

Application of Motifs Woodcarving in Preserving Its Authenticity in Istana Balai Besar, Kota Bharu Kelantan

Siti Aisyah Muhammad^{1*}, Normaisarah Mohd Rosdi²

¹College of Architecture and Design,
Prince Sultan University, 11586 Riyadh, KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

²Faculty of Architecture and Ekistics,
University Malaysia Kelantan, 16310 Bachok, Kelantan, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: A palace is the legitimate house of a noble monarchy or excessive dignitary. The palaces of the Malay Kings are derived from the architecture of the Malay houses but in a larger scale. However, since it was a government palace, its structure had to be changed to accommodate its dual functional structure. In addition to accommodating the king, the palace also functions as a hub for administrative work. Therefore, traditional Malay royal palaces were decorated with carved decorative elements depicting intricate carvings in specific patterns, shapes, sizes and arrangements. Various sculptural elements with specific characteristics were created depending on their location and the shape of the palace. The woodcarving as embellishment was created at the palace to symbolize the king's status. Motifs are considered one of the primary elements behind the creation of woodcarving and is visually incorporated into various arts and crafts categories. Motifs also plays an important role in a woodcarving composition. Therefore, this study aimed to present a research to explore the visual forms of motifs of the carved component in Istana Balai Besar, Kota Bharu, Kelantan. A qualitative research approach was used to collect data through an analytical review of measured drawings and reports of the Istana Balai Besar from the architecture gallery at the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), interviews with previous local woodcarvers and site visits to the selected palace. The final model confirmed that there were four types of motifs, namely flora, geometry, cosmos features, and Arabic calligraphy carved in two and three compositions together with perforated and embossed types of forms and it can be concluded that the floral motifs are the types of motifs that dominated the woodcarving at Istana Balai Besar.

Keywords: Woodcarving, motifs, palaces, royal woodcarver

1. Introduction

Numerous research on Malay woodcarving and the preservation of local customs, designs, techniques, and the origins of this woodcarving has been done in the past by previous scholars, and it seems there has been a long-standing interest in appreciating traditional heritage. The invention of woodcarving was intended to support and improve Malay culture's artistic endeavours. The practice of traditional embellishment by local Malay woodcarvers is linked with carving. A distinctive tradition can enhance a region's sense of belonging. Wood carving's legacy should be preserved, passed down from generation to generation, and treasured [1].

The principal element of a woodcarving consists of motifs, patterns, philosophy, sources, incisions, and decorative patterns. Noor & Khoo [2] also agreed that Malay woodcarving's physical form is defined by its motifs, designs, source, decorative manners, techniques in creating the panels, and incision underlays between the lines and curves.

Traditionally, before beginning to carve, the woodcarver will evaluate the motif that will be chosen based on the proper technique for the type of wood and the part that will be carved [3]. Hence, in traditional woodcarving, motif is employed aesthetically as the primary component and is crucial to many different forms. In arts and crafts, a motif is a repeating shape or theme in a pattern or design [4]. A motif also was described as a design that is regularly combined to make a pattern in fabric or another type of material, such as timber or another material [5]. A motif in a design is a key design feature or pattern used in crafts such as painting, carving, and ceramics. Since choosing a motif with intricate features demands the woodcarver to show their talent and precision, the motif of the woodcarving panel is vital to its intricacy. Based on this consideration, a study on traditional woodcarving at Istana Balai Besar has been developed. This article aims to analyze the motifs used in the woodcarving application at Istana Balai Besar, Kelantan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Istana Balai Besar

Istana Balai Besar is the sacred palace for the descendants of the Kelantan Sultanate and this is where all official ceremonies and royal customs take place from 1845 until now. The first official ceremony was held with the *Surat Sejabat* or recognition from the King of Siam to Sultan Muhammad II. The content of this *Surat Sejabat* is the confirmation of Tuan Senik Mulut Merah as Sultan Muhammad II by the Great King of Siam, who is also the patron of Kelantan. Sultan Muhammad II was also given the title Pia Lecha Kelantan by King Siam [6].

The late Sultan Muhammad II constructed this traditional timber royal palace with 175 000 square feet in 1844 (1261 Hijri) to replace Istana Kota Lama, Kelantan's old primary government edifice in Gunung. Since the 19th century, Istana Balai Besar has served as the residence of Kelantan's rulers. It was now officially known as the Office of the Sultan of Kelantan. Istana Balai Besar is known for its vast front hall, throne, and collection of royal instruments belonging to the King of Kelantan. Sultan Muhammad II built Istana Balai Besar to replace his palace on Saba Island, which floods and riverbank erosion had damaged.



Fig. 1 - Istana Balai Besar Site during the era Sultan Muhammad II [4]

The palace's location was chosen based on its accessibility at the time, as it was neither too far nor too close to the Kelantan River, where traders used to do business, and the notion that the neighbouring Calumpang tree was magical. The Malay people at the time thought that when a Calumpang tree bloomed, it would prevent flooding in the surrounding area.



Fig. 2 - Istana Balai Besar present perspectives

After the Istana Balai Besar was completed, the inhabitants termed it 'Kota Bharu' in association with 'Istana or a new city that was completed'. Over time, this designation became a household term and was adopted as the official

name for Kelantan's state capital, Kota Bharu. Istana Balai Besar also represents the King of Kelantan's institution, which is magnificent in the center of the state capital of Kelantan [6].

2.2 Traditional Malay Woodcarving

The Malay Palace is regarded as the first architectural work based on psychology and the highest spiritual humanistic philosophy applicable to daily life [7]- [10]. A palace known as an Istana in Malay is erected for the ruler or king of Malaya's several states. Traditional Malay Royal Palaces are remarkable architectural constructions in Malaysia that serve as an essential and distinguishing emblem of the kings and royal families. Traditional Malay royal palaces have served a variety of important functions in addition to serving as royal residences and administrative centers for the Sultanate [11]. Traditional Malay Royal Palaces are significant architectural legacies serving as residence and administration places. Wood carving is a kind of art that originated in the Malay population, particularly in the Malay Peninsula, and has since merged with it. During the time of the old Malay kingdoms, most Malay monarchs, their families, and chieftains lived in carved-timber palaces or dwellings. The aristocracy and the palace employed craftsmanship, especially the art of carving, as a sign of authority [10]. Thus, wood carvings are used as symbols for nobles and kings, and the courtiers act as the ones that evoke the glory of this art [6]. Istana Balai Besar is a traditional Malay palace composed of wood with exquisite carvings highlighting exceptional craftsmanship. Woodcarvings were used in traditional Malay vernacular palace architecture to accentuate the hierarchy of space, wealth, social rank, and authority for the people to observe [12]. The traditional wood carving theoretically based on Malay society symbolism and traditions eventually earned a particular position in the palace as a consequence [13]. The carved panel was developed for monarchs with the highest design qualities to reflect ideals and status. Hence, the intricate and massive timber woodcarving panel that located at royal traditional palace of Istana Balai Besar was designed to express the symbolization of royal status of the kings and its aristocrats.

Carvings of varied shapes and designs depicted beauty in these palaces and therefore Malay rulers had skilled craftsmen in their palaces. The craftsmen supported themselves purely by their talents, which were promptly recognized by their clients, who included Sultans or members of the nobility, and thus reflects the peak of traditional Malay woodcarving. When this group elevated the craftsmen's social standing to that of royal sculptor [14]. During the start of the Malay government's reign, it became necessary for the government to dwell in a home loaded with sculptures. As a result, the kings employed their own craftsmen or carvers to embellish their palaces. A significant number of cultural villages were constructed near the royal grounds at the period. The greater the number of ornaments owned by the kings, the higher their position or rank in the eyes of the people. The elaborate structural designs in woodcarvings indicate great social rank in the Malay culture [15]. Malay palaces use adornment as a visible statement of wealth, prestige, and power. These brilliant craftsmen or royal woodcarvers, who dwell on the palace grounds under the patronage of the sovereign, will provide the Sultan with the most magnificent carvings for the palaces and other goods such as weapons and crafts [16]. The Malay palace displays riches, rank, and authority to the people via ornamentation. A sultan frequently displayed his or her dominance during those times by decoration [17].

2.3 Elements of Malay Woodcarving

Woodcarving is a procedure that involves the ability to carve a solid plank or block into relief and non-relief components, which can only be learned through apprenticeship. It manifests the craftsman's imagination for botanical, geometric, calligraphic, animal, and cosmic elements, resulting in abstract yet tangible products [18]. It symbolizes the region's architectural identity and the stylish patterns of the region's artisans. From an intangible perspective, it demonstrates Malay craftsmanship in architecture, devotion to God, and a contribution to society [19]. Based on an interview with a well-known woodcarver, Noorhaiza Noordin [15] postulated that the basis of traditional carving refers to the processing and filing of the six main elements, namely the source, motif, pattern, decorative style, technique, and philosophy.

Generally, a woodcarver will apply one or more than one of five motifs consisting of flora, fauna, calligraphy, geometric, and cosmos [18]. Floral motifs are woodcarvings' most prominent and recurring decorative patterns [20]. The motif will then be translated from its abstract form into an organic shape with elements such as *daun sibardayang*, *daun pengasuh*, tendrils, stem, and flower buds.

2.4 History of Woodcarving Motifs Development

Evolution is a term that is used to refer to the processes that produce history. The Malay Nusantara region is rich in culture and history. Malay wood carving history goes way back to the country's establishment. But over time, it evolves according to the ideology of the people. The first is animism, followed by Hindu-Buddhist ideology, and the third is Islamic influence [20] and supported by [21] that Malaysia has gone through various cultural, artistic, and religious development stages. Prior to the advent of Islam, there were three primary sources of nature motifs in Malay traditional craft: floral (plant), fauna (animal), and cosmic (universe).

Each time a new religion enters the land, the culture will also experience changes or perhaps some new additions. Faith shapes people's lifestyles, affecting how they talk, rule, write, trade, and even express their creativity [21]. A

religion greatly influences the motifs seen in Malay wood carving. Table 1 shows the motifs comprise a symbolic meaning in their original Hindu-Buddhist contexts, which have been passed down to the present.

Table 1 - Evolution of motifs before and after the presence of Islam [22], [23]

Pre Islam (Before 14 th Century)	Description	Post Islam (Post 14 th Century)
<i>Dewa</i>	It appears fully equipped and thinks it will make its owner invincible during combat.	<i>Tuhan</i>
<i>Kala</i>	An unruly creature allegedly punished for eating himself, Shiva later overturned the judgment and turned it into a Protector.	<i>Punca Bunga Ukir</i>
<i>Makara</i>	<i>Makara</i> has a fish-like body and head, and its mouth is joined to an elephant's trunk.	<i>Sulur Bayu</i>
Mount Meru	Hinduism refers to God.	<i>Head</i>
<i>Stupa</i>	It represents the earthen stack in the Indian cemetery and is a representation of Buddha entering Nirvana.	<i>Buah Buton</i>
<i>Pohon Beringin</i>	The naga or dragon is another animal rendered everlasting in Malay woodcarving.	<i>Pohon Budi</i>
Padma/ Lotus	A floral scent	<i>Bunga Tunjung</i>
<i>Naga</i>	Not applicable for motifs	Discourage in usage
<i>Garuda/ Jentayu</i>	In addition to being known as Vishnu's chariot, the garuda was also used to transport the Malay king and queen in ceremonial processions.	<i>Petala Indera/ Gagak Sura</i>

3. Methods

In this study, three sources of data collection were applied: from secondary sources, observation, and analysis, and lastly from a survey, which interview methods. All data collected will be applied for data analysis.

Generally, a typical qualitative approach for gathering data is the interview. In-person interviews are used to gather data for the study questions. Therefore, the researcher selected to interview with a professional craftsman, Mr. Muhaimin Hasbollah from Pahang. In addition, Mr. Muhaimin Hasbollah carries the title of Adiguru, master craftsmen and is an expert in producing contemporary products with combination in injecting the philosophy into modern design. Besides, methods used were collection of data on elements of woodcarving from literature review on existing journal by previous researchers, unpublished thesis and books alongside the documentation of measured drawing carried out by previous student from the Faculty of Architecture and Ekistics (FAE) from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). Lastly, site visit to Istana Balai Besar was conducted for on-site verification on motifs applied to each woodcarving composition.

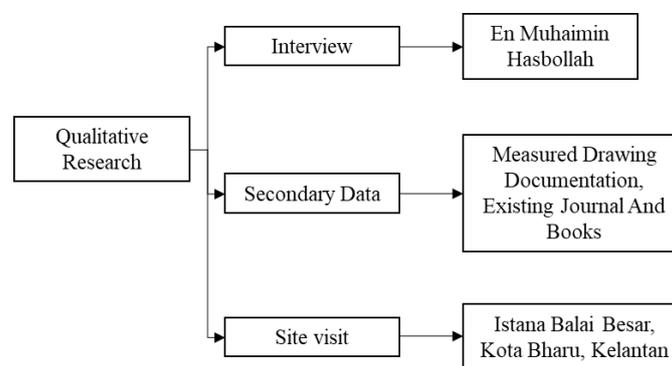


Fig. 3 - The methods applied in conducting this study

4. Results and Findings

From the field survey, woodcarving at Istana Balai Besar also functioned as a fenestration for air and sunlight fenestration so that the circulation within the palace is smooth to give comfort to the atmosphere of the building due to the small openings within the palace walls. Aside from assisting the cross circulation of the palace, the intricate and massive woodcarving at timber royal palaces of Istana Balai Besar was designed to symbolize royal status, acting as a genius loci and a beauty expression. Another type of woodcarving located at Istana Balai Besar is the *jejala*, which works as a special decoration, but in this modern-day, the *jejala* no longer serves as the palace air ventilation system

but more as the sunlight penetration system. Some of the *jejala* that still remain to this day at the palace are *jejala tebuk bunga cina*, which was taken from the Chinese leaf flowers and was located at the Balairung Seri, which is near the throne. Next is *jejala tebuk ladu*, which is situated at pagar musang, below the windows, and these types of *jejala* allow wind and light to flow into the palace from the bottom of the wall. The last *jejala* is *jejala bunga salah penyangga* that is located at *balai bujur* walls with the Jawa flower pattern.

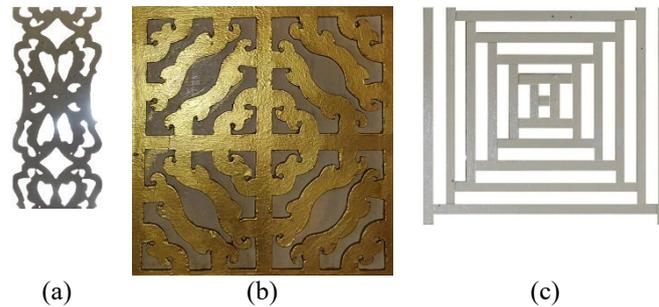


Fig. 4 – The example of *jejala* (a) *Jejala bunga salah penyangga*; (b) *Jejala tebuk bunga cina*, and; (c) *Jejala tebuk ladu*

Floral motifs dominated the most from the inspirations namely *bunga kembang cina*, *bunga kiambang*, *bunga ketam guri*, *bunga bayam peraksi*, *bunga kerak nasi*, *bunga tampuk manggis* and *ketumbit*. Table 2 shows a woodcarving panel with a complete pattern located in the kitchen area of Istana Balai Besar with its element composition. At the same time, Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of woodcarving motifs at Istana Balai Besar.

Another type of motif applied was a combination motif of flora and calligraphy, designed into a *ladu* pattern. In Kelantan, Terengganu, and Negeri Sembilan, calligraphy is used as a focal point on the walls and ventilation panels of homes. As for the Istana Balai Besar, the calligraphy translation is the names of four caliphs with circle-shaped flower motifs, *bunga bayam peraksi*. They were Abu Bakar As-Siddiq, Umar Al-Khatab, Usman Bin Affan, and Ali Bin Talib. Another type of woodcarving motif at Istana Balai Besar is the cosmos. It can be seen from the upper ceiling of the void, namely *lebah bergantung* and it was made to match the gold-painted plaster ceiling.

Table 2 - Example of woodcarving element in a woodcarving composition in Istana Balai Besar

	Motif	<i>Bunga kerak nasi</i>
	Pattern	<i>Awan larat</i> in complete pattern
	Incision	<i>Silat dada tuma & silat minangkabau</i>
	Technique	Embossed carving with incision
	Source	Flower

5. Discussion

5.1 The Application of Floral as Carving Motifs

The most applied motifs at Istana Balai Besar is flora, the most popular and long-lasting motif types in arts. From the interview conducted, Muhaimin cited that for flora motifs, the sort of plant used depends on what is readily available close to the home compound. Furthermore, woodcarving with floral motifs can convey these cultural messages and values. Malay woodcarvers prefer the usage of creeping plants and flower-producing plants because of their aesthetic appeal. Flowers and plants are intrinsically beautiful and complicated in their natural forms. Woodcarving artists are frequently inspired by nature's enchanting beauty and strive to imitate it. The chosen plant as a motif as due to its uniqueness of plants itself. The traditional sculptor will then translate the plants' features before choosing as the motifs. Creeping plants and blooming plants are preferred by Malay woodcarvers because they are attractive to the eye and suited for carving. The stylization of the motifs not only enhanced their beauty but also revealed the secret of their application. The chosen motifs were useful in the treatment of various diseases and illnesses. Herbaceous plant function knowledge is typically passed down orally from generation.

In Istana Balai Besar, one of the motifs chosen was *bunga kembang cina*, which stands for purity. The peculiarity of this flower is also known as Ban Jien Jieng, which is Malay for "the young throughout the year". It is recognized for its enduring qualities, including tolerance and wisdom. In Malaysian culture, it is also seen as a sign of kindness and is frequently utilized as women's decor. *Bunga kembang cina* motif is symbolic of attractiveness, prosperity, and good fortune. The motif incorporation into woodcarving panels represents a desire for wealth and well-being. It also

functions as a form of visual communication and narrative. The arrangement and composition of the floral elements on the woodcarving panel can communicate specific messages or descriptions. Therefore, incorporating specific flowers or symbols may represent themes such as love, harmony, or unity. The repeating layer in a composition shows its complexity and intricacy, making it a focal point reflecting the woodcarver's craftsmanship in creating the best visual presentation for the king.

Meanwhile, floral themes can communicate stories, myths, or meanings. For instance, *bunga kiambang* is often correlated to the harmonic culture within the life of a society, as can be seen in the Malay idiom *biduk lalu kiambang bertaut*, which means to fight and to make peace once again. *Bunga bayam peraksi* is famous for the traditional medicine, whereby the liquid from grinding and filtering the whole plant believed to treat dengue fever and improve blood platelet count.

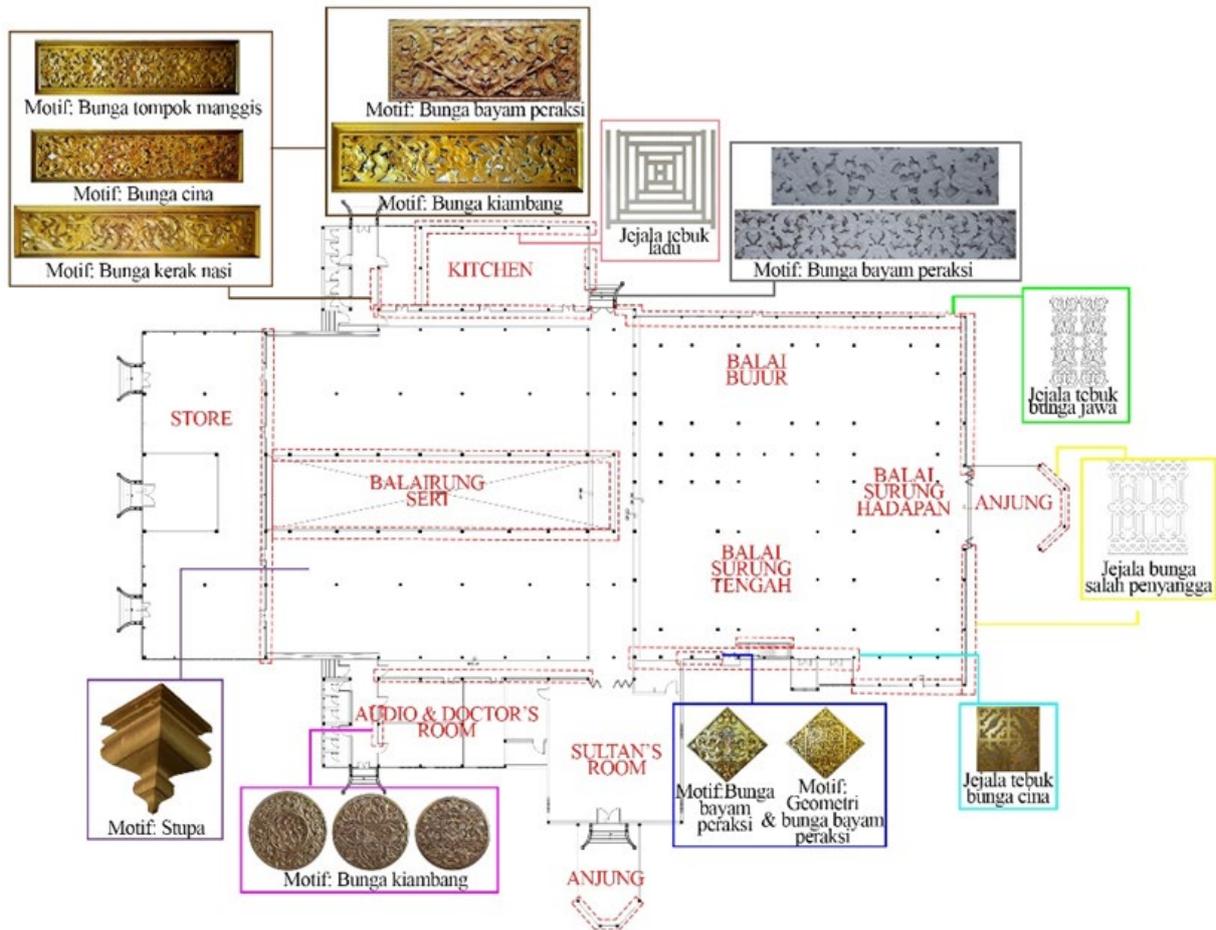


Fig. 5 - The placement of woodcarving motifs application at Istana Balai Besar

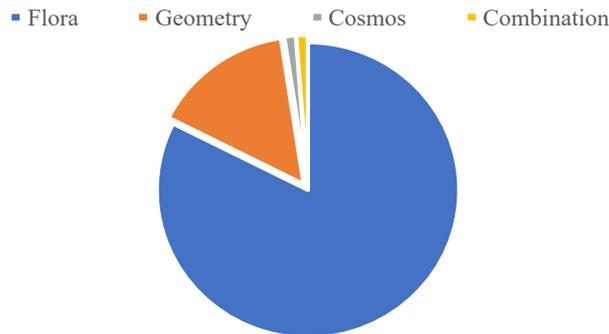


Fig. 6 - The frequency distribution of motifs applied in woodcarving at Istana Balai Besar

5.2 Geometry as Carving Motifs

The ornament located at the wall of Balairung Seri and *ukiran darjah kebesaran* at the royal throne featured non-figurative motifs like geometry. This non-relief perforated panels have distinct qualities characterized by two different layouts and geometrical designs. Geometric woodcarving needs high precision, making it an excellent choice for talented craftsmen to demonstrate their abilities. *Jejala bunga salah penyangga* also applied the geometry motifs whereby the vertical stripes dominate the railing panel in a repeated pattern and geometrical flora in horizontal lines. On the other hand, the compositional features in a circle at the exterior wall of the audio and doctor's room provide a sense of visual continuity. The geometric pattern, for the most part, repeats the same motif to create a sense of harmony. Another geometry motif at Istana Balai Besar is the *tebuk ladu* shape. This shape was designed to symbolize excitement, freshness, and being alive; despite not wilting, it has harmony-related features.

5.3 Cosmos as Carving Motifs

The application of cosmic motifs to woodcarving panel can inspire and astonish. It may motivate viewers to contemplate the universe by telling them of its beauty and intricacy. At Istana Balai Besar, the cosmos motifs are *lebah bergantung* located at the ceiling of Balairung Seri. Its pyramidal design, wide base, slope side, and solitary peak at the top have all been interpreted in various cultural and historical contexts as symbols of power, authority, and unification. The pyramid represents the metaphorical imposition of order from above as viewed from the top.

5.4 The Combination of Carving Motifs

Apart from motifs of flora, cosmos, and geometry, a combination of these designs can be seen on various types of carved components at the interior wall of *balai surung hadapan*. Combining motifs allows the woodcarver to produce a visually rich and exciting composition. Different motifs, such as floral and geometric designs, can complement each other and give layers of complexity to the piece. Besides, the juxtaposition of contrasting motifs can create an aesthetically pleasing contrast. For example, the interplay between intricate floral designs and precise geometric shapes can be visually striking. The ornament is made up of two different sorts of motifs, which are calligraphy and flora motifs. The use of calligraphy written by Abu Bakar As-Siddiq, Umar Al-Khatab, Usman bin Affan, and Ali bin Talib is a focal point, surrounded by a floral theme, producing a sense of contrast and variation.

6. Conclusion

In short, Malay vernacular architecture involves intricate woodcarving that affects both architectural and non-architectural elements. It stands for an ethereal yet concrete expression of a craftsman's talent, as they artfully translate aspects from the natural world onto the canvas of timber. Notably, the designs adorning the carved components of Kelantan's Istana Balai Besar display distinct visual features, including a rich tapestry of flora, geometry, cosmic themes, and intriguing amalgamations. The lush and organic forms of flora themes dominate the woodcarving designs, ushering in a profound connection with the natural environment.

The conclusions of this extensive investigation undoubtedly contribute significantly to the noble goal of conserving our royal heritage. They serve as a historical record and a guidepost for future woodcarvers, providing essential insights into these intangibles yet treasured gems of our cultural heritage. In doing so, they bridge the gap between the past and the present, ensuring that the delicate and intricate art of woodcarving continues to thrive, evolve, and be treasured for future generations.

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