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## Malay *Tepak Sirih* in Malaysia: Form, Functions and Meaning

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### Abstrak.

*Tepak sirih* is one of the cultural heritages of Malays objects that are still being used as a medium during Malay community ceremony including proposing, engagement and marriage, as well as used in official and royal ceremonies. The aim of this research is to study the form, function and meaning of Malay *tepak sirih* by using Meyer Schapiro (1953) Theory. The meanings of each *tepak sirih* are different and most of them are related with the Malay philosophy. However, the modernization has transferred the design of *tepak sirih* to a very simple form and decoration, which are more minimal and plain. The study concluded that Malay *tepak sirih* need to be preserved in term of the form, function and meaning and can be sustained and valued by the future generation. Besides that, the Malay community not only follows the tradition but also the appreciation and an interpretation for the *tepak sirih*.

**Keywords:** *tepak sirih*, cultural heritage, Malay symbol

## Introduction

*Tepak sirih* is an object that is often used in the community, especially when conducting ceremonies and traditions including in weddings, which is a popular practice among Malay community. Generally, *tepak sirih* known as a symbol for the Malay community to deliver a purpose and desire (Anwar Din, 2007).

There are several meanings of *tepak sirih*, and Rooney D.F. (1993) mentioned that *tepak sirih* is a rectangular wooden box with internal compartments and covered with gold embroidered red velvet. Whereas Norhayati Mohd Said (1987) stated that *tepak sirih* is a container and has a mini container in it. Noriati A. Rashid (2007) stated that *tepak sirih* is made from brass, and this is similar with Yahaya Ismail's (1989) opinion, in which *tepak sirih* is made from silver and brass as well.

Karafi Saleh (2010) mentioned about the differences between rectangular *tepak sirih* and oval *tepak sirih*, and called *tepak sirih* as 'Puan'. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia (1999) with their researchers stated that *tepak sirih* is commonly found in shapes of hexagon or octagonal, with a measurement of 8x6x10 cm and to put the betel leaves and the other ingredients in different containers. This opinion is similar with Karafi Saleh (2010), regarding the *tepak sirih* known as 'Puan' and Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia also mentioned about the name of rectangular *tepak sirih* as 'Tepak'.

The most common type of *tepak sirih* is a rectangular lidded box, about 12 inches long, 7 inches wide at the base, but a little narrower at the top, and about 6 inches high. These boxes have a metal tray, which can be removed so that the betel leaves can be stored under it (Mubin Sheppard, 2011).

The *tepak sirih* is divided into five compartments: four of these are on one side of the tray and are occupied by small round boxes, two inches high. Three of the small boxes are spherical with a flat top and is a little shorter than the others. The first round box usually contains thin slices of areca nut; the second contains lime paste, the third *gambier* and the fourth with shredded tobacco (Mubin Sheppard, 2011).

The usual items found in *tepak sirih* are the tray; the betel leaves holder, receptacles for other containers and an areca nut cutter. The leaves are peppered with lime, *gambier* and areca nuts. Tobacco may also be added for flavor. The betel leaf is held and placed on the palm. Lime is smeared down the betel and small bits of *gambier* and areca nut are placed in the center of the leaf. The leaf is then folded

into a small package and chewed as an official ceremony.

Cultural heritage has grown in our country's industry and requires more in-depth exposure to peel all intents and implicit forms in *tepak sirih's* income in this industry. Generally, the approach to retain this Malay traditional item can be developed based on all the information on cultural heritage and traditions of the community.

### **The Function of *Tepak Sirih***

The *tepak sirih's* position in traditional Malay society is closely related to the system in the Malay community. Therefore, whether in small or large event, *tepak sirih* takes precedence. *Tepak sirih* is given to people accordingly to age and position. The role of *tepak sirih* is widely used in Malay costumes such as engagements, weddings, booking midwives to deliver babies, *melenggang perut*, building a house, etc.

*Tepak sirih* also used in royal courts or ceremonies of nobility depicting the ornateness of craftsmanship because they were commissioned to make ornate objects used. It was the tradition to offer the *tepak sirih* to guest as a sign of welcome and as diplomatic gesture practices by the Malays before any serious verbal communication was made (Mohd Taib Osman, 1997).

*Tepak sirih* serves as a symbol of communication between two parties, such as invitations to celebrate bargaining, discussions and other forms of communication. It is a sign of things agreed upon bond. In addition to being a symbol of respect, honor, peace and understanding between each other, our culture thus also becomes a symbol of harmony and unity among the kings and commoners. The serving of *tepak sirih* brings pure and sincere intentions that cannot express in words. *Tepak sirih* represents friendliness, warmth and friendship, and its notion is so deeply ingrained in the Malay community.

Abd Ghani Abbas (1958) stated that *tepak sirih* symbolizes man because of the hard nature and represents women as well because of its softness. *Tepak sirih* symbolizes the bond of men and women that cannot be separated (Rusini Abd Razak, 1980).

*Tepak sirih* indirectly shows the modesty of the Malay community in social life. This can be seen how they organize and roll betel leaves, the tail of the betel leaf should not be issued, which means shame and dignity that should be taken care of. In addition, the method of eating betel in full order also begins with a smear

of chalk on the back of betel using the ring finger. The vine should be smeared with lime and then other ingredients are put and this process symbolizes orderliness in life.

But nowadays, people tend to forget customs and tradition of *tepak sirih*. *Tepak sirih* has its own ways or specific regulations, all of which are related to the system of the Malay community, which concern a respectful, courteous, united, cultured and regulatory life. In fact, the role of *tepak sirih* is associated with the values that can be found in the Malay community. The Malay life is seen as having a very conscious courtesy tradition through *tepak sirih*.

### **Theory Meyer Schapiro**

The theory was used by Meyer Schapiro, which emphasizes the style and history. Studies related to *tepak sirih* can be seen through the chronological beginning of a bygone era, where *tepak sirih* is used as an intermediate medium and only used by the upper classes such as kings and nobles. In addition, the facts of history are also important because they also involve relations with the influence and status of the owner. This theory is used for the purpose of writing a very special collection of data, particularly *tepak sirih*.

The selection of a relevant theory in this study is the importance and the relevance of the invention, which can be incorporated in any data collection. The selected theory is used to analyze any data and it aims to make the data described more accurately. There is one type of theory that will be considered for the purpose of guiding this study, which will make it more meaningful. That theory is the theory by Meyer Schapiro (1953).

This theory is chosen as it aims to find out the type of each motif, which is found on the decorations around *tepak sirih*, including on the *cembul*, *kacip* and betel containers contained therein. The selection of this theory will help to assess the content of beauty and aesthetic motifs and patterns available on the *tepak sirih*.

### **Designs and Motifs on *Tepak Sirih***

According to *Kamus Dwibahasa* (1979), motif is defined as a pattern arranged repeatedly to create patterns in cloths and other objects. It also described as the pattern drawing in the creation of an art object. *Kamus Inggris-Melayu Dewan* (1995) defined motif as a design or material, while *Kamus Dewan* (1998) defined it as a basis or pattern in a painting (or carving or something else). The term motif in this study includes motifs created to obtain a design on the *tepak sirih*.

Motifs produced according to arrangement are classified based on either single or multiple arrangements, which can produce patterns and function as decorations. The term motif and pattern also refer to the use of decoration on textiles and its own specific meaning.

Designs, which are popular among the Malay carvers, are of two basic types, namely 'cut- out' design and 'carved in low relief', which serves as a ventilation panel, to admit air and light. The common design in Malay art and crafts is the '*awan larat*', which is normally represented in the form of 'coiling leaves and branches'. It is a repetition of almost a similar design beginning from one end to the other (Wan Hashim Wan Teh, 1996).

According to Arba'iyah Ab Aziz (2010), the context of Malay art is a tribute to the beauty and wonder of Malay art itself. *Tepak sirih* is also included in the object of art, beauty and appreciation, especially when its use is widespread, when a man proposes to a girl in a traditional Malay engagement, where *tepak sirih* becomes the chairman and head of customs.

The concept of Malay aesthetics often has particular relevance to the meaning as described by the Malays through experience and observation of the environment. This can be attributed to the motifs and patterns that exist in *tepak sirih*, in which each motif used is based on the environment, flora and fauna, and is associated with meaningfulness (Syed Zulfida, 1992).

For aesthetic evaluation of Malay art by Syed Ahmad Jamal (1992), it starts from nature and then to design the back to nature theme. Such assessments can be associated with the motifs used on *tepak sirih*, but still based on the basic design of the plant itself.

*Tepak sirih* also applies aesthetic values generated by motifs tied to the principles of Islam. The floral design of *tepak sirih* results in motifs of life that influenced other religions such as Hinduism as contrary to Islamic values. This statement supported by the existence of several floral designs that are on the *tepak sirih*, instead of images and sketches of animals, except on the *kacip*. This is because several types of *kacip* have animal motifs such as birds and mythical horses to distinguish between male and female *kacip*.

Imam Al Ghazali (1909) also associated beauty with intrinsic and extrinsic angles as external and internal beauty that can be seen visually. In assessing *tepak sirih*, the beauty of art is closely appreciated to the glory of Allah. This can be proved

by several motifs used and the spirit of the use of motifs involved. Each piece of content in various tepak sirih has a very deep meaning and it is more focused on the power of Allah.

Syed Ahmad Jamal (1992) stated that every subtlety of art is based on the concept of *Tawhid*. This clearly shows that the *tepak sirih*'s concept of beauty are much appreciated and held in high regards, and refers to both outdoor and indoor aspect of beauty.

As for motif, it can be generally classified into five different types, namely cosmic motif, flora, fauna, geometric and calligraphy. Both cosmic and fauna motifs are remnants of the pre-Islamic cultural tradition. Fauna motif is rarely used in the Malay woodcarving nowadays as carving of living creatures are forbidden in Islam (Wan Hashim Wan Teh, 1996).

Certain principles must be followed when designing a motif; these principles are related to the cultural values of the Malays. Firstly, the new emerging branch of a plant must appear from behind or below the original branch. This is symbolic of the Malay cultural norm and value whereby the elderly must be the forefront in their daily interaction in relation to the younger ones. In the Malay society, older people are accorded a higher status than the younger people because of the formers' earlier experience in life and longer experience is synonymous with better or wider knowledge.

Secondly, when two leaves meet or are in close contact with one another, the sharp end of the leaf must be avoided from touching the other one. The symbolic meaning of this is that in one's life, one must not hate or despise or cause hardship to others. Living in harmony and having a good relation is a virtue as compared to conflict and antagonism. This is related to the maxim that all Muslims are brothers and sisters to one another.

Thirdly, a piece of design should not be too elaborate and lavish. There should not be a combination of several motifs to form a sophisticated formation. This type of design is regarded as drunk and drunk is forbidden in Islam. It would also appear unpleasant to the eyes.

Fourthly, the design should not be stiff. It must have the expression of softness of the carver. And finally, a small branch should end in a fold. It refers to life as a whole in this world. There is the hereafter that one must be prepared for. One must also seek knowledge to uncover all the mysteries in this world (Wan Hashim

Wan Teh, 1996).

While the animal motifs selection is based on three criteria, which are uniqueness, edibility and Hindu influence. Finally, the choices of motifs from earth sources were based on uniqueness and symbols. From the technical perspective, it was found that flora motifs were used more often (Haziyah Hussin, 2010).

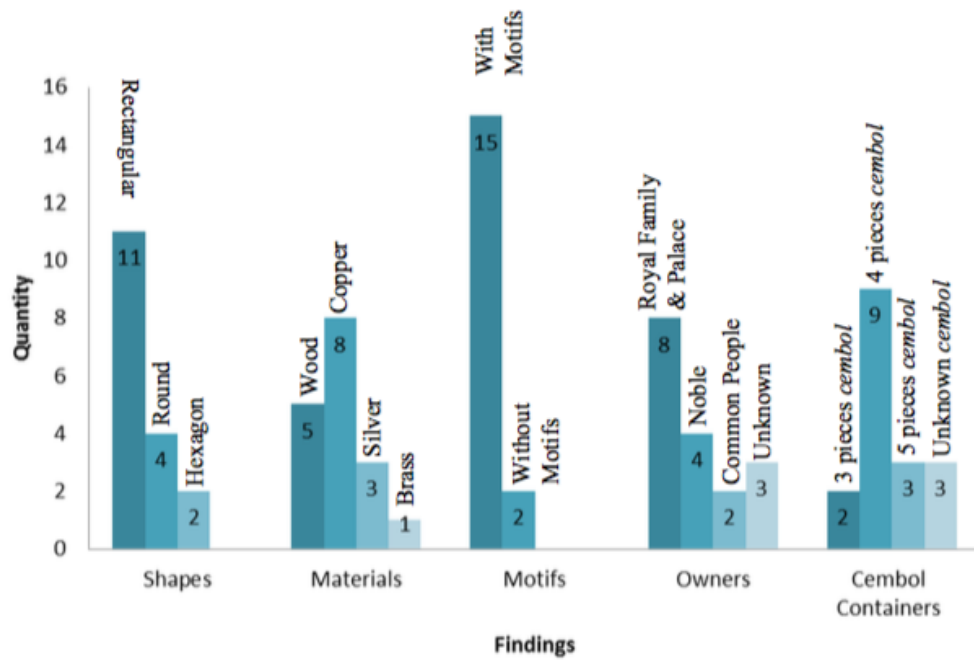
All manners of decoration can also be recognized from its adherence to Islamic tradition prohibiting depictions of the human form or animals and replaced with beautiful curves of the Arabic alphabets with environmental branches, leaves and beautiful flowers inspired by everyday life (Mubin Sheppard, 1980).

Several motifs come from the name of Malay cakes. There are several motifs which are believed to have been influenced by Hinduism, as the initial, strong Hindu influence on the Malay society before Islam spread across the Malay Peninsula, where after most of the Hindu motifs are modified because Islam forbids compositions that resemble animal and human forms. Over time, a variety of motifs and patterns derived from nature were ingeniously incorporated and known as the motifs of the Malay world (Mohd Taib Osman, 1997).

### **Analysis of Data**

Data collection and observation were conducted in several museums that have been chosen based on the collection of Malay *tepak sirih*, which are located around Kuala Lumpur and Malacca. 17 samples of *tepak sirih* were observed from Muzium Negara, Muzium Kesenian Islam, Muzium Etnologi Dunia Melayu, Muzium Tekstil Negara, Muzium Perbadanan Kraf Kuala Lumpur and Muzium Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam, Malacca.

Figure 1: Shapes, Materials, Motifs, Owners and *Cembol* Container of *Tepak Sirih*



Based on Figure 1 above, there are 11 *tepak sirih* were rectangular in shape that is most common used in the Malay community until today. While the other 4 *tepak sirih* were in round-shaped and the rest of 2 were in hexagon shape, which is extremely rarely found.

There are 4 types of materials used in 17 types samples of *tepak sirih* studied. Copper is a material that is most often found with a total of 8 pieces, 5 pieces of wood, 3 pieces of silver and only 1 piece made of brass. The material for every *tepak sirih* plays an important role as it represents the status of the owners and their class. However, there are also *tepak sirih* done for ordinary people such as copper. This statement can be attributed to the opinion by Yahaya Ismail (1989), which stated that former *tepak sirih* are usually made of copper and silver.

The motifs of *tepak sirih* were divided into 2 types, those with motifs and pattern decoration, and the other one without a motif. This is because this classification will lead to an explanation of the motif. There are 15 *tepak sirih* with motifs, while the other 2 *tepak sirih* are without any motif.

Referring to Roselelawati (2014), a curator of Muzium Negara Kuala Lumpur and Nurul Iman (2014) from the Islamic Arts Museum, they are stated that the material used to make the *tepak sirih* also affects who the owner is. It can also symbolize the status and class of the owner. 8 of them are from the royal family and are the state-owned property, which include: *Tepak Sirih* Sultan Abdul Samad, *tepak sirih* from royal relatives of the State of Kelantan, *tepak sirih* from royal relatives of Perak, Malacca and Negeri Sembilan. In addition, there are 4 *tepak sirih*



owned by the nobility and upper class, while 2 pieces on display are owned by an ordinary people, and there are 3 pieces of *tepak sirih* with unknown owners.

*Tepak sirih* contains several small containers for the purpose of filling the ingredients for the betel chewing. The study found that the numbers of *cembul* presented in each *tepak sirih* are different: there are 3, 4 and 5 *cembul* in every *tepak sirih*. There are 2 pieces of *tepak sirih* which have 3 *cembul*, 9 pieces of *tepak sirih* with 4 *cembul*, 3 pieces of *tepak sirih* with 5 *cembul*, and the rest 3 pieces of *tepak sirih* with an unknown number. This is because, these 3 pieces of *tepak sirih* is made of wood and covered with velvet cloth of gold thread embroidery. Each *tepak sirih* displayed did not show all the contents inside and were sealed. It can be concluded that the *tepak sirih* that has a number of 4 *cembul* is the easiest and most common, while the *tepak sirih* with 3 *cembul* is very rarely used.

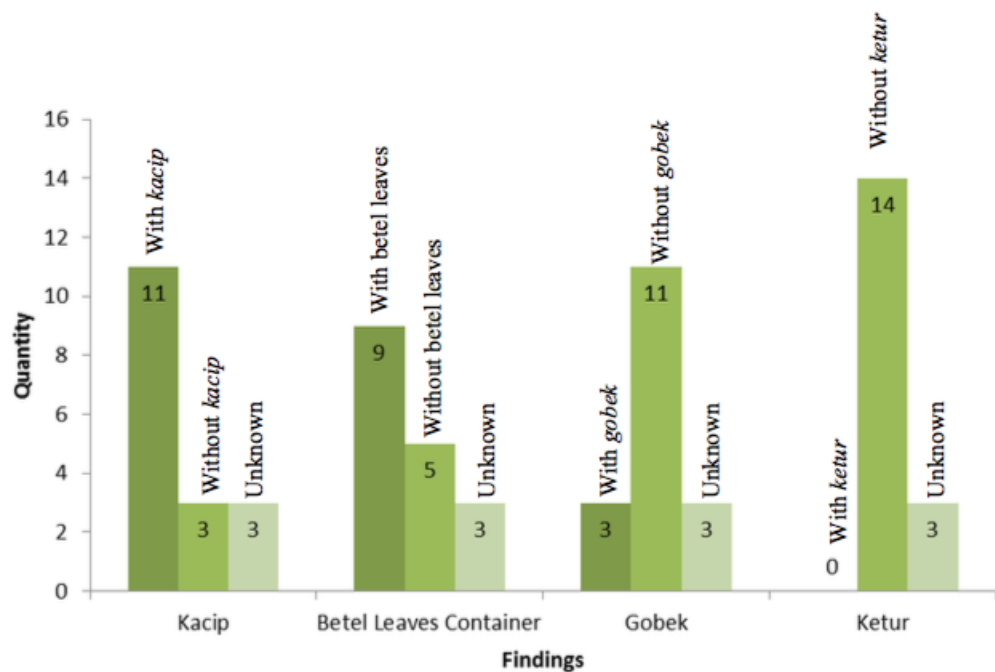


Figure 2: *Kacip*, *Betel Leaves Container*, *Gobek* and *Ketur* of *Tepak Sirih*

Referring to Figure 2, *kacip* is used to cut *gambier*, areca nut and lime, and is one of the important components in *tepak sirih*. The study found that 11 pieces of *tepak sirih* contain *kacip*, while 3 pieces of *tepak sirih* are without *kacip*, and the remaining 3 are unknown. The formulation can be made by declaring that *kacip* is complementary in *tepak sirih* because almost all the studied *tepak sirih* contain *kacip* in their set. The *kacip* classified into 2 types, namely male and female *kacip*. Male *kacip* has motifs such as birds, horses and others, while female *kacip* neither has any motif nor carving. The study found that they are 4 male *kacip* with mythical horse and bird motif, while the remaining 7 are female *kacip*. The carved male

*kacip* in *tepak sirih* are in possession of the royal family. It can be concluded that each *tepak sirih* owned by the royal family is filled with *tepak sirih* motif and beautiful decorations.

The betel leaves are usually put in a small box or slot to be served or eaten. However, there are also *tepak sirih*, which do not have a container. Betel leaves placed inside the *tepak sirih* need to be fresh and will be changed after they have wilted. There are 9 pieces of *tepak sirih*, which have betel leaf containers, while the other 5 pieces do not have any. These include the 3 pieces of *tepak sirih*, which are unknown whether there are any containers to put the betel leaf, or not. For those *tepak sirih* that do not have it, the betel leaves will be inserted or tucked in between the *cembul* or any spaces that is empty.

*Gobek* are made from copper, iron and wood. It is a tool to pulverize betel leaves along with the nut, lime and *gambier*. It is cylindrical in shape. Results from the study found that 3 pieces of *tepak sirih* have *gobek*, while 11 of it do not have any. Other than that, 3 *tepak sirih* cannot be known for sure whether they have *gobek* or not. The *tepak sirih* that have *gobek* are exhibited at Muzium Etnologi Dunia Melayu Kuala Lumpur, Muzium Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam Melaka and Muzium Perbadanan Kraf Kuala Lumpur.

*Ketur* is a tool, which is higher than the *tepak sirih*, and it is normally not to be served in the *tepak sirih* because of its size. *Ketur* is laid out separately beside the *tepak sirih*. It serves as a place to spit the betel after being chewed or eaten to avoid clutter. However, all the 14 *tepak sirih* studied did not have any *ketur*, while the rest 3 are unknown.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that the *tepak sirih* plays an important role in Malay community relations. It has a variety of form, functions and meaning that is different from others but still has an interest depending on the ceremony, occasions and usefulness.

Cultural and artistic crafts should be maintained and preserved because without both, we will be able to recognize the history of civilization, especially for young generations. The aesthetic values of Malay *tepak sirih* are associated with intrinsic or implied the meaning as a description of the aspects of the philosophy, values, beliefs, principles and norms.

The beauty of art of *tepak sirih* through aesthetic activity which are used to conduct intelligence, sensitivity and creativity, as pointed out by Collingwood (1974), which are not just to see but to appreciate, approached up a sport invented just what is seen, but is created through a process of appreciative awareness eyes.

Therefore, appreciation and observations are necessary to produce an aesthetic standpoint through the motif of the relationship between humans and the natural surroundings. Awareness was followed by the concept of art form is associated with the aesthetic beauty. However, in terms of perception is based on the environment and emulated in terms of composition and form.

Today's generation should appreciate the role of *tepak sirih*, which has long taught us to control our words, maintain refinement of character, appreciate guests and cultivate moral values in our daily lives. Not only that, *tepak sirih* also functions as the beginning of the discussion about all things especially in the matters of proposal and saying hello. Everything is done with great manners, according to Malay identity, that implies maintaining the heredity customs inherited from ancestors.

*Tepak sirih* is now available in various designs that serve as souvenirs and gifts. The replica of *tepak sirih*, which is sleek and modern, is re-established as an award or prize to reward any person in gatherings and occasions. This relic of the nation's heritage should continue to exist in everyday life as symbol of modesty and courtesy, as the Malay community is rich in values.

A few recommendations were suggested for the next research in future. Due to the lack of documentation about the Malay *tepak sirih* especially from the context

of the meanings, it is an honor to see that this research will expand more on the meanings behind Malay *tepak sirih* and its philosophy in the Malay society.

The development of the form of *tepak sirih* can be more specific, such as the Malay *tepak sirih* variations through design transformation including the evolution and the changes. The curator of Muzium Negara Kuala Lumpur suggested that the research of Malay *tepak sirih* need to be focus on the motifs on the *kacip*. This is because the *kacip* itself has certain motifs and intrinsic meaning that are meaningful towards the influences and philosophy.

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