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Abstract Art as a Medium for Cultural Preservation: Re-Storying the Malay Folktale Sang Kancil Through Islamic Art Concepts

Zuriati Mohamed Shaari[1*], Noor Hidawati Mohamed Amin[1], Fariz Azmir Mohd Ghazali[2], Noriza Arzain[1]

[1]*Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia*
[2]*Faculty of Animation & Multimedia, Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based research examines the potential of abstract painting as a medium for re-storying the Malay folktale Sang Kancil through Islamic art concepts. Guided by the Kancil Attribute (KA) 2023 framework, the study translates narrative details from Gong Raja Sulaiman into an original abstract artwork titled Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman. The research applies reflective visual analysis to evaluate how description, investigative identification, symbolisation of knowledge, and stylisation of knowledge operate in the creative process. The findings indicate that abstract visual language can communicate selected narrative elements, especially wisdom, restraint, and purposeful action, without relying on literal animal representation. The artwork shows that geometric structure, stylised form, textural contrast, and balanced composition can support a culturally grounded, Islamically resonant mode of visual storytelling. The study contributes to contemporary Islamic art discourse by positioning abstract art as a viable strategy for preserving Malay folklore while encouraging ethical reflection through visual practice.

INTRODUCTION

Culture acts as a shared system of meanings that helps communities build social identity, pass on values, and keep traditions alive across generations (Geertz, 1973). Folktales are part of this cultural system because they convey moral lessons, social memory, and symbolic knowledge through easy-to-understand stories (Taylor, 1965; Dundes, 1980). In Malaysia, Malay folktales play a key role in preserving local customs, ethical values, and community imagination (Mustafa, 2021; Rahmat, 2006). However, the rapid growth of digital media, urbanization, and global cultural exchanges presents new challenges for preserving intangible cultural heritage (Gwerevende & Mthombeni. 2023,; Lv, 2025). Within this environment, artists do not just create or visualize images; they act as cultural mediators who can bring traditional stories back to life through modern forms. Visual art lets folktales be reinterpreted while keeping their cultural roots. This approach matters especially as younger audiences encounter traditional stories through visual, digital, and interactive platforms rather than only through oral storytelling (Bourdieu, 1993; Hamid, 2013; Qiu, 2023; Hedley, 2021). This paper examines how

[1*] Corresponding author. *E-mail address*: zuriati9216@uitm.edu.my

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abstract painting can help preserve and reinterpret the Malay folktale Sang Kancil while staying connected to Islamic art concepts.

Although Sang Kancil has been widely circulated in oral storytelling, children's literature, animation, and selected contemporary artworks, limited attention has been given to the systematic development of abstract painting as a method for re-storying this folktale through Islamic art concepts. Existing discussions on animal imagery in Islamic art often focus on representational issues, while creative practice offers another route through stylisation, abstraction, and symbolic meaning (Amri, 2000; Saidi, 2008). This raises a research question about how Sang Kancil can be visually conserved without relying on literal animal representation. Accordingly, this study has two objectives. First, it aims to develop an abstract painting that re-stories Sang Kancil through the Kancil Attribute (KA) 2023 framework. Second, it analyses how Islamic art concepts are articulated through the formal and symbolic elements of the resulting artwork. The study emphasises Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman, an abstract painting adapted from the tale Gong Raja Sulaiman.

Malay Folktales and Sang Kancil

Malay folklore includes various story types, such as myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, ghost stories, and symbolic tales that are rooted in local culture and the environment. Bascom (1965) categorizes folklore into myth, legend, and folktale, while Malay narrative traditions also feature sub-genres like origin stories, epic tales, comic tales, and animal tales and this is approved by study from Bastet & Houlbrook (2023). Sang Kancil belongs to the animal-tale tradition and is well known as a clever mousedeer whose smarts help him outwit stronger animals.

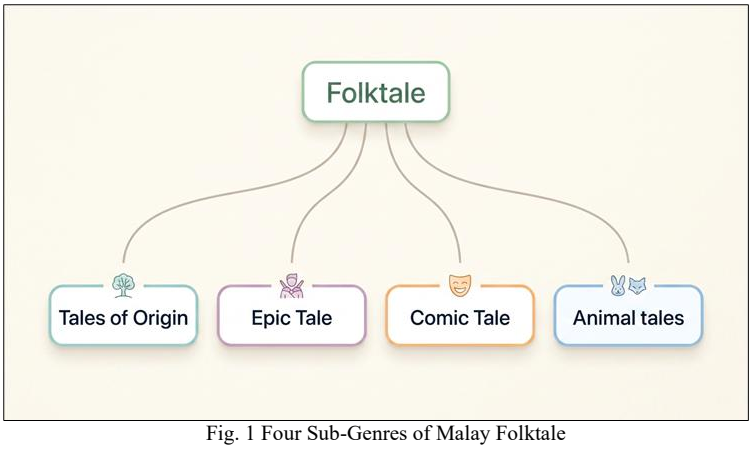


Fig. 1 Four Sub-Genres of Malay Folktale

Source: Bascom (1965) and Zuriati (2023)

Rahman et al. (2018) defines Sang Kancil as a character who uses trickery, judgment, and intelligence to solve problems and help other animals. Although the character can be mischievous, the stories emphasise practical wisdom, strategic thinking, and moral consequences. These traits have kept Sang Kancil appropriate in education, children's literature, oral heritage studies, animation, and modern visual culture. In Malaysia, Sang Kancil stories help pass down values across generations by presenting ethical ideas in a memorable, entertaining way.

Sang Kancil in Visual and Digital Media

Sang Kancil's enduring importance is evident in Malaysian animation and contemporary art. A significant early contribution is Hikayat Sang Kancil, a 1983 animated short produced by Filem Negara Malaysia and directed by Hassan Abdul Muthalib. Later works like Sang Kancil & Monyet (1984) and Sang Kancil & Buaya (1986) built on this storytelling tradition and introduced the character to new audiences through animation. From an Islamic communication viewpoint, digital media and information communication technology can help spread ethical and religious messages when used properly (Aznan, 2012; Rahim et al., 2018).

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Sang Kancil has also entered contemporary visual and performance art. For instance, Khairul Ehsani Sapari portrayed the character in the performance work Sang Kancil dan Hidupan Harian Manusia di Kuala Lumpur for Bakat Muda Sezaman 2023 at Balai Seni Negara. More recently, the animated feature Dongeng Sang Kancil showed how adaptable the character is in popular media. These developments indicate that Sang Kancil is not a fixed cultural figure; instead, the character is continually reinterpreted in response to changing artistic styles, technologies, and audience expectations. The researcher's earlier artwork, S1RS: Kancil Membilang Buaya, which used abstract composition and augmented reality via the Artivive application, further highlights the potential of new media and abstraction in revitalizing Malay folktales. This path informs the current study, which focuses more closely on abstract painting and Islamic aesthetic principles to retell the story of Sang Kancil.

Islamic Art Concepts and Abstract Visual Language

Islamic art is often understood through its emphasis on unity, order, rhythm, stylisation, and the meaningful arrangement of formal elements. Idham (2017) argues that Islamic art's identity is grounded not only in subject matter, but also in elements, techniques, and styles such as dots, lines, circles, geometric forms, colour, texture, light, rhythm, and spatial organisation. This view matters for the present study because it lets us discuss Islamic art beyond literal iconography and toward the ethical and aesthetic functions of form. Noor Hisham Md Nawi et al. (2019) further argue that beauty in Islamic thought cannot be separated from values of good and bad, because art should guide human beings toward meaningful relationships with God, other people, nature, and the wider created world.

Similarly, Amatillah Thaha, & Muhammad Yusron Maulana El-Yunusi (2024) emphasise that art in Islam is purposeful and should be guided by fitrah and Shariah. For Sang Kancil, this perspective allows the story's values of wisdom, restraint, and moral awareness to be interpreted through abstract visual composition. Abstract art is particularly relevant because it communicates through visual structure rather than direct representation. Rajudin et al. (2020) explain that abstract art involves observation, contemplation, abstraction, and expression through line, shape, space, texture, colour, and value. Zuriati et al. (2024) similarly note that non-representational elements such as colour, form, line, and texture can suggest emotional and conceptual responses. In the present study, abstraction serves as a way to translate animal-based folklore into a visual language that is less literal, more symbolic, and better aligned with selected Islamic aesthetic concerns.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a practice-based research approach in which artistic production functions as both the process and the outcome of inquiry. The artwork serves as a site of investigation because creative decisions, material experimentation, and reflective analysis generate knowledge about how a folktale can be transformed into abstract visual form. The study uses Gong Raja Sulaiman's narrative content as the primary source, supported by literature on Sang Kancil, Malay folklore, Islamic art, and abstract art. The research method involved four stages. First, the researcher identified the core narrative and moral values of Gong Raja Sulaiman, particularly the episode in which Sang Kancil survives through wisdom and strategic restraint. Second, key visual cues were selected from the narrative, including Pak Belang’s stripes, the wasp nest, buzzing movement, and the aftermath of the sting. Third, these elements were translated into abstract visual components such as lines, circular forms, textures, contrasts, and balanced spatial divisions. Fourth, I analysed the completed painting through reflective visual analysis using the Kancil Attribute (KA) 2023 framework.

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Kancil Attribute (KA) 2023 Framework

The Kancil Attribute (KA) 2023 framework (Zuriati, 2023) provides the methodological structure for adapting literary and narrative sources into visual art. The framework consists of four interconnected components: description, investigative identification, symbolisation of knowledge, and stylisation of knowledge. Description clarifies the narrative subject and its basic storyline. Investigative identification examines the subject's visual and conceptual identity through literary references. Symbolisation of knowledge translates the researcher's understanding into metaphorical imagery. Stylisation of knowledge abstracts and simplifies imagery so that the artwork conveys both descriptive and interpretive meanings.

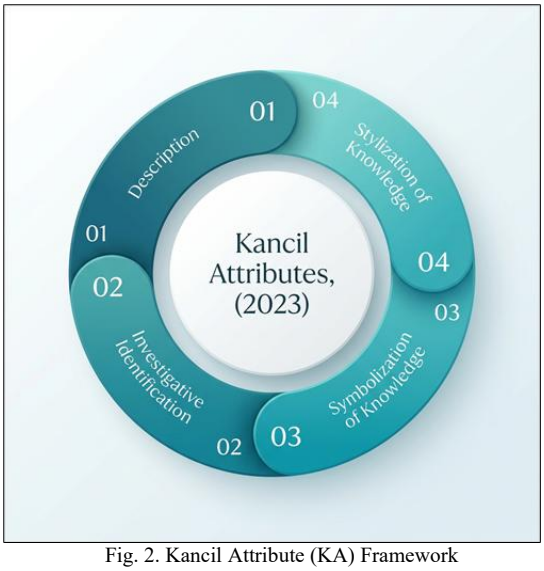


Fig. 2. Kancil Attribute (KA) Framework

Source: Zuriati (2023)

Artwork Production

The artwork produced for this study is Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman, measuring 95 cm x 95 cm, created in 2024 using oil pastel, cement filler, and charcoal on canvas. The work was exhibited from 11 to 29 November 2024 at Galeri Shah Alam, Yayasan Seni Selangor, as part of the Geng Prektis Exhibition. The artwork represents the researcher's early exploration of abstract painting following earlier works that relied more directly on recognisable animal figures and surrealist imagery. This shift toward abstraction was motivated by the intention to develop a visual language that could carry cultural narrative content while appealing more deeply with Islamic aesthetic principles of stylisation, order, and symbolic restraint.

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Fig. 3. Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman, 95 cm x 95 cm, oil pastel, cement filler and charcoal on canvas in Year 2024

Source: Authors (2026)

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The analysis focuses on how the KA 2023 framework guided the development and transformation of Gong Raja Sulaiman into an abstract painting and how the completed artwork indicates selected Islamic art concepts. The discussion is organised according to the four KA components and a final interpretive category on Islamic aesthetics.

Table 1. Analysis of Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman Using the KA 2023 Framework

KA Component	Visual Translation	Interpretive Discussion
Description	The painting adapts the episode in which Sang Kancil escapes Pak Belang by directing him to strike a wasp nest that is framed as King Sulaiman's gong	The narrative emphasizes wisdom, courage and the consequences of doing things without thinking. These values are the conceptual basis of the work (Amin, 2015)
Investigative identification	The main narrative cues are Pak Belang's stripes, the wasp nest, buzzing movement, and the repeated sensation of stings	Instead of illustrating the animals literally, the study identifies visual elements that can be abstracted into line, circle, texture, and rhythm
Symbolisation of knowledge	Rough black lines, orange-black contrasts, repeated circular forms, and textured surfaces are used as metaphors for threat, pain, motion, and impact	The visual elements symbolise Pak Belang's physical distress and emotional agitation after striking the nest, while also suggesting the hidden consequences of careless action
Stylisation of knowledge	The composition is balanced through structured divisions, repeated motifs, and controlled contrasts rather than realistic depiction	Stylisation turns the folktale into a reflective visual statement: curiosity should be guided by wisdom, and action should consider potential harm and benefit
Islamic art concept	Geometry, abstraction, rhythm, texture, and balanced spatial arrangement are emphasised over naturalistic representation	The artwork aligns with Islamic aesthetic concerns by privileging symbolic form, order, moral reflection, and the ethical value of hikmah, or wisdom (Idham, 2017; Noor Hisham Md Nawi et al., 2019)

Source: Authors (2026)

Narrative Translation Through Abstraction

The analysis shows that the KA framework supports a structured development from story content to visual abstraction. The description stage keeps the artwork connected to Gong Raja Sulaiman, while investigative identification keeps the visual process informed. Through symbolisation, the story's

dramatic elements are converted into visual metaphors, particularly through the use of rough line, circular repetition, textural contrast, and colour tension. Through stylisation, these elements are reorganized into an abstract composition that suggests narrative movement without depending on literal representation. This process is important because Sang Kancil stories are normally connected with recognisable animal characters. By moving away from direct representation, the painting makes the folktale's moral and conceptual dimensions more prominent. The tiger's physical power is suggested through stripes and dark linear forms, while the wasp attack is revealed through repeated circular and textural marks. Sang Kancil's presence is therefore conveyed indirectly through the outcome of wisdom rather than through a literal image of the mousedeer.

Islamic Art Concepts in the Artwork

Islamic art can be conceptualised in the illustration Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman through abstraction, stylisation, and the story's ethical grounding. This occurs through use of formal attributes of lines, circles, contrast, rhythm, textures, and spatial balance. These attributes relate to Idham's (2017) understanding of Islamic art as fields structured through formal elements, processes, and forms. No use is made of naturalistic renderings of animals; rather there is a symbolic visual space within which the form carries moral values. The artwork's moral reading connects to the value of hikmah. In the story, Sang Kancil survives not through physical dominance but through discernment and strategic intelligence. This resonates with Islamic ethical teachings that value wisdom, self-control, and purposeful action. The Qur'an describes wisdom as a great good granted by God (Qur'an 2:269), while the hadith tradition emphasises that true strength is connected to self-control rather than physical force (Sahih al-Bukhari). Through this lens, the artwork does not simply retell a clever trick, it reframes the tale as a reflection on restraint, consciousness, and dependence on divine planning.

The study finds that the KA 2023 framework is useful for producing abstract artwork from Malay folktale because it provides clear stages for moving from narrative description to symbolic and stylised visual form. The framework helps the researcher avoid a purely decorative interpretation by keeping the artwork conceptually connected to the source narrative. The study also finds that abstract art can support cultural preservation when the artwork communicates narrative values rather than merely reproducing recognisable characters. In Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman, the visual emphasis on rhythm, balance, and stylisation creates a culturally rooted, Islamically meaningful form of re-storying. However, the study also recognises that further refinement is needed, especially in strengthening the relationship between formal elements and intended meaning. Future practice should deepen the researcher's control of abstract composition, spatial dynamics, and symbolic clarity.

CONCLUSION

This study discussed the process and analysis of Sengatan Gong Raja Sulaiman as an abstract painting that retells the Malay folktale Sang Kancil within an Islamic art conceptual framework. Strengthening by the KA 2020 framework, the research shows how descriptive narrative, analytic identification, symbolisation and stylisation may serve the process of folktale adaptation to abstract contemporary painting. Through the artwork, Sang Kancil may be kept and remembered not just through literal rendering, animation, or oral narration, but through abstraction that emphasises virtues like wisdom, moderation, and reflection. The research contributes to current Islamic art discourse by offering abstraction as a viable alternative for engaging animal folk tales in a culturally sensitive context that de-emphasises animalistic depiction. As a practice-based research project, it demonstrates a systematic creative framework's capacity to generate both artwork and research insights. Although the visual narrative in the painting shows a convincing correspondence with Islamic art concepts, further research and creation are needed to refine the technical and conceptual expression of abstraction for storytelling. Moreover, further studies could apply KA framework on other Malay folk tale, compare how different set of Islamic aesthetics in persuading the abstract painting's narration.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors affirm that there are no personal, financial, or professional conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article. The study was conducted independently without influence from any external stakeholders or funding bodies.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Zuriati Mohamed Shaari contributed to the conceptualization, investigation, methodology, data curation, visualization, writing of the original draft, and writing review and editing by conducting the research, producing the artwork, and preparing and revising the manuscript. Noor Hidawati Mohamed Amin contributed to conceptualization, methodology, supervision, and writing–review and editing by developing the central research idea and providing theoretical guidance. Fariz Azmir Mohd Ghazali and Noriza Arzain contributed to methodology, supervision, validation, project administration, and writing review and editing by designing the research structure, supervising the research progress, leading the manuscript review and revisions, and approving the final version of the article for submission.

AI DECLARATION

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.5) solely to improve the language, grammar, and clarity of this manuscript. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final manuscript. AI was not used for data generation, analysis, interpretation, or authorship.

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