

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**CALLIGRAPHIC WOODCARVING
ORNAMENTATIONS IN SELECTED
PENINSULAR MALAYSIAN
MOSQUES**

AHMADREZA SABERI

Thesis submitted in fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying

September 2016

ABSTRACT

Woodcarving is a form of Malaysian traditional art. After the advent of Islam in the Malay Peninsula in the 13th century (Pasai) and 14th century (Malacca), Islamic motifs such as calligraphic woodcarvings are added to the local art forms, particularly to embellish Malaysian mosques. Although Malaysian mosques have been built using three architectural styles, namely the vernacular, colonial and modern, the designers did not distinguish between the styles when installing calligraphic woodcarving ornamentations in the prayer halls. Furthermore, although many studies have been conducted to investigate the characteristics of Malaysian woodcarvings, findings on the opinions of mosque users are lacking. Hence, this thesis aims to identify the various forms of calligraphic woodcarving ornamentations through the analysis of their writing styles and other characteristics of this ornamentation from the selected peninsular Malaysian mosques. The objectives are: i) to establish the judgments of mosque users about calligraphic woodcarving ornamentations based on types of scripts, legibility, locations, function, aesthetic, desirability and combination of patterns; ii) to analyse the current calligraphic woodcarving ornamentation (writing styles, locations and contents) of Malaysian mosques; and iii) to propose recommendations on the appropriate design of calligraphic woodcarving ornamentations for Malaysian mosques. This study employed quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Five scripts - *Thuluth*, *Kufi*, *Naskh*, *Nastaliq* and *Diwani* and eight mosques in the North East and South West regions of Peninsula Malaysia were selected for the case studies. Firstly, the field study documented existing decorative woodcarving inscriptions in the mosques. Then, from the total number of 408 respondents, the assessments of mosque users on wood-carved calligraphy are conducted. The qualitative data are discussed comprehensively while SPSS is used to analyse the quantitative data of the questionnaire survey. The investigated variables included the locations, readability, aesthetic, function, mixture with other motifs and preference of scripts. The findings showed that calligraphy not only functions as ornamentation in a spiritual atmosphere, but also for recitations. *Thuluth* and *Kufi* are the most preferred scripts as decoration of mosques as woodcarving ornamental inscriptions. The users of mosques preferred individual inscriptions in terms of legibility while they desire to observe Arabic inscriptions to decorate *Mihrab*, *Mimbar* and entrances respectively. The designers preferred *Thuluth* scripts, but the selected contents did not follow the principle of connection between location and content of inscription. The study summarised design recommendations which will assist calligraphers, woodcarvers and designers of mosques to provide more desirable calligraphic woodcarving ornamentations for Malaysian mosques based on the users' assessments and the existing decorative inscriptions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Praise is to the Almighty *Allah*, the most beloved, the most gracious and merciful. This study would not succeed without the intellectual contributions, works and support of many individuals to whom I am most grateful and indebted.

First and foremost, I dedicate my deep appreciation to my beloved wife, Bita, and my cherished parents who support, care and inspire me immeasurably. Indeed without their encouragements this part of my life was a nightmare.

I also would like to give a special thanks to Associate Professor Dr. Esmawee Endut and Associate Professor Dr. Sabarinah Ahmad, the supervisors of my Ph.D. They always encouraged me in every possible way as trustworthy teachers.

I deeply am indebted to FSPU post-graduate centre as well as my dear friends Dr. Shervin Motamedi, Dr. Mahmood Danaee and many others who assisted me during this four years study. Special thanks are dedicated to interviewed experts who spent their time and kindly answered me with patience.

AHMADREZA SABERI

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CONFIRMATION BY PANEL OF EXAMINERS	ii
AUTHOR’S DECLARATION	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LISTS OF TABLES	xiv
LISTS OF FIGURES	xvi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background of the Study	3
1.2.1 Effect of Islam on Malay Architecture	3
1.2.2 Users’ Assessments and Mosque Decoration	4
1.3 Problem Statement	5
1.4 Research Questions	7
1.5 Aims and Objectives of Study	8
1.6 Summary of Research Methodology	8
1.7 Research Scope and Limitation	10
1.8 Significant Contribution to New Knowledge	13
1.9 Conceptual Framework of the Research	14
1.10 Thesis Structure	15
CHAPTER TWO: THE ART OF WOODCARVING IN ISLAM	16
2.1 Introduction	16

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The architecture of Malay mosques is identified by its practical function for congregational prayers as well as its aesthetical values through ornamentations. Woodcarvings of floral and geometrical motifs and calligraphic *Quranic* phrases are examples of the application of ornamentation in the prayer halls. The value and elegance of woodcarvings is almost parallel to the beautiful design of the mosques in Malaysia. The motifs used in wood-carved ornaments had an early influence from the vernacular house architecture of *Pattani*, which is located in Southern Thailand (Noor, Khoo, & Lok, 2003). This particular style of decoration has been handed down from ancestors to descendants by replicating of structural and decorative embellishments. The visual designs of wood carvings illustrate highly talented and skilled craftsmen. These wood carvings are usually applied in structural and infill parts of building such as, columns, beams, door leaves, wall ventilation panels, railings, fascia boards, gable ends and kingposts (Jamal, 1994).

Wood carving decoration would be known as a significant cultural heritage in the Malay architectural elements which its magnificence and beauty is completely noticeable and ubiquitous. This particular art which was created to be applied either in mosques or houses' decoration from many years ago was a manifestation of a craftsman's inspiration into a piece of wood. According to Flood (1997) wood carving decorations were adopted in mosque ornamentation since the Umayyad established mosque all around the conquered land, especially in the elemental parts of mosques for example walls, windows, *Mihrab* wall and *Mimbar* (Flood, 1997; Michell, 1984).

In general, architectural design completely depends on the geographical zone where the buildings are planned to build (Ahmad, 1999; Feldman, Franseen, Joeckel, & Heckel, 2005; Rani, 2012; Said, 2004). In Malaysia, there are three different architectural styles used by the builders with corresponding built periods. Timber architecture which is known as the Malaysian vernacular style is initiated in mosques' architecture from the 15th century and continues to the current time. The second type