

Water Transports Art and Symbolism in the Malay World: Types of Bangau Decorations on Traditional Boats from the East Coast of Malaysia

Norazilawati Abd Wahab¹, Nur Alia Shamsul Bahri², Arba'iyah Mohd Noor², Mohd Firdaus Abdullah³, Nurshuhada Mohamed¹

¹Faculty of General Studies and Advanced Education, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Terengganu, Malaysia

²Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

³Center for Research in History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Malaysia.

mfa@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

Boat ornaments are an important art form for the Malay community, particularly among coastal fishermen in the East Coast states of Terengganu and Kelantan, Malaysia. The most prevalent motif used to decorate the body of the boat is the bangau or stork. The bangau serves not only as an artistic and decorative element but is also believed to imbue strength and spirit to the fishermen who sail the seas. This study explores the collection of bangau motifs found on traditional boats in the East Coast states and examines the symbolism behind these motifs within the broader context of the Malay maritime world. Employing a qualitative method, data were gathered through interviews with local craftsmen and experts. Secondary sources, including journals, books, and archival materials, were also consulted, with resources drawn from the National Archives of Malaysia, Terengganu Branch, the Terengganu State Museum Library, the University of Malaya Library, and other institutions. The findings reveal five common motifs used by Malay fishermen in the East Coast region: wayang kulit (shadow puppets), serita panji (Panji tales), makara (plant-inspired motifs), sulur daun (leaf tendrils), and birds. These motifs carry deep symbolism, reflecting elements of art, culture, and the aesthetics of the Malay community. Typically positioned at the front of the boat, either on the prow or along the sides near the bow, the bangau serves a practical function by holding the sail or oar when not in use. Symbolically, it is regarded as a protective figure that ensures the boat's safety and brings good fortune to fishermen. This study highlights the unique artistic and cultural significance of these motifs and their deep connections to the values and beliefs of fishing communities in Terengganu, Kelantan, and potentially other parts of the Malay world.

Keywords: Bangau Collection, Art, Symbolic, Boat, East Coast

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Introduction

The study of water and its related elements is vast, covering various aspects such as water imperialism, water politics, water heritage, and water transportation (Abdullah et al., 2023; Abdullah et al., 2024). Water being a critical resource,

has shaped not only the livelihoods of communities but also their culture, beliefs, and identity (Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2020). For instance, in traditional Malay communities, boats serve not only as a means of transportation but also as a symbol of connection to the natural world, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices. As the main transportation method for fishing communities, boats also play a role in water heritage, representing the techniques and craftsmanship passed down through generations (Shamsul Bahri et al., 2024). Additionally, water transportation, especially in coastal areas, has been a significant mode of economic and cultural exchange, further emphasizing the importance of water in shaping the history and development of maritime communities (Ali & Abdullah, 2024). Boats are water transportations which can be categorised as highly aesthetical craft produced by the Malays. In the Malay world, boats come in varying shapes and sizes. To compare one type of boat to another, the name of the boats are put into different types such as *perahu kolek*, *perahu jalur*, *perahu payang*, *perahu sagur*, and others. From the Malay classical literature resources such as *Sejarah Melayu*, *Misa Melayu Tuhfat al-Nafis*, *Syair Siti Zubaidah* and *Syair Perang Siak*, there are 82 names of traditional Malay vessels (Abdul Wahab, 2013). Even *Syair Tawarikh Zainal Abidin III*, written by Tengku Dalam Kalthum (TDK), includes discussions on the boats in Terengganu, highlighting the deep historical and cultural significance of water transport in the region (Abd Wahab et al., 2022).

In the East Coast region, the use of boats in daily life, especially for the purpose of fishing, has become a significant tradition in the community in the past and at present. For people from all walks of life, the boat has always been the most useful mode of transportation in cultural and historical aspects. Fishermen in the East Coast states rely entirely on these traditional boats to earn a living. Since the boat is part of their lifeline, it has to be equipped with 'spirit' and brings 'luck' or bountiful catch of fish. It is interesting to highlight the fact that boats were crucial to the fishermen in the past as it represented their connection with the sea and the community's livelihood (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018). Some of the boats made by the boat makers for the fishermen in the East Coast are known as *Bedar*, *Sekoci*, *Jalur*, *Payang* and *Pinis*: these boats are among those which were widely used among them (Abd Wahab, 2014). Most of the boats produced would be carved and painted with colors according to specific themes and motifs of which some of them appeared distinguished on the boat.



Figure 1: Bedar Carved and Painted with Distinctive Themes and Motifs

Source: Abdullah, M. F. (2022). *Bedar Carved and Painted with Distinctive Themes and Motifs*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terengganu State Museum (Photograph). Terengganu State Museum, Terengganu, Malaysia.

Adorning the boat with decorations was not done solely for aesthetics reason: these decorative items became the “guardian” to the boat that was built (Mohd Nasir & Asyaari Muhamad, 2018). One of the most interesting decorations made for a boat is the *bangau*. *Bangau* is a piece of wood which is carved to shape like a stork poised to catch fish as food. From time to time, the decorative *bangau* has developed and evolved especially in the aspect of art and symbolism and it keeps being used by the Malay fishermen when they go out to catch fish. Hence, this study aims to discuss the types of *bangau* found on traditional boats in the East Coast. The researcher would also like to identify the symbolism behind the decorative item (*bangau*) created by the Malay fishermen community in Terengganu and Kelantan, at that time.

Literature Review

Research in the aesthetics and motif of *bangau* from the East Coast has not received substantial academic attention. This scarcity is partly due to the challenge in locating and documenting the use of *bangau* among the Malay coastal communities, especially in Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang, where many such practices are fading or undocumented. Nevertheless, there are several important studies that help illuminate the symbolic and aesthetic significance of the *bangau*. Mohd Nasir and Muhamad (2018) provide one of the most direct discussions on *bangau* as a key decorative object on East Coast fishing boats. Their work highlights *bangau*'s symbolic role in signifying strength and endurance, serving as a metaphysical protector and spirit of the boat during perilous fishing journeys. This symbolic function aligns with Abdul Wahab and Nik Abdul Rahman's (2013) study, which identifies *bangau* motifs as carriers of deep cultural and spiritual symbolism, derived from various Malay visual traditions including *wayang kulit*, the *panji* stories, and traditional motifs such as *makara*, *sulur daun*, and stylised avian forms. Each of these visual elements encodes values, cosmological beliefs, and behavioural ideals held by the Malay community, particularly coastal artisans who imbued their craft with moral and philosophical meaning.

The spiritual and psychological elements of the *bangau* are further reinforced through colour symbolism. Coatalen (1982) and Ismail (2014) demonstrate how colour usage, particularly blue, red, and yellow, was not merely aesthetic but deeply embedded in the cosmological worldview of the Malays. Blue, for instance, signifies water and abundance, and its frequent appearance on boats suggests both environmental adaptation and spiritual invocation of sustenance and safety. The symbolic placement of the *bangau* at the bow of the boat underscores the performative aspect of Malay boat making, where visuality becomes part of a ritualistic assertion of human nature relations. Furthermore, the *bangau* does not stand alone. It is structurally supported by *okok* and *caping*, which, as described by Coatalen (1982), form an interlocking system of wooden elements that combine function and symbolism. These parts are not merely technical; they represent layered relations between humans and the sea, between artisans and ancestors, and between individuals and their community's collective memory.

Scholars like Winstedt (1961) and Skeat (2020) have long documented the rich material and symbolic culture of Malay seafarers, but they often overlooked the aesthetic dimensions of boat ornaments like the *bangau*, treating them as peripheral rather than central to understanding Malay maritime ontology. More recent cultural anthropology literature, such as those by Gibson (2021) on Indonesian maritime cosmologies and by Manguin (1986) on the art of boat building in Southeast Asia, affirms that decorative features on boats are often imbued with protective and animistic functions, consistent with the broader Austronesian worldview. This opens comparative possibilities, situating the *bangau* within a regional tradition of carved boat adornments that link seafaring, ritual, and identity.

Harun (2002) and Noor & Khoo (2001) have also discussed how artisanal boat building among Malays involves tacit knowledge inherited through oral traditions and apprenticeship, making the *bangau* not just a product of aesthetic desire but of deep intergenerational transmission. The neglect of *bangau* in mainstream academic literature may reflect a broader bias in Malaysian historiography and art history that tends to prioritise courtly and Islamic motifs over folk or animist traditions. This tension deserves further exploration, particularly in understanding how visual culture from below, such as the *bangau*, challenges conventional hierarchies of Malay art. In sum, while current literature is limited, existing works reveal that *bangau* operates at the intersection of aesthetics, cosmology, craftsmanship, and ecological consciousness. Further studies are needed to map its evolution, regional variants, and sociopolitical meanings, especially in the face of modernisation and the decline of traditional boat building practices.

Research Methodology

In all, the data for this study are divided into two: the primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through field work and interviews. Thus, the researcher had interviewed several relevant figures who were directly involved with *bangau* carver and the expert who could provide information on the object. All data gathered in this study were analyzed through descriptive statistics that is the method of arranging, explaining, and summarizing of available information to enable the researcher to conclude the symbolism and art of the *bangau* art.

Primary Data

Interview

This method enables the researcher to delve deeper into and further elaborate the chosen issue. The researcher had met several important informants who were able to aid in gathering the research data. They were individuals who were directly involved with the decorative item *bangau*. Interview sessions were carried out from June 2022 until January 2023. Below is the list of individuals who were interviewed:

Table 1: List of Names Who Were Interviewed in this Research

Informant Names	Location	Date
Baharuddin Che Husin	Kemasin, Kelantan	November 6, 2022
Mohd Yusoff Abdullah	Pulau Tongkang, Tumpat, Kelantan	November 7, 2022
Khairuddin Ibrahim	Terengganu State Museum	January 1, 2023
Ramlah Latif	Terengganu State Museum	January 1, 2023
Alex Lee Yun Ping	Terradala, Terengganu	January 3, 2023

In addition, observation and evaluation were other methods which were applied in the study of relevant *bangau* collection and other decorative items found on the fishermen. Five *bangau* artifacts were studied and the researcher's observation on the collection was focused on themes, motifs and the symbolism behind the motifs created. Conceptually, themes are ideas or main thoughts which exist in an artwork. Themes which were used for *bangau* carried certain meanings which could be understood by the fishermen community in the East Coast. Based on the research conducted, there were five themes of *bangau* which were used by boatmakers in the region namely *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets), *makara* (in the form of plants), the story of *panji*, *bangau daun* (*sulur*) and birds (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018).

In addition, this study also applied the library research method, and the researcher went to the National Archive of Malaysia, National Archive Terengganu Branch, Terengganu State Library, Terengganu State Museum, Terrapuri Heritage Village, Kg. Mangkuk, Setiu, Terengganu and libraries at public universities around the country and others to gather sources which could support the data collection. This research began with the heuristic process which was collecting data and relevant resources. Next process was resource review which meant the resources obtained would be compared with other records such as books, journals, conference papers, thesis, educational trainings, and others. It is a crucial process in determining the credibility and validity of the resources collected as well as to filter inaccurate information that was not relevant to the study. Lastly, the data went through analysis process which involved summarizing the interview data which were supported by other primary and secondary sources. This process would produce a synthesis of all resources mentioned. Consequently, the findings would be clearer, more precise and interesting (Shamsul Bahri & Abd Wahab, 2022).

Results and Discussion

The Making of *Bangau* on Boats from the East Coast

In the Malay world, fishing has always been a significant economic activity (Rohazid & Abdullah, 2022). Many changes have taken place to the surroundings, but the rivers and sea are still one of the significant sources of income and economy because in the past, when roads were not paved, boats, vessels and fishing activity became the link between the community as well as the main source of economy to sustain the local community in Malaya (Ali & Abdullah, 2024). The era in which fishing was the source of income was felt as the Malay community transformed and shifted towards a different orientation with the promise of a bigger profit. With better profits and more functions, fishing began to develop especially among the communities at the coastal areas (Abd Wahab, 2022). Since fishing was significant to the communities in the East Coast states such as Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang, the bootmakers were drawn to produce a *motif* which could give them the motivation when they were at the sea for quite some time. Based on the history of sculpture in Malaya, the art developed around 200 years ago. Symbols and inspiration found on the carved motifs in the past offer clear images which had become the inspiration to the Malay community then (Abdul Wahab et al., 2022). Therefore, it was possible that as the local art continued to develop, the artists were driven to create various motifs on several parts such as the staircase, rooftops, walls as well as the boats (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018).

Even though by the 13th century Kelantan and Terengganu were influenced by the Islamic teachings, from the aspect producing cultural materials, there was an assimilation of Hindu-Buddha, Islam, and the local art (Abu Bakar et al., 2022). Based on historical facts, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang as well the Pattani region in Southern Thai, were among the states which received strong influence from the Hindu-Buddha teachings (Manan et al., 2022). The construction of Borobudur Temple, Prambanan, Bujang Valley and Angkor Wat were also linked to the spread of Hindu-Buddha teachings (Khan, 2017). At that time, most Malays from Kelantan and Terengganu hailed from the generations of Pattani-Malay who were among the pioneers in Peninsular Malaysia. Hence, almost all traditional cultural crafts from Kelantan and Terengganu originated from the Pattani-Malay Kingdom and Langkasuka since the first century (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018).

From the perspective of use and importance of boats, there is a possibility that it involves other practices too. Based on the context of traditional beliefs, the sea is a world with its own power (Ali & Abdullah, 2024). For most fishermen, boats were not just a means of transportation to catch fish, they were also used as the symbol of connection between lives at sea and the community. Names such as *Payang*, *Kolek*, *Buatan Barat*, *Gelibat*, *Sekoci* and *Bedar* were some of the types of boats which were commonly used by the fishermen in the East Coast regions. Most obvious was that each boat was adorned with some decorative items which were carved and coloured with certain themes and colours. Several decorative items stood out when placed on the boats. Nevertheless, these items were not created for decorations only: they functioned as the 'guardian' to the boats. Hence, among the east coast fishermen, there was a belief that when they were at sea, 'good' and 'bad' goddess were required as 'guardians' (Hussein, 2009). The equipment which was deemed as sacred or protective were several types of decorations which were put at the front of the boat such as *bangau*, *okok* dan *caping*. Decorations which were commonly found on the fishermen boats at the East Coast regions were mostly *Payang*, *Bedar*, *Sekoci* and others were the *bangau* (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018).

Types of Decoration on Malay Boats from the East Coast Regions: The Past and Present

Bangau

Bangau refers to a piece of wood which is carved to shape like a crane with a curved neck. It was put at the front of the boat and at times, on the left side. *Bangau* was used to tie the sail when it was not used (Abdul Wahab, 2013). When boats were widely used among the east coast fishermen, the 'good' spirit to catch more fish was in demand. For instance, in Terengganu, where the beach stretched up until 130 miles compared to Kelantan which had only 60 miles, the fishermen actively used the boat as their main transportation to catch fish (Abd Wahab, 2022).

Therefore, most of these fishermen could have relied on 'the spirit' as support to gain bountiful catch when they were at the sea. For this purpose, the *bangau* was used as a symbolism and strength to the fishermen to catch plenty of fish at that time. The image was used by the fishermen as the source of their strength to catch a lot of fish. From the Malay community's point of view, the crane that was perched on the buffalo back while waiting for fish clearly indicated that it was possible for it to catch more fish. Interestingly, there were some Malays in Kelantan and Terengganu who worked on paddy fields and at the same time, they were also fishermen. From their observation, the characteristic of a crane which often waits for the fish and later managed to catch enough of them, inspired their creative ideas to use *bangau* as a symbol of bountiful catch. Based on this observation, the shape of a crane with curved neck shaped like an 'S' was carved and put on the front side of the boat. They believed that when the *bangau* was put on the front side of the boat, more fish would be caught (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018).



Figure 2: A Standing Crane (left) and the Carved Wooden *Bangau* (right) is Waiting for the Catch

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2023). *The Carved Wooden Bangau (right) is Waiting for the Catch*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terrapuri Heritage Village. (Photograph). Terrapuri Heritage Village, Kg. Mangkuk, Setiu, Terengganu, Malaysia. Also refer: Coatalen, P. J (1982). *The Decorated Boats of Kelantan*. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Based on Figure 2, it is apparent that the Malays had unique art because the decorative item was aesthetically produced. In fact, the Malay community was able to tap deep into the harmonious relationship between nature and a crane which awaited its catch which led to the creation of *bangau* in the form of an attractive carved wooden decorative item. The shape of a crane on the front of the boat signified the relationship between culture and the Malay community as well as with the sea and the spirit of the boat was strong (Asmawi, 1957). Nevertheless, from the religious point of view, the creation of art of *bangau* motif did not mean the community was blasphemous. the decoration was used as fishermen's source of motivation as well as used as support for mast and *galah panjang* (long rod). These mast and long rod would be hung at the *bangau* which was placed at the front part of the boat while waiting for the catch that the fishermen would bring onto the vessel (Abdul Wahab, 2013).

Okok

According to Mohd Nasir (2018), among the fishermen community in Terengganu and Kelantan, *okok* is known as the offspring of *bangau*. *Okok* has a flat surface and is in contrast with the *bangau*. It was also smaller from *bangau* ranging from 2 inches to 2 feet difference. The artistic theme on *okok* was often represented in colours which were found on *bangau* since it was considered as the latter's offspring. It was common for *bangau* and *okok* to be given bright and strong

colours such as red since it signified strength and bravery. Fishermen were brave as they gallantly faced the vast ocean to catch fish and they were well-known for being hardworking. “*Kuala Kemaman, nelayan hari ini, belayar sekoci, di laut, ada hari pagi, ombak tidak bicara, ada pak mentari, meredah ombak gelora*” (Ali, 1993). It is also important to know that the word *okok* which was termed by the Malay boat makers in the East Coast was taken from the word *bongkok* (hunched) or in the local Terengganu dialect *ongkok*. The word was brilliantly chosen by the Malay boat makers to portray the fishermen who were often in hunched position especially when casting the net and pulling it out to collect the bounty (Shepard, 1963).

Based on the research also, close inspection of Figure 3 below would show that *okok* was also given the portrayal of the shadow puppets to further elaborate on the daily lives of East Coast fishermen. *Okok* and a character from the shadow puppet known as *Semar* were immortalized in the symbolism behind the creation of *okok* on the front side of the boat. *Semar* was portrayed as a character with dark skin, shirtless and he tied a patterned black sarong around his waist and a pouch for a shawl dangled on his shoulder. When he moved, *Semar* appeared to be hunched or stooping. Generally, to the fishermen community *Semar* portrayed one of them at sea, shirtless with a patterned sarong and a pouch for shawl on his shoulder to protect him from the scorching sun. *Semar* was a character that symbolized a hardworking individual who toiled under the hot sun to earn a living but did not really experience any hardship. Thus, *okok* was created to appear as hunched and placed in front of the fishermen's boat in the East Coast region because it was an adaptation of a fisherman who was patient, resilient and managed to avoid adversity even when he depended entirely on the ocean for his living (Mujiyat & Koko Sondari, 2002).



Figure 3: *Okok* (left circle) is a Depiction of the *Bangau* Offspring by the Malay. While the *Semar* Character (right) is Portrayed as a Hunched Fisherman.

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2023). *Okok* (left circle) is a Depiction of the *Bangau* Offspring by the Malay, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terrapuri Heritage Village. (Photograph). Terrapuri Heritage Village, Kg. Mangkuk, Setiu, Terengganu, Malaysia. Also refer: Mujiyat, M. & Sondari, K. (2002). *Album Wayang Kulit Banjar*. Indonesia: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Culture and Tourism Development Board 2002.

Caping

The final part on a *bangau* is known as *caping*. *Caping* is a piece of wood that is tied on a keel, and it remains on the front part of the boat. It appears to the public eye as a semblance of a banyan. Banyan tree looked like a mountain from afar and it was considered as extremely symbolic to the community at that time. This was due to the fact that the tip of a mountain was considered as the peak of success and a better life (Mohd Nasir, 2018). *Caping* was also installed permanently on the boat's keel, and it could not be removed from its original place. Among the local community, banyan tree was deemed as firm and strong as its roots were deeply riveted into the earth: *caping* symbolized this function as it provided strength of the banyan tree (Abdul Wahab et al., 2014).

Hence, it is possible that *caping* on the front part of the boat was closely related to the main activities of the fishermen community (Baco & Stephen, 2020). *Caping* was depicted as life at the highest peak and personal development of the fishermen of that era. After the arrival of Islam, the sharp point at the tip of *caping* symbolized the relationship between the Creator, Allah SWT and nature which was able to channel the 'energy of life' or the 'spirit' in sustaining life based on the marine resources (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018).



Figure 4: *Caping* (in the circle)

Source: National Archive of Malaysia

The Shape of *Bangau* on Traditional Boat from the East Coast

Cultural diversity and acculturation among the Malay community in the East Coast had caused the creation of various exquisite art especially those found on the boat's decorative items. Wood carvings and the use of boats in the community were manifested into the numerous decorative themes for the fishermen vessels which carried some symbolisms with meanings specifically known to the people. In fact, in the art of traditional Malay carving, cosmos became one of the main elements in the choice of design theme for *bangau* on the boats from this region. However, the theme and motif which were found in the designs of *bangau* inspired by images derived from the pre-Islamic years which were strongly etched in the community in the form of animism, Hindu-Buddha, and Islam. (Mohd Nasir & Asyaari, 2018).

The Shadow Puppet Form

Using art through the theme of shadow puppet characters such as Mahabharata and indicated that the *bangau* carver manifested the local traditional to inculcate the spiritual elements on a boat. Boats which commonly used the shadow puppet themes were known as *Payang* and *Sekoci*. Most of the characters depicted provide a clear meaning where they were known to be firm and brusque. It was stated that many fishermen used *bangau* with shadow puppet themes such as Mahabharata or the character known as Maharaja Burus Serawa (Mahabharata) because he was known to be sincere, brilliant, and humane in life (Hopkins, 1993). This shadow puppet character portrayed the strength and intelligence of the local fishermen as they were wise when they had to earn their living from the sea. In Pulau Gajah, Kelantan for example, there are still some collections of *bangau* with the shadow puppet themes. Based on the researcher's observation, both characters were deemed as "heroes" and fishermen at sea were considered as the master and experts in catching fish in the open sea (Alex Lee Yun Ping, Interview, January 3, 2023).



Figure 5: Shadow Puppet Character Maharaja Burus Serawa (Right) was One of the Most Preferred Characters by the Fishermen in the East Coast Region to put in Front of their Sekochi Boat.

Source: *Shadow Puppet Character Maharaja Burus in Sekochi Boat*. (1984). Malaysia: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan.

The *Panji* Story Theme

In addition, *bangau* also came in the form of *panji* theme. One of the characteristics of the story of *panji* was great adventure and arduous journey as these demanded the individual to be strong at heart until his goals were achieved. Some of the characters with high ranks or positions based on the *panji* story were *ratu* such as Ratu Sang Geruh (Ratu Istana Jajar), Ratu Mataram, Ratu Sujuwandu dan Ratu Gegelang. All four *ratu* (princess) were believed to possess immense power and highly esteemed status. In fact, with inner strength, these *ratu* were portrayed as those with big dreams in life. In the East Coast regions, *bangau* with the *panji* story theme were extremely favoured since most fishermen believe that these *ratu* were once humans with strong willpower when they were at sea. Qualities such as inner strength which was further enhanced by the symbolism of hardworking nobles had affected the fishermen's wives (Alex Lee Yun Ping, Interview, January 3, 2023). Fishermen's wives from the East Coast regions depended entirely on their husband's earnings. To represent the inner strength of Malay women from this area, the *panji* characters were most suitable (Mohamed, 2016). These Malay women worked hard to assist their husbands financially to sustain their lives. According to Isma'il (1997), unfederated states especially Terengganu and Kelantan were the best examples to find women's who were involved in the economic activities. Most of these women assisted their husbands to lift the catch, later they would dry the fish, and put them under the sun. Once all the fish were completely dried, the women would pack them and sell them to the locals. Other than these activities which were related to fishing, the women were also involved in various businesses: *Malay women's involvement was in agriculture, commerce, weaving, fishing, and basic handicraft production*" (Isma'il, 1997). Therefore, the *panji* characters were close to the heart of the community as they could relate to their qualities, and they symbolized inner strength. It was this inner strength that had helped them in handling their economic activities and businesses based on marine products such as *keropok*, *budu*, *belacan*, anchovies and others to earn a living and these was recorded in Beting, Lintang, Besut Terengganu. (Abd Wahab, 2022).



Figure 6: *Bangau* Theme: The *Panji* Story

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2023). *Bangau Theme: The Panji Story*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terrapuri Heritage Village. (Photograph). Terrapuri Heritage Village, Kg. Mangkuk, Setiu, Terengganu, Malaysia.

Makara Shape

Other than the shadow puppets and the *panji* story, there were images of *bangau* which were infused with the elements of flora known as *Makara*. *Makara* provided an image and art element which were a bit different than the shadow puppets and the *panji* story. This is because the *makara* image was more organic in nature and it focused more on plants. From the perspective of symbolism, flora has always been part of the Malay community. Nature is not only praised for its beauty but is also considered as God's greatest creation (Abdul Wahab et al., 2022). By using *makara* as the shape for *bangau*, the boat maker was able to create a motif which brought calmness, happiness and appreciation to the Creator who made the earth. This form of art was crystal clear because to the Malay community that depended almost entirely on the marine life, they were still able to be contented and blessed with their rizq (Khairuddin Ibrahim, Interview, January 1, 2023).

Based on the *keladi* and *peraksi* motifs from the *makara* part in the picture provided below, it is apparent that they were meaningful to the Malays. Both motifs meant good life and the need to establish human relationship and nature. Based on the picture given, the elements of plants such as *sulur bayur* (leaf tendrils) was a common motif of which the plant climbed up and shaped like the letter 'S' with the young shoot at the tip (Abu Bakar & Utaberta, 2013). *Sulur Bayur* is an expression of art which was often used by the Malays as it provided a pleasant sight. In fact, the climbing plant signified a divine force to the extent that one must work to accept success (Ramlah Latif, Interview, January 1, 2023).

Producing art and shape of motif which were used on *makara* were based on ethics which had long existed among the fishermen community. There were also some taboos and ritual practices which the fishermen had to observe when fishing was done. Thus, it was suitable for *makara* shape to take the form of flora motifs for decorations on the boat as they provided added values which were highly esteemed among the fishermen community. It was also because to have the goal to succeed, particularly in getting a lot of catch (Abdul Wahab, Nik Rahman & Ramli, 2014).



Figure 7: A Collection of *Bangau* with Makara Images

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2023). *A Collection of Bangau with Makara Images*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terrapuri Heritage Village, Kg. Mangkuk, Setiu, Terengganu, Malaysia.

The Shape of leaf tendrils (*Sulur*)

Other than the *bangau* theme which revolved around shadow puppets, *panji* story and *makara*, there were other superior designs from the Malay community in the East Coast. One of them is *bangau* with the theme of leaf or *sulur*. Leaf or *Sulur* theme for *bangau* were created to be used on the front part of the boat usually the *kokel* type, especially those who lived in the vicinity of Kemaman, Terengganu. The motif looks simpler to create and there were speculations which said that *bangau daun* theme originated from sea horses or the locals called them as *unduk-unduk*. For the East Coast fishermen too, the sea horses represented calmness and strength in strong current. Therefore, it was highly likely that the unique seahorse would be used by these fishermen when they went to the sea (Mohd Nasir & Muhamad, 2018). *Sulur* was not only used on the fishermen boat alone: it had been applied to fishermen vessels such as *Perahu Pinis* and *Perahu Bedar*. Most of the art of from *makara* images were simple and free from patterns (Abdul Wahab et al., 2014).

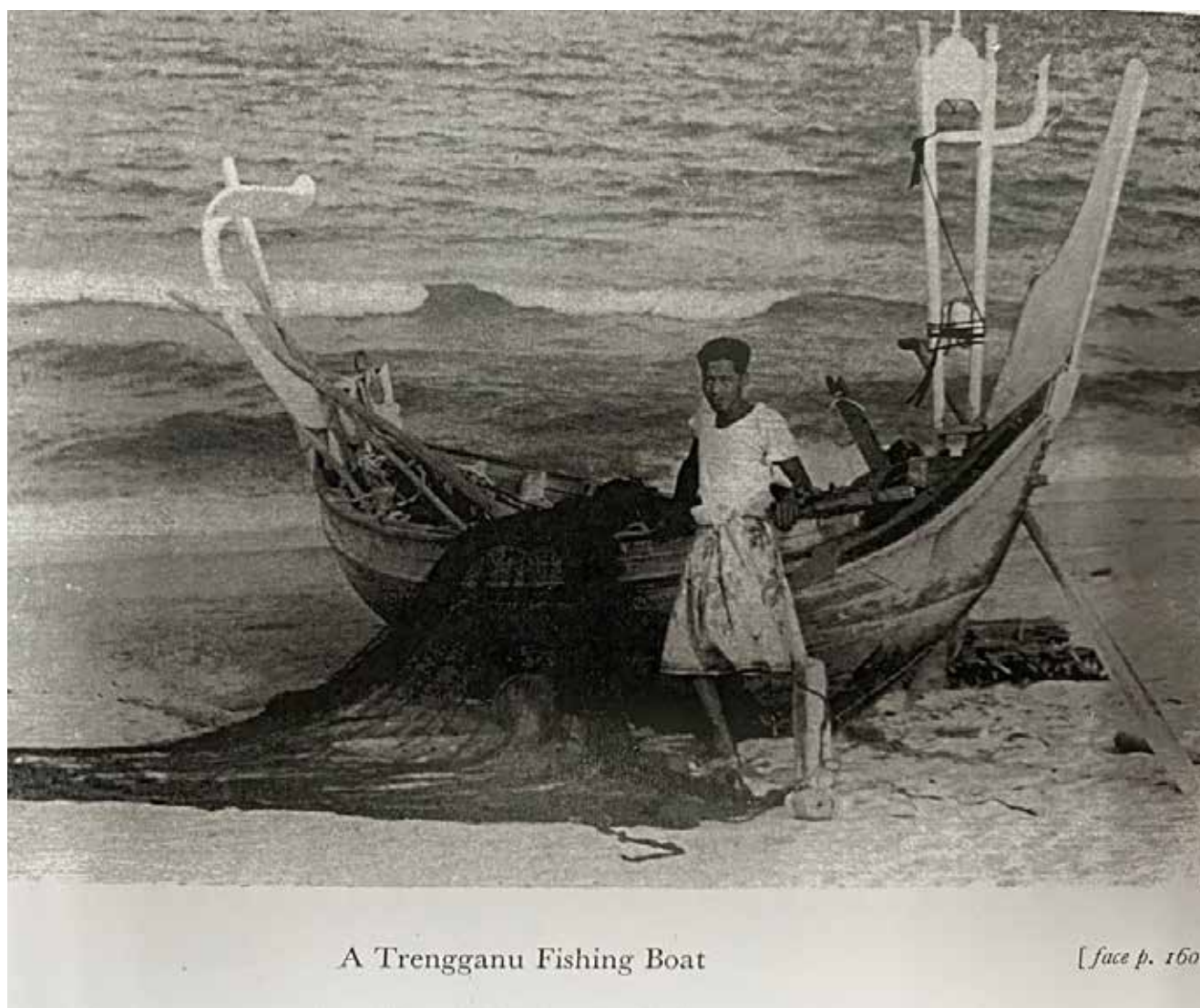


Figure 8: The East Coast Fishermen Placed *Bangau* at the Front Part of *Kolek* Boat. Also Visible was a Fisherman who was Mending the net while Wearing *Batik Sarong* with Flower Motif.

Source: Winstedt, R. (1961). *The Malays a Cultural History*. Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD: London.

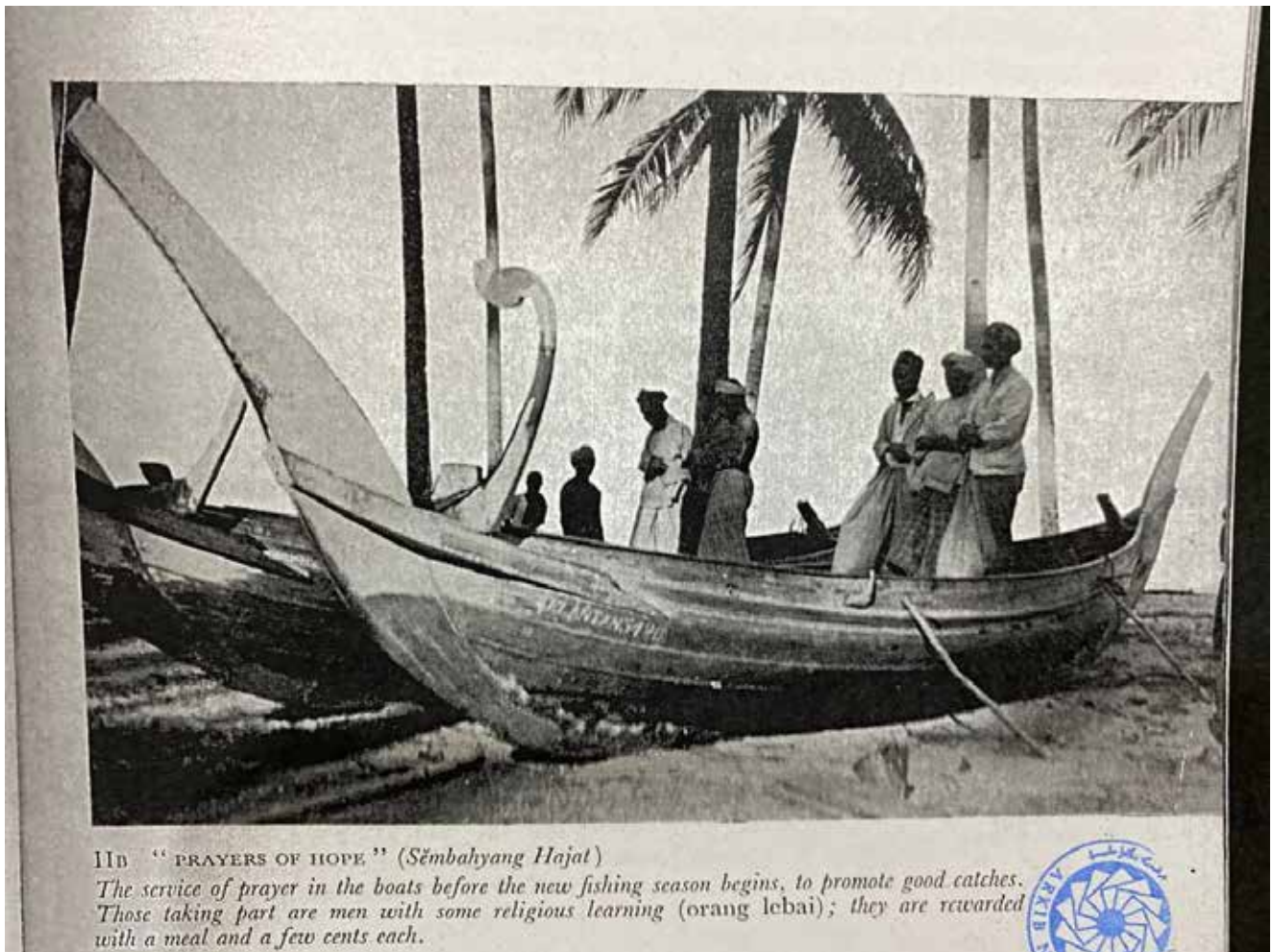


Figure 9: The East Coast Fishermen were Praying on Kolek Boat. At the Front Part of The Boat, there was a *Bangau* (leaf) Placed.

Source: Winstedt, R. (1961). *The Malays a Cultural History*. Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD: London.

It is important to stress that even though the Malay community used *bangau* on the body of the boat they used, the art created was used as decorations. Art and its creations were not limited to only for decorations: it represented a lasting will in acknowledging that every creation comes from Allah SWT. For instance, the fishing community did observe the 'eternal truth, willingness and respect' to God and made ibadah as their main practices. Big vessels which were built by the Malays were not mainly for fishing purposes, but they made it easier for the Malays to perform their five prayers before they went to the sea.

Bird Shape

Based on the research conducted, the shape of a bird's head was one of the most popular choices among the East Coast fishermen especially those found on *Payang* and *Buatan Barat* boats. Bird heads were also used in other Malay art such as the hilt of kris, carvings on *congkak*, Malay headgear (*tengkolok*) and others. Since it became a trend to the Malay community, the bird head was also used and placed on the front part of the boat. From the aspect of history, the use of birds in the daily lives of the Malay community was quite common. Birds were not only considered as animals that were used to send messages, but they also symbolized loyalty to the owners, brought fortune and possessed inner strengths. Hence, this was the belief among the Malay community which led to the use of bird head shape on the boat as it was believed to represent protection when the fishermen were at

the open sea (Abdul Wahab et al., 2014).

The strength of birds as exemplified by the Malays was that humans too must act fast to earn a living. Fishermen were known to begin their voyage to the sea before *fajar* itself to get the most catch (Abd Wahab, 2022). Nevertheless, the shift in the form of *bangau* from ritual objects to cultural objects happened with the introduction of Islamic teachings. In fact, cultural objects were considered as unique among the coastal community because they came with their own philosophies which underlined their lifestyle at that time.



Figure 10: *Bangau* (The Eagle on the Body of the Boat in Terengganu)

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2022). *Bangau Theme: The Eagle on the Body of the Boat in Terengganu*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terengganu State Museum (Photograph). Terengganu State Museum, Terengganu, Malaysia.

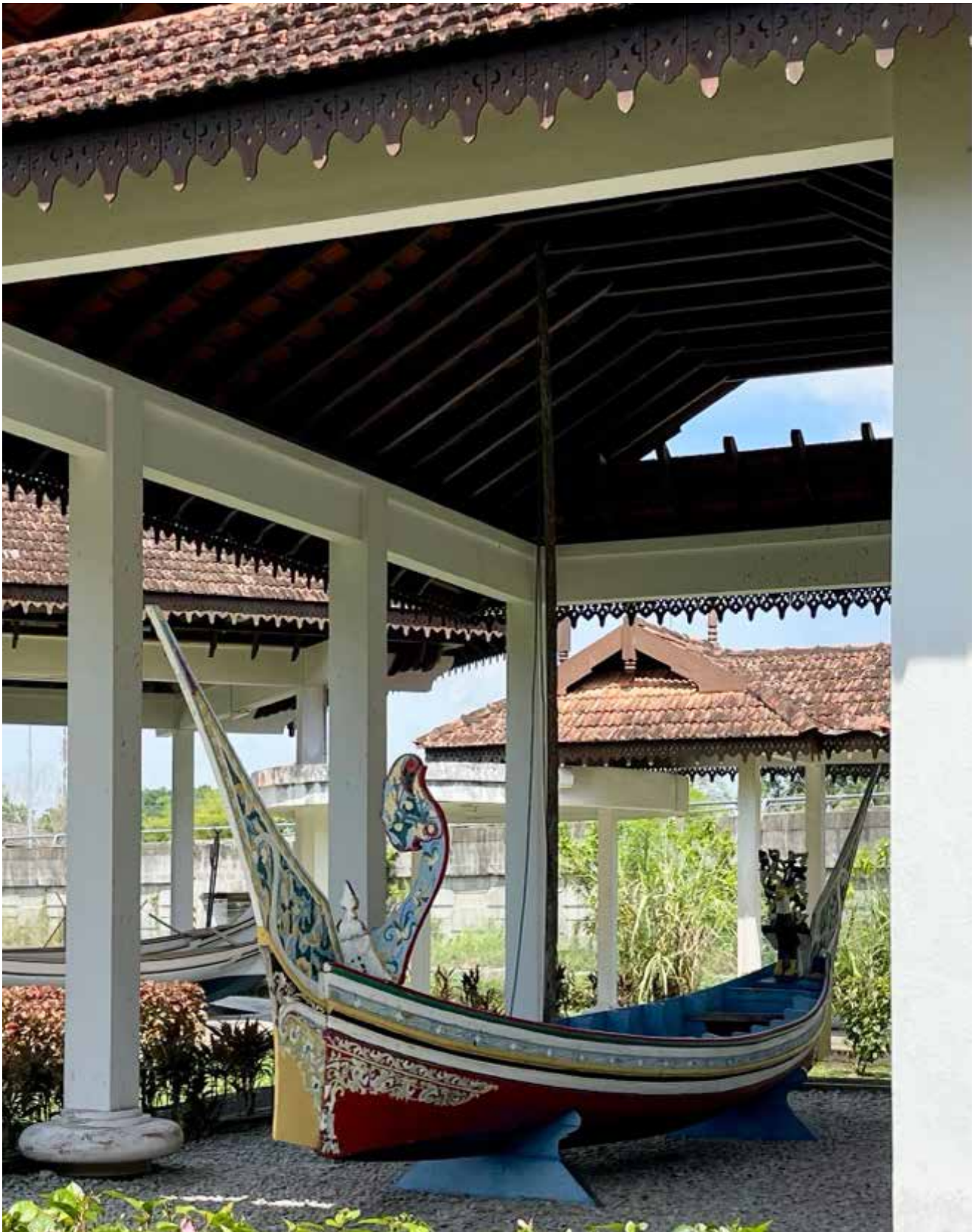


Figure 11: *Bangau* (The eagle on the body of the boat in Terengganu) - Front View

Source: Abdullah, M. F. (2022). *Bangau (The Eagle on the Body of the Boat in Terengganu) - Front view*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terengganu State Museum (Photograph). Terengganu State Museum, Terengganu, Malaysia.

The Effects the Malay Community Intelligence in the East Coast

The existence of various decorations on the body of the traditional boat

Each decoration found on the boat has its own narrative and myths. The art and design of these decorations were influenced by the background of the woodcarver. All of them signified cultural influence which came together with highly valuable philosophies. After the arrival of Islam to this part of the world, the use of geometrical objects, plants and calligraphy were created. However, as time progresses, the use of fauna motifs such as land and sea animals were introduced to be used on the body of the boats (Abdul Wahab et al., 2014). For example, in Kelantan, the boats were not only adorned with images of *bangau*, but other animals were also chosen for the same purpose. This could be observed on the body of *kolek* boat which had highlighted an exquisite use of decorations for the *kolek* boat which were used for race. According to the interview with Mohd Yusoff Abdullah (2022) at Pulau Tongkang, Kelantan, there was no complete plan to decorate the body of the boat. Instead, the idea came naturally to the boat maker. For instance, the image of animals such as the red gaur and white horses clearly showed that these animals embodied the spirit of hardworking since they had been used as domestic animals for transportation in war and human communication. Moreover, these animals represented the concept of beauty, loyalty, strength, agility, dignity, and luxury as they were given away as gifts by the wealthy (Hairul Nisma Wahab, 2020).

Thus, it was possible for the boat maker in the past to use these animals as his muse and symbolism that represent inner strength to attain success. The uniqueness of animal images such as horses and gaurs which were found on the body of the boat were able to attract the interest of other community to use them in boat races. For example, there was a well-known *Pesta Air* (Water Festival) which took place in Kelantan at Kampung Tongkang Kelantan. The water festival on the coastal areas had given the opportunity for the public to watch the parade and competition of the decorated boats which were adorned with various carvings and art. At this festival, the boats would be carved with many images and carvings based on the customized orders. This event showcased boats with colourful carvings at the edge of Kota Bharu, Kelantan and it provided the public the change to watch the competitions and parades of most beautiful boats and race boats. Most common colours used on the boats were blue, green, yellow, and white (Baharuddin Che Husin, Interview, November 6, 2022). Based on the study, these colours have their own distinct artistic meanings and symbolism. For instance, blue is the colour that is often synonymous with nature and the sky. When the sky is clear, it means the weather is favourable and suitable for many activities. In fact, blue also means 'strong'. Green on the other hand means 'luck', yellow means *Daulat*, white means "the straight path" and black means "strong and influential" (Ismail, 2014). Based on the use of colours on the body of the boat, it is apparent that each one has its own esteemed value and symbolism. It is also said that these colors must be on the boat's body because it brings "spirit" and amazing strength to the participants who were involved in the boat race.

Due to the exquisite values found on a boat that was made, the Kelantan state government had come out with a program for boat race which would be entertaining to the public. Such program contributed to the boat maker as it urged them to produce high quality boats to fulfil the demands from the wealthy while earning a stable income at that time. Boats for race, for examples, were part of the government's initiative to promote local boats to a bigger market. Small boats or big vessels, the government aimed to ensure that boat makers would continue to earn their living from this industry while contributing to tourism economy (Assistant Advisers Journal Cmr. Mc.ff Sheppard, November 1932-November 1933).



Figure 12: Horse Motif (left) and Gaur Motif (Right) on the Race Boat at Pulau Tongkang, Kelantan

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2023). *Horse Motif (left) and Gaur Motif (Right) on the Race Boat*, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terrapuri Heritage Village. (Photograph). Pulau Tongkang, Kelantan, Malaysia.

The Existence of Creative Art and Colour Symbolism on the Body of the Boat.



Figure 13: A Very Unique Vessel which was Made by a Boat Maker in Terengganu which has Various Colours and Symbolism.

Source: Abdul Wahab, N. (2022). *A very unique vessel which was made by a boat maker in Terengganu which has various colours and symbolism, Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Terengganu State Museum* (Photograph). Terengganu State Museum, Terengganu, Malaysia.

Generally, most of the boats owned by the Malay community in the East Coast region are painted with various colours which made them very attractive. Other than those which are adorned with unique symbols such as birds, dragons, plants and others, some boats are made without any symbolism, but they are given just colours. From the perspective of art and creativity of the community in the East Coast states, most boats are painted with beautiful combination of colours. Some of the most common colours used on the body of the boats are yellow, red, green, and blue. As shown in Figure 13, these colours are synonymous with their daily life, and they had a huge impact on them. Yellow, for example, symbolizes the royals and the East Coast states have their own Sultans, they are highly respected by the locals. (Abd Wahab, 2022). The royal colour yellow, symbolizes the “esteemed

nobility” and a calming surrounding. It is akin to “the sound of the *nafiri* which erases the waves and vibrations of emptiness” Red means “the flame which is spreading and encouraging” and it also resembles the soft morning rays and the beauty of nature with its abundance of resources. In addition, the same colours can be found in the characters in the shadow puppet shows that are creatively made by the Malay community. These colours represented Sita Dewi, a character that always stands out and expressive in the eyes of the locals (Ismail, 2014).

In addition, the art in boat making brings forth the kind of nature available at the East Coast: there are tall coconut trees swaying in the breeze and emerald sea under the blue sky which draw one’s attention to the greatness of Allah SWT creations. Appreciating these natural wonders enable man to experience the close relationship between the world and the Creator. Nature in its glory is represented by blue and green painted on the body of the boats. Blue is often associated with the beautiful azure sky. Blue sky also indicated that the weather is good for ant activities and mankind is able to work to support their lives (Ismail, 2014).



Figure 14: Interview With Baharudin Che Husin in Kemasin, Kelantan About the Unique Boats Produced by the Kelantan Malay Community

Source: Baharudin Che Husin in Kemasin, Kelantan, Interview, November 6, 2022.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be stated that historically, the Malays have unique art which exudes their intelligence or also known as “*local wisdom*”. This could be observed among the Malays and the fishing community when they express their art of carvings and decorations not only on textile, houses, kris and copper items, but also on the body of their boats. Their artistic intelligence is expressed in their ability to use natural elements created by Him and turn them into something creative like *bangau*. From observing the norm of a crane or egret which is often perched on a buffalo waiting for its prey, the boat makers and wood carvers create an image of *bangau* and apply to it various themes such as shadow puppets, *panji* story, *makara*, leaf (climbing shoots) and birds. All of these *bangau* have their own uniqueness and symbolism which are integrated into the life of the fishermen as they also acknowledge them and use them on their boats.

Nevertheless, the application of *bangau* and other symbolism does not go against their beliefs in the Islamic teachings. Their faith in Allah SWT remain steadfast and would always be a priority. The East Coast Malays, including the fishermen community is known for their adherence to Islamic teachings in determining the path of their lives.

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Interviews

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