

THE MALAY PRINCIPAL FORM: A STUDY OF ROOF DECORATIVE ELEMENTS OF RUMAH LIMAS BUMBUNG PERAK

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the Malay principal form in the roof decorative elements of Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak (RLBP). Through site observation, the data is collected in the form of images and analysed using the CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) of Atlas Ti. 8. The findings of the research found that there are four Malay principal forms; Gunungan, Buah Guntung, Lebah Bergantung and Pohon Beringin present in the roof decorative elements of RLBP. The similarity and uniformity in the engagement of the form and its meaning is identifiable with the traditional houses of the other region which indicates a uniform understanding of the belief system and practises of the craftsmens throughout the Peninsula.

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Keywords: Malay principal form, Roof, Decorative elements, Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak



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INTRODUCTION

Long before the arrival of the modern tarmac roads, the Perak River was well used by its inhabitants as an important river for the social, economic and political contact. For this cause, the river's vicinity area has witnessed the rich growth of a significant portion of the traditional art and architectural aspects. It is shown in the form of historic architectural remains, some of which are still left in the area. It is very much a pleasant tour along the vicinity of the Perak river area to be able to see its traditional houses inherited from the past still standing and decorating the kampong landscape of the area. (Harun & Mat Zin, 2018) have identified that the Perak traditional houses that are located along the Perak river as one of the important "Cultural Heritage Resources" that contribute towards the cultural heritage significance of Perak. The research suggested that all of these cultural heritage resources should be identified, interpreted, and promoted wisely for the benefit of the community and the preservation of the local heritage as outlined by the National Policies. One of the sustainable goals of NKRA (National Key Results Areas) is to elevate the rural economic revitalization. This is achievable through the enhancement of the cultural heritage and tourism industry that helps in shaping the national identity and promotes Malaysia as a world-class cultural and tourist destination. In the heritage landscape of Perak, there are two types of traditional house, which is the Rumah Kutai (RK) and the Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak (RLBP). Recent research on the traditional architecture of Perak found alarming findings where most of this built heritage especially its traditional houses of both RK and RLBP is rapidly decaying and extinct from the architectural landscape (Rashid, 2017). Without a proper solution to this issue, it is not impossible that one day with the sweeping and rapid, modern built environment development, this key to the nation's heritage, identity, and history will be lost forever. Therefore, in safeguarding this treasured heritage, a holistic conservation plan should be made possible where it should be based on fundamental and intensive research and documentation effort. There has been a number of extensive research conducted on the study of RK. Whilst for RLBP, there are several scholarly research has been conducted on the typologies and the spatial characteristic of RLBP (A.H.Choo, et al.2020), the differences and evolution of the typologies of RLBP and RK (Rashid, et al.2019), the decorative elements of RLBP (Rashid, et al.2018), as well as the current survival and depleting condition of RLBP (Salleh, et al. 2019). Despite

the uniqueness of the architectural and decorative characteristics of RLBP, there is no research conducted to study the principal form of the decorative elements of RLBP that helps to identify the character and identity of its decorative elements. In corresponding to the research significance and gap discussed above, this research aims to identify the Malay principal form in the roof decorative elements of Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak (RLBP).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak (RLBP)

There are two styles of traditional Malay house of Perak, namely; the Rumah Kutai (RK) and the Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak (RLBP). Built before the 1900s, RK is the oldest style of traditional Malay house of Perak whilst RLBP is the latter style that started to be built starting from 1900s onwards (Rashid, 2017). RLBP is distinctive and easily recognizable with its roof form that is called Bumbung Limas Potong Perak. According to a craftsman called Tuan Haji Muhamad bin Ismail in Lenggong, Perak, the term limas, however, comes from the word "five," because the roof of this kind of house typically has five ridges (perabung lima). Bumbung Limas Potong Perak is subtly distinct from bumbung perabung lima, where it is easy to distinguish Bumbung Limas Potong Perak with a narrow triangle form space situated at the end of its gable. Bumbung limas potong Perak's form is inspired by the colonial influence, which is the Dutch. Bumbung limas potong Perak is also known as bumbung limas potong Belanda for that meaning. This term is commonly used in the east coast region. Besides the distinctive roof, RLBP is also known for its open spatial characteristic of the house beside the usage of the full window, called as tingkap labuh. In terms of its spatial components, RLBP comprises of rumah Ibu (main living room), rumah anjung, rumah selang and rumah dapur (kitchen) together with intermediary spaces such as anjung, serambi, ruang tengah and ruang dapur. (Rashid, et al, 2019). As compared to RK, the spatial quality of RLBP is comprised of complex spaces and arrangement, as well as the façade of the house, is equipped with a lot of full window opening which is seen as more open and welcoming than the simple and inclusive house character of the RK (Rasdi, 2005, Rashid, 2018).

The Malay Principal Form & Motifs

The Malay world is rich with its art and architecture that have outgrowth from the complex layers of belief systems from the early pagan, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs to the Islamic belief. The form, pattern and motifs are taken from the surrounding through observation and experiences of the local customs, culture, belief, ideology and history (Ahmad Sayuti, et al. 2018). Before Islam arrived in the Malay world, Malay art is centered particularly around the interaction between the people and their environment (Noor, Khoo, & Lok, 2003). Nakula (1985) stated that the arts and architecture of South East Asia have been founded thousands of years ago.

Table 1. Transformation of Interpretation and Meaning of form after the Arrival of Islamic Influence

Pre-Islamic Form	Islamic Influence Form
Dewa	Tuhan
Kala	Punca Bunga Ukir
Makara	Sulur Bayur
Gunung Meru	Gunungan
Pohon Beringin	Pohon Budi
Stupa	Buah Guntung
Padma / Teratai	Bunga Tanjung
Naga	Tidak digunakan
Garuda / Jentayu	Petala Indera / Gegak Sura

Source: Noordin (2009) & Hussin, et al. (2012)

Its evolution and improvement of its meaning have been brought by the later influence of multiple beliefs – from the belief of the pre-Islamic period up until the period of Islam in the Malay world. During the arrival of Islam, the new interpretation of meaning in this long existed traditional architecture and symbol has been added and translated according to the Islamic view (Nakula, 1985). According to Effendy (2009), a motif is made for multiple functions and it is used as both a decoration and also as a medium to convey important lessons to the viewer. It is also believed that it provides protection and blessings to the house owner. In the context of the art of woodcarving, Said (2002) claimed that *gunungan*, *stupa*, *makara* and *padma* are the four principle forms and motif that exist in the art of Malay woodcarving. In addition to this, Othman (2005), Rashid (2007), and Noordin (2009) added

that before the arrival of Islam, principal forms and motif from animism and pre-Islamic beliefs were widely used. This does not only confined to the physical characteristics. However, the availability of the architectural elements in the buildings depends upon the position of the landlord. It is known from previous studies that RLBP house furnished with decorative elements is commonly owned by the wealthy and noble citizens of society. RLBP is decorated with a total of nine decorative elements consisting of tunjuk langit, kayu pemeleh, kepala cicak, ande-ande, kepala tingkap, kepala pintu, kekisi, gerbang and pagar musang (Rashid, Choo, Ramele, Baharuddin, & Alauddin, 2018). Whilst the decorative elements that are located specifically at the roof comprise of four decorative elements, which include; tunjuk langit, kepala cicak, papan cantik and also kayu pemeleh.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research is based on the exploratory research basis where case studies strategy is employed in gathering the data. The primary data collected for this study is in the form of images and field notes, obtained through field observation. There are nine houses chosen as the samples for the case studies and all of these houses are chosen from the four main areas of Perak namely, the northern area, coastal area, central area, and southern area. All of these houses were obtained during the inventory study of RLBP where the researcher had successfully identified 260 houses of RLBP throughout the state of Perak. Samples for the case studies are chosen from the database of RLBP produced from the inventory study. The selection of the houses is guided by a parameter set by the researcher as a determinant of the types of RLBP fit for this research. Six houses were selected from the central area (since most of the houses that fit the parameter set in this study are located at the central area), while there is only one house selected from the rest of the area (coastal, northern, and southern area) where the architectural character of the house represent the best house of the area. All the data collected during the observation is in the form of images and field notes. The researchers used a DSLR camera for a standard and accessible shot, whereas for the highly inaccessible shot, such as the tunjuk langit and the peak of the roof, a drone (DGI Mavic Mini Drone) is used to capture the images. The data is organized and analyzed using the typological analysis in the Atlas Ti. Version 8 software - a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Atlas Ti. Version 8 is a qualitative analysis

software tool that enables a large dataset to be managed and analyzed in a systematic arrangement. The software works based on data coding which helps extensively in making the work better by efficiently sorting, arranging, and analyzing large data sets through its software features (Hwang, 2008). In corresponding to this research, the data analyzed is the images of decorative elements of the RLBP. The advantage of doing the analysis using this software is that, once the data is coded based on the objective of the research, various tables and diagram analysis network can be automatically generated. Besides, it saves the time spent in handling the data analysis, the large data of images using this software will be more manageable than using other computer application which generally could not handle such a large amount of data which will jeopardise the data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The discussion of this research will be discussing the two main aspects which are; 1) the form attributes of the roof decorative elements of RLBP and 2) the presence and relation of the Malay principal form and motif in this roof decorative elements of RLBP. The results of the analysis showed that there are several forms of the Malay principal form and motif that exist and can be identified from the form of roof decorative elements of RLBP. Those four forms are; the Gunungan, Buah Guntung, Lebah Bergantung, and Pohon Beringin. The results of the analysis were summarized and presented in Figure 1. From the visual analysis conducted, the results showed that the physical form of almost all of the tunjuk langit in the research is dominated by the form of a conical rod. This conical rod is characterized by a conical sharp end that takes a half quarter of the overall length of the tunjuk langit. Just under this cone, there are at least two to three repetitive, ball-like shape adorning the bottom portion of the tunjuk langit.

Table 2. The summary of Principal form Presence in the Roof Decorative elements of RLBP

	Dewa	Garuda	Gunungan	Kala	Lebah bergantung	Makara	Naga	Padma	Pohon Beringin	Buah Guntung	Total
Tunjuk langit	X	X	4	X	X	X	X	X	1	3	8
Kepala cicak I	X	X	X	X	5	X	X	X	X	X	5
Kepala cicak L	X	X	X	X	17	X	X	X	X	X	17

Papan cantik	X	X	X	X	8	X	X	X	X	X	8
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(Source: Author)

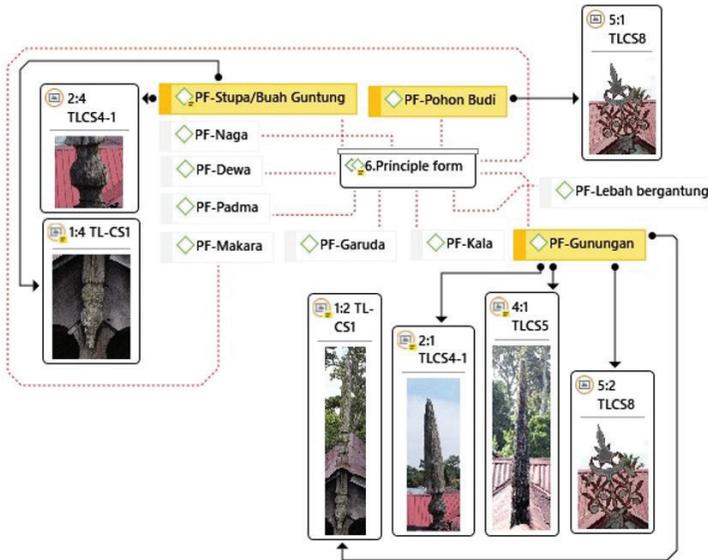


Figure 1. The Typology, Principal Form and Motif of Tunjuk Langit.

(Source: Author)

Whilst there are three types of principal forms identified in the form of tunjuk langit of RLBP. Those three types comprised of gunungan, buah guntung and pohon budi. The form of cone or any form that resembles the shape of a peak is considered as the form of Gunungan in the Malay principal form and motif (Noor, Khoo, & Lok, 2003). Gunungan is based on the universal shape of a triangle. In the Malay Islamic perspective, according to Nakula (1985), the triangular shape of gunungan is associated with the symbol of divinity and the sacredness of Allah. The ascent shape of the triangle is attached to the meaning of ascension movement towards divinity. Whilst, in the pagan belief of the Malay, the form is closely associated with the same concept of sacredness. It is believed the form of gunungan resembles the shape of Mount Meru, a sacred mountain believed to be the abode of gods and the ancestors as it is associated with the symbol of the column that upholds the sky, based on the Hindu cosmological understanding. Despite the variety of meanings across the different eras,

upon the coming of Islam, all of the meaning of the principal form and motif are associated and attached to the Islamic ethos. Gunungan is one of the major principal forms and motif that does not only appear in the design of the decorative elements, it is also widely used in the Malay arts. In the batik and anyaman Malay crafts, the triangular shape of gunungan is also known as pucuk rebung, a motif typically used in both of the crafts (Rashid, 2007). Whilst towards the bottom portion, the form of tunjuk langit is made of several layers of the 3D ball shape element that resembles closely the shape of buah gantung in the Malay principal form. These findings are aligned with what has been suggested by Utaberta et.al, (2012) where it is stated that this variation of tunjuk langit is termed as type “rod buah buton” in the research. Buah buton is also known as buah gantung after the arrival of Islam. In the art of Malay woodcarving, buah buton or buah gantung exists in two positions, either positioned upright or downright. The symbolism that it carries has almost the same meaning conveyed by the gunungan.

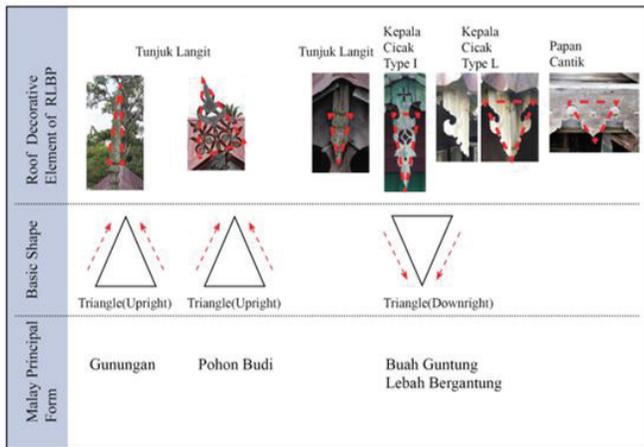


Figure 2. The Basic Shape of the Malay Principal Form

(Source: Author)

In addition to these findings, it is also found that one of the forms of tunjuk langit in one of the houses is in the shape of a triangular panel. The physical characteristic of this panel is in the shape of a tree-like motif, decorated with a floral motif and a small star located at the peak of the panel. In the Malay principal form and motif, this tree-like shape panel resembles closely the form of pohon beringin where according to Kingham(2001) the

form and motif of pohon beringin is commonly comprised of the outline of the mountain shape, decorated with a tree or plant-like elements such as branches, flowers, birds, snakes, fishes that come from soil and water. In the Malay Islamic belief, the symbolism of pohon beringin is translated to the meaning and symbolism of gunungan. Whilst in the Javanese literature, Muhajirin(2010) stated that pohon beringin is associated with Pohon Paridjata. In the old Malay literature, it is associated with Pauh Djanggi that is believed to be the tree of life that gave life to all living creatures in the old pre-Islamic belief of the pagan Malay.

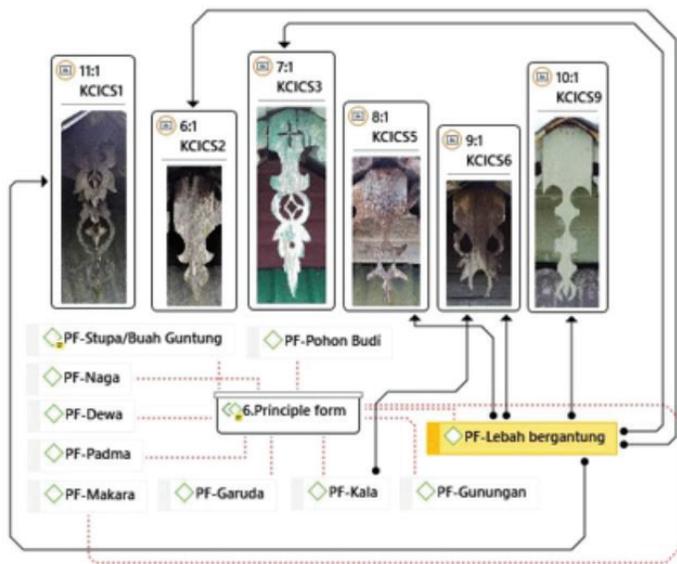


Figure 3. The Typology, Principal Form and Motif of Kepala Cicak Type I
(Source: Author)

Whilst in the form of the other roof decorative elements such as kepala cicak type I, kepala cicak type L and papan cantik, the results of the analysis show that the basic form characteristic of all of these decorative elements is in the form of an inverted triangular based panel. Looking closely at the placement of all of these decorative elements - kepala cicak type I located under the roof peak, kepala cicak type L located at the edge or corner of the roof, and papan cantik located under the roof eaves (fascia board), it is noticeable that all of these decorative elements form shared one mutual characteristic, which is in the form of the hanging condition. Carving form

in this manner is generally referred to as the hanging stupa or buah gantung in the east coast region.

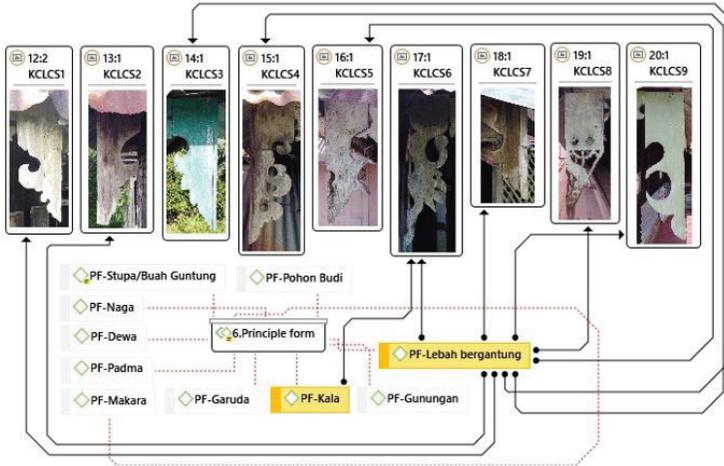


Figure 5. The typology, principal form and motif of Kepala Cicak Type L
(Source: Author)

In the Malay principal form, as suggested by Noor et al., (2003), the same triangular form (Gunungan) can also be read as the inverted one, which symbolized the meaning of duality – the concept of ascension and degeneration, harmony and plurality, unity and diversity as well as particularism and universalism. Whilst in the west coast region, this inverted triangular shape is known as Lebah Bergantung in Indonesia's Kampar and Riau culture, which holds its philosophy and meaning. The inverted triangular form took the shape of the hanging bees. Bee is a good and beneficial creature in a way that it is perceived as a creature that brings benefit towards others by producing nutritious honey, hardworking, and only feeds on pure and good food of the flower nectarines. It is also a brave creature that only attacks its opponent once provoked. For this good value portrayed by the bees, the form is embedded in the art as a reminder and advice for the community to reflect on the character of the bees. The symbolism value that this metaphor suggests include sacrifice and selflessness, symbolized by the pure and good qualities of the bees, embedded in the everyday life of the society as a reference in terms of ethical behaviour (Titof, 2018).

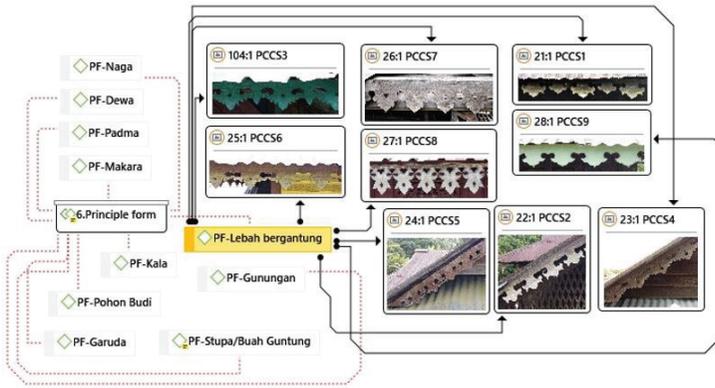


Figure 6. The Typology, Principal Form and Motif of Papan Cantik

(Source: Author)

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the presence of Malay principal form and motif in the roof decorative elements of RLBP. The findings of the research also suggest the character of the roof decorative elements of RLBP and its typology as discussed in the discussions. It is found in the findings that even though there are differences in the design and types of roof decorative elements of RLBP with the other region, however, the principal form and motif in the form of the decorative elements suggest uniformity in terms of the principal form usage. This simultaneously reflects the Malay world's mutual thought and belief regarding the cosmological and metaphysical belief, engaged in the context of the principal form and motif of its art and architecture. In corresponding to this research, it exists in the roof decorative elements of RLBP. Whilst looking from the view of the historical timeline, it can be concluded that most of the principal form, even though the form originated from the period of the pagan, pre-Islamic period, nevertheless, the understanding and the attachment of the key meaning and symbol are based on the same concept. The difference that differentiates the meaning and interpretation of the form between both the pre and post-Islamic period is the interpretation of the meaning following the Islamic beliefs and ethos. Islamic values have been embedded in the art of woodcarving. Thus, after the arrival of Islam, the form and motifs that previously involve figurative elements have been discarded and stylized using the floral motifs, ie; the

sulur bayur. This is in parallel to what has been suggested by the previous scholars, Nakula(1987), Ahmad Jamal(1992), Noor, et al. (2003), Rashid (2007), and Nordin (2009) regarding the adaptation and assimilation of the Islamic belief to the Malay art.

In addition to this, the meaning expressed by each of the decorative elements of the RLBP roof form specifically conveys and indicates the roof as a symbol of sacredness, enlightenment, ascension, and divinity in the form of the upright peak shape while the downright peak shape symbolizes man's world. This supports the cosmological Malay concept of the three realm- Alam atas, Alam tengah and Alam bawah, represented by the three vertical division of the house, which are the posts, the wall and the roof (Ariffin, 2001). Besides enriching and supporting the Malay traditional architecture and art theory, the findings of this research contribute towards the identification of the characteristic of the roof decorative elements as well as the identity of one of the Malay traditional architecture of Perak.

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