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THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERAK TRADITIONAL MALAY ROOF HOUSES (PTMRH) IN THE YEAR OF 1820-1940: A CHRONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ARABESQUE TYPES ON WALL OF RUMAH IBU

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Abstract

This paper qualitatively discussed about the decorative woodcarving on Perak Traditional Malay Roof Houses built between the years 1800-1940 looking from the perspective of the Malay belief in Islam. Perak wood carving on houses is considered decorative art of Islam which is known as arabesque. Arabesque may represent a thought process, an idea as well as an abstract representation of line and pattern on any material surface. It is a decorative element results from Islamic reaction against anything iconic or representational arts. Perak wood carving seems to carry both elements of flora and fauna limits itself to the framework of Islamic arts owes motif to predominantly Malay primordial belief. The 'arabesque forces' vis-à-vis Islam that later took over the previous art of earlier belief, adopt and actualize the art of the earlier belief of the Perak Malay while, the Chinese migrant carpenter or tukang Cina (Chinese carpenter) carved motif in accordance to this belief system. Initially the Chinese *tukang* abide to rule and being accommodative for the sake of the survival of the carpentry enterprises. Prior to analysis, identification of carving types has been made through recognizing houses built by Malay and Chinese tukang or by both parties through interviewing process on the living *tukang* and elders in the villages. Three categories of PTMRH are identified in the discussion, the first was the earliest Malay houses which is the traditional version built solely by Malay tukang, the second version is the *orang kebanyakan* (ordinary Malay) and *orang berada* (Malay novelty) version built by the Malay tukang and the third was the innovative version built either by the Malay or by the Chinese alone or by joint effort of the two *tukang*. However, houses built by Malay and Chinese seem to have slight differences in construction as well as decorative aspects. Through visual observation, carving done by Malay is fluid or fine refers its motif to the surrounding environment while the Chinese carving is abstract, modular, to be as close as to the Malay counterpart reminiscent of Malay flora and fauna essence while carrying and applying (some Chinese abstract formal tendency) Chinese hidden geometrical structure to the carving that need further research.

Keywords: Islam, Arabesque pattern (Malay carving), Perak Traditional Malay Roof Houses (PTMRH), Chronology, Malay and Chinese *tukang* (carpenter)

1. Introduction

Origin of carvings in the Malay world are widely discussed, Rosnawati (2005) and Sabrizaa on carving associate to symbolism (2007), Anuar Talib on Islam related to carving (2006), Eddin Khoo and A. Farish Nor (2000) on Malay carving culture and most of these scholars believed it to have originated from the Malay intimate interaction and care of the nature. The West terms this association as animist or the belief in the seen and unseen forces of nature. The selected flora carved on wall element is not solely for beauty, but symbolically selected to give magical, medicinal and edible values to Malay (Sabrizaa, 2006). The nature is both proponents that are friendly and opponent that warrants reconciliation and thus, the essence of the nature is not coincidence in Malay carving designs. The sensitivity of nature made the Malay able to gain accommodation and consistently stay harmony with it. The idea of intervention on nature and to dominate nature is almost absent in Malay traditional world view of the past.

Scholars like Naguib (1972) and Taib (1983), believed that the Indian religions were embraced by the court community in a deeper sense, while the people at large practice the ritual aspect of the religion. The teachers of Indian religions were invited to teach to the court and not to the public, and thus, the essence of the religion was practiced philosophically as well as ritually by the novelty rather than people at large. The Malay novelty in this case preserved some of the teachings which are essentially Indian in characters, though they had embraced Islam. Some of the material aspects of the religion are such as elements of worship, evident in Malay architecture. '*Lebah bergantung*' which is in previous belief known as stupa was part of the decorative and symbolic component of the

Malay house. The motif such as Kala and Lotus was Indian in essence evident in the Malay house. Based on a research carried out by Sabrizaa (2007) the most encountered and popular motif the master carver engrossed was associated to vegetal motif of Hindu-Buddha essence such as *bunga putu*, *bunga 'teratai'* ('telipok') and '*bunga tanjung*'.

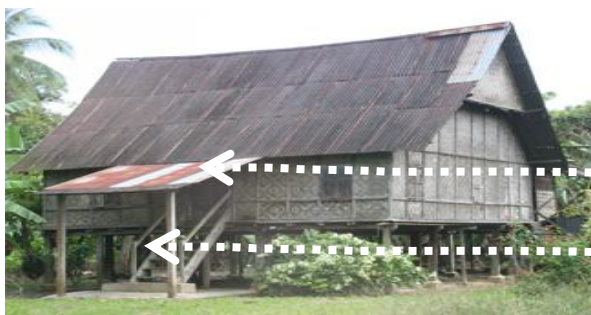
It is a general understanding that Islam came to the Malay community was in harmony and without a confrontational one. A change in arts and culture too is evolutionary and not an abrupt one. This subtle process seemingly suited the people. Some arts such as wood carving stayed as they are without very much questioned about the intrinsic and symbolic meaning as long as the form was consistence with the new teaching that forbids graven images. Islam adds Arabic script in hand with vegetal motifs of either animist or Indian root to the strong carving culture especially of the East Coast. In this case the vegetal pattern tends to flourish and survived overtime as long as the culture of carving exists. While, Kala motif associated to Indian religion of the east coast stayed for some time and decayed as the knowledge of Islam flourish. The learned in Islam or '*ulama*' and religious Malay scholar such as Abdullah Mohamed Nakula however translated and gave new meanings to existing motif to avoid association to the earlier meanings. Some of the fauna motif of lesser type of the west coast lived by its name such as '*itek pulang petang*' and '*badak mudik*' motif primordially were abstract forms. The west coast seemed lesser in its representation of the Indian fauna motif.

1.1 Arabesque

Arabesque is a symbolic and a loaded concept. It is an essence, a visual form and phenomena that represents both the tangible such as the architecture and the intangible such as thought process and philosophy (al-Faruqi 1990: 69). It covers idea, concept and visual form such as literary works, music, craft, art, design, architecture rooted from the understanding of the essence of the al-Quran and the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. In the concrete, tangible and visual terms, arabesque means objective visual representation of art and architecture of the Muslims, the people that embrace Islam, characterized by its infinite patterned in the form of Arabic script, geometry, vegetal and fauna applied either on earthly or synthetic surfaces. Arabesque in this research dealing with the very visual pattern and form, the Islamic aesthetics form applied in art, design and architecture where its essence is the abstraction. Arabesque is tangible arts invention that owes its root from the Arab. Perak Malays are rooted from Islamic way of living as well as Malay adat derived from the indigenous belief and the Indian religions. It is evidence that carving elements of PTMRH bound to the framework of Islam belief of abstract non iconic art, the arabesque pattern. The Chinese tukang who were Taoist, Buddhist or Communist adorned the Malay houses abide to the arabesque framework.

1.2 Perak Traditional Malay Roof House (PTMRH)

Since the study deal with the arabesque pattern applied on PTMRH (**Photo 1**), therefore, an introductory to this type of dwelling is a necessity. PTMRH was traditional Perak Malay dwelling structurally built of wood and other sustainable materials either by the Malay or Chinese tukang alone or by the both parties that collaborated. This house like any other Malay houses exhibits a well-thought design and construction (Zulkifli, 2004) that possesses architectural qualities of functions, beauty and technology that is equivalent to any Eastern and Western vernacular architecture.



Main house/*rumah ibu*

Soyok

Photo 1: Example of PTMRH owned by the late Hj. Ahmad Kutai.

A study by Dawson and Gillow (1997) about indigenous dwellings in Nusantara, categorized Malay house as a 'modern' dwelling. The statement is rather confusing because Malay houses known were built earlier before modern era. The structure was known since the reign of Malaccan Malay Sultanate of Islam around 1400 A.D. Naguib (1972) describe the Malay as a rational people lived by the sea who fished, sailed and traded. Jakob Sumardjo (2002) describes the Malay as a rational, opportunist and pragmatic race. The Malay dwelling tells those qualities because the house was built base on rational construction and proper spatial configuration that seemed to suit modern criteria's such as economy, comfort, hygienic and rational division of spaces. This can be elaborated as the architecture of the PTMRH known to have basic functional and rational spaces such as *soyok* or the main stair space with extended roof overhangs and 'serambi' or visitor living spaces which represent a public domain. The *bilik* or bedroom in *rumah ibu* or main house represents a private domain, while 'selang' (an intermediate space links 'rumah ibu and dapu'r) and 'dapu'r (kitchen) represent a female domain observed in traditional Malay culture. The provision of shades is for controlling heat and rain and the openings is for ventilation. Further analysis on spatial configuration had proven that it abides the rule laid by Islam regarding the spatial division for guest, non-muhrim and owner (Marzukhi, 2007).

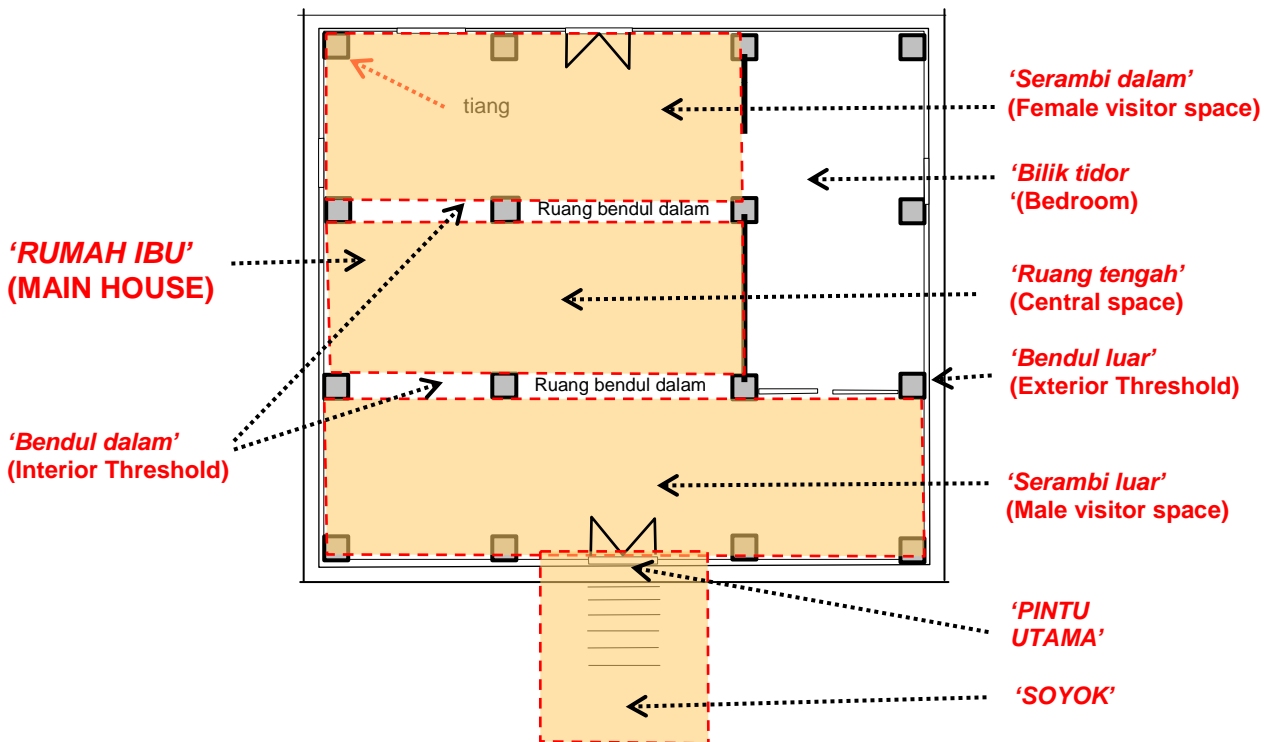


Diagram 1: Plan (not to scale) of the PTMRH shows bedroom and the two 'serambi' ('serambi luar' and 'serambi dalam') that made up the space of the main house.

The uniqueness of PTMRH are the differences from the other Malay houses of Northern, Southern and Eastern Style types of the Peninsular Malaysia by the absence of proper 'serambi' space. The 'serambi' space is incorporated into 'rumah ibu' without a definite wall or partition. It is solely defined by floor element called 'bendul dalam' (Diagram 1). Zulkifli (2004) states that the PTMRH is the only Malay house types in Malaysia known without a properly defined 'serambi' or the house with ill-defined *serambi*. Studies by Marzukhi (2007) on Malay spatial quality relative to the requirements of Islam categorize the PTMRH is lacking in meeting the standard required by Islam. While, studies (Norhasandi, 2010) on PTMRH built between 1800 to 1900 discovered that factors like the surroundings environment, social and 'adat' aspects had shaped the spatial configuration of PTMRH, while Islam was still a guiding factor.

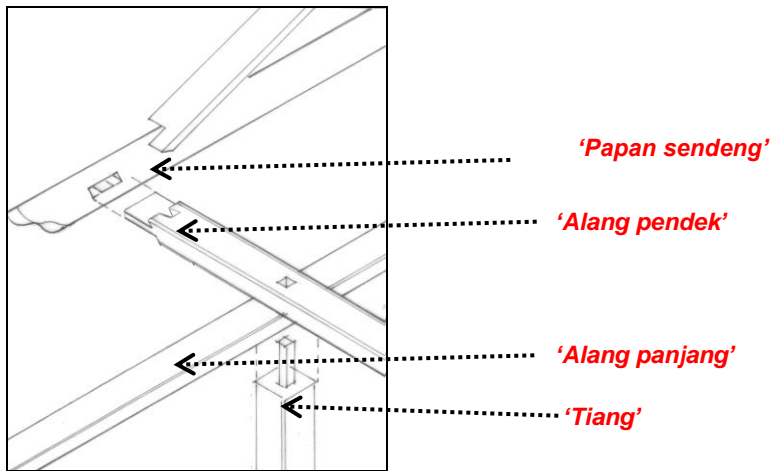


Diagram 2: Detail relationship of roof structures to *papan sendeng*.

The beauty of the PTMRH derived from two (2) aspects which is the usage of technology of construction in traditional manner and the inherent decoration carved on house components as the integrated part of the architectural construction program, such as carving treatment on main structural components known as '*larik*' (Rosnawati, 2005) and the actual carving treatment in vegetal and geometry evident at '*atas pintu*', '*pintu*', '*atas tingkap*' and '*tingkap*' only. Another prominent structural component that deserves special carving treatment is a pair of '*papan sendeng*' (**Diagram 2**), where both ends are made curvy in which this treatment is inherent on most PTMRH. The existence of this '*papan sendeng*' is to strengthen the structural component of the PTMRH roof spark another question which is substantial to the study of the relationship of the PTMRH to Rumah Negeri Sembilan that is having similar '*papan sendeng*' in place that other types of Malay traditional houses do not have. However, this paper will only focus on the study of types of decoration at '*atas tingkap*' on houses from the Islamic stand point where this decoration is termed as the arabesque pattern.

3. Issue Regarding Geometrical Arabesque Pattern on PTMRH on Atas Tingkap

Understanding the symbolic aspect of geometrical pattern on PTMRH is not well portrayed in a well balanced perspective due to the blanketing of all types of carving were made by Malays which were not all the time true. This is because not all the Malay houses were built by the Malays, as some were built also by the Chinese. They also carved for the Malays with vegetal motifs to suit the Malay beliefs. In this case, the Chinese contributed towards adorning the Malay houses, which through initial visual study carried out on some of the houses objectively differentiate the carving by the Malays and the Chinese. The geometrical structure of carving made by the Chinese needs deeper analysis either from tangible or intangible aspect.

4. Methodology of Arabesque Carving Selection

A representative sample of carvings of the PTMRH was selected based on three time frames (Norhasandi, 2010) as stated in the analysis. Prior to the analysis and discussion, identification of PTMRH made by the Malay and Chinese was determined through interviews of the Malay elderly lived along the riverbank of Sungai Perak. They were the one whom acknowledged which house was made by the Malay, the Chinese or by the collaboration of two parties. This paper aimed for further research to visually present the carving made by the Malay as compared to the Chinese. The carving was generally discussed in term of the form and structure.

5. Analysis of Geometrical Arabesque Pattern on PTMRH

During early of 1820 towards 1860, the culture of adorning houses with carving were everywhere, while, the houses bound to proper traditional construction were done by the Malay '*tukang*'. Between 1860-1890 carving activities stopped for a while and towards the end of 1800 and early 1900 the activities resumed again. The carvings were made easy by machine introduced by the Chinese and hand carving per se started to slow down. Only two types of arabesque patterns were inherent in the PTMRH which were the geometrical and vegetal forms. The Arabic

scripts or calligraphy were absent on this type of house except the Perak house with ‘*bumbung limas*’ and bumbung Perak of the later types. In relative to arabesque pattern, PTMRH can be divided into three period types according to timeline between the years of 1800-1940 which is laid down in the diagram below.

Period/year	Types of arabesque application on PTMRH	Carpenter	Description
1820-1860	PTMRH having a complex vegetal carving and very less openings	Malay	A few in number
1860-1890	PTMRH having no vegetal carving at all	Malay	Many in number
1890-1940	PTMRH carving in simple form with more openings	Either Malay or Chinese or Joint effort of the two	Many in number. Most are the innovative types made by Chinese.

Diagram 1: Time periods relative to arabesque carving and carpenter.

5.1 Arabesque on houses made between 1820-1860

Most of the PTMRH is known to have carvings either vegetal or geometrical patterns or at least a ‘*larik*’ pattern. ‘*Larik*’ is a pattern made on edges of the main structural component of houses. The geometrical pattern was later introduced to the PTMRH. Normally, geometry or vegetal type carvings are mainly in the plain ‘*tebuk terus*’, represent a simple cut through carvings that lack of three dimensional qualities. However, with the exception of the earliest traditional Perak houses still survived to date built within the year of 1820 -1860 constitute of Tok Sedara Bongsu (TSB), Maharaja Hitam Lambok (MHL) and Itam Bahak (IB) houses possessed vegetal carvings at some of its architectural component, meaning that these houses during the mentioned period of time are carved intensively with complex carvings. TSB house was made around 1860 while house of IB was made in 1819 and MHL in 1820 represent the three oldest version of PTMRH still in existence. The existing TSB house in Bota Kiri is known to have comprehensive carving on walls of ‘*rumah ibu*’. It represents the only carved Perak Malay traditional house that at par with the other carved houses of this type in other regions in Peninsular Malaysia. Most walls of the MHL main house were altered but some of the existing interior structures were carved. Author deduced that the existing wall components had some carvings before it was replaced by new wall which is of plain timber.



Legend: 1. ‘*Lubang angin berukir*’ (carved ventilated opening), 2. ‘*Tingkap sekerat berukir*’ (carved half window), 3. ‘*Atas tingkap berukir*’ (carved window top).

Photo 2: Wall and traditional window components with complex carving of TSB house built in 1860.

Initially, in the early year of 1820, the method of making done by hand carved tools without the assistance of machine is witnessed through carving made at house of TSB (**Photo 2**) and IB (**Photo 3**).



i. 'Tingkap jengok' in actual form.



ii. Detail of three dimensional vegetal carving.

Photo 3: 'Tingkap jengok' (peeping window) of House of IB with carving by the Malay.

As mentioned earlier, TSB, MHL and IB houses are the only surviving examples of houses of novelties and ordinary, respectively, which were carved with complex vegetal motif on traditional opening components, while the carvings were positioned on walls in a very strategic location. TSB is considered the only traditional Malay house survives overtime that truly carries the characteristics of genuine traditional Malay house. The characteristics is determined by having carved windows of smaller scale and walled with solid timber plank. This is the only house represents one of the earliest version of Malay house still in existence in Perak.

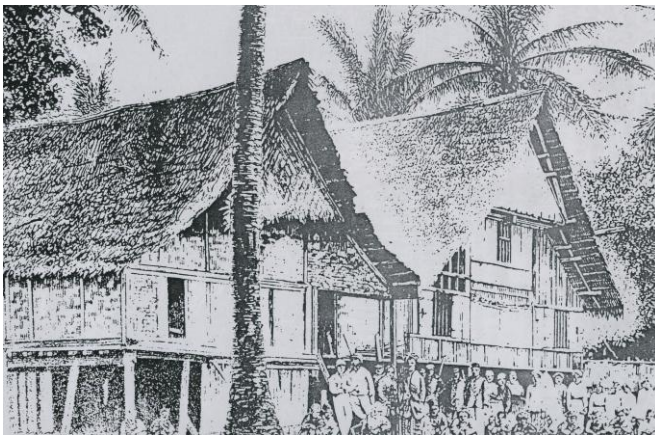


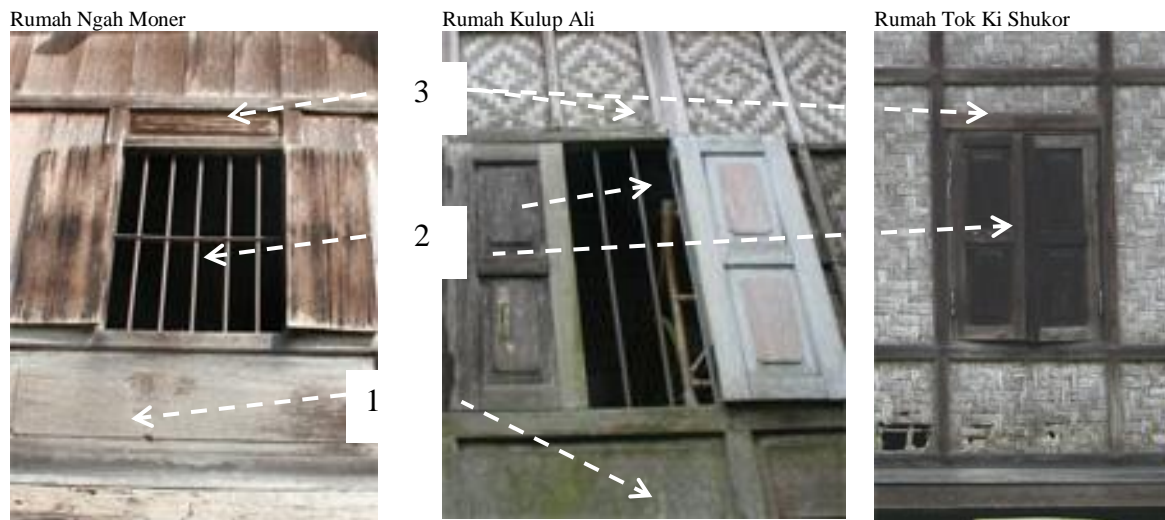
Photo 4: Photo of Cik Maida house in Kuala Kangsar taken around the year of 1880 shows the traditional Malay house opening of wall which was later demolished in the same year to be replaced by British building. Sources: M.A.Fawzi Basri (1986:94).

The IB house on the other hand, is known to be the oldest house of the ordinary people exists by having a similar carving feature as to the TSB. However, the carving is presented only on the front façade of the 'rumah ibu'. Sketches made by Abdul Halim Nasir in the 1980's shown that the wall element of one of PTMRH in Kuala Kangsar is having similar characteristics to TSB and IB. However, the house was no longer in existence. The other evident is a photo of Cik Maida house (Photo 4) taken around the year of 1880, which is no longer exists. The authors believed that the house was built between the years of 1820 to 1860. The evidence proves that the earlier version of PTMRH especially was carved with complex carving within the years 1800-1860.

5.2 The absent of arabesque for houses made between 1860-1890

In general, most houses either owned by the ordinary people or novelty are made between the years 1860 to 1890 were unadorned or without any vegetal carving, however structural components of the houses were at least treated with a kind of carve pattern called 'larik'. This means that the Malay 'tukang' stopped to carve vegetal pattern at this point in time but only able to treat the main structure with larik pattern. Studies discovered that carving efforts was put to halt partly due to factors that affect the life of the Malay. These factors and other elements such as internal and external issues relatively to period of uncertainty and chaos affect the carving activities. By being on the ground, that is by visiting each and every unadorned houses built without the Malay architectural aesthetics and meeting with the elderly questioning them why the Malay houses made during this time neglect the carving, the answers were pointed to the state of the sosio-cultural condition and the belief system of the Perak Malay within that period deserves further discussion.

As mentioned, houses made between the years 1860 to 1890 absent the geometrical and vegetal pattern (**Photo 5**) and the 'atas tingkap' component was in the form of either solid timber panel, timber slat or bamboo weave.



Legend: 1. Panel papan (dado wall), 2. 'Tingkap sekerat' (half window), 3. 'Atas tingkap' (window top).
Photo 5: Wall and window component of houses built between 1860 to 1890 without carving of 'atas tingkap' (window top).

As has been mentioned, most houses of the ordinary people made between years 1860-1890 were seen to have plain wall treatment; however some of them had dado at the lower wall. The elderly told that those who were able to build PTMRH at that point of time were considered well to do.

5.3 Arabesque on houses made between 1890-1940

As mentioned, study discovered that most of the PTMRH were uncarved during the period of years 1860-1890. Study however discovered that the introduction of carving to the PTMRH was then again resumed in 1890 to 1900 and onwards for houses built within that time frame. Based on interviews of the elderly and the living 'tukang', the carving were initiated and introduced by Chinese 'tukang' in the year of 1890 and onward who had acquired the knowledge of building PTMRH. The authors believed that the Chinese initiative then motivated the Malay to dictate the action of the Chinese to having carving on the 'atas tingkap', which was an innovation to the Perak Malay houses of these types, where between the years of 1860-1890, none of the Malay houses had carvings on 'atas tingkap'. Instead, the 'atas tingkap' was frame with timber panel or 'tepas' weave devoid of any carvings. The years of 1890 to 1900 are when the Malay had started to have carvings on atas tingkap. This is also suggested that the Chinese introduced the carvings of 'atas tingkap' to the Malays (**Photo 8**).

As discovered most of the geometrical pattern (**Photo 6 and 8**) can only be found on houses made after the year 1890 and onwards.



Window top of House of Hj. Md. Nor

Window top of House of Toh Paduka Raja

Photo 6: Geometrical pattern of *atas tingkap* on PTMRH built around 1890 and onward.

As mentioned, the present of vegetal patterns on '*atas tingkap*' was identified on houses made in 1890 and onwards only. Types of this simple cut through vegetal pattern discovered ranges from the simple to complex forms and compositions. Knowing the '*tukang*' of the house, the identification of patterns carved can be easily associated to either the Malay or the Chinese '*tukang*'.

Rumah Hj. Abas



Rumah Hj. Ahmad



Rumah Andak Endah



Legend: 1. *Panel papan* (dado wall), 2. '*Tingkap sekerat*' (half window), 3. '*Atas tingkap*' (top window).

Photo 7: Wall and window components of houses built after 1890 and onward.

Based on visual observation, the Malay '*tukang*' used to carve simple to complex vegetal forms associated to vegetation in the surrounding environment they lived in or imaginative vegetal form in a plain '*tebuk*' types.



Legend: 1. Panel papan (dado wall), 2. 'Tingkap sekerat' (Half window), 3. 'Atas tingkap' (top of window).
 Photo 8: Wall and window component of houses built by Chinese tukang.

The Chinese tukang seemed to carve vegetal motif independence of local reference, which in this case the vegetal disassociate from the surrounding. They seemed to dictate the vegetal form of the Malay tukang; however, there are distinctive differences of their vegetal motif in fluidity of form. The Chinese carved the motifs with a degree of abstraction losing the natural tendency, while the Malay tried to get the motif close to the nature with a degree of abstraction too.

Studies showed that PTMRH built around 1860-1900 for ordinaries and novelties by the Malay tukang devoid of carving on wall. However, the only carving component known as batu nesan or lebah bergantung are witnessed at the end of longitudinal beam of rumah ibu for houses built before 1900. Lebah bergantung element was waived off slowly and even was abandoned on house built around 1900 and onward. Research witnessed that most of PTMRH built by Chinese abandoned the lebah bergantung element. This is probably the utilitarian nature of the Chinese tukang that do away with the elements. As stated earlier, the Perak Malay started to carve at the time the Chinese introducing carving element of atas tingkap. This statement deserves further investigation.



House of Hj. Abas



House of Andak Endah



House of Hj. Ahmad

Photo 9: Vegetal pattern by Malays.

The characteristics of Perak Malay carver's works can be described as simple without neglecting the fluidity of form (**Photo 9**). In this case, their vegetal motif seems delicate and fine. The vegetal seemed to have gradual and subtle curves. Thus, the carving seemed to have some sensitivity to formal fluidity and less rigid though it is of simple form.



Rumah Lebai Ali



Rumah Tok Manap



Rumah Kulub Anbia



Rumah Ismail Tamin

Photo 10: Vegetal pattern by Chinese.

The Chinese carving is definite (**Photo 10**). It is a determined form because it tried to dictate the geometrical structure that shape carving module. The popular module unit is three. It can be said that the carving is merely a predictable form with essentially geometrical bias. Introduction of the mechanical tool by Chinese seem to make carving faster however limit the carving quality.

CONCLUSION

PTMRH is known to tell a few fundamental things about the Malay ways of life during that period of time. Chronologically, the earlier version of PTMRH was known to be well-carved arabesque and it was done by the Malay especially in the early quarter of 1800 and to the year of 1860. The PTMRH of the ordinary people and novelty were built around the years between 1860 to 1900 is plain and lack of carving. This means that the Malay didn't carve or stop to carve or didn't put effort to enhance their dwellings during that year period. The life of the Malay at that point of time had been identified to a phenomena associated with social cultural element of some sort that put the creative endeavor to stop. The PTMRH made after 1900 were carved with simple vegetal form, a simplified arabesque. That time, the carving on the PTMRH was made by the Malay is a little different than those of Chinese. The period after 1900 may also represent the openness of the Malay towards Chinese tukang to build the Malay house in Perak in an intensive way. It is important to note that the Chinese may had influenced the Malay tukang to carve on '*atas tingkap*' in the 1900 and onward, where prior to 1890 the Malay didn't carved. Even though, the carving culture then was again resumed, the Malay arabesque differentiates itself from the Chinese. However, the Chinese had learned how to build a Malay house in new ways as timber mills increased in numbers. The Malay told that the Chinese built faster and worth of money. This strategy invited more Chinese to built PTMRH of the innovative types in Perak, which then were dominated by '*Rumah Bumbung Perak*'.

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