

## Carved Arabesques in Malay Traditional Houses: Skill, Tradition and Preservation of Identity

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the placement and fabrication of the wood carvings within the old Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses. The main objective of this study was to examine the placement of wood carvings in the houses with emphasis on its fabrication as house components. Non-interactive and interactive methods of data collection were employed as research tactics. The non-interactive method involved archival review of 25 sets of measured drawings of the Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses from the Centre for Study of Built Environment in the Malay World at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The interactive method involved semi-structured interviews with five woodcarvers to obtain their verification on the findings from the analytical review which served as the primary data. The study found that architectural components of the houses especially perforated ventilation panels of walls, doors and windows were fabricated in different composition of carvings with intricate arabesque design. Regularity in the placement of these components give spatial identity to the principal spaces such as '*rumah ibu*' (core house), '*serambi*' (verandah) and main bedrooms. Fabrication of the carvings as house components was in parallel with their structural layouts and functions. This architectural inclination addresses the relationship of creativity, skill and intrinsic knowledge of the Malay craftsmen in keeping the tradition upon the exquisite forms of the houses in general and the carved arabesques in particular. The regional identity of the carvings has been practically and consistently sustained through ages, which suggests preservation of architectural identity within the traditional living environment.

**Keywords:** Carved arabesque, Malay traditional houses, craftsmen, identity and tradition

### Introduction

Wood carving is an ornamental feature found in many Malay vernacular houses especially owned by prominent and wealthy residents. Embellishments are important status symbols in traditional Malay society whereby carvings in residences of wealthy Malays are usually more elaborate and beautiful than those found in ordinary houses (Farish and Eddin, 2003). The traditional Kelantan and Terengganu houses which were located in the north-eastern part of Peninsular Malaysia exhibited various forms of wood carvings in distinctive features that reflect the status of its residents as well as regional identity. These carvings were usually enriched by the beautiful spectrum of craftsmanship. Carvings from Kelantan and Terengganu are the most refined and beautiful of all Malay woodwork in terms of its shape and carving techniques which exhibit a degree of

beautification not found elsewhere in Malaysia (Raja Bahrin, 1988; Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1994).

Intricate designs of arabesque with geometric flora, Arabic calligraphy and foliate or plant patterns are prevalent on the carvings. Arabesque is an abstraction of the patterns that employs plant elements or foliage in partially naturalistic form to produce an intricate design of interlaced lines (Gombrich, 1984). Pattern is defined as the repetition of a design element or varied elements in recurring arrangement within a composition (Wallschlaeger and Busic-Snyder, 1992). The term carved arabesque used in the context of this study means a style of decorative pattern applied on wood carving panel which is characterized by intertwining plants and abstract curvilinear motifs. Expressions of arabesque are usually prevalent in tiles, ceramics and stone works of Muslim artisans in the Middle Eastern countries. Whereas, Muslims in the South East Asia region, for example, Malay craftsmen from northeastern region of Peninsular Malaysia express the patterns of arabesque on indigenous timber-based products like wood carving. It is considered as the most classic product of the traditional Malay visual art form (Md. Din Jusoh, 1983). The underlying principles of arabesque patterns in Malay wood carving are fundamentally similar to those found in visual arts of Arab cultures. The differences are only on the materials and techniques used. Distinctiveness also reflects on the visual composition of the motifs and its stylization which denote its significant attributes and meanings to the carved components and the timber architecture of this region.

This paper presents the various types of carving patterns formed in arabesques with flora, geometry and Arabic calligraphy which were depicted on ventilation panels of doors, windows and walls. They are formed in different shapes and sizes in relationship to their distribution within the traditional timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu. This study focuses on the arabesque pattern of carved components found at the houses of wealthy Malays which were built in the years 1850s to 1930s. Two major research questions for this study are: (1) what are the distinctive characteristics of arabesque patterns within the carved components of the houses?, and (2) how are the carved components distributed within the house fabric relative to the specific composition of the carvings? The carving patterns studied here were identified in relation to their layout in the carvings and the placement and functional aspects of the carved components. This research involves the visual description and interpretation of the carved components pertaining to specific carving patterns within the context of their configuration and distribution in the interior and exterior settings of the houses. This paper explains the findings based on analyses conducted on the carved components of 25 timber houses that serve as the unit of analysis.

Placement of the carvings in the traditional Malay houses has seldom been studied thoroughly. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to examine the placement of wood carvings in the houses with emphasis on its fabrication as house components. Placement of the carved components connotes certain meanings and significant purposes. Consistency in the patterns of carved arabesque, particularly flora, results to the establishment of identity to the components and its placements within the dwelling architecture of northeastern region of Peninsular Malaysia. This study hopes to capture the spirit and forms of the carvings placed in the traditional Malay houses not only because it is one of the richest components of Malay cultural heritage but more importantly to show that the humble, simple and exquisite forms of the carvings have a vital and essential elements that have its roots in the values and culture of its beholder.

## Background

A few published literatures with general references to the concept of composition in the Islamic art in general and Malay art in particular were reviewed as fundamental theoretical background. Craft works, as perceived from Islamic perspective, is essentially a nonfigurative in nature. As Nasr (1987) postulates that the works of Muslim artists reveal their strict adherence to the teachings of the Islamic faith and inspiration they derive from their environment. This can be seen in all their works whether in the use of geometric designs, plant and floral motifs or the use of Quranic verses. Extensive use of these elements for all kinds of art forms is particularly established throughout the Islamic world (Isma'il and Lois Lamya', 1992). The most significant form of relation between expression of decoration and Islam comes from the Islamic tradition of cautioning against the representation of living beings in art forms (Schimmel, 1984). Consequently, spiritual symbolism in different styles of decoration is a key part of the importance of arabesque to Islam and Islamic cultures. Instead of portraying figurative forms, Islamic art is often associated with the employing of arabesque style (Gombrich, 1984).

Application of specific principle in composition that reflects its relationship to a religious concept is also pervasive in Malay visual art. Zakaria (1989) postulates that the principle of meaningfulness in artistic expression means to effectively convey an idea which communicates hidden meaning based on religio-spiritual perception of ultimate reality. For example, carvings that represent Quranic verses are works of art that convey the meaning of ultimate reality. As Nasr (1987) notes that the symbolism of calligraphy's visual motion in continuity reflects its relationship to a religious concept. Othman (1995) states that Muslim artists emphasize on the concept of harmony in space in all their works of art through the use of symbols and objects derived from natural surroundings. This is very relevant to the Malay carvings where it is not apparently designed only for specific functions or decoration but also respecting this concept with a few set of rules that govern Malay creativity and craftsmanship that defines actual beauty. Crafts of the Malays had flourished in creativity and attained a high level of beauty (Syed Ahmad, 1994). This is closely related to the concept of composition in '*awan larat*' (meandering cloud) pattern which usually incorporate elements derived from natural plants to form harmonious arrangement. The specific arrangement of compositional elements in a meandering or spiraling movement in '*awan larat*' contributes to design characters that resemble to patterns in arabesque. Hence '*awan larat*' is recognized as a Malay model of arabesque and as claimed by Farish and Eddin (2003) it has been the most popular design pattern employed in the Malay art.

In the art of Malay wood carving, the specific composition elements are arranged to fit the surface of a timber board that serves as the carving medium where carved details like a motif, pattern and form of incision and perforation have been integrated and controlled within the pre-determined shape, size and dimension. Ismail (2001) identifies three different modes of incisions applied in the Malay wood carving, namely relief, perforation or a combination of these. Wood carving from Kelantan and Terengganu are generally formed with perforations in different depths of incision by applying a cut out technique on a thick plank with specific design motifs (Norhaiza, 2009). Flora, geometry and Islamic calligraphy are the three major types of motifs used by Malay woodcarvers (Zulkifli, 2000). The most prominent and recurrent decorative patterns found in wood carving derived from floral motifs (Ismail, 2002; Ismail and Zumahiran, 2009). These attributes are interconnected and are considered as important ingredients for aesthetic design and they are normally fashioned in harmony on a piece of carved panel.

## **Methods**

This study was conducted as an explorative and interpretive research for which a significant amount of relevant inferences were gathered from the non-interactive and interactive methods of data collection.

### **Non-interactive Method**

Analytical review was conducted on a set of twenty five measured drawings and reports of Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses from the Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM) at the Department of Architecture in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. These visual data of 25 prominent Malay timber houses: 14 houses from the state of Kelantan and 11 houses from Terengganu. They were found in six different architectural dwelling forms including '*rumah perabung pecah lima*' (five-ridged roof house), '*rumah bujang berselasar*' (bachelor house with unroofed platform), '*rumah perabung lima*' (five-ridged house), '*rumah tiang dua belas*' (twelve-pillared house), '*rumah bujang berserambi*' (long-roofed house with verandah), and composite house forms. These vernacular houses of the north-eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia existed in the periods between 1850's to 1930's. Houses with long roofs such as the twelve pillared house, the long-roofed house with verandah and the bachelor house with '*selasar*', an unroofed platform, were the earliest forms built among the six types of houses. These forms of house were no longer built after World War II and are considered as the heritage of traditional Malay architecture (Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1996).

A set of measured drawing reports that serve as determinative evidences which consist of plans and elevations of the 25 houses including cross-sectional and detailed drawings were referred to for detailed analysis. These reports were produced and documented by the students of an architectural programme conducted at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The reports were documented from 1976 to 2005. The purpose of the analysis was to identify the types of carved components and to determine their physical attributes within the carvings including visual forms and the principles of composition. The method of visual analysis matrix was used to present information on the pattern of the attributes corresponding to a particular carved component identified from the houses and the distribution of the carved components for each house. The idea of the matrix is that it can be used to display database in a systematic way (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Further drawings were produced based on photographs found in the documents to improve the visual quality and accuracy for the purpose of analysis and data display.

### **Interactive Method**

In-depth interviews with five prominent Malay woodcarvers were carried out to obtain their verification on the findings from the visual analysis of the measured drawings. Information on the art and craft of wood carving was elicited by the woodcarvers through the interactive measure. The woodcarvers involved in the interviews were Wan Mustapha Wan Su and Norhaiza Noordin from Besut in Terengganu, Latif Long, Abas Abdullah and Abdul Rahman were from Kelantan. Each interview was carried out for a period of approximately two hours with the adoption of standardized open-ended interview questions. A set of visual templates that contains samples of carvings from the houses was posed to each woodcarver during the interview for the purpose of getting their conformity.

The interview questions were categorised in relation to the research questions formulated for this study.

Narrations from the interviews were descriptive inferential evidences and views of expert wood carvers. They were supportive data elicited by the living woodcarvers who were practitioners and actively involved in the wood carving industry. Interpretation of the verbal data began by bracketing the words and phrases of the carvers. The interview data was dissected, uncovered, defined by analyzing the elements and essential structures of the woodcarvers' opinions to elicit meaning of the words and phrases. The result of bracketing was to categorize the meaning of the conversation to a simpler format that show a pattern of meaning of wood carving perceived or understood by the woodcarver. The categories of meaning include: (1) depiction of carving motif, (2) layout and orientation of carving, (3) intrinsic meaning of motif, and (4) carving techniques.

The data from KALAM documents was augmented by the information gathered from the five woodcarvers. Narration and interpretation from the woodcarvers on the design aspects and craftsmanship of the traditional wood carving from the states of Terengganu and Kelantan were needed to substantiate the main data gathered from the measured drawings. Their opinions served as verification and supplementary information to the analysed data.

## Findings and Discussion

### Patterns of Arabesque in the Principal Carved Components

The analysis of the measured drawings indicated that the wall, door and window ventilation panels were the principal group of carvings that dominated all the twenty five houses. Arabesques with flora, geometry and Arabic calligraphy were depicted on these panels in different shapes and sizes which are prevalent in all types of house forms. The intricate patterns of the arabesque are attributed to the visual quality of the components. Hence, the physical form of the carved component is characterized by the distinctive shape of arabesque pattern apart from the type of perforation and incision in the panel. Most of the carved components depict floral design with perforated and relief or non-relief carving. The analysis reveals that most of the ventilation components found in the twenty five timber houses were fabricated with five essential attributes of pattern, namely plant form or foliage, geometric flora, geometry, calligraphy and a combination of these as highlighted in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Carved component with arabesque patterns found in the timber houses

NAME OF HOUSE	TYPE OF HOUSE	TYPES OF CARVED COMPONENTS	PATTERN OF ARABESQUE
Mohamad Dobah	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of walls	-Plant form, foliate pattern, and geometric pattern
Nik Salleh Wan Ahmad	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of walls, -Decorative wall panels	-Plant form and geometric pattern, combination (flora + geometry), -Calligraphy
Wan Mek	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of wall, -Gable end panels	-Plant form and geometric flora -Plant form,
Lebai Ali Abdullah	Five-ridged roof house	-Ventilation panels of walls, -Ventilation panel of window -panels above doors	-Geometric pattern, -Geometric flora, -Plant form
Hassan Mohd Amin	Five-ridged roof house	-Ventilation panels of door -Ventilation panel of window, -Ventilation panel of wall,	-(flora + calligraphy + geometry), -Plant form -(Flora + geometry)

		-Roof eave panels	-Plant form,
Yaakub Mohammad	Five-ridged roof house	-Ventilation panels of doors, -Ventilation panel of wall, -Decorative panel of door	-(flora + calligraphy) -Plant form -Arabic calligraphy
Wan Sulong	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of doors -Ventilation panel of window, -ventilation panel of wall, -Wall panel, -Gable end panels	-(flora + calligraphy) -Plant form -Geometric flora, -Plant form -Plant form
Abd Rahim Endut	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of doors, -Ventilation panel of wall, -Railing panels -Decorative ceiling panels -Panel above door	-Plant form -plant form -plant form -plant form -(Flora + calligraphy)
Nik Mohamad bin Hitam (Dato' Biji Sura) Kota Duyong	Mixed-traditional form	-Ventilation panels of doors -Ventilation panel of window -Railing panels, -Gate leaf, -Door leaf, -Wall panel	-Plant form, Arabic calligraphy, -Plant form -Geometric flora -Plant form -Geometric flora -Geometric flora, calligraphy
Nik Mohamad bin Hitam (Dato' Biji Sura)	Mixed-traditional architectural form	-Ventilation panels of wall, -Ventilation panels of doors -Decorative ceiling panels	-Plant form, geometry -Combination (flora + calligraphy) -Plant form
Tok Ku Paloh 1	<i>'Rumah bujang berserambi'</i>	-Ventilation panels of wall	-Plant form
Tok Ku Paloh 2	<i>'Rumah bujang berserambi'</i>	-Decorative panels at staircase	-Plant form
Wan Embong Wan Awang	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of wall, doors and windows, -Railing panels	-Plant form, geometric flora -Geometry
Su Muhammed Salleh	Mixed-traditional form	-Ventilation panels of wall, doors and windows,	-Plant form
Wan Aisyah	Twelve-pillared house	-Ventilation panels of walls, -- -bracket panels	-Plant form, geometric flora, geometry -Geometry + flora
Wan Ahmad Abdullah	Five-ridged roof house	-Ventilation panels of doors -ventilation panel of wall	-Plant form -Geometry + flora, plant form
Wan Hussain Wan Abdul Rahman	Five-ridged roof house	-Ventilation panels of doors - ventilation panel of wall	-Plant form + calligraphy -Plant form
Hassan Yusof	Five-ridged roof house	-Ventilation panels of doors - ventilation panel of wall	-Plant form + calligraphy -Plant form
Tok Yakub	Twelve-pillarded house/ Long- roofed house	-Ventilation panels of doors - ventilation panel of wall - wall panel	-Plant form -Geometry -Flora
Mariam Hj. Mat	Twelve-pillarded house/ Long- roofed house	-Ventilation panels of doors - ventilation panel of wall - railing panels	-Plant form -Plant form, geometry -plant form
Awang	Twelve-pillarded house/ Long- roofed house	- ventilation panels of wall	-Plant form and geometry
Noh bin	<i>'Rumah bumbung</i>	-wall ventilation panels	-Plant form, geometric flora

Osman	<i>limas'</i> (pyramid-roofed house)	-ventilation panels of doors -ventilation panels of windows	-Plant form -plant form
Che Muhammad Che Harun	<i>'Rumah bujang Limas Bungkus'</i>	-wall ventilation panels -ventilation panels of windows	- geometric flora -Plant form
Tahir Yusuf	Twelve-pillared house/ Long-roofed house	-ventilation panels of windows - railings at window and serambi	-Plant form -Plant form
Halijah Haji yusuf	<i>'Rumah bumbung limas'</i> (pyramid-roofed house)	-wall ventilation panels -ventilation panels of windows -ventilation panels of doors -railings at window	-geometry -Plant form -plant form -geometric flora

The wall, door and window ventilation panels were classified as fenestrations fitted according to their specific location within the houses and utilitarian purposes which were evident in most of the houses. Windows, doors and perforated panels are common types of fenestrations found on walls of the Malay houses (Zulkifli, 1996). The carved panels were installed mainly to provide ventilation apart from visual beauty. From the interview, all woodcarvers verified that carved panels on walls, above windows and doors are the most predominant forms of perforated carvings found in the traditional Malay houses. Most perforated carvings on walls were found at Kelantan and Terengganu houses with long roof known as twelve-pillared houses. For example, Wan Embong's and Wan Sulong's houses as illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b have been at the forefront of the elaboration with a variety of carved fenestrations on their primary walls. Apparently, door leaf, gate leaf, roof eave and gable end panels were rare types of carving. Each of them was only found in one particular house which was obviously owned by a nobleman.

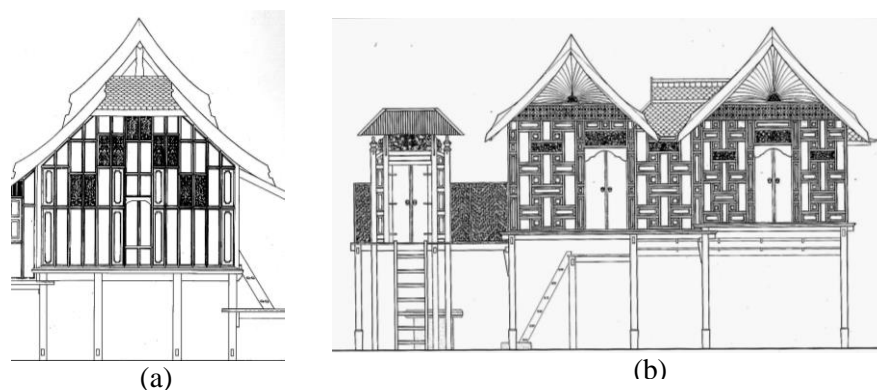


Fig 1: (a) The layout of perforated wall ventilation panels at Wan Embong's house and (b) Wan Sulong's house

### Principal Compositions in the Carved Arabesque

The analysis of the drawings revealed that the modes of composition were formed into two principal variants: (1) monothematic—single element, and (2) multi-thematic—mixed elements. Monothematic composition comprises of clear elements of plant form, geometric flora, calligraphy or geometry in a single mode of expression. In the multi-

thematic or mixed composition, the elements of plant form, geometric flora, calligraphy or geometry are put together in a specific arrangement. It was found that besides these modes of composition, there were inherent visual qualities in the layout of carved components including types of perforation and incision, shape of panel, and compositional layout. These qualities are manifested in the carved panels of walls, doors and windows as well as roof, gate, railing and ceiling. For example, the perforated window panel found at Biji Sura's house was equipped with plant-based motif in a horizontal layout (Figure 2a). Inasmuch, a rectangular ventilation panel fitted on top of the doors of Wan Sulong's house was carved in perforation with mixed motifs of flora and Arabic calligraphy derived from Thuluth script (Figure 2b). Thuluth is classified under cursive script and was first developed by Arab calligrapher from the Umayyad period (661-750) (Yasin, 1978).

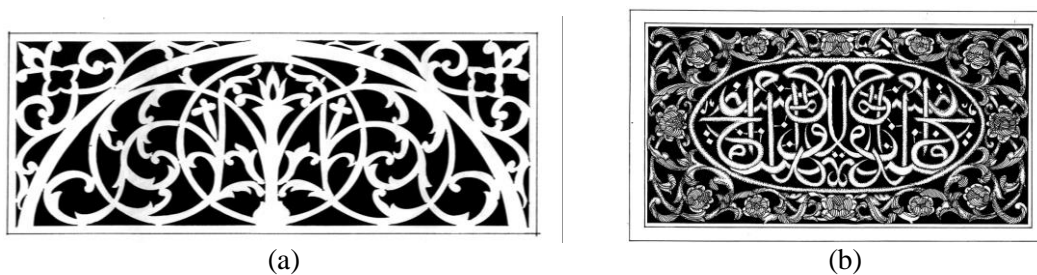


Fig 2: (a) Window panel with foliated pattern situated at Biji Sura's house and (b) Ventilation panel of door with mixed elements found at Wan Sulong's house

Apparently, the forms of the arabesque either in monothematic or multi-thematic composition relate well with the shape and layout of the carved components. Similarly, the distributions of these components within the interior as well as the exterior facades of the houses are in harmony with the architectural form. It seems that the application of the carving compositions with the specific visual elements for the carved components reflects its layout and distribution in the houses. For example, the carved ventilation panel with Qur'anic verses as found at Wan Sulong's house was fitted above the doors of '*rumah ibu*' and bedroom. Most of the carved panels found in the houses which are carved with quotes from Qur'an are securely placed on top of the doors. This is probably the right position for this type of calligraphy because of its sacredness. Calligraphy is the most direct of all art forms in the expression of Divine origin (Khatibi and Sijelmassi, 1994).

### Application of '*Awan larat*' as Carving Identity

'*Awan larat*' (meandering cloud) is a meandered or spiraled carving pattern of floral motif in naturalistic or stylized feature which is mostly prevalent on ventilation panels found on the upper part of walls, above windows and doors of Kelantan and Terengganu houses. The pattern of carving contains specific arrangement of compositional elements which contributes to the individual character of the carved components. The name '*awan larat*' was initially derived from a moving cloud (Syed Ahmad, 1994; Wan Mustapha, 2009). This pattern usually represents a harmonious relationship between the elements of motifs in a specific arrangement according to the shape and size of the panel. The flow of '*awan larat*' is usually controlled within a clearly defined space. Every flow of the carving elements has compositional meaning (Wan Mustapha, Norhaiza, Latif, Abas and Abdul Raman, 2009). For example, as apparent in the ventilation panels shown in Figure 3 where a growing plant becomes a dominant element featured in meandering character. The



composition of the plant elements are organized by the regulated ordering principles with specific meanings as appeared in this window ventilation panel fitted to the wall of Nik Salleh's house.

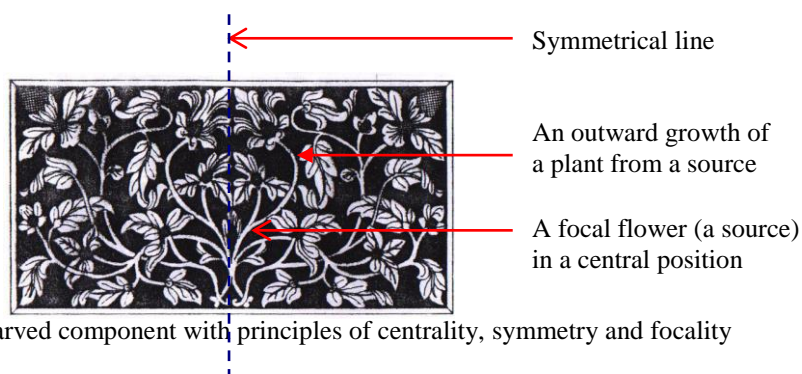


Fig 3: The carved component with principles of centrality, symmetry and focality

This panel which mainly consists of foliated patterns exhibits a combination of several principles including symmetry, centrality and focality which serve as the central theme in the composition. These principles were combined to regulate the form of carvings in complete pattern that flows within vertical and horizontal rectangular panels. This perforated panel in relief carving is equipped with various plant elements including a central flower which is portrayed as a focal point and symmetrically positioned at the vertical axis. Focality (visual emphasis) is one of the organizing principles that characterizes visual unity (Wallschaeger and Busic-Snyder, 1992). The visual unity is reflected on the arrangement of the various plant elements in complete harmony governed by a symmetrical line.

The focal flower serves as an origin or a source from which other plant elements including stems, flowers, flower buds, leaves and shoots grow in upward and regulated movements. Carving with a central motif represents the unending growth and movement of life in a natural plant (Farish and Eddin, 2003; Rosnawati, 2005). The traditional concept of '*awan larat*' was based on orders in the growth of natural plant. The flow of the growth in plant follows a specific order which govern the harmonious relationship between the compositional elements. The movement of the elements does not only reflect the orders in growth but also the principles of composition. This is the foremost principles observed and should be recognized by the woodcarvers in the fabrication of the carved components. This explains that the flow of outward movements of plant with its various elements in a specific order of arrangements and is regulated by the compositional principles is perhaps an important identifying feature that characterized the Malay '*awan larat*'. From the analysis this meandering pattern with a concept of plant growth was frequently found at ventilation panels fitted on walls and above windows and doors.

Various plant elements were represented in the carved panels giving a sense of variety with harmony and visual unity. The plants were commonly grown in the house yards including '*ketumbit*', '*ketam guri*', '*bayam peraksi*' (all are weeds) and '*kekacang*' (climbing legume). They were depicted as primary motifs and a full-bloomed flower generally becomes a focal or central object. Apart from a flower, other focal elements including a flower vase and a root or seed were depicted as growing sources from which other flora elements emerged. The various applications of central object are samples of works from the Malay woodcarvers of the past generations that demonstrate the fabrication of carvings were bounded within a language of traditional conception. As verified by the woodcarvers, the Malay '*awan larat*' usually depicts a growing plant that

emerges either from a flower, a flower vase, a plant seed or root. Apparently, the fabrication of the carving with the distinct characters of a plant as central elements within a symmetry, centrality, focality and variety in composition was probably a defining feature for this type of arabesque with floral pattern.

In short the finding suggests that the significant aspect of the placement of the carved components with '*awan larat*' pattern in the timber houses is that it signifies regional identity to the vernacular architecture of these two states whilst embellishing the buildings. As verified by all woodcarvers that '*awan larat*' represents an identity of carvings from Terengganu and Kelantan.

### Placement of the Components for Spatial and Social Identity

It is evident that the fabrication of the Malay carved arabesques follows certain principles. Their variation in visual forms was according to the type of houses and the different functions of spaces within it. Likewise, the distributions of the carved components correspond with the specific layouts of arabesque. The placements of the carved components with distinctive forms of arabesque were fixed within the fabric of the houses according to their specific functions and layouts. In terms of pattern of distribution of carved components in the houses, the ventilation panels were fitted on top of walls that have various design forms of arabesque were major carved components found in the houses. Wall ventilation panels with perforation were found in two principal forms, namely single rectangular panel and continuous horizontal panel (Zumahiran and Ismail, 2008). These panels were widely found on walls at '*rumah ibu*' (core house), for example, Tok Ku Paloh's house from Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu is among the long roof houses that exhibits the placement of a series of single rectangular panel at the core area as illustrated in Figure 4.

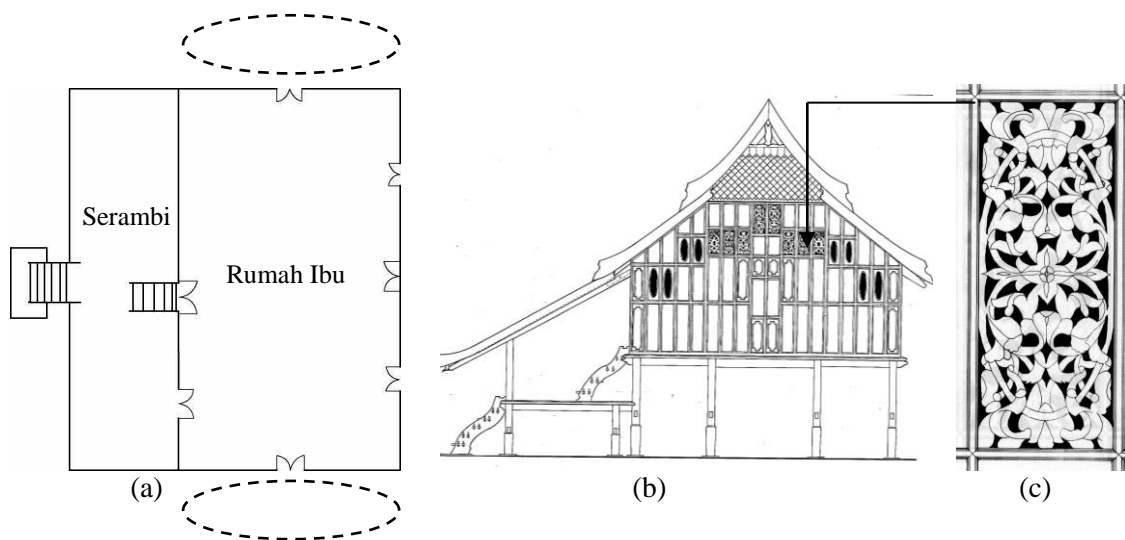


Fig 4: (a) The floor layout with the distributions of carvings at Tok Ku Paloh's house, (b) Layout of rectangular ventilation panels on the primary wall and (c) one of the wall ventilation panels

These carved panels with various patterns of arabesque in stylized plant forms were fitted as integral components to the wall that faces the '*rumah ibu*' thus giving a sense of spatial hierarchy. Notwithstanding to the sense of spatial identity, the distinct character of the placements of the carving is perhaps an important identifying feature for

the particular form of traditional house. As Wan Mustapha, Norhaiza, Latif, Abas and Abdul Raman (2009) point out that the fabrication of the carvings with their specific shapes and layouts relate well with the house forms. The findings indicate that the placement of ventilation panels on the upper sections of the primary walls was discernible in most long-roofed houses that had become the most habitual manner. It was found likewise in other long-roofed houses like Mohamad Dobah, Wan Mek, Nik Salleh, Wan Sulong and Wan Embong which portrays the wall ventilation panels in rectangular layout as predominant carved components.

Apart from these, there is a close relationship between the house and the socio-economic status of the owner. The visual qualities of the wooden arabesques and their pattern of distribution within the houses seem to reflect the personal affairs, way of life and social position of the occupants of the houses. Su's house from Losong, Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu is one of the examples of the wealthy resident that exhibits a wealth of window and door ventilation panels in the principal areas as illustrated in Figure 5. This house with a combination of several Malay traditional architectural form is one of its variations and it is an elaborate dwelling unit. In this type of dwelling architecture, the ornate carvings were profusely found on the exterior wall of a building, especially at the front façade. This house which was built in the late nineteenth century was owned by a wealthiest and successful merchant. His reputation was highly regarded by most of the residence of Losong as well as members of royal family. The significance of the placement of the carved panels within the house was probably to indicate the point of entry to the important places like '*rumah ibu*' and guest areas from its front facade. These areas can also be accessed through the doors positioned at the side walls facing to the '*serambi*' (verandah) areas located on the left and right sides of '*rumah ibu*'. These side doors were adorned with the door ventilation panel (DVP1) shown in Figure 5(c). Thus, the different composition in the carved panels reflects its distribution within the walls that surround the area of '*rumah ibu*'. This mode of placement distinguishes the main or front façade of '*rumah ibu*' from its secondary or side facades. The carved arabesques were fitted as integral components to the house's façade and they were equipped with mixed elements of floral motifs. Perhaps the depiction of such elements of embellishment with exclusive carving forms reflects the personality of the house owner who was also a pious person. The forms of the components were probably crafted to meet specific requests from the house patrons according to their ways of life based on regional cultures and religious values.

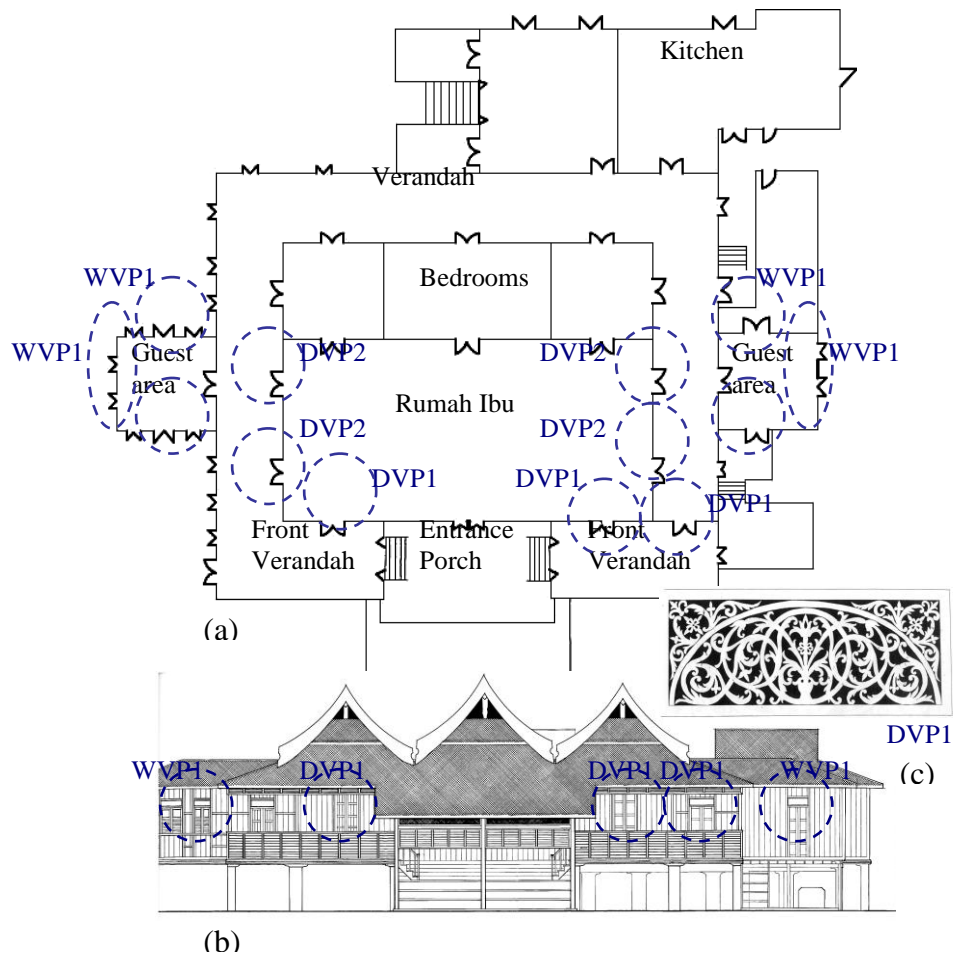


Fig 5: (a) Layout of spaces with the placements of carved panels at Su's house, (b) distribution of the door ventilation panels at the front facade and (c) one of the door ventilation panels

In the construction of the timber houses, the roof, wall and pillar and its related elements should be regarded as important components of the building. Of these, the most influential is the wall section because it is the most dominant feature that enveloped the building spaces according to the uses of these living areas. Apparently, there was a clear distinction between those building components thus forming different divisions on the house façade. In the structural feature of the wall envelope, the placement of the wooden arabesque at the upper section of the windows and doors should be recognized as an important feature for this building component. Their presences give strong character to the wall and create a sense of spatial identity to the core areas.

The placements of carved components were not in a haphazard appearance. Its arrangements were premeditated with a sense of control and these carved components were equipped with arabesque design in multi-thematic scheme to ensure the state of standardization of ideas in harmonious sense. Each mode of decoration for the houses was constrained within the Islamic principles and clearly prescribed with absence of figurative form. Most of the houses show conspicuous plant-based ornaments on their main building facades either exteriorly or interiorly. For example, the convex wall at the interior facade of Nik Salleh's house from Kelantan was adorned with a wealth of perforated carvings as shown in Figure 6. This house is characterized by a long gable roof and decorative convex wall. Mixed composition of arabesques was evident in this wall. They are associated components including wall panels, perforated carvings and a door that contribute to the

overall wall composition. The facade has distinctive character where elements of Arabic calligraphy that were placed at the upper section of the wall had become one of the associated components. This perhaps explains the preference of this mode of decoration reflects the personality of the house patron who was a pious person and also known as a *wali* (religious saint). Nik Salleh was a descendant of a reputable family who was respected by his community for his socioeconomic status and especially for having deep religious knowledge.

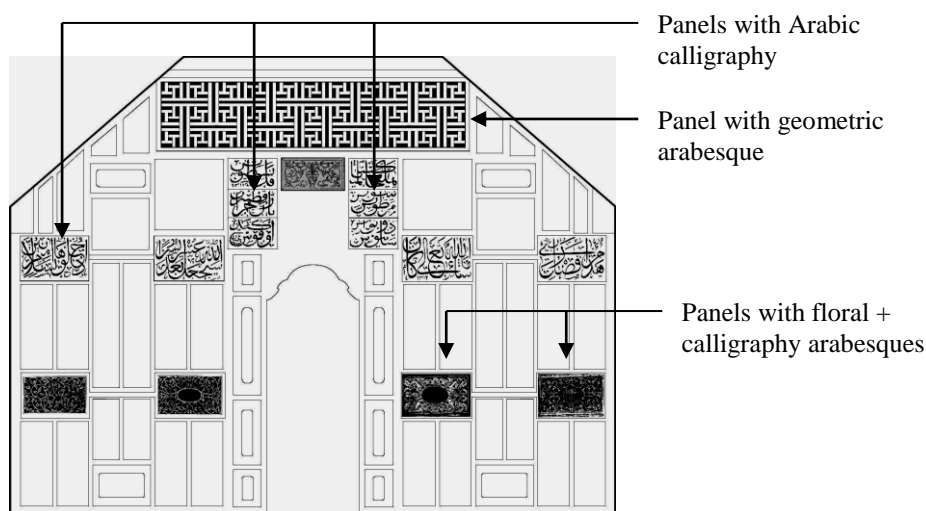


Fig 6: Interior walls at Nik Salleh's house with geometric, calligraphic and floral carvings

The findings suggest that the natural-inspired ornamentation in the Kelantan and Terengganu houses was culturally and religiously restricted to the plant based-motif. Thus most of the carved arabesque contains two modes of plant depiction: (1) derivation from living plants and (2) inspiration from carvers' imagination. These modes of arabesque motifs were pervasively used in the carved ventilation panels placed on the upper part of walls, doors and windows. This is evident in the widespread use of the living and imaginative floral motifs in the carved components with an absence of figural representation. These artistic inclinations addressed by the Malay craftsmen in the formation of the carvings for the timber houses.

### **Fabrication of Carvings as Carved Arabesque: The Relationship of Creativity, Skill and Knowledge**

Beauty in carving is also a pleasing quality associated with excellence of craftsmanship, skillfulness and authenticity in the craft-making (Figure 7). The size, scale, dimension, proportion and carving texture on the carved components can be both physical and visual attributes because these qualities can be perceived through both visual and tactile means. Attributes means a quality of characteristics of a wood carving. Wood carving literally means the art of carving in wood (Wilbur, 2008). Fabrications of carved components with intricate and complex carvings require skillfulness and creativity in the craftsmanship apart from passionate and full concentration. In the art of wood carving, skillfulness refers to the specialized ability in the application of carving techniques that require uses of hands (Wan Mustapha, Latif and Norhaiza, 2009). Creativity in wood carving means having the ability to bring out details about the originality of a piece of

wood carving. Both abilities are superiority in every stage of carving works. Thus a dynamic form of a carved panel results from the skillful use and creative choice of carving devices by the craftsmen. For example, in the depiction of flower motif, it differs between carvers which suggests different interpretation and ingenuity of knowledge of carving. Hence, carving is a carver's expression of showing a morphous form (a life flower) into another morphous one (non-life, static as well as an abstraction form the life). The self-expression suggests a carver's knowledge differs from his peers, thus there is a nuance of perspective of carving skills and understanding.

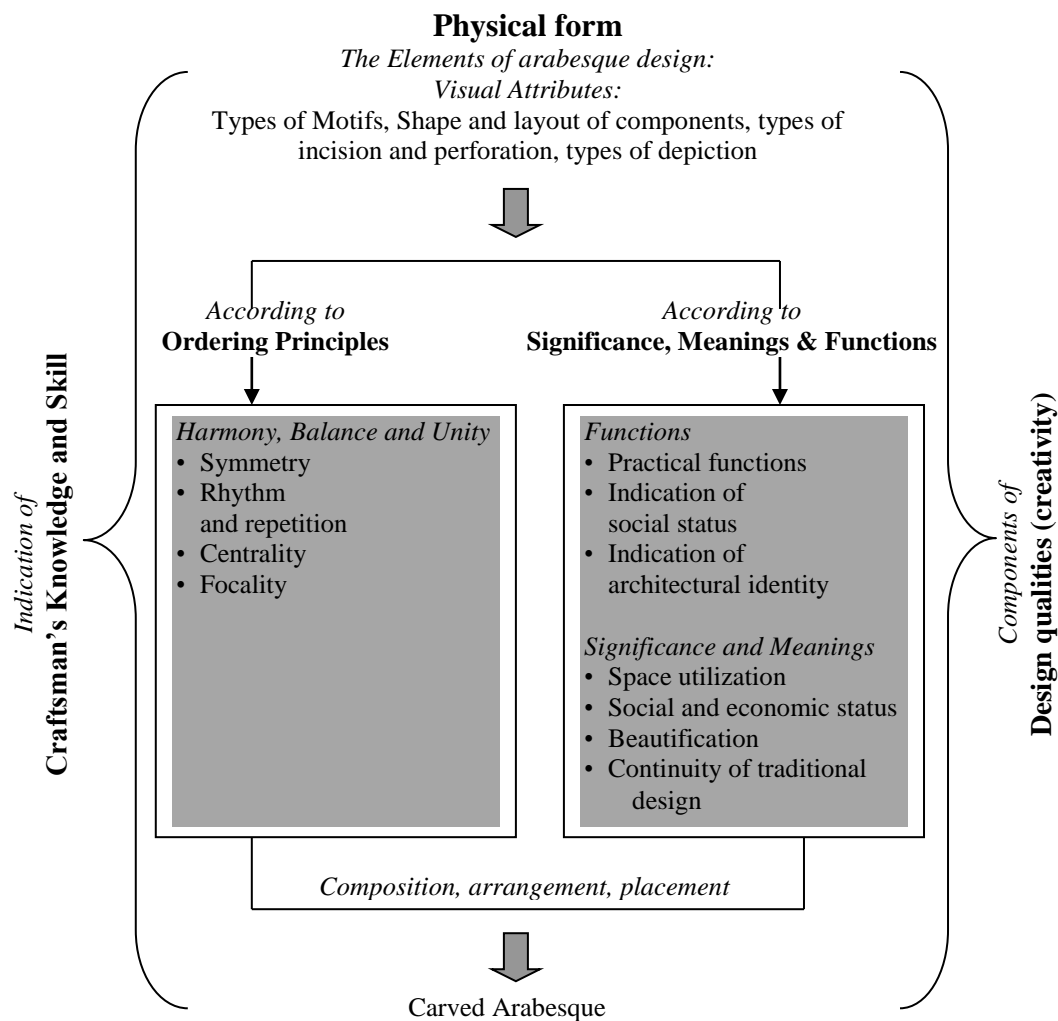


Fig 7: An outline of the related components involved in the fabrication of carvings

The value of Malay carving is influenced by the level of skillfulness in carving. As agreed by all woodcarvers, skillfulness is needed in making of carving. Skillfulness in carving as claimed by Wan Mustapha (2009) comprises many aspects which include: (1) ability in doing carvings, (2) knowing the philosophical meaning and (3) meaning of beauty. Skillfulness also means how to use carving tools because skillfulness in using the tools results to quality carving (Latif, 2009). There are as many as ten different tools

required to carve certain motifs such as flowers, leaves, buds, fruits and seeds which require carving skill in order to form its individual character in distinctive feature. Skillfulness in carving reflects on the arrangement or composition of motifs and depictions of plant elements such as leaves (Norhaiza, 2009). In this case composing the leaves and other elements of plant is called techniques of arrangement that also influence the level of complexity and intricacy in carvings. Certain carving motif like '*ketamguri*' is more complicated to form as compared to '*ketumbit*' which requires extra effort to carve because of its complexity (Abdul Rahman, 2009). Extra skillfulness is required to produce complex forms like perforated relief carvings. However, carvings with simple motif do not necessarily exemplify a low level of skillfulness (Wan Mustapha, 2009). He also notes that skillfulness is also associated with design idea and claims that a simple carving is not necessarily easy to design.

A skillful craftsman is being knowledgeable and humble which is gained through apprenticeship (Norhaiza, 2009). The rendering of nature cannot be achieved by any untutored individual, however gifted, without the support of a tradition (Gombrich, 1984). The arabesque or the carvings come to mind of the craftsmen as such typical 'end products' of a long sequence of what Trilling (2001) calls 'linked solutions'. There is a lineage in the dissemination/inheritance of carving knowledge. Furthermore, talent and '*adab*' are additional benefits to enhance skill which develops quality in carving. This implies that positive behavior like humbleness is a requisite to attain a carving skill.

### Concluding Remarks

The study found that the carved components of the old Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses were fabricated in different composition of carvings with intricate arabesque design. There are five essential attributes of arabesque pattern, namely plant form or foliage, geometric flora, geometry, calligraphy and a combination of these. The most depicted one is plant form especially in *awan larat* which is prevalent in the carvings of perforated ventilation panels of walls, doors and windows that dominate the houses. The fabrication of these components in different shapes and sizes are in parallel with their placement within the houses. The finding of the study also suggests that the distribution of the carved components with the specific visual elements reflects their structural layouts and functions. The placement of the wooden arabesque as fenestration or ventilation panels at the upper section of walls, windows and doors serve as important feature which give strong character to the principal spaces including '*rumah ibu*' (core house), '*serambi*' (verandah) and main bedrooms. This pattern of distribution creates a sense of architectural identity not only to the interior spaces but also to the form of the houses. For example, the long-roofed houses of Mohamad Dobah, Wan Mek, Nik Salleh, Wan Sulong and Wan Embong which portrays the wall ventilation panels in rectangular layout as predominant carved components. These components serve as an important identifying feature for the particular form of traditional house. Also, the qualities of the wooden arabesques and their distribution within the houses are closely related to the socio-economic status of the owners of the houses.

The study confirms that the old craftsmen remained steadfast in the fabrication of carved components by adhering to the established tradition. In the past, arabesque design in carvings was not only appreciated by the Malays for embellishments of their dwellings, it also was even considered as a serious art form. This has been consciously ingrained by the cultural beliefs which made it impossible for the Malay craftsmen to employ depiction of figurative forms in their carvings. Since such depiction was forbidden, the works were based on abstract composition. Flora, calligraphy and geometry were the most important part of the decorative elements in the carvings. Instead of making depiction of living

beings, the decorative elements were employed probably to seek blessings from Allah on the dwelling environment and its decorative objects in carving forms. There was a persistence of decorative traditions exemplified in the Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses thus indicating that regional identity of the carvings has been practically and consistently sustained through ages. This is suggestive indication of preservation of architectural identity within the traditional living environment. Hence, the craftsmen could be considered as a symbol, a metonym of the material culture from this region.

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Centre of Research for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World at the Department of Architecture in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Thanks are also due to the five woodcarvers who have provided some insightful information for this study.

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