

# The Evolution of Visual on Malaysian Banknotes Design

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## Abstract

The visual and design function on banknotes are not merely for decoration but instead in each design element and symbol created represents specific meaning. The banknote itself can be considered as a symbol and identity to a country due to its function as a national currency. It can also be perceived as a propaganda tool for a government. This paper aims to see to what extent the evolution of the visual design of Malaysian banknotes from the British colonial period up to the third series of the Malaysian banknotes issued by Bank Negara Malaysia. Thus, this study uses the approach of the history of art with visual analysis methods. In this study, each banknote is examined to identify the changes that occur and interpret why it is happening. The study found that the visual evolution of the design of the Malaysian banknotes has changed from time to time due to colonialism, war, independence, changes in government, changes in national policies, and the appointment of a new governor in addition to the upgrade of the banknotes security system. Looking at the design evolution of the Malaysian banknotes alone can make an impact in understanding the nation's history from the colonial period up to the time of the country's aspiration towards achieving a developed nation status. The visual elements and symbols used are not just an ornament on the banknotes but also evidence and valuable artifacts in understanding Malaysia and its history.

*Keywords - Visual Analysis, Design Evolution, Malaysian Banknotes*

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## 1. Introduction

When discussing money, most people would focus on the value of the currency and also from an economic standpoint. While the images and design elements are rarely discussed. The visual and design function are not only accessories on the banknotes but each design element and symbol used represents a specific meaning. According to Elmily Gilbert and Eric Helliener (1999), research on currencies dominated by the scholars of the economic and financial caused the social science researchers to avoid this subject. Therefore, research on money should also be studied from a different perspective, especially in the context of history, art, design, and meaning.

This research is focused more on the aspects of the evolution and design of the Malaysian banknotes. According to Katsari C. (2006), the banknote itself can be considered as a symbol and identity of a country because of its function as the currency of the country and it is also regarded as a propaganda tool for the government. Therefore, this paper aims to see how deep is the relation between the evolutionary design of the Malaysian

banknotes and the political, cultural and social development from the British colonial period up to the third series of the Malaysian Banknotes issued by the Bank Negara Malaysia.

## 2. The Design Evolution Of The Malaysian Banknote

Banknotes were introduced in Malaysia in the early 19th century in Singapore. According to the Bank Negara Malaysia (1989), Singapore at the time was under the Government of Straits Settlements required a banking system that is more efficient to fulfill the demands of additional commercial hubs. In 1840, The Union Bank of Calcutta in Singapore issued their first banknotes in Singapore. Following this, other banks in Singapore began to issue their banknotes until the Government of Straits Settlements issued their banknotes in 1889 and ceased the production of banknotes from private banks.

In this paper, we have divided the evolutionary design on the Malaysian banknotes into four segments, namely the British colonial period, the Japanese occupation, the pre-independence era and the Malaysian era. Each segment takes into account the circulation of the banknotes nationwide as opposed to limited designated areas.

### 2.1 British Colonial Period

The British ruled Malaya for a substantial amount of time, but this study only focuses on the banknotes in the British colonial era that were issued by the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan Currency (1939-1952) and the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan and British Borneo Currency (1952-1963). These banknotes continued to be valid legal tender until 16th January 1969.

The banknotes issued by the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan Currency was at the dawn of the first and second world war. During the Japanese conquest of Malaya, the banknotes were replaced with the Japanese army banknotes (1942-1945). It was only after Japan formally surrendered on 2nd September 1945, the British gradually re-established the whole of Malaya. According to Bank Negara Malaysia (2003, p.260), the country's finances at the time were administered by the Department of Currency Comptroller and the Army Pay Corps Account until 1st April 1946. Generally, in terms of the design of the banknotes, the front of the banknote is decorated with a portrait of King George VI. The roman script in English is the main script followed by the Malay Jawi script. In the center of the note, there is a circle containing a watermark in the form of a tiger's head. Meanwhile, the back of the note is decorated with the seals of the royal Malay states (Perlis, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Brunei) and also the seal of the Straits Settlement.



Figure 1. Banknote of the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan Currency

The Board of Commissioners of the Malayan and British Borneo Currency had to be restructured when the state of Sarawak, North British Borneo, and Labuan were included under the authority of the Colonial Office. The banknotes issued were for use by the states in Malaya including Labuan, North British Borneo, Sarawak, Singapore, and Brunei. Although Malaysia successfully gained its independence on 31st August 1957, the banknotes were still being used until 1967 when Bank Negara Malaysia issued the first series of banknotes in June 1967. Like the previous banknote, this particular banknote is also decorated with a portrait of the British monarch Queen Elizabeth II. The roman script in English was also used as the main script but retained the Malay Jawi script on the note itself. The back of the banknote were also decorated with the royal Malay states

seals (Johor, Melaka, kedah, Perak, pahang, Pulau Pinang, Selangor, Terengganu, Perlis, Brunei, Negeri Sembilan and Kelantan) including the Sarawak, North British Borneo, Singapore seals and a new seal of the Federation of Malaya.



Figure 2. Banknote of the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan and British Borneo Currency

## 2.2 The Japanese Occupation

During the spark of World War II, Japan has managed to conquer the whole of Malaya from the British administration in 1942. After that, the Japanese were quick to introduce their Japanese-styled administration, education, defense, and economy systems in Malaya. The Japanese currency was also introduced to replace the British currency. The banknotes were used until the Japanese surrendered in September 1945.



Figure 3. Banknote of Japanese Government

The design and visual elements used by the Japanese Government in Malaya on the Japanese banknote were different compared to the British banknote. The banknote is decorated with images of the environment that is synonymous with the local residents. Among the images used were banana trees, palm trees, bull carts, rubber tapping, scenic villages and paddy fields. The main text on the banknote is written in roman English with the Japanese script placed at the bottom of the banknote. The Malay Jawi script however was not found on the notes.

## 2.3 Pre-Independence Era

On August 31st, 1957, the Federation of Malaya achieved independence from the British government. Since On August 31st, 1957, the Federation of Malaya achieved independence from the British government. Since then, a lot of changes have been made in the government administration. However, the banknotes system and its design were retained by the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan and British Borneo Currency. Only the one ringgit and ten ringgit notes were redesigned replacing the existing one and ten ringgit notes with the portrait of the Queen Elizabeth II.

The newly design one ringgit notes were first introduced in 1959. At the front of the banknote is an image of a fishing boat, while the back of the note is illustrated with the image of some fishermen pushing a boat to shore. However, the English roman script was still used as the main text and the Malay Jawi script as the secondary text. The seals of the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei, and Singapore were still present at the back of the note.



Figure 4. One ringgit banknote of the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan and British Borneo Currency

The newly designed ten ringgit notes were only introduced in 1961. These banknotes were embellished with images of a farmer plowing the paddy fields on the front. While the back of the banknote is decorated with the seals of the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei and Singapore. Just as the one ringgit note, this banknote also retained the roman script in English as the main text and the Malay Jawi script as the secondary text.



Figure 5. Ten ringgit banknote of the Board of Commissioners of the Malayan and British Borneo Currency

#### 2.4 Era of Malaysia

Malaysia was successfully established on 16th September 1963 with the consolidation of the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak. On June 12, 1967, Bank Negara Malaysia released its first series of banknotes. This was a historic event because for the first time in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei issued their own respective currencies and no longer share the same currency as before.



Figure 6. Malaysian Banknotes First Series

The first series of the Malaysian banknotes adorned the portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tunku Abdul Rahman ibni Almarhum Tuanku Muhammad on the front. For the first time, the Malaysian banknote uses the Malay language in roman script as the main text and was signed by the Governor of Bank Negara Malaysia, Tun Ismail Ali. The back of the banknote was illustrated with repetitive geometric patterns that vary according to specific denomination. The Bank Negara Malaysia logo embellished the back of the banknote replacing the

seals of the federal government and the states of Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei and Singapore. Only on the back of the \$1000 notes were decorated with the Malaysian Parliament building. There were a few changes that occurred while the first series were in distribution such as the amendment of the Malay language spelling system in 1972, the change of the security design system and the change of signature of a new governor.



Figure 7. Malaysian Banknotes Second Series

The second series of Malaysian banknotes were first introduced in 1982 in conjunction with Malaysia's 25th Independence Anniversary by distributing new denominations of \$20 and \$500 notes with a new pattern design. Banknotes themed with cultural artifacts were used in 1982-1998 in Malaysia. In general, the design of the banknotes in this series is based on the traditional ornaments, the native plants in Malaysia, and significant landmarks in Kuala Lumpur at that time. The notes retained the portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong and also the roman Malay script as the main text. During the distribution of these banknotes, some of the changes that occurred were the signature change of the new Governor and the design upgrade of the security features. In addition, there were also changes in terms of the image that provoked controversy, namely the image of the flag pole at the Royal Palace gates that were perceived as a crucifix. Due to the pressure of the public, the Bank Negara Malaysia amended the image by removing the bar on the image of the flag pole.



Figure 8. Malaysian Banknotes Third Series

The third series of the Malaysian banknotes was distributed to the public by introducing the new denomination of the RM2 note in 1996 a new, more modern design. These notes that were themed Vision 2020 also introduced the RM symbol that represents the Ringgit Malaysia replacing the \$ symbol that were used before. These banknotes were also known to have denominations up to RM100 only. Denominations of RM20, RM500 and RM1000 were no longer issued by the Bank Negara Malaysia. In addition to maintaining the portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the roman Malay script, the Malay Jawi script was also reintroduced at the back of the banknotes. Based on the theme Vision 2020, the images that were used referred to the development aspirations of the country's economy such as tourism, telecommunications, infrastructure, logistics, mining and heavy industrial activities. Like the previous series of banknotes, the third series also undergo some changes such as the change of the new Governor's signature and the improvements of the security features. Moreover, the series reintroduced the denominations of the RM1 notes and ceased the production of the RM2 notes. The RM5 banknotes were also printed on a polymer material to replace the paper-based material that were widely used.

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted using qualitative methods with the approach of art history. Researchers conducted the field work and collaborated with Bank Negara Malaysia. The data collected were in the form of artifacts (banknotes) discussions, exhibition catalogs, books and official records issued by Bank Negara Malaysia. There were also a few books and catalogs published by local and foreign numismatic experts. This research was continuously conducted as it is also based on visual analysis. In this study, each banknote was examined to identify any aesthetic changes and to understand its cause.

Moreover, this study is based on the semiotic theory of signs by Ferdinand de Saussure to understand the hidden meaning of each visual development on the Malaysian banknotes. According to Danial Chandler (2002), Saussure divides a sign into two parts which were form (signifier) that represent sound or image and its meaning (signified) that represents an idea or concept. Saussure explains that the two parts of this sign are inseparable and interdependent on each other in forming a significance. According to him, the form (signifier) is explicit and the meaning (signified) is implicit.

### 4. Finding and Summary

The discussion on the findings and conclusions of this study will be divided into four parts, namely the British Colonial period, the Japanese occupation, the pre-independence era and the Malaysia era. The findings and conclusions were based on the visual analysis that has been carried out.

#### 4.1 British Colonial Period

It is well known that our country was colonized by the British before attaining independence on August 31, 1957. However, there are historians that presented the view that the British only colonized a few states, namely Penang, Singapore and Malacca. They believe that the other states only accepted a British Resident as the Sultan's advisor. Nevertheless, if we refer to the notes that were issued during the British colonization, they were legal tender nationwide by the nation's population in the whole of Malaya including Sabah and Sarawak. This means that not only the British controlled the nation's administration but the economy as well.

The visual analysis study supports this assumption. Firstly, the front of the British colonial era banknote, the portrait of King Edward (1945-1946) and Queen Elizabeth (1946-1967) can be seen instead of the Malay rulers. Secondly, in terms of the banknote's design layout, the roman English script was placed as the main text with the Malay Jawi script positioned as a complementary text due to the fact that the main population in Malaya at the time can only read the Jawi script. Thirdly, the back of the banknotes were decorated with the seals of the Federation of Malaya (including Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak). Fourthly, we found that the note during the British Colonial Era did not use the typical Malay decorative patterns and motifs but rather the patterns and motifs from the west. Lastly, the person who has the authority to sign off the bill at the time was also an Englishman. Looking at the visuals used on the banknotes at the time, we can conclude that the whole of Malaya including Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak were colonized by the British.

#### 4.2 The Japanese Occupation

During the Japanese occupation, most of the banknotes were decorated with environment visuals that were familiar to the locals. Images such as the banana trees, palm trees, sceneries of the villages were used on the Japanese dollar banknote in Malaya. These images that are so synonym with the locals were a part of the Japanese military propaganda to support the local population.

However, the Malay Jawi script was not found on the banknote. It was quite strange when the Japanese military administration used the roman script in English as the main text on the banknotes as opposed to the Japanese script. But this is probably due to the possibility that the use of the roman English text is much more convenient for the local residents as well as the Japanese forces, since the Jawi script is foreign to both parties. There is also a possibility that it is the standard design and text applied to all lands conquered by Japan at the time.

#### 4.3 Pre-Independence Era

In the early days of the independence after August 31, 1957, there were only two denominations issued which were the one ringgit (images of fishermen) and the ten ringgit (images of farmers). However, other denominations still used the banknotes that is decorated with the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II until the Bank Negara Malaysia issued the first banknote in 1967. This was rather irritating because although the country is independent, the images of the invaders were still circulated among the local population.

Moreover, the English roman script was still used as the primary inscription while the Malay Jawi script were used as the secondary inscription on the banknote. There are 5 government seals on this banknote at the time, namely the seal of the Federation of Malaya, Brunei Darul Salam, Sarawak, North Borneo (Sabah) and Singapore.

#### 4.4 The Era of Malaysia

The first series of the Malaysian banknotes was decorated with the portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tunku Abdul Rahman ibni Almarhum Tuanku Muhammad replacing the portrait of Queen Elizabeth. The portrait of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong who was dressed in the customary royal Malay outfit showed some definite meanings such as independence, Malay supremacy and the identity of the sovereignty of an independent country. The use of the roman script in the Malay language as the main inscription, replacing English indicates positive changes in terms of consolidating a nation. Due to that purpose, the Malay Jawi script was sacrificed and was no longer on the first series of the Malaysian banknotes. These banknotes were also decorated with geometric patterns as a security feature. In addition, the image of the Parliament building was placed on the back of the \$1000 denomination to reflect that the country supports the practice of constitutional democracy.

The second series of the Malaysian banknotes held a theme of cultural artifacts and were decorated with indigenous cultural handicrafts such as wood carvings, metal art and textile art. In addition, the back of the banknotes displayed significant landmarks in the capital city such as the National Monument (on the one ringgit), the National Palace (on the five ringgit), the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station (on the ten ringgit), the Bank Negara Malaysia (on the twenty ringgit), The National Museum (on the fifty ringgit), the Sultan Abdul Samad Building (on the five hundred ringgit) and lastly the National Parliament (on the one thousand ringgit). These landmarks were government buildings showcasing the progress and development of the country post-independence. The portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the roman Malay script maintained on the banknote series. Looking at the visuals used, the design of the second series banknotes fulfilled the principles of the national cultural policy that was established to ensure the indigenous culture remains as a pillar of the national identity.

The third series of the Malaysian banknotes that was themed the 2020 Vision showed the country's aspiration in achieving its ambition of becoming a modern and developed nation. The banknotes in this series also succeeded in reintroducing the Malay Jawi script as well as introducing the RM symbol as the currency symbol replacing the \$ symbol. The Malay Jawi script as well as the RM symbol are the government's efforts to lift the country's identity. The images used in this series showcased the tourism (Mount Kinabalu, Mount Mulu, the coastal scenes and the Wau Bulan), telecommunications (Kuala Lumpur Tower and the MEASAT satellite), infrastructure (the Petronas Twin Towers, the Sepang International Airport, a map that refers to the development of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya), logistics (Putra LRT, MAS Airbus planes and MISC cargo ships), mining activities (oil mines) and heavy industries (national car manufacturing industry). These images not only refers to the progress and development of the nation's economy but also implies the legacy and vision of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

## 5. Conclusion

This study found that the evolution of the visual design of Malaysian banknotes has been amended from time to time as a result of colonialism, war, independence, changes in government, changes in national policies, and the appointment of a new governor in addition to improving the security system of the banknote itself. Images, text, and symbols that were used on the banknotes were not merely decorations but holds significant values in the country's culture and history. Looking at the evolution of the visual design of the banknotes in Malaysia alone can have an impact in understanding the history of the country from the colonial period up to the time of the country's aspiration to achieve the status of a developed nation. The visuals and symbols not only decorated the banknotes but also became the evidence and valuable artifacts in understanding Malaysia and its history.

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