

# The Philosophy of Traditional Malay Ornamentation in Architecture: Preservation of Meaning and Culture

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## Abstract

*Traditional Malay ornamentation in architecture carries a rich philosophy that weaves together cultural identity, cosmological beliefs, and aesthetic values. While previous studies often focus on the decorative and stylistic features of Malay woodcarving, there is less attention given to the deeper philosophical and cosmological meanings, particularly those framed within Islamic visual culture. This study seeks to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional Malay motifs, exploring how they serve as vessels for cultural wisdom and spiritual philosophy. Using a qualitative material culture approach, the research draws on extensive fieldwork carried out between 2007 and 2020 at Masjid Kampung Tuan in Malaysia, as well as Masjid Agung and Istana Agung in Indonesia. This fieldwork is complemented by archival research, artifact analysis, and interviews with local communities. The interpretation of these motifs is guided by Syed Ahmad Jamal's theory of form and soul, along with the History of Muslim Art Tradition framework. The findings indicate that Malay ornamentation goes beyond mere decoration; it encodes values related to spirituality, social hierarchy, and cosmological balance. Through these motifs, a visual philosophy emerges that links art, faith, and community, illustrating a holistic worldview. This study contributes to the conversation on architectural heritage by showing that traditional Malay motifs act as living repositories of cultural identity and philosophical thought, shedding light on the preservation and ongoing vitality of Malay cultural heritage today.*

**Keywords:** *Traditional Malay ornamentation; Malay philosophy; Malay motifs; aesthetics; symbolism; Islamic art.*

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## Introduction

Traditional Malay architecture represents one of the most profound cultural heritages of the Malay world, characterized by intricate ornamentation that reflects not only aesthetic refinement, but also philosophical, spiritual and social meanings (Hosseini, Mursib, Nafida & Shahedi, 2012). Woodcarving, in particular, has long served as a medium through which Malay craftsmen expressed values of identity, belief and cosmology (Safar, Raman, & Hazali, 2022). Ornamentation in traditional Malay houses, mosques and palaces are therefore more than decorative

embellishment. It is a cultural text that encodes local wisdom, collective memory and religious consciousness (Noordin, 2005).

Despite its cultural richness, studies of Malay ornamentation have tended to emphasize form, style and aesthetic value rather than its deeper philosophical interpretation. Much of the existing research focuses on technical craftsmanship, superficial symbolism or functional aspects of design (Daud, Arbi, & Faisal, 2012; Harun & Samsudin, 2022; Karsam, 1999; Zakaria Ali, 1989). While these studies have contributed valuable insights, the discussions on Malay ornamentation are commonly reduced to static embellishment, with little attention to its function as a visual philosophy connecting material and metaphysical dimensions. There is a clear gap in how Islamic values are integrated into local artistic traditions. Many motifs draw not only from traditional animistic and natural sources but also reflect shifting cosmological and spiritual ideas (Othman, 1986). This study addresses that gap by examining Malay ornamentation through the perspective of Syed Ahmad Jamal's theory of form and soul (1992), paired with Hamidon's framework on Islamic art (2012). It argues that Malay motifs express a holistic worldview, linking physical forms to deeper spiritual meanings. The research, conducted in both Malaysia and Indonesia combines fieldwork, artifact analysis and interviews with local communities. The findings highlight the importance of Malay Islamic art, showing how these decorations play a vital role in preserving cultural continuity and shaping community identity.

## **Background of the Study and the Concept of Malay Traditional Architecture**

Traditional Malay architecture embodies a comprehensive cultural worldview that integrates functionality, spirituality and artistry. It transcends mere physical structures; houses, mosques and palaces convey a balance between human life, nature and divine order. These buildings serve as visible expressions of social identity, cultural values and religious beliefs (Nasir & Teh, 2011; Lim, 1987). A key characteristic of this architecture is the extensive use of wood, chosen not only for its suitability to the tropical climate but also as a canvas for detailed woodcarving and ornamentation. These carvings express profound philosophical, spiritual and social meanings by symbolizing core Malay values such as spirituality, morality and social harmony, thus acting as a bridge between past and present (Nasir, 2016; Yahya, 1995).

The roots of Malay woodcarving traditions lie in animistic beliefs, with motifs inspired by natural elements such as plants and animals, reflecting a deep affinity with the natural world (Ahmad, 2002). The advent of Islam in the 13th century brought new influences, leading to the incorporation of abstract patterns, Arabic calligraphy and geometric designs. This fusion created a distinctive blend of local cultural expression and Islamic aesthetics (Othman, 1986; Hashim, 2006). As a result, decorative elements in Malay architecture function beyond just as ornamentation, they also serve as symbolic texts that encode cultural memory, philosophical concepts and spiritual lessons. This synthesis underscores the role of Malay ornamentation as a living archive of heritage, identity and faith, highlighting the critical importance of woodcarving and ornamentation in the understanding of Malay architectural and cultural values.

## **Previous Studies**

Research on traditional Malay ornamentation in architecture reveals that decorative motifs serve as more than just as an aesthetic embellishment. The rich cultural, philosophical, and spiritual significance of Malay motifs truly captures the essence of the Malay identity and worldview. In their research, Kamarudin, Kassim, and Abdullah (2020) delve into the use of these motifs in urban architecture, highlighting

how designs featuring floral, geometric and cosmic motifs serve as vessels for cultural stories deeply connected to Malay spirituality and cosmology. Their study, conducted in Putrajaya, Malaysia, reveals how these motifs help maintain cultural memory and heritage even in modern settings, embedding sacred meanings and social values into the architecture. This showcases the profound link between art, faith and community. Kamarudin et. al., (2020) also explore roof decorative components of traditional Malay architecture, highlighting that carved motifs symbolize harmony and balance within nature and human existence. The motifs convey Malay cultural values, including humility, respect and devotion to Allah, the Creator. Here, architectural ornamentation functions as a spiritual expression, with the roof acting as a symbolic mediator, connecting the physical and spiritual realms.

Adlin Ahmad, Ab Aziz, and Abd. Aziz (2024) examined a traditional house known as *Rumah Warisan Hajah Kundur*, emphasizing the role of woodcarving motifs in shaping Malay architectural identity, particularly within the cultural context of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, where the house is located. Key features, including fascia boards (horizontal boards along the roof edge), gable ends (triangular wall sections at the ends of a sloped roof), *buah buton* (a motif prevalent in traditional Malay material culture) and structural poles, are examined not only as ornamentation but also for their symbolic, spiritual and cultural significance. Floral motifs, especially *sulur* (referring to twisting vines), *jantung pisang* (banana blossom) and *bunga teratai* (lotus flower), dominate the decorative repertoire. The text discusses the significance of traditional Malay carving motifs, which represent growth, resilience and purity, linking art with nature and spirituality. It highlights geometric patterns like diamonds and circles for their aesthetic and functional benefits, particularly in terms of ventilation and lighting. The *buah buton* is noted as a key element in Malay joinery that symbolizes cultural and cosmological ties.

Hussin, Baba, Hassan and Mohamed (2020) explore the philosophy behind these motifs, emphasizing that traditional woodcarving is rooted in cultural and spiritual beliefs. The motifs draw inspiration from nature, such as plants and animals, but are stylized to reflect a Malay worldview that prioritizes harmony. Ethical and religious guidelines inform the creation of these designs, steering clear of excessive realism in line with Islamic teachings.

The study indicates that these motifs carry deeper meanings, fostering values like humility and respect for the environment. Overall, traditional Malay decorative motifs, as described, serve as cultural symbols that preserve identity, transmit moral lessons, and highlight the connection between humans, nature, and the divine. They represent a holistic visual philosophy essential for maintaining cultural heritage.

## Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional Malay ornamentation and motifs in woodcarving in Malay traditional architecture, focusing particularly on how these motifs function as carriers of cultural wisdom, spiritual philosophy and social values. It aims to explore the intersection of the Malays cosmology and Islamic influences within the visual language of architectural decoration, revealing how these elements contribute to the articulation of identity, faith and community cohesion. Through a qualitative material culture approach, the study seeks to uncover the layered meanings behind the motifs beyond their aesthetic appeal, positioning them as active agents in the preservation and transmission of Malay cultural heritage in both historical and contemporary contexts.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design based on a material culture approach to interpret traditional Malay ornamentation as cultural texts carrying deep social, spiritual and philosophical meanings. Data collection took place in several phases from 2007 to 2020 at Masjid Kampung Tuan (Malaysia), Masjid Agung and Istana Agung (Indonesia). This was due to logistical and resource constraints. The images taken in 2007 represent critical visual documentation from the initial phase of fieldwork, capturing key architectural and ornamental details, which serves as baseline data supporting the triangulated nature of the study.

Research data were gathered through key informant interviews, an in-depth qualitative method in which individuals with direct knowledge or experience provide rich, detailed insights. Unstructured interviews were conducted with four informants: Wan Jaafar Wan Hassan (Informant A) who is a descendant of the Masjid Kampung Tuan founder; La Ode Hafidu (Informant B) who is a descendant of the Royal Buton family and tourism officer at Pulau Buton, and two local community members (one informant at each site) who are recognized elders with longstanding involvement in preserving and maintaining the cultural heritage of the sites. These community informants possess deep familiarity with the traditional motifs and their cultural significance, providing essential perspectives on the meanings and community values represented in the ornamentation.

Data saturation was achieved when interview data and triangulated sources such as visual observation, artifact analysis and archival research repeatedly revealed consistent themes, and no new significant information emerged. This ensured thorough and credible coverage of key topics.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Interview transcripts and observational notes were coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns related to spiritual symbolism, social hierarchy and cosmological meanings embedded in the ornamentation. Themes were developed by interpreting these codes within theoretical frameworks on Malay philosophy and Islamic art traditions. Triangulation with multiple data sources and member checking with an expert in Malay art history were used to ensure validity and trustworthiness.<sup>1</sup>

To clarify and summarize the thematic findings alongside data triangulation, a table is provided (see Table 1) to illustrate how themes were supported by various data types.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Summary of this Research

Theme	Description	Supporting Data Sources
Ornaments	Ornamentation with motif conveys deep spiritual and cosmological meanings linked to Islamic and the Malay local beliefs.	Key informant interviews, artifact analysis, archival research, visual observation
Symbolism	Motifs encode social status and community structure, such as royal authority and class distinctions.	Interviews, field observations, architectural site analysis
Cultural identity and philosophy	Carved motifs and other forms of ornamentation act as carriers of Malay cultural identity, preserving traditional wisdom, philosophy values of social harmony, respect and unity within the community.	Interviews, literature review, artifact analysis

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of Malay aesthetics focuses on how we sense objects or environments. It values artistic beauty more than functionality (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1992). Syed Ahmad Jamal believes that the true value of an artwork comes from its emotional impact and the feelings it evokes in the moment. From this viewpoint, the shape of an artwork cannot be separated from its spirit. This reflects a deep connection between its appearance and inner meaning.

<sup>1</sup>Hamidon is a subject-matter expert and consultant in Malay and Islamic visual arts, including art history.

Syed Ahmad Jamal's ideas about form and spirit are especially important for understanding Malay woodcarving and ornamentation. While Malay craftsmen did not typically create their work with explicit religious motives, their creative expressions were often shaped by inner spiritual awareness and the consciousness of the soul (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1984). This intrinsic connection reflects Islamic influences that cannot be separated from artistic practice. Motifs or patterns, whether floral, geometric or calligraphic, are not only for visual decorations, but reflections of cosmology, belief and cultural experience. In this study, the theory of form and soul is used to interpret how external forms (the carvings themselves) embody inner philosophical meanings, both of the craftsman and the community that produces and preserves them.

Alongside to this, the study applies the History of Muslim Art Tradition framework (Hamidon, 2012), which combines the Islamic theory of knowledge articulated by Al-Ghazzali and Panofsky's (1939) theory of iconology. The framework begins with the principle of *Tawhid* (the oneness of Allah), which guides artistic vision and practice. For artist, this process moves outward; from inner spiritual understanding to outward form. On the contrary, for researcher, the process is reversed where interpretation begins with the artwork, then moves inward to uncover its cultural and spiritual meaning. Figure 1 illustrates this framework.

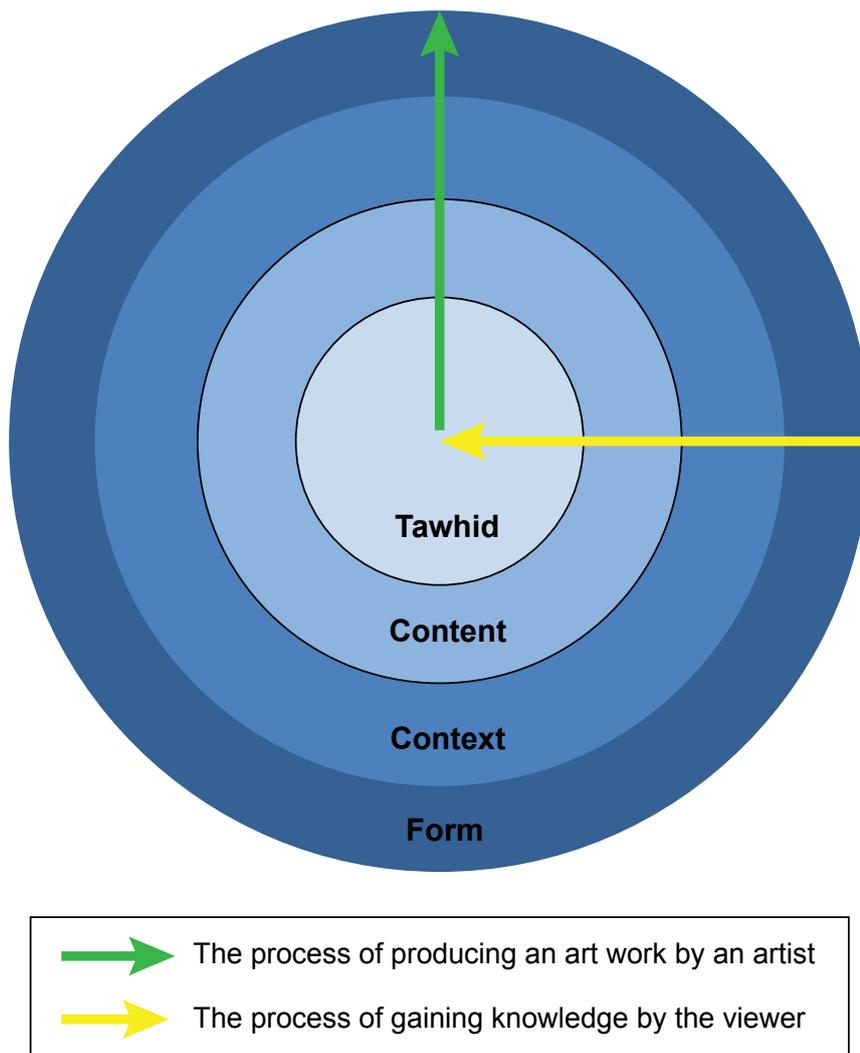


Figure 1: History of Muslim Art Tradition Framework (Hamidon, 2012).

As shown in Figure 1, the framework illustrates how the process moves outward for artist but inward for viewer (in this context, researcher is considered as a viewer). In this study, the framework was operationalized by first analyzing the forms of motifs (shape, pattern and placement), then situating them in cultural and historical context and finally interpreting their philosophical and spiritual meaning. By moving from form to meaning and from surface to depth, the framework allowed this study to interpret ornamentation as a cultural text that integrates art, belief and identity.

## Traditional Malay Motifs on Ornaments and Woodcarving in Malay Traditional Architecture

Malay traditional architecture combines beauty and philosophical meaning deeply rooted to their culture. Carvings were not simply decorative embellishments but conveyed symbolic messages that reflected the community's worldview, values and spiritual beliefs (Nasir, 1985; Noordin, 2009). Through careful selection of motifs, Malay craftsmen embedded layers of meaning into architectural elements, enabling built forms to function as both aesthetic expressions and cultural texts. The motifs most frequently found in Malay traditional architecture fall broadly into three categories which are floral (or plants), geometric and calligraphic. Floral or plant-based motifs such as the *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) normally symbolize growth, resilience and continuity of life (Pratiwi, 2021). Geometric motifs often derived from Islamic artistic principles, reflect the importance of harmony, balance and the concept of infinity, resonating with the Islamic cosmological worldview (Al-Attas, 1990). Calligraphic motifs, particularly Quranic inscriptions, reinforce the integration of faith into daily life and emphasize the principle of *Tawhid*, the oneness of Allah (Muhammad & Rosdi, 2023).

Woodcarving provided the primary medium for the expression of these motifs. Positioned strategically on doors, windows, gables and verandahs, carvings framed the architecture while simultaneously embodying cultural philosophy. Their placement was not arbitrary but carried functional and symbolic significance. For instance, ventilation panels with perforated floral motifs allowed air flow while representing vitality and continuity (Othman, Hanita & Majid, 2017). Carvings on gable end (the Malay called it as *tebar layar*) in Malay architecture, often have plants or cosmic motifs that represent domestic and community spaces with spiritual meaning (Binti Mohamad, 2025). This design reflects the belief in combining function and meaning in architecture, making it a living symbol of cultural values. The same type of carvings can also be found in mosques and palaces in which they are meant to express respect, harmony and the spiritual essence of Malay culture. Recognizing these motifs as essential to architecture allows for a deeper understanding in the following discussion of findings.

## Research Data and the Findings

Masjid Kampung Tuan, also known as Tok Tuan Mosque or Sheikh Abdul Rahman Mosque, was built in 1830 by the local community in Kemaman. It is named after its founder, Tuan Sheikh Abdul Rahman, a notable scholar from Pattani, Thailand. Prior to settling in Kemaman, he had studied in Madinah, Makkah and Pattani, before moving to Kemaman in 1810 to escape conflicts in his homeland. The architectural design of Masjid Kampung Tuan resembles a traditional Malay house, utilizing local materials, designs and craftsmanship. This reflects the Malay principle of aligning built forms with the local environment, integrating physical and spiritual needs in architecture (Nasir, 1985). It is also believed to have been influenced by the Nusantara architecture from Demak, Java and Pattani. The original design resembles early mosques in Pattani, characterized by a simple layout that features a large, open space without internal walls. The prayer area for men and women is separated by partition (refer Figure 2).



Figure 2: Masjid Kampung Tuan Prayer Space for Men and Women Is Separated by a Curtain Partition. Photo by Embong (2020)

The second architectural site for this research is Masjid Agung in Baubau, Indonesia. It serves as a central element within the Benteng Wolio palace complex and functions as the hub for religious activities and the administrative apparatus of the sultanate. Constructed in 1712 during the reign of Sultan Sakiyuddin Darul Alam (also known as La Ngkariyri), the 19<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Buton, the mosque stands out not only for its architecture but also for its unique religious organizational system known as Sara Kidhana. This system reflects a form of syncretism, blending religious practices with local traditions. The officials who serve at the mosque wear distinctive attire during Friday prayers and other major traditional ceremonies. The Sara Kidhana exemplifies the way ornamentation and ritual practice function as vehicles of social and spiritual governance, embedding Islamic philosophy within local culture (Malim, Sumantri & Tahara, 2019; Rasyidi, 2019).

The third site is Istana Agung, also known as 'Maligei', Kamali' or 'Istana Sultan Buton'. It served as the palace of the Sultanate of Buton from the reign of Sultan Muhammad Hamidi Kaimudin (Boby, Oihu & Gazalin, 2024). A unique feature of the structure is its construction without iron nails, instead of employing traditional interlocking techniques with wooden pegs or dowels. It is an elevated wooden structure comprising four levels, with spatial proportions narrowing gradually as the building rises. There are five front pillars aligned in rows that extend to the back, made up of 40 pillars in total. The central column, called the *tutumbu*, symbolizes "continuous growth." All the columns are square, a design traditionally reserved for royal residences whereas columns in commoners' houses are typically round. This practice is well known among local communities in Indonesia and can be clearly observed in many of their traditional buildings (Septia, Rachmawati & Santosa, 2021). The number of side columns also reflects social hierarchy, with higher status individuals possessing more columns and rooms. This material encoding of hierarchy demonstrates Panofsky's iconological principle that form communicates cultural values and it reflects the continuity of indigenous craftsmanship within Malay cosmology.

## Ornamentation Analysis

Figure 3 until Figure 11 presents the data of this research on the ornaments and woodcarving of all three architectural sites visited.

Site 1: Masjid Kampung Tuan, Terengganu, Malaysia



Figure 3: *Buah buton* at the Top of the Roof of Masjid Kampung Tuan in Kemaman, Terengganu, Malaysia. Photo by Embong (2020).



Figure 4: The Window of Masjid Kampung Tuan. Four Wooden Bar Separators, Aligned with Each Other with Small Gaps, for Natural Air Flow. Photo by Nasir (2015).

(Note: The Window was not Carved but can be Considered as Part of Ornament for the Building Structure)



Figure 5: *Mimbar of Masjid Kampung Tuan. Mountain or Peak Motif and Bunga Sulur Bayung (Floral Motif with Vine-Like) Pattern. In the Middle Part is a Calligraphy of a Prayer (Du'a).* Photo by Embong (2020).



Figure 6: *The Interior of Masjid Kampung Tuan, at the Frame of the Mihrab. Combination of Motif Sulur or Vine-Motif with Islamic Calligraphy.* Photo by Embong (2020).

Site 2: *Istana Agung*, Baubau, Indonesia



Figure 7: *Carving at the roof of Istana Agung in Baubau. The Motif of Buah Buton at the Roof, Carved on Wood.* Photo by Hamidon (2007).



Figure 8: Traditional Wooden Stand, Designed for the Ceremonial Display and Upright Placement of Tombak (Malay Spears) at Istana Agung in Baubau. Photo by Hamidon (2017).



Figure 9: Close-Up On the Carving of the Tombak Stand at Istana Agung, Showing the Motif of Pineapple, Believed to Be Related with the Origin of First Settlers from Johor-Riau. Photo by Hamidon (2017).

### Site 3: Masjid Agung, Baubau, Indonesia



Figure 10: Masjid Agung  
Photo by Hamidon (2007).



Figure 11: The Space for Mimbar is the Symbol of Human Head. The Main Prayer Hall is the Human Abdomen.  
Photo by Hamidon (2017).

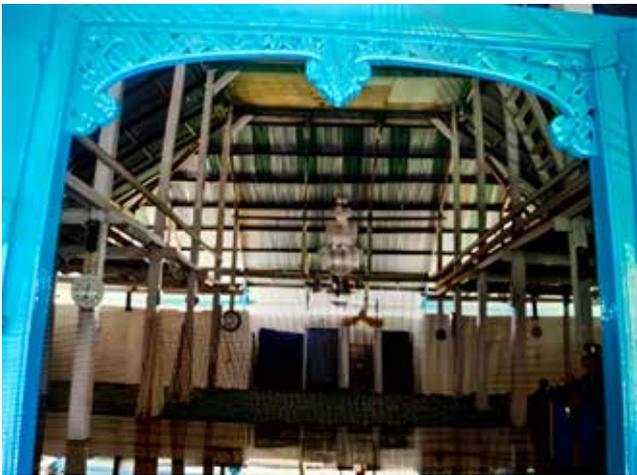


Figure 12: Woodcarving at a Door Frame of Masjid Agung in Baubau.  
Photo by Hamidon (2007).



Figure 13: The Main Entrance of the Masjid Agung. "Beduk" is Placed at the Left Part of the Main Prayer Hall, Representing "The Heart". Photo by Hamidon (2017).



Figure 14: The Main Entrance of the Mosque, Viewed from the Interior. Photo by Hamidon (2017).

Overall, based on the information gathered, the physical design of all three buildings were said to mirror the structure of the human body, reflecting the Malay worldview that positions the house as a metaphor for the human self (*rumah sebagai tubuh*). This perspective regards the building as both a physical shelter and a metaphysical symbol, emphasizing a balance between body, soul and community (Al-Attas, 1990). Oral testimonies from informants who are also religious personnel affirm this interpretation, highlighting how these structures embody harmony between humanity and spirituality. This approach is common in traditional Malay architecture, which employs a modular system based on human body measurements, reflecting philosophical and aesthetic values embedded in structural components such as pillars, beams and walls. The modular design not only facilitates adaptability but also symbolizes social and spiritual harmony, positioning the built environment as an extension of human identity and a medium for cultural expression (Muhammad, 2020).

## Symbolic Meanings

### The motif of *buah buton*

The *buah buton* motif, also known as *buah gantung*, appears prominently at all three sites. In certain contexts, “*buah Buton motif*” and “*pineapple motif*” refer to the same visual motif. At Masjid Kampung Tuan, the roof finial takes the form of a seven-tiered *buah buton* made of copper clay. This design symbolizes the seven heavens in Islamic cosmology (Fig. 3). Positioned at the mosque’s pinnacle, this ornament represents the *zat* (essence) of Allah S.W.T., which is considered incomparable and indescribable.

At Masjid Agung and Istana Agung, the *buah buton* motif (Figs. 7-9, 11-12) carries dual meanings: as an emblem of royal authority and as a cultural symbol linked to seclusion practices within the Malay life cycle. These interpretations derived through triangulation of oral histories, archival research and expert consultations (Hamidon, 2007). According to Informant B, the pineapple plant is not indigenous to Baubau but originated from a country outside Indonesia. It was commonly planted as a thorny crop around the island to protect against enemies and pirates. It is also believed that the origin of the pineapple motif (or *buah buton* motif) is associated with four men who came to Baubau from Johor-Riau, founded the island, and brought the motif from their homeland (Ab. Karim, Khaza'ai, Ahmad, Hamidon, Cik Din, & Daud, 2011). When considered from the perspective of its cultivation, the pineapple embodies the meaning of protection, as its thorny nature served as a natural safeguard encircling the island. Conversely, when traced to the

legacy of the island's pioneers, the motif carries the symbolic weight of sovereignty, signifying the authority and legitimacy of the founders in shaping Buton's cultural identity. Beyond this context, the *buah buton* motif is also documented in Bugis and Gowa culture in Makassar, where it symbolizes fertility, prosperity and nobility, further demonstrating the broader Nusantara significance of this visual tradition (Septia, Rachmawati, & Santosa, 2021).

### Symbolism of other Architectural Ornaments and Motifs

At Masjid Kampung Tuan, five windows are arranged across five wall panels, each divided by four timber separators (Fig. 3-4). Locals interpret these numbers as corresponding to the twenty attributes of Allah ( $5 \times 4$ ). This symbolism illustrates how architectural elements integrate religious concepts, a claim supported by both interviews and prior studies (Safar et.al., 2022; Nasir, Nasir & Aziz, 2015). The *mimbar* at Masjid Kampung Tuan (Fig. 5) features a peak motif combined with *bunga sulur bayung* patterns. These motifs include depictions of old and young stems, symbolizing wise, respected elders and inexperienced younger generations, respectively. This visual metaphor reinforces the Malay ethic of respect for elders as foundational to communal harmony. The motif's meaning is substantiated by oral testimonies and scholarly literature on Malay symbolism (Azmin, 2021; Noordin, 2009). The arrangement of leaves where they delicately carved to avoid overlapping serves as a moral reminder to cultivate harmony by avoiding envy, jealousy and conflict within the community (Daud, Arbi & Faisal, 2012). These motifs exemplify Syed Ahmad Jamal's theory of form and soul, where outward designs encode inner ethical and spiritual values.

The *mihrab* of Masjid Kampung Tuan (Fig. 6) showcases a combination of *sulur* motifs and Islamic calligraphy, illustrating how traditional ornamentation intertwines local cultural aesthetics with Islamic spirituality, grounded in the principle of *Tawhid*. A similar symbolism is present at Masjid Agung (Fig. 8), where wood features, tall staircases and decorative motifs collectively embody the "head," "body" and "legs" within the human anatomy. Oral histories from Baubau locals suggest some of these symbols relate to the community's historical experience of external threats and the need for protection, a view supported by historical records. Again, this context led to the cultivation of pineapple alongside the construction of fortress walls on the island. The fruit and its carved designs represent authority, protection and cultural identity. They reflect responses to social and defensive needs (Maamor & Taif, 2020). These elements show that architectural features, like woodcarving and window designs, serve not just decorative roles but also important spiritual functions based on Islamic teachings and the concept of Allah's oneness. Ornamentation becomes a living text of cosmology, embedding religious principles into daily life.

Floral designs on the *mimbar* and *mihrab* further express values such as respect and harmony. The columns at Istana Agung illustrate social hierarchy by making a distinction between royalty and commoners. Together, these motifs combine artistic beauty with spiritual significance, representing lasting expressions of Malay cultural identity.

### Cultural Identity and Philosophy

The decorative patterns observed across the three sites reveal a profound connection between Malay cultural identity and architectural design. These motifs exceed the role of simple decoration, they encode symbolic meanings grounded in local beliefs, values and social structures. For instance, the *buah buton* motif on the roof of Masjid Kampung Tuan symbolizes the seven heavens of Islamic cosmology and represents the *zat* (essence) of Allah, anchoring the community's spiritual orientation. The mosque's windows, divided into five panels by four timber

separators are interpreted as representing the twenty divine attributes of Allah, thereby integrating practical design with theological meaning. Similarly, the *mimbar* incorporates *bunga sulur bayung* carvings and central calligraphic inscriptions of prayer or *du'a*, symbolizing communal values of respect and harmony, while delicately carved leaves serve as moral reminders to avoid jealousy and discord (Fig. 5). The *mihrab* (Fig. 6), adorned with a blend of Malay floral motifs and Islamic calligraphy, exemplifies the synthesis of local cultural aesthetics with Islamic spirituality, producing a rich visual language of devotion.

At Istana Agung, the *buah buton* motif (Fig. 7-9) signifies royal authority and the ritual practices tied to Malay kingship. Ornamentation here functions as a marker of social hierarchy and continuity of tradition. Likewise, the woodcarvings on Masjid Agung's door frames (Fig. 12) exemplify craftsmanship as a form of cultural expression, while also highlighting the Malay conception of architecture as a reflection of the human body.

The symbolic correspondence between architecture and the human form is also evident in Masjid Agung where this design draws explicitly upon Sufism philosophy (Fig. 10-14). The mosque structure mirrors human anatomy, comprising the head (roof), body (prayer hall), heart (*bedok* drum), and legs (stairs). The *imam*'s prayer niche (designated for the person leading prayer) at the front of the hall corresponds to the head, while the wider congregation's area aligns with the abdomen (Fig. 11). The placement of the *bedok* (traditional Malay drum) on the left side of the hall, in which the sound resonates at prayer times, is understood as representing the heartbeat. Supporting pillars symbolize the ribs, and the women's prayer galleries on the first floor correspond to the arms, thus embodying a complete human anatomy within sacred space.

The symbolic framework extends to the mosque's entrance. The main doorway opens to a staircase in which the steps broaden downward in a form reminiscent of traditional Malacca houses. At the center, two rounded urn or water jars positioned at the center of the doorway, which local informants interpret as anatomical symbols of the male genitalia. However, during the visit, only one urn was available (Fig. 14). This illustrates how sacred architecture in Butonese Malay society was imbued with inner spirituality and Sufism philosophy. Even the name *Pulau Buton* is believed to derive from the Arabic term *batin* (inner or esoteric), reinforcing the spiritual worldview underlying its architecture.

Overall, the decorative and structural motifs observed in these sites embody cosmological and cosmogonical values resonating with Bugis-Malay traditions. They articulate the universe in relation to spiritual dimensions, the origins of creation, and the structure of existence itself. In summary, these architectural elements express Malay philosophies that conceive built form as an extension of the human self. Through the interplay of ornament, proportion, and symbolism, they communicate religious beliefs, social ethics, and cosmological ideas, transforming architecture into a living expression of Malay identity and shared wisdom.

## Conclusion

This article shows that traditional Malay decorations in architecture are not just for enhancing the physical beauty of a structure. They hold deep significance, merging spirituality, philosophy and social values deeply entwined with Malay culture. By examining motifs seen at Masjid Kampung Tuan, Masjid Agung and Istana Agung, carvings like the *buah buton* and other detailed motifs illustrate profound concepts which have connection with Islamic principles to the distinctive identity of the Malay people.

Using Syed Ahmad Jamal's ideas of form and soul along with insights from Muslim Art Tradition history, this study highlights the way visual beauty is tied closely to

deeper spiritual meaning. Carved motifs and other ornamentations are not just for decoration. They express the community's shared beliefs and views on life. Findings from fieldwork, including examining artifacts and input from the locals reveal that these designs hold collective memories and cultural philosophies reflecting Malay perspectives on life, harmony and the universe as a whole. Thus, architecture stands as a sacred area embodying both faith and communal connections.

The study also finds that Malay ornamentation cleverly fuses native traditions with Islamic symbols to maintain cultural continuity. This work adds important knowledge to architectural heritage studies and Malay Islamic art while emphasizing the urgent need to preserve these artistic expressions as central parts of identity and social unity. Future studies might broaden the scope to other Malay regions, making comparative analysis with other Islamic art traditions or engage with new artisans to trace how these rich legacies continue to evolve. Ultimately, traditional Malay ornamentation beautifully illustrates the fusion of art and culture within architecture, a powerful expression of the community's core values that endures in the very spaces they live and worship.

In conclusion, this study affirms the interpretive approach, which highlights the constructive meanings ascribed by the local community through lived experience and social interaction. Rather than being confined to the measurement of physical objects, the analysis seeks to reveal the deeper significance embedded within motifs and architectural design. Drawing on close examinations and interviews with local cultural experts, the findings indicate that, for the Malay community, material forms are not merely functional but are imbued with soul and meaning, expressed through values, life principles, worldviews, and belief systems that collectively form the foundation of Malay civilization. Thus, the research objective has been successfully achieved.

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N/A

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