CARVING MOTIFS IN TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU: SUSTAINING MALAY ARCHITECTURE IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

Prominent timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu are adorned with decorative carved components depicted in motifs of flora, geometry and Arabic calligraphy. Consistency in patterns of motif, particularly flora motifs, results to establishment of identity to the vernacular architecture of north-eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia. This paper presents an analytical study of the visual forms of motifs of carved components in the houses of Kelantan and Terengganu which denotes its significant attributes and uses. Carvings of nine houses in Kelantan and four houses in Terengganu were analyzed by interpreting 13 sets of carving measured drawings of the houses. The drawings were obtained from Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World at the Department of Architecture in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Interpretation of motifs is based on meanings described in the texts accompanied the drawings and literatures of Malay woodcarving, and triangulated with narrations from the two woodcarvers. The analysis of the documents revealed that several types of carved components with distinctive motifs in two and three dimensional compositions were placed in certain orders within the fabrics of the houses. Wall, door and window ventilation panels, railings, gate panel and stringers are types of components characterized by the shape of perforation and incision with relief or non-relief carvings. These components were crafted in relation to the house form and architectural elements such as wall, door, window, stair and gate. The significant aspect of the placement of the carvings in the houses is that it enhances beautiful ambiance and signifies regional identity to the vernacular architecture of these two states. To sustain the woodcarving as Malay architecture heritage, this paper presents a framework for the existing craftsmen to continue making carved components for urban housing markets. The suggested components are ventilation panels of door, window and wall, door leaves and window railings. The framework suggests a network of production and purchasing of the carved components; the former comprises of association of woodcarvers in Kelantan and Terengganu, and the latter comprises of association of architects and housing developers.
1. INTRODUCTION

Woodcarving is ornamentation to the traditional Malay houses of Kelantan and Terengganu which are located in the north-eastern states of Peninsular Malaysia. The application of carved ornamentation contributes to the identity of the traditional architecture from this region which originated from the architecture of Langkasuka Empire dated as early as 14th century (Farish and Eddin, 2003). Carving motifs of flora, geometry, Arabic calligraphy and cosmic features are depicted on carved panels of doors, walls, railings and ventilation components in different shapes and sizes (Ismail, 2001). Flora, geometry and Islamic calligraphy are the three major types of motifs used by Malay woodcarvers Zulkifli (2000). Motif is referred to as a recurrent or repeated thematic element and closely related to pattern (Ocvirk, 2002). The several types of carving motifs, especially flora were applied as identifying features to the woodcarving with specific shapes, sizes and compositions. Several carving techniques including perforation and incision with relief or non-relief carvings also contribute to the distinctive character of the motifs. Apart from these, intricacy and complexity of the carving motifs and its methods of depiction add to the distinctiveness. Wall, door and window ventilation panels, railings, gable end and ceiling panels are types of carved components found within the fabric of the houses and usually characterized by the types of carving motifs used and shapes of the panels. Most of these panels were equipped with floral design within the specific carving patterns.

This paper presents an initial finding of the various types of carving motifs used on differing types of carved component existing in the traditional timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu. This descriptive and interpretive study was conducted based on the two major research questions pertaining to the carving motifs which include: (1) What are the types of carving motif and contents of carved elements that shaped the differing forms of carved components found in the traditional timber houses, and (2) What are the uses, styles and pattern of regularity of carving motifs developed in the woodcarving which signify regional identity?

The aim of this research was to highlight the visual interpretation of the woodcarvings with reference to the specific carving motifs which were applied as house components. This study provides a significant pattern of carving motif and its application in the carved components of the timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu within the context of its configuration and distribution in the building fabric. These timber houses were constructed in the years of 1850s to late 1940s. The pattern of architectural embellishment could serve as a framework which could be considered as part of invaluable Malay heritage and they are indeed of lasting historical and cultural importance. The woodcarving is
a traditional art that reflects the local traditions and customs which should be kept and strengthened especially in the current exposure to the threats of rapid changes and developments of the modern architecture.

2. METHODS
2.1. Analytical Review on Measured Drawings

Thirteen prominent Malay timber houses were selected for the study. Nine houses were located in Kelantan and the other four houses were located in Terengganu. Table 1.0 shows the information of the houses including the types of architectural forms and year of construction, owners and locations of the houses. Several factors determine the selection of the houses which include: (1) the houses represent the type of dwelling architecture that originated from the east-coast region of Peninsular Malaysia, (2) the houses were decorated with excellent carvings which are regional and distinctive in character, and (3) the houses provide a comprehensive collection of carved components which are relevant for visual analysis purpose.

**Table 1:** Timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu selected for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Type of House</th>
<th>Year Built</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Location of House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Combination of twelve-pillared and five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1850s</td>
<td>Tuan Mohamad Dobah (Tuan Mohamad Abdullah)</td>
<td>Jalan Post Office Lama, Kota Bharu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Combination of twelve-pillared and five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1880s</td>
<td>Nik Salleh Wan Ahmad</td>
<td>Kampung Pulau Panjang, Kota Bharu, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Combination of long-roofed and five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1800s</td>
<td>Wan Mek</td>
<td>Tumpat, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Hassan B. Mohd Amin</td>
<td>Jalan Pengkalan Chepa, Kota Bharu, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Hassan Yusof</td>
<td>Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Wan Hussain Bin Wan Abdul Rahman</td>
<td>Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1900s</td>
<td>Lebai Ali Abdullah</td>
<td>Jalan Pantai Irama, Bachok, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Twelve-pillared house</td>
<td>1800s</td>
<td>Tok Yakub</td>
<td>Kampung Belongan, Bachok, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Twelve-pillared house</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Wan Sulong</td>
<td>Jalan Sultanah Zanab, Kota Bharu, Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Twelve-pillared house</td>
<td>1880s</td>
<td>Mariam Mat</td>
<td>Kampung Hiliran Masjid, Kuala Terengganu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Twelve-pillared house</td>
<td>1900s</td>
<td>Abdul Rahim Endut</td>
<td>Tanjung, Kuala Terengganu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Five-ridged roof house</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Dato’ Biji Sura (Nik Mohamad bin Hitam)</td>
<td>Duyong Kecil, Kuala Terengganu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Twelve-pillared house</td>
<td>1890s</td>
<td>Wan Embong Wan Awang</td>
<td>Pulau Duyung Besar, Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Carvings of the thirteen houses were reviewed and analyzed by interpreting a set of measured drawings that serve as pictorial data. The measured drawings which consists of plans and elevations of the 13 houses including crossed sectional and detail drawings of carvings was referred for visual analysis to identify the types of carved components and determine their motifs and composition. These measured drawings and detailed reports were produced and documented by the students of architectural program from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Edition and reproduction of a few documented drawings were made to improve its visual quality and accuracy for the purpose of analysis and data display.

2.2. Interview with Woodcarvers

Personal interviews with the adoption of standardized open-ended interview questions were conducted with two well-known woodcarvers including Norhaiza Nordin from Kampung Raja and Wan Mustapha Wan Su from Besut, both were in Terengganu. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain their verification on the application of carving motifs in the traditional Malay architecture and reasons of selecting the motifs. The interviews were carried out to substantiate the results obtained from the analytical review on the measured drawings. Inasmuch, narrative information from the woodcarvers was triangulated with the measured drawing that serves as the main data. In short, the open-ended interview was another qualitative measurement which was adopted to improve the validity of the measurement of the document review and supported by the literatures of Malay woodcarving. The triangulation of several measurements is in the search for a degree of validity unattainable by a single method of research (Patton, 2003).

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS
3.1. Types of Carved Components

Malay timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu exhibit various forms of woodcarving equipped with distinctive features of carving motifs. The analysis revealed that a collection of 13 types of architectural carved components, namely ventilation panels of window, door and wall, railings of verandah and staircase, wall panels, leaves of door and gate, roof eaves, brackets and gable end panels as highlighted in Table 1. It appears that there is a certain pattern of distribution of different types of carved components in each house. The findings indicate that the carved components in forms of wall and door ventilation panels were the most widely found in the timber houses. They were produced in relation to the architectural elements and the house forms. The
carved components were fabricated with specific visual attributes: (1) carving motif and pattern, (2) types of perforation and incision, (3) shape of panel, and (4) size and layout.

### Table 2: Types of carved component found in the selected timber houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of house</th>
<th>Window ventilation panel (WVP)</th>
<th>Door ventilation panel (DVP)</th>
<th>Wall ventilation panel (WPWP)</th>
<th>Window railing (RP1)</th>
<th>Railing at serambi/Sorong (RP2)</th>
<th>Railing at Staircase (RP3)</th>
<th>Wall panel (WP)</th>
<th>Door leaf (DP)</th>
<th>Stringer (S)</th>
<th>Gate leaf (GP)</th>
<th>Roof eave (REP)</th>
<th>Ceiling panel (CP)</th>
<th>Gable end (GEP)</th>
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</tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Hassan Yusof</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Abdul Rahim Endut</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dato’ Biji Sura</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Wan Embong Wan Ahmad</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2. Distribution of the Carved Components in the Houses

The placements of the carved components with distinctive forms were fixed within the fabric of the houses according to their specific arrangements and purposes. In terms of pattern of distribution of carved components in the houses, the ventilation panels fitted on top of walls that have various design forms were major carved components found in the houses. The wall ventilation panels with perforation were found in two principal forms: (1) single rectangular panel, and (2) continuous horizontal panel. Perforation in carving is a fully piercing technique done on a piece of wooden panel leaving a cut-through section (Norhaiza, 2008; Ismail, 2002). It appears that the carved components in forms of ventilation panels were widely found on walls at rumah ibu (core house). It is the core area of the traditional house and usually located at the centre of the house. Rumah ibu is the largest and principal area of the traditional Malay house that serves most of household activities such as receiving house
guests, sleeping, praying and gathering (Lim, 1987; Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1996).

Muhammad Dobah’s house from Kota Bharu, Kelantan is one of the examples of the traditional house that exhibits the placement of several carved panels in various designs of motifs as an integral part to the wall component as illustrated in Figure 1. The single rectangular panels were produced with distinctive features of carving attributes that gave the front façade (façade of rumah ibu) of the house its defining character. This facade exhibits the repetition of several horizontal rectangular ventilation panels in staggered configuration. The carved ventilation panels were positioned on the upper section of the wall. This character is perhaps an important identifying feature for this particular type of a house which is known as twelve-pillared house.

Most of the ventilation panels in continuous horizontal layout were widely found in five-ridged roof houses. For example, the wall ventilation panels fitted at the top of interior wall of Hassan’s house in Kelantan stretch from wall to wall in continuous form (Figure 2). These panels were fitted on the upper sections of the walls as well as on top of a bedroom door facing the rumah ibu of the house.

3.3. Types of Motifs Used in the Carved Components

As shown in Table 3 that the largest percentage of the carved components (57 %) were depicted with floral motifs either in relief or non-relief form and with perforated or non-perforated carvings. The carved components were walls and ventilation panels above doors and windows, railings at verandah and window, wall panels and gable end panels. It was found that 28 from 55 components are equipped with mixed-motif composition. This is suggestive indication that traditional craftsmen had strong preference for plant-based motifs.

Geometry was another type of carving motif found in lesser quantity which forms only 14% of carved components. Panels with the geometry motif usually give a sense of visual intricacy and its formation requires a high degree of accuracy and consistency. This is perhaps the main reason that made the motif less popular. The analysis also found that only 4% of the panels were depicted with motif of Arabic calligraphy in perforated form, and all of them were door ventilation panels. This motif which was unique and complex in character was apparently the least applied due to its complexity which require extra skillfulness to form the Arabic scripts.
Table 3: Percentage for the types of carving motifs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Types of motif</th>
<th>Carved Components</th>
<th>Quantity (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>Wall ventilation panel (PWVP) Railing at serambi/Sorong (RP), Window railing (WRP), Wall ventilation panel (PWVP) (S), window ventilation panel (WVP), Gable end (GEP), Door ventilation panel (DVP), wall panel (WP)</td>
<td>55 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>Wall ventilation panel (PWVP) (S), Door and window ventilation panel (DVP), railing, gate and wall panels</td>
<td>27 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td>Ventilation panels above walls (PWVP), railing panels</td>
<td>14 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Door ventilation panel (DVP)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.1 Floral Motifs and Its Compositional Characters

The motifs of flora are considered as the most prominent and recurrent decorative patterns found in Malay woodcarvings (Ismail, 2002). Floral motif of a specific plant with its elements including flowers, flower buds, leaves, tendrils, fruit, and shoot were the most popular design pattern employed in the carvings of Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses. They were combined to form one complete carving with a certain degree of complexity and intricacy. Figure 3 is an example of a carved ventilation panel fitted on wall of rumah ibu at Mohamad Dobah’s house. This perforated panel was equipped with floral elements including a central flower that serves as a central piece. The design of motif in a wood carving is usually illustrated as growing plant emerges from a single point which serves as an origin (Rosnawati 2005; Wan Mustapha, 2009). This point of origin was hidden behind a flower, leaf, vase or container. The central flower was surrounded by the complementary motifs of other plant elements like branches, leaves, stems in meandering characters. The depiction of the plant elements were in naturalistic characteristics with distinctive features.

Motif of a specific plant with its various elements represents the natural growth and movement of life in living plant (Rosnawati, 2005; Norhaiza, 2008). The application of plant motif into the carved panel suggests a manifestation of craftsman’s perception of the beauty in nature into the art form. Several types of plants such as ketumbit, ketam guri, bayam peraksi (all are weeds grown in house yards) and kekacang (climbing legume) are carved, and full-bloomed flower generally becomes focal object in the carving composition. Other focal element is a vase where other flora elements emerged.

The traditional craftsmen used two methods of motif depiction: (1) close imitation of natural plants from immediate surroundings, and (2) transformation of the plant motifs that barely resemble their real-life image (Norhaiza, 2008).
Apart from motif, the specific arrangement of compositional elements contributed to the individual character of the carved components. Meandering or spiraling pattern or locally known as *awan larat* (meandering cloud) was widely applied in the composition of the carved components. The name of awan larat was initially derived from a moving cloud (Ahmad Jamal, 1994; Wan Mustapha, 2009). The pattern usually represents a harmonious relationship between the elements of motifs in a specific arrangement according to the shape and size of the panel. Variations in composition were achieved through the different arrangement of the elements of motifs either as border, central placement or a combination of these that creates an overall pattern.

The form of *awan larat* is usually controlled within a clearly defined space. For example, tips of the leaves in the carving—see Figure 3—are purposely folded up or furled to avoid touching the adjacent leaves and these elements flow within the specified space. This form of carving also creates a gentle character of the leaves and it has become one of distinct features in Malay woodcarving. Every flow of the carving pattern has meaning (Wan Mustapha, 2009).

Spiraling tendrils were also represented in the carved components, for example, as apparent in the ventilation panels shown in Figures 4a, 4b and 5. Inasmuch, the spiral becomes a dominant element featured as meandering tendrils in regulated movements. Spiral is a compositional device used in the formation of awan larat (Wan Mustapha, 2009). The depiction of similar type of floral motif with vivid variation in composition signifies the craftsmen ingenuity and creativity. Beauty is portrayed in these panels by its elegant and gentle movement of the spiral elements within the pattern of awan larat. The panel in Figure 5 displays spiral elements with rhythmic flow enclosed by an elongated horizontal border. The distinctive characteristic of the carving is recognized by the representation of the spiraling movement in a continuous fashion.

In short, all panels exhibited inward organic movements of the spirals with regulated movement within the rectangular borders which spread from the focal element. It appears that this type of relief and non-relief floral motif in naturalistic and stylized feature was mostly prevalent on ventilation panels found on the upper part of walls, above windows and doors of Kelantan and Terengganu houses.

Differences in carving techniques also give distinctive character to the carved components. Carvings were normally fabricated with several carving techniques: (1) perforated or non-perforated, (2) relief or non-relief, and (3) overlapped or non-overlapped. The application of these techniques leads to the
formation of either two-dimensional or three-dimensional woodcarving. It appears that carved ventilation panels in a single rectangular layout were commonly found in a three-dimensional format that contributed to high visual intricacy and complexity. For example, the ventilation panel fitted to the wall of Wan Mek’s house was a three-dimensional form (Figure 6). This perforated panel portrayed a delicate and complex arrangement of relief floral motif, possibly, *bakawali* (*Epiphyllum oxypetalum*; a plant species of cactus) which consisted of several plant elements including flowers, flower buds, branches, stems and leaves in intertwined and overlapped characters. In this panel, complexity was reflected by high relief plant motif that has flowing elements in curvy lines to cross over or under each other in delicate movement. Fabrication of carving with overlapped technique requires a high level of carving skill and ingenuity (Norhaiza, 2008: Wan Mustapha, 2009). Certainly, perforated and overlapped carving is most difficult to produce that demands high carving skill.

Apart from the complex and intricate pattern, the carvings were also depicted in a simple flora form, for example, a single flower as a principal element carved on the front wall of Tok Yakub’s house (Figure 7a). It is a semi-pierced carving of a lotus. Simpler carving is found at Lebai Ali’s house: a perforated flora-motif carving. This stylized plant element is depicted in an uncomplicated relationship signifies the simplicity in the single pattern and the carvings look two-dimensional in composition. Both panels portray clear-cut silhouettes of flower motif with simple features. Perhaps, the application of this type of motif reflects the woodcarver’s passionate mind to a particular type of a flower by capturing the essence of its shapes but departing from its naturalistic form.

### 3.3.2 A Reason for the Application of the Plant as Motif

Flora is considered by the woodcarvers as the most enduring and influential motif-types in the house ornamentation. It subsequent influence was widespread till today. A possible reason is that plants of gentle features such as weeds, climbing legumes and fragrance flowers were considered as form of beauty (Wan Mustapha, 2009). According to Norhaiza (2008), the Malay woodcarvers prefer to use creeping plants and flower producing plants because they were eye-catching and suitable for woodcarving. Motif of flora can be formed and composed in unrestricted fashion for various carved panels with unlimited types of pattern and carving layout according to the artistic and technical skill of craftsmen.
3.3.3. Application of Geometrical Motifs

Non-figurative motif like geometry was also applied by the woodcarvers from the states of Kelantan and Terengganu as apparent in the window railing (Figure 8a) and wall ventilation panels (Figure 8b) found at Wan Embong’s and Nik Salleh’s houses, respectively. These perforated panels exhibit distinctive carving features which are characterized in two different layouts and geometrical motifs. Motifs of vertical stripes in repetitive arrangement and geometrical flora in horizontal lines dominate the railing panel. The series of vertical lines and horizontal bands were stretched along the vertical layout forming rhythmic composition of strip and band pattern. In contrast, compositional elements of circles in the wall ventilation panel give a sense of visual consistency. The overlapping circles are repeated rhythmically extending to infinity and absence of focal point or centrality. The repetition of uniformed circles in unvarying composition flow within the horizontal rectangular layout. Most obviously, the geometric pattern uses the similar motif, repeatedly in a predictable order resulting in a sense of harmony.

The two-dimensional composition of geometrical motifs in non-relief carvings enhances the rectangular layout of the two panels. The visual form of these panels which are different in character signifies the craftsmen ingenuity and creativity in the fabrication of the carved components for the specific locations and purposes.

3.3.4 Calligraphy as Carving Motifs

Fabrication of carved components for house setting was not limited to the application of carving motif from floral elements and geometries alone. The woodcarvers also applied calligraphy which was normally produced in non-relief and non-overlapped forms. In sharp contrast with geometry, calligraphy motif consists of complex elements that are formed in intertwined character within a specific border. A motif of Arabic calligraphy is normally used in carved components to convey Islamic messages whilst offering aesthetic values. Calligraphic elements usually depict the form of Arabic characters, verses from the Quran and local Arabic writing called Jawi (Abdul Halim Nasir, 1987).

A few prominent houses like Biji Sura house also known as Kota Duyong was adorned with various forms of Arabic calligraphy depicted on several carved panels fitted above doors. For example, the carved ventilation panel found on top of the doors of rumah ibu and bedroom (see Figure 9) represents Quranic verses derived from surah Yasin that read as ‘Peace!-a word (of salutation/greeting) a Lord Most Merciful’ in the style of Arabic script called Thuluth. It is enclosed by the embedded semi-circular structural frame as a
border. The symmetrical repetition (mirrored-image style) of the same calligraphy motif and pattern on both sides of the panel creates a sense of balance and consistency in composition. Apparently, the unique character of the carved component is in the intertwining movement of the calligraphic elements that embrace the non-relief surface of the rectangular panel. In many cases, calligraphic elements were usually found in isolation or in complementary with the floral motifs.

It appears that Arabic calligraphy motif was only applied on ventilation panel fitted above doors. A possibility is that the motif of calligraphy possesses Quranic verses which are supposed to be located at a higher position.

3.3.5 Mixed Motifs and Its Configuration of Pattern

Apart from motifs of flora, geometry and calligraphy, combination of these motifs are also apparent on different types of carved components including ventilation panels, railing panels, door leaves, gate leaves and window bracket. For example, the rectangular panels (Figures 10a and 10b) represent a combination of two different types of motif. In Figure 10a, a plant motif in a meandering feature encircles the Arabic calligraphy as a central element. The calligraphy is depicted in a Thuluth script written as Abu Bakar As-Sidek who was one of the prophet’s companions. The meandering plant is represented in a complete pattern emerges from the top and bottom sources. This motif is portrayed in a naturalistic feature and depicted as a growing plant with an intricate and complex carving. The depiction of calligraphy as a focal element and surrounded by the floral motif creates a sense of variety and contrast.

In sum, the study found that figurative elements either in abstract or real-life image was never applied as carving motif on any type of carved component from the timber houses. This suggests that motifs of flora, geometry and Islamic calligraphy or in combination of these were the principal types of compositional elements in the woodcarvings which adorned the houses from the states of Kelantan and Terengganu. The least used of the four is calligraphy. Relief carving with floral motif was mostly found on single ventilation panels fitted on top of windows, doors and walls either in vertical or horizontal rectangular layout.

4. DISCUSSION

The first research question is on the types of carving motifs applied on the differing forms of carved components found in the traditional timber houses. A woodcarving was a decorative panel used as the house components where
carved details like motif, pattern and form of incision and perforation have been integrated within the specified shape, size and dimension. Motif is the main element in any piece of woodcarving (Wan Mustapha, 2009). For example, patterns of floral motif usually comprise of flowers, leaves, stems and tendrils are arranged to create the overall compositional elements in woodcarvings. The woodcarvers have responded to the pristine beauty of natural plant by preserving it in forms of woodcarving with the best way whenever they can. The name for floral motif was usually derived from the original plants. However, some motifs are without name because its depiction is based on the woodcarvers’ imagination (Norhaiza, 2008; Wan Mustapha, 2009).

Application of flora as carving motif was not arbitrary; it represents meaning and conforms to explicit or even implicit rules as evident in many carved components found in the study. The floral motifs perhaps entailed a bigger recognition as local taste as compared to the other types of motifs. Nevertheless many examples of carved components from the study testify to the strong influence of floral-based ornament for the houses through the early nineteenth and sometimes into the middle of twentieth centuries.

The findings also suggest that the natural-inspired ornamentation in the Kelantan and Terengganu houses was culturally and religiously restricted to the plant based-motif. This is evident in the widespread use of the living and imaginative floral motifs in the carved components with an absence of figural representation. Apart from these, the form of Arabic calligraphy had been on the Islamic message in the cause of Allah with special emphasis on ethics and moral, as evident in the ventilation panel found in Biji Sura’s house. This religious message intertwined with natural elements as an ornamental device. The conveyance of the sacred message in an attractive manner could invite viewer’s attention whilst serving as an invoking art piece. The Muslim chose calligraphy in aesthetic expression because it is based in beauty of form and this beautiful form is free from a representation of any object (Ishtiaq, 1981). Meaning of the specific ornament involves its formal and technical aspects which were influenced by the regional, social and religious variations of the people who created and beheld them (Bear, 1998).

The art of woodcarving certainly serves as an evident of woodcarvers’ expression and ways of communicating their thoughts (Norhaiza, 2008; Wan Mustapha, 2009). Many components were equipped with balanced design especially those with floral composition. Balanced composition was created by symmetrical repetition (mirror-image composition) and it was common means of achieving unity in composition which can be seen in many forms of the carved components. This suggests that the Malay woodcarvers were driven by
their passionate interest for symmetry. Thus, the use of balanced design could also be considered as the artistic tradition of the Malay craftsmen.

The second research question concerns the pattern of regularity of the carving motifs with respect to its styles, patterns and uses developed in the carved components which signify regional identity. The findings indicate that awan larat has become the recurrent floral pattern in the woodcarvings. Its consistency in design is one of the earliest examples of the carefully controlled decoration that has become the hallmark of the Terengganu and Kelantan woodcarvings. A possible reason is that these panels were produced by a few master craftsmen who were originated from the same region and was hired by the several house owners to fabricate their dwellings with the carved components in distinctive carving features. Apparently, the panels with this type of floral composition serves as one of carving archetypes originated from this region and imitated by several craftsmen with their individual artistic approach. The differences in the forms of carving composition and the deployment and depiction of motifs reflect the craftsmen’s individual translation based on their imagination and creativity. However, their artistic translation and creativities were guided by the traditional concept in the formation of the carving pattern and composition. According to Wan Mustapha (2009), an ability to apply the traditional concept in carving works is vital apart from having logical thinking and creativity. These are the main criteria to be possessed by the craftsmen in order to produce their art work with novel and aesthetical sense.

Meandered or spiraled pattern carvings with relief or non-relief floral motif was mostly found on ventilation panels fitted on top of walls, above windows and doors. This 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. Farish and Eddin (2003) note that awan larat has been the most popular design pattern employed in Malay art.

The intricacy and complexity of carving suggest a certain degree of skillfulness and creativity of the traditional craftsmen in the fabrication of the carved components (Muhammad Afandi, 1995; Norhaiza, 2009; Wan Mustapha, 2009). For example, the horizontal rectangular panel found at the external wall of Wan Mek’s house as illustrated in Figure 6 has carving in quadruple overlaps character represents the intertwining of the plant motif with complex arrangement of elements gives almost a three-dimensional look. Inasmuch, the configuration of patterns consisting of floral motif create a sense of visual intricacy and complexity with deep understanding and insight that capture the essence of the natural plant. Depiction and composition of floral motifs in high relief and carved with perforation contributed to a high degree of visual intricacy
and complexity (Farish and Eddin, 2003). The proficiency of shaping woodcraft with the skilful use of the media offers the craftsman a means of artistic expression (Jackson and Day, 2005).

Awan larat is probably a Malay model adopted by the woodcarvers since the nineteenth century or perhaps much earlier times. Its origin into Malay carving is unknown. Similarly, its widespread popularity in this region was also unknown. However after the woodcarvers had accustomed to the meandering pattern, they endured it highly. For example, this pattern was recognized and applied in a wide version as apparent in the panels shown in Figures 4a, 4b and 5. A relatively minor change in the shape and flow of the spirals permitted a radical change in the appearance of the pattern. This type of pattern has probably provided Malay woodcarver with both an anchor in tradition and a device for innovation. The meandering pattern serves as a design framework in the fabrication of woodcarving and it has indeed been applied by the past and existing craftsmen in their carving works.

The placements of the ornamental carved components as decoration in the house settings especially those in forms of ventilation panels fitted on top of walls, doors and windows and railing panels reflect the craftsman's adherence to the specific style of Malay architecture. Consistency in its architectural forms and patterns of motif, particularly flora motifs, results to the establishment of identity to the vernacular architecture of north-eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia. It is often seen that these carved components with the certain degree of visual complexity were usually placed on top of walls, windows and doors above the eye level of the viewer to give a greater impact to the carving whilst serving its practical function. Similarly, the railing panels especially fitted at full-length windows give visual impact at different eye level although it is normally adorned with less complex carving. It is apparent that the placement of these carved panels on the main façade of the houses represents a certain mode of ornamentation for the earliest type of Kelantan and Terengganu dwelling architecture which had reached over seventy to a hundred years old. The design of the houses stands out clearly with the carved panels as complementary elements to the house overall form. It is apparent that the form of carvings was kept within certain dimensions and configurations in relation to the shapes of the wall and together they form the image of regional house architecture. The placement of carved panels on the walls especially at rumah ibu probably denotes the importance of space utilization of this particular area of the house. The placements of the carved components were certainly fixed within the specific arrangement and significant functions and uses.

It seems that the traditional Malay craftsmen used the compositional principles including symmetry, repetition and unity, which provide them with
structural guidelines for the design and treatment of visual forms and elements in their carving works. The recognition and understanding of these principles by present and future generations of craftsmen are important. Understanding of the knowledge by the craftsmen is significant because not only their levels of artistry and technical skill could determine the distinct characteristics and features of woodcarving which are considered as regional identity. Hence the identity could be preserved and the tradition in the making of woodcarving could be practiced by the present and future generations. In order to achieve this and prevent from losing its identity, the traditional creations and knowledge of woodcarving should be restored to the handful of experts and masters of the crafts and should be inherited by the subsequent generation of woodcarvers in a continuous manner.

Sustaining Malay architecture identity particularly the one from the north-eastern region requires mutual efforts from woodcarvers, architects and housing developers. The findings of the research provide a set of design blueprint in the art and craft of woodcarving that could become a significant framework. It suggests that there had been a strong association between woodcarvers in Kelantan and Terengganu in the past. This phenomenon suggests an existence of a network of production and purchasing of the carved components between the craftsmen and the owners of the prominent houses. This should happen in the recent trend in the building of modern Malay houses by continuing the use of traditional carving elements as part and parcel of building components. These houses are human dwellings not only made for people to dwell in it but also enriched with material traces from its lived past which has been passed on by tradition and apprenticeship. Consequently, this scenario would create an environment sustaining of its genuine Malay identity. Likewise, to make it sustainable in tradition, the application of carved components should be geared towards achieving its main objective which is for the promotion of the traditional design and not for the sake of commercialism per se.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, a variety of carving motifs in the carved components of Kelantan and Terengganu houses displayed distinctive visual features. The carved components were not objects crafted in a simple way but deeply anchored to the traditional principles which have been recognized from older traditions. These works are manifestation of artistic qualities and skillfulness possessed by the traditional craftsmen. Woodcarving is an item which is strong in definition of the character of the vernacular type which should be kept as it is. However the idea of work should evolve and develop instead of remaining as static and homogenous in character. Inasmuch, the advancement and
development should be guided and kept within the prescribe framework. This has been practiced by the Malay craftsmen throughout the ages as evident in the woodcarvings produced during the middle nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Its visual forms were crafted and subscribed by the craftsmen to be seen or used primarily in the domestic setting thus creating pleasant ambiance and in harmony with the regional identity.

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7. REFERENCES

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