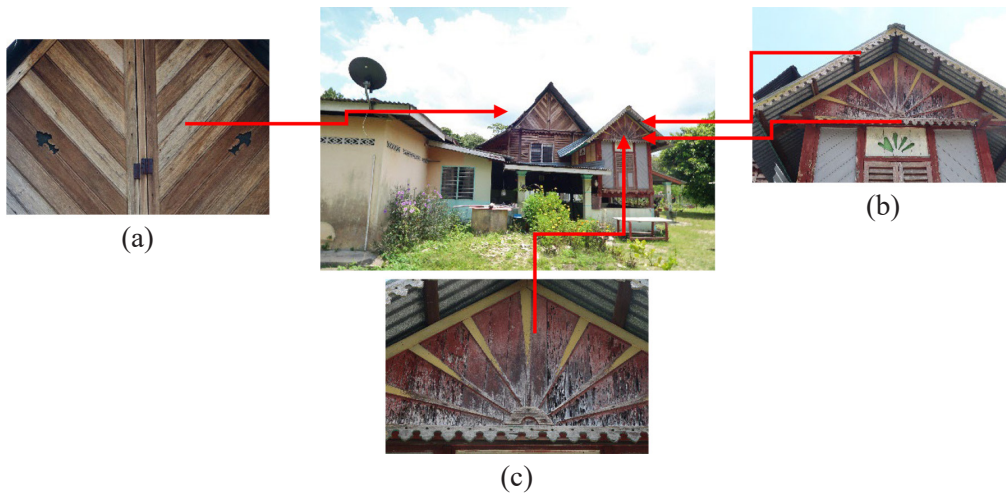


Figure 5: Motifs (a) still-life, (b) fauna, and (c) cosmos on the gable ends, bargeboard, and fascia board of Ramlah bt. Sulaiman's house.

Source: Author.



Figure 6: Motif (a) and (b) floral on the window heads of Nurul Ain bt. Sameon's house.

Source: Author.





Figure 7: Motifs (a), (b) geometry and (c) cosmos on the fascia board, window head and window rails of Mokhtar Ayub's house.

Source: Author.



Figure 8: Motif geometry on the door head of Mokhtar Ayub's house.

Source: Author.



Figure 9: Motif geometry on the gable end of Mokhtar Ayub's house.

Source: Author.

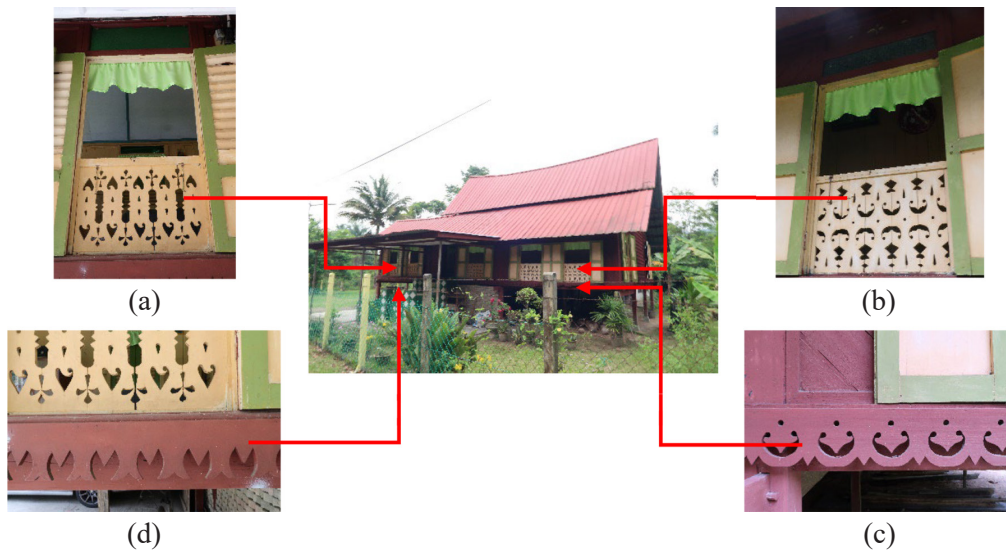


Figure 10: Motifs (a), (b), (c) combination and (d) fauna on the window rails and side panel of the floor slab of Mariam bt. Abu Bakar's house.

Source: Author.



Figure 11: Motif floral on the gable ends of Mariam bt. Abu Bakar's house.

Source: Author.


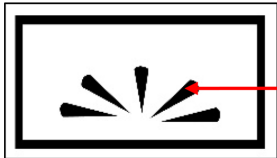

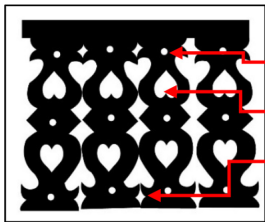





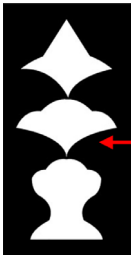
### Analysis of Woodcarving Motifs from the Selected Houses

The first house, owned by Ramlah bt. Sulaiman, built in the 1950s, is located in Kampung Terap, Senaling, Kuala Pilah. This house falls under the architectural classification of *rumah bumbung panjang* (long-roofed house), a traditional style commonly found in Malay vernacular houses, particularly in Negeri Sembilan. The defining feature of the *rumah bumbung panjang* is its prominent, elongated roof with details on the roof eaves. Ramlah's house comprises several areas, including *serambi* (veranda), *rumah ibu* (main room), and *dapur* (kitchen). Woodcarving motifs adorn various architectural elements within the house, such as the *kepala tingkap* (window head), *jerejak tingkap* (window rails), *tebar layar* (gable ends), *papan manis* (fascia boards),




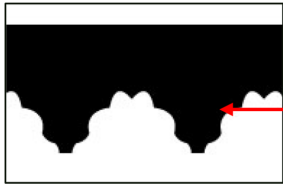
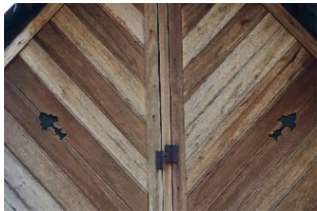
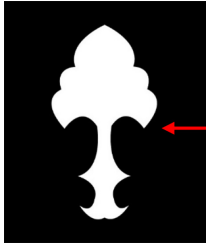

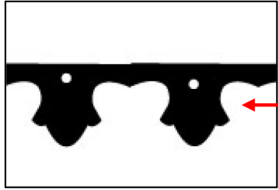


*papan layang* (bargeboard), and *papan cantik* (side panel of the floor slab), as illustrated in Table 3. These woodcarvings fall into several categories namely fauna, cosmos, geometry, and still-life motifs.

Table 3: Identified motifs of Ramlah bt. Sulaiman’s house

Picture	Illustration	Motif
 <p>Cosmos</p>		1. Sun rays
 <p>Geometry</p>		2. Circle 3. Heart 4. Diamond
 <p>Fauna</p>		5. <i>Lebah bergantung</i> (hanging bees)
 <p>Fauna</p>		6. <i>Unduk-unduk laut</i> (sea horses)
 <p>Still-life</p>		7. <i>Pasu</i> (pot)


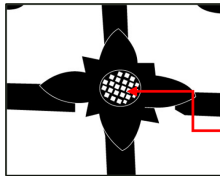
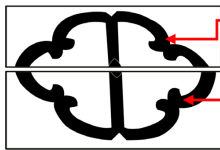


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Table 3: (continued)

Picture	Illustration	Motif
 Fauna		8. <i>Lebah bergantung</i>
 Still-life		9. <i>Cokmar</i> (mace)
 Fauna		10. <i>Lebah bergantung</i>
 Cosmos		11. Sun

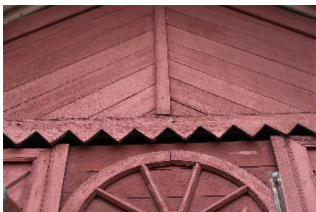

Next, the house owned by Nurul Ain bt. Sameon was built circa the 1930s and comprises various sections, including the *anjung* (porch), *serambi*, *rumah ibu*, and *dapur*. This ownership follows a cultural tradition rooted in the rules and regulations of *Adat Perpatih*, where female family members, particularly the last-born, inherit such properties. Situated along Jalan Tamin in Kuala Pilah, this house is classified as a *rumah limas* (limas house) due to its distinctive *limas* roof design. The identification of a *rumah limas* is characterised by a forward-protruding *anjung* layout that is elevated above the ground (Yusof et al. 2023). Table 4 shows that the woodcarvings are notably present on the *kepala tingkap* of Nurul Ain's house, exemplifying floral motifs of *bunga tanjung* (*Mimusops elengi*) and *sulur*.

Table 4: Identified motifs of Nurul Ain bt. Sameon’s house

Picture	Illustration	Motif
 <p>Floral</p>	 	<p>1. <i>Bunga tanjung</i></p> <p>2. <i>Sulur</i></p>
 <p>Floral</p>		<p>3. <i>Sulur</i></p>


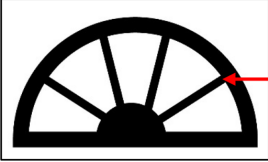

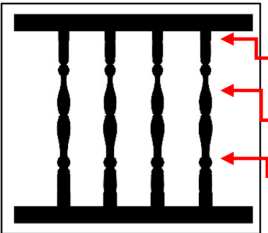

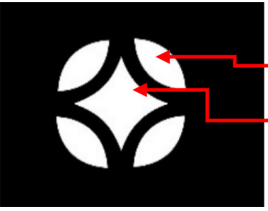

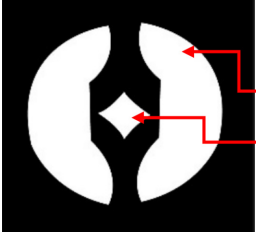
Mokhtar Ayub’s house is located at Jalan Taman Bukit Indah in Pekan Lama Kuala Pilah. The house was built in the 1920s, and its layout comprised *anjung*, *serambi*, *rumah ibu*, and *dapur* areas. According to the owner, it was one of the first houses built in Pekan Lama Kuala Pilah. The architectural classification of this house falls under *rumah bumbung panjang*, distinguished by its extended, elongated roof. The carving motifs identified within this traditional Malay house encompass cosmos and geometry themes. These motifs are prominently featured on various architectural elements, including the *papan manis*, *tebar layar*, *kepala tingkap*, and *kisi-kisi* (window rails), as depicted in Table 5.

Table 5: Identified motifs of Mokhtar Ayub’s house

Picture	Illustration	Motif
 <p>Geometry</p>		<p>1. <i>Triangle</i></p>

(continued on next page)

Table 5: (continued)

Picture	Illustration	Motif
 <p>Cosmos</p>	 <p>2. Sun</p>	
 <p>Geometry</p>	 <p>3. Rectangle 4. Cylinder 5. Oval</p>	
 <p>Geometry</p>	 <p>6. Oval 7. Diamond</p>	
 <p>Geometry</p>	 <p>8. Oval 9. Diamond</p>	

The final house belongs to Mariam bt. Abu Bakar and is located in Bukit Tempurung, Seri Menanti, built circa 1820s. According to Mariam, this house was also known as Rumah Telapak Penghulu Luak Gunung Pasir. The house was meant for the *penghulu* (chief) to convene and discuss concerns with other chieftains prior to their audience with the Yamtuan Antah during the olden days. This Malay house is structured with areas including the *serambi*, *rumah ibu*, and *dapur* areas, conforming to the architectural style referred to as *rumah bumbung panjang*. The carving motifs featured within this Malay house encompass combination, fauna, and floral themes. These motifs are visibly displayed on the *jerejak tingkap*, *papan cantik* and *tebar layar*, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Identified motifs of Mariam bt. Abu Bakar’s house


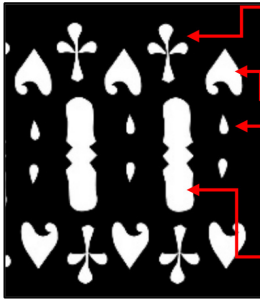

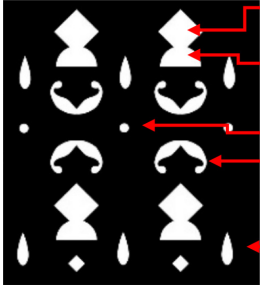





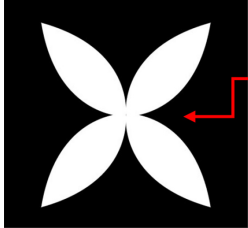

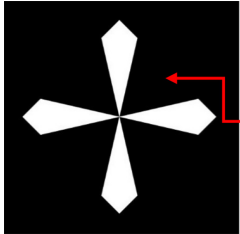
Picture	Illustration	Motif	
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Cokmar</i></li> <li>2. <i>Daun sirih</i> (betel leaf)</li> <li>3. Dew</li> <li>4. <i>Buah larok</i> (<i>Polyalthia beccarii</i>)</li> </ol>	
<p>Combination</p>			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Diamond</li> <li>6. Semi-circle</li> <li>7. Circle</li> <li>8. <i>Sulur</i></li> <li>9. Dew</li> </ol>
<p>Combination</p>			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. <i>Kelawar bergantung</i> (hanging bat)</li> </ol>
<p>Fauna</p>			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Circle</li> <li>12. <i>Sulur</i></li> </ol>
<p>Combination</p>	<p>(continued on next page)</p>		



Table 6: (continued)

Picture	Illustration	Motif
		13. <i>Bunga pecah empat</i> (four broken flowers)
		14. <i>Bunga cengkih</i> (cloves)

## DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed six categories of woodcarving motifs, i.e., cosmos, geometry, fauna, still-life, floral, and combination, as detailed in Table 7. These motifs were found mainly on the fascia boards, bargeboards, gable ends, window rails, side panels of the floor slabs, window heads, and door heads.

Table 7 presents findings indicating that geometry and combination were the most commonly encountered motif categories in the selected houses. The analysis revealed that geometric motifs, as shown in Tables 3 and 5 on the window rails, gable end, fascia board, and door head, were characterised by minimalistic and straightforward designs. Despite their simplicity, these geometric motifs reflected the prevalently harmonious and symmetrical design principles in traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah. Moreover, geometric ornamentalations were preferred patterns in traditional Malay houses due to their simplicity and ease of carving. The category of combination involved the fusion of several types of motifs into a single unified unit. For instance, Table 6 illustrated combination motifs on the window rails of Mariam's house, where floral, natural, geometric, and still-life elements merged into cohesive designs.

The findings also showed the significance of fauna motifs in the selected traditional houses. Informants Norhaiza and Ibrahim highlighted the enduring prominence of fauna motifs in Kuala Pilah despite their abstraction

Table 7: Categories of motifs from the selected houses

No.	Owner	Category of motif						
		Cosmos	Geometry	Fauna	Still-life	Floral	Combination	
1.	Ramlah bt. Sulaiman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sunrays</li> <li>• Sun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circles</li> <li>• Semi-circles</li> <li>• Hearts</li> <li>• Diamonds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Lebah bergantung</i></li> <li>• <i>Unduk-unduk laut</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Pasu</i></li> <li>• <i>Cokmar</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	
2.	Nurul Ain bt. Sameon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bunga tanjung</i></li> <li>• <i>Sulur</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	
3.	Mokhtar Ayub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triangle</li> <li>• Rectangle</li> <li>• Cylinder</li> <li>• Oval</li> <li>• Diamond</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	
4.	Mariam bt. Abu Bakar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Kelawar bergantung</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bunga pecah empat</i></li> <li>• <i>Bunga cengkik</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Cokmar</i></li> <li>• <i>Daun sirih</i></li> <li>• Dew</li> <li>• <i>Buah tarok</i></li> <li>• Diamond</li> <li>• Semi-circle</li> <li>• Circle</li> <li>• <i>Sulur</i></li> </ul>	

and stylisation. This was evident in motifs such as *lebah bergantung*, *kelawar bergantung*, and *unduk-unduk laut*, as shown in Tables 3 and 6 for Ramlah's house and Mariam's house. These motifs were primarily located on the door head, side panel of the floor slab, and fascia board. The findings additionally revealed that hanging bees were the most dominant motif in the fauna category. Norhaiza stated that these fauna motifs in selected traditional Malay houses symbolised a unique trait exclusive to Negeri Sembilan. While primarily based on animal forms, these motifs had been abstracted to retain their cultural and artistic value, as the arrival of Islam in the early fourteenth century prohibited animistic or figurative representations. This transformation and evolution of fauna motifs had been influenced by Islamic restrictions over the years.

Ibrahim further explained that the placement, functions, and uses of the woodcarving motifs aligned with the houses' design. These woodcarvings were decorative elements and served practical functions depending on their location within the structure. Examples of such instances could be observed in motifs found in *jerejak tingkap*, *kepala tingkap*, *kepala pintu* (door head), and *tebar layar*. The functional purposes of these motifs, situated within these architectural components, primarily included providing air ventilation and allowing sunlight to penetrate throughout the day, highlighting the multifaceted role of woodcarvings in traditional Malay architecture. The strategic positioning of the motifs rendered them relatively inconspicuous and understated to the public, solely enhancing the homeowners' enjoyment.

## Discussion on Motif Categories

As indicated in Table 8, the cosmos motifs comprised sunrays and the sun. The presence of cosmos motifs was located on the window head, as seen in Figure 2, and the gable end, shown in Figure 5, served as reminders of the magnificence and divinity of Allah SWT during the dawn, as inferred from the findings. According to Norhaiza, cosmos motifs were relatively uncommon in Malay woodcarving compared to other motif categories. However, he also explained that the sun and its rays held significant symbolism within Malay culture, regarded as symbols of power and energy. Based on the belief that the cosmos represented the origins of creativity, the sun motif was selected to retain its uniqueness until it was integrated as an enduring reminder. As per the researcher's findings, the gable end adorned with a sun motif, depicted in Table 3, symbolised the way of life of the house owners. Furthermore, intentionally positioned in the west to face the qibla (the direction of the Kaaba), to which Muslims turn in prayer, the gable end

with sun motif represented the divine power of Allah SWT. Additionally, as shown in Figure 2 for Ramlah’s house, the sunray motif could cast beautiful shadows on the house’s interior and facilitate air ventilation.

Table 8: Categories of motifs

Category	Motif
Cosmos	1. Sunrays 2. Sun
Geometry	1. Circle 2. Semi-circle 3. Heart 4. Diamond 5. Oval 6. Triangle
Fauna	1. <i>Lebah bergantung</i> 2. <i>Unduk-unduk laut</i> 3. <i>Kelawar bergantung</i>
Still-life	1. <i>Pasu</i> 2. <i>Cokmar</i>
Floral	1. <i>Bunga tanjung</i> 2. <i>Sulur</i> 3. <i>Bunga pecah empat</i> 4. <i>Bunga cengkih</i>
Combination	1. <i>Cokmar</i> 2. <i>Daun sirih</i> 3. Dew 4. <i>Buah larok</i> 5. Diamond 6. Semi-circle 7. Circle 8. <i>Sulur</i>

The subsequent category, as detailed in Table 8, was that of geometry, involving motifs defined by patterns and designs. These motifs displayed abstract, polygonal, and non-representational forms such as circles, semi-circles, ovals, triangles, hearts, and diamonds. Notably, Ramlah’s house and Mokhtar Ayub’s house exhibited geometric patterns ornamenting the window rails and gable end, where recurring instances were evident. The repetition of these shapes created a sense of uniformity and consistency, as demonstrated in Figures 2, 7, 8, and 9.

The findings implied that Malay craftsmen had chosen geometric patterns as their design choice due to their universal aesthetic appeal and timeless quality, which is derived from their harmonious and well-organised

arrangement. Fundamentally, compared to other categories, they were easier to construct and replicate accurately than complex, freeform designs. With the advent of Islam, they gained prominence in the Malay world and became an influential aspect of local Malay woodcarving. Geometric patterns had specific arrangements and techniques, but they also carried their symbolism. Universally, the circle depicted wholeness and infinity, embodying the essence of Allah SWT (Mohamed 1978). Drawing a parallel, the researcher interpreted the heart motif in Malay woodcarving as resembling the Quran, which is considered a sacred gift to Muslims infused with divine words. This symbolism was thought to stem from the heart of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the revered Kaaba, a sanctuary dedicated to worship. According to Ismail's (1986) theory, circles and other polygon shapes were used as basic frames to create Malay woodcarving. They served as boundaries or borders when constructing the structures of geometric motifs.

Table 8 indicates a distinct group within the architectural environment of these traditional Malay homes, focusing on elements inspired by fauna. The fauna motifs found in Ramlah's house, depicted in Figures 2–5 and in Mariam's house, shown in Figure 10, demonstrated an elevated level of stylisation. Due to the incorporation of Islamic principles, they had been transformed into geometric and floral decorations. The combination of Malay woodcarving and Islamic influences resulted in a fascinating outcome whereby although the basic structure remained intact, the patterns experienced an organised series of changes, including denaturalisation, stylisation, and final abstraction.

The findings indicated that the architectural components featured fauna themes, reflecting a dynamic relationship between nature and creative expression. A recurring motif in these traditional houses was the depiction of hanging bees, or *lebah bergantung*, displayed on the fascia board and the side panels of the floor slab (refer to Table 3). Although the bee symbol was stylised into simpler forms, its essential shape retained its recognisable character.

Another fauna motif that subtly resembled an animal was the *unduk-unduk laut*, as depicted in Table 3. Although transformed into elegant floral patterns, the motif retained graceful, curvilinear “S” shapes. Norhaiza explained the concept of *kelopak maya*, denoting *bunga khayalan* or imagined flower, which arose from the carvers' imaginative abilities, incorporating 60%–70% imagination and 20%–30% real flowers. This flexibility allowed carvers creative freedom, provided they adhered to the foundational principles of Islam. He added that the carver responsible for the *unduk-unduk laut* motif



likely drew inspiration from the seahorse's elegance, incorporating natural elements such as undulating tendrils, spiralled leaves, and the curvilinear forms of a flower. He stressed the importance of a holistic approach in integrating fauna motifs within traditional Malay houses, ensuring they align with Islamic principles. Craftsmen should understand local customs, the appropriate placement of motifs, and the necessary skills. Additionally, the selected fauna motifs should convey messages of mutual respect and compassion, reflecting the fundamental principles of Islam.

While still-life motifs in Malay woodcarving were less prevalent than other thematic categories, they existed within the architectural compositions of traditional Malay houses and structures. This relative scarcity of still-life motifs underscored their distinctive presence in the art of Malay woodcarving. In Malay society, the selection of still-life motifs was based on everyday objects that inherently symbolised the status and power these objects held, as seen in Table 8. Based on the findings, two motifs associated with still-life were the *pasu*, as shown in Figure 4, and *cokmar*, as shown in Figure 5.

The *pasu* motif found in Ramlah's house assumed the form of a symmetrical cylinder, primarily functioning as a utilitarian object for storing water and cookware. The historical lineage of traditional Malay pottery could be traced back to the Malacca Sultanate era during the fifteenth century, signifying that it had been an enduring art form practised by the Malay people for centuries. In addition to its functional role, the *pasu* symbolised societal status while also encapsulating a symbolism related to the concept of a seed. Within this symbolism, the *pasu* represented attaining accomplishments and a source of ideas (Wan Yusoff and Awang 1997).

The second motif, *cokmar*, identified in Ramlah's house, represents an accessory frequently used in royal ceremonies and rituals. Norhaiza explained that the *cokmar* embodies national identity, symbolising authority, power, and regality. He noted that its presence in a traditional house signifies the identity of the homeowner, implying that both the craftsman who carved the motif and the homeowner held significant social status and importance within the community.

The next category focuses on the floral theme, as detailed in Table 8, which played a crucial role in woodcarving craftsmanship. The floral category is highly prominent in Malay woodcarving, embodying artistic and cultural significance. Floral designs in Malay woodcarving were influenced mainly by the beautiful natural surroundings, particularly native flora such as the *bunga tanjung*, *sulur*, illustrated in Figure 6, *bunga pecah empat*, and *bunga cengkih*, shown in Figure 11. Based on the analysis of the floral motifs,

Norhaiza described the concept of *kelopak hidup*, which referred to motifs that closely resembled real flowers in the local area. These motifs comprised around 70%–80% natural elements and 30%–20% non-floral features. He stressed that woodcarvers frequently derived inspiration from the natural elements in their vicinity while drawing from their imagination.

The carvers often replicated the curvilinear elements of flowers and leaves using their creativity and imagination. In particular, the *bunga tanjung* motif was one of the most widely used floral motifs in Malay woodcarving, usually found in the tropical woods of Southeast and South Asia. The *bunga tanjung* was characterised by its white colour, eight petals, and a subtly fragrant scent. Every flower contained symbolism; therefore, the *bunga tanjung* represented a kind and welcoming gesture towards visitors to a home. The attribute of *terbukaan rumah*, meaning “openness of the house”, has been a fundamental aspect of Malay society.

The *bunga pecah empat* motif frequently appeared in woodcarving patterns and was often favoured by woodcarvers. The term “four broken flowers” did not refer to a specific type of flower but represented flowers with four petals. The flower symbolised the four cosmological elements—earth, wind, fire, and air—in Malay society (Hamdan 1998). These elements were derived from the setting of Malay medicine, where they underlined the need to maintain a harmonious balance in the natural order of one’s physical existence since these factors provided the foundation of their composition. The four fragmented flowers discovered in the gable end panel of Mariam’s house exhibited a reduced design; however, their shape was easily identifiable even from a distance. The petal shapes in four repetitive corners symbolised elements of balance and simplicity.

Tendrils were significant in Malay woodcarving in the *awan larat* motif, where they typically assumed a subservient role within the overall design. However, this investigation repositioned the *sulur* motifs from their secondary function to assuming the primary features on the window heads, as seen in Table 4. As per the researcher’s findings, the *sulur* was highly esteemed as a visual representation of life’s never-ending journey, serving as an enduring symbol deeply rooted in the principles of Malay woodcarving philosophy. Tendrils in traditional Malay woodcarving signified the importance of nature’s resources and held significant meaning for the Malay people.

The last motif category is combinations, as indicated in Table 8, which involves the integration of various themes into one cohesive design. From the findings, Mariam’s house showcased most of the combination motifs carved on the window rails and side panels of the floor slab, as shown in Figure 10.

These motifs consisted of various themes namely still-life, floral, nature, and geometry. Despite including multiple themes in one design, the findings indicated that the main objective was to create a design that appeared incorporated and visually attractive. For example, the combination motifs in Table 6 contained elaborately carved patterns; however, they displayed a sense of harmony rather than appearing disorderly or fragmented. The utilisation of combination motifs served as evidence of the carver's talent and craft, as creating a cohesive design with multiple elements necessitated a great deal of knowledge and expertise.

## CONCLUSION

The findings identified six categories of motifs in traditional Malay woodcarvings, including geometry, cosmos, still-life, fauna, floral, and combinations. These motifs were predominantly located on gable ends, window heads, door heads, fascia boards, bargeboards, window rails, and side panels of floor slabs. Geometrical patterns emerged as the most prominent category in the woodcarvings. The influence of Islamic principles led to a simplification of design. While these carvings may have appeared subtle, they held values and lessons that observers could appreciate upon close examination, especially in the context of local traditional houses in Kuala Pilah. The study also revealed that these motifs were inspired by the natural surroundings, influencing woodcarvers in their designs. The placement of these motifs also played a vital role, highlighting the social status and identity of the house owners, depending on the motifs chosen by the *tukang* (craftsman) and their positioning within specific architectural components in the selected Malay houses in Kuala Pilah.

Each woodcarving motif identified in this study's traditional Malay houses was distinctive, highlighting the Malay people's unique cultural identity in Kuala Pilah. Therefore, preserving Negeri Sembilan's identity and heritage is crucial due to the significance of these woodcarving motifs in traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah. These findings can serve as valuable guides for contemporary woodcarvers looking to incorporate these motifs into their future works, further preserving the region's identity. Consequently, the objectives of preserving local identity and upholding the authentic principles of our heritage remain strengthened. Additionally, this study can hopefully provide a foundation for future scholars researching woodcarving motifs on the southwest coast of Malaysia, contributing to the continued significance of Negeri Sembilan's identity.

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## COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Data on the houses and interview responses were collected with the informed consent of the respondents and approval from the research supervisor, in accordance with the standard procedures set by Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam.

## NOTE

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