

Traditional Kelantanese Portals: A Study of Form and Content

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Abstract

Traditional Kelantanese portal is a form of Malay traditional door structure that can only be found at royal palaces and homes of dignitaries. In addition to its function as an entrance into the palace area, the portal is also a safety door for the palace. Since traditional portal belongs to the minorities, this heritage is rarely known by the public. The art of traditional Malay portals has never been researched and written thoroughly. The subject is briefly discussed in some books on art and architecture. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to study the history, form, visual elements, motifs, and meanings of the portals based on Erwin Panofsky's theories. This research will begin with the identification of the form and visual elements of traditional Kelantanese portals in the collection of the National Museum, Kuala Lumpur. In order to gain more information, interview sessions were conducted with the museum director, senior curator, cultural experts and academicians. The result of this study shows that in terms of history, traditional Kelantanese portals were influenced by the Patani Langkasuka style as Kelantan historically used to be under the rule of that government. Basically, traditional portal consists of four basic forms of architecture which are the pillars, wall, door and the head of the door. Meanwhile, there are four categories of motifs namely flora, fauna, cosmos, and calligraphy. Each of these motifs have different meaning and most of them are related to Malay philosophy and aesthetics, as well as cultural and religious belief. Finally, it can be concluded that traditional Malay portals should be conserved in terms of history, form and meanings for the future generation, as well as a form of respect and appreciation to the richness of Malay art and heritage.

Keywords: Traditional; Portal; Form; Content

Introduction

Kamus Dewan (2005-fourth edition), defines ‘gerbang’ as a large door with a curve structure; namely “gapura” on top of it. Abdul Halim Nasir (1986:143) defines ‘pintu gerbang’ as a form of building erected in front of a city, a palace or home. ‘Pintu gerbang’ usually consists of doors that open inward, with roof cover that is embellished with beautiful carvings. In Indonesia, this type of ‘pintu gerbang’ is called ‘paduraksa’ while ‘pintu gerbang’ that has no structure at the top is a form of ‘candi bentar’ that can be found in Bali.

There are two types of ‘gerbang’ or portal. First, ‘exterior portal’ outside a house that serves as an entrance to the yard and second, ‘interior portal’ that is used as a main door to the house or as a spatial division in the house.

Portals are one of the elements that show a nation’s artistic and cultural influences. In major cities in Europe, portals are considered as a historical marker to the nation. While in the Malay Archipelago, the traditional portal is one of the landmarks of a royal palace, the house of aristocrats and also temples. The types, forms, and motifs on portals can be characterized by some criteria such as the influence of society’s belief system, their environment and also period.

According to Mohd Sabrizaa Abd Rashid (2008), the portal is an element of architecture that is familiar to traditional Malay architecture of Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah, particularly for palaces and homes of dignitaries. He writes that there are visual records of portals at Istana Seri Akar and Istana Balai Besar in Kota Bharu which show the use of wood materials, ‘*buah buton*’ (stupa finial) motif, flower engravings, decorative walls, the ‘mountain peak’ shape and quranic calligraphy as features on palace portals.

A. *Definitions of Terms*

Motif - According to *Kamus Dwibahasa* (1979), motif means pattern arranged repeatedly to create patterns in cloth and other objects.

Kamus Ingggris-Melayu Dewan (1995) defines motif as a design or material while *Kamus Dewan* (1998) defines it as a basis or pattern in a painting (or carving or something else).

Malaysian Encyclopedia (1996), defines motif as basic or pattern on

painting, carving, craft and art and others.

According to Haziyah Hussin (2009), a motif is a decorative element in a single form, while the pattern is based on repeated motifs according to the principle of design. Basically, the motif in Malay art is derived from floral, fauna and cosmology.

Traditional - according to Ruzaika Omar Basree (2013), traditional is shaped of culture, manners, thinking, and in term of material that inherited to next generation. While traditional in religion inherited through citation from books and '*kitab*'.

Portals (*Gerbang*) - *Kamus Dewan* (2005-fourth edition), defines '*gerbang*' as a large door with a curve structure; namely "*gapura*" on top of it.

Halim Nasir (1986:143) defines '*pintu gerbang*' as a form of building erected in front of a city, a palace or home. '*Pintu gerbang*' usually consists of doors open inward, with roof cover that is embellished with beautiful carvings.

Traditional portal - According to Mohd Sabrizaa Abd Rashid (2008), the traditional portal is an element of architecture that is familiar to traditional Malay architecture of Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah, particularly for palaces and homes of dignitaries.

Form - Form refers to overall arrangements of an artwork which comprises of the elements of art and principle of organization. Elements of art are line, texture, shape, color, and value. The principle of the organization is harmony, variety, balance, proportion, dominance, movement and economy (Ocvirk et. al., 1993).

Content - Content is the meaning or iconography of a work of art. According to Panofsky, content as opposed to subject matter, is the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religion or perhaps philosophical persuasion (Panofsky, 1955).

B. Origin of Traditional Portals

There is no exact date to indicate when the portal was first built or used in Malaysia. However, based on Sulatus Sulatin, portals have been used since the Gangga Kingdom period in Bruas, Perak. This is indicated in the text as follows:

*".....maka segala rakyat Raja Suran pun
datanglah mengepung kota Gangga*

Negara itu, maka dilawan berperanglah orang di atas kota itu. Maka beberapa ditikam dan dipanah orang dari atas kola, tiada diendahnya; maka tampil juga ia menghampiri pintu kota Gangga Negara, dipalunya dengan cokmarnya, maka pintu kota Gangga Negara pun robohlah. Maka raja suran pun masuklah ke dalam kota Gangga Negara dengan segala hulubalangnyanya....”

(A.Samad Ahmad, 1979)

However, up until now most of the portals left in Malaysia were specifically from Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah which were produced since the 18th century (National Muzium, 2002). According to Nasrulamiazzam Mohd Nasir (2015), Malay traditional portals had influence from Patani and Langkasuka style as most of the wood carvers came from there or were influenced by the style.

C. Style and Function of Traditional Portals

Malay traditional arts are not only created for the sake of beauty but at the same time are very functional. For the Malay palaces, a portal is a gateway into the palace courtyard and it also functions as a security door. According to Nasrulamiazzam Mohd Nasir (2015), as a security, construction of a portal in the past would involve a ritual of splashing blood on the portals. This is related to an ancient superstitious belief of preserving ghosts as guardians to protect the house.

Traditional Malay portals are a symbol of status and power. As such the owners of portals were usually the nobles or wealthy persons (Ibid). Traditional portals symbolize a social border between dignitaries and ordinary people. Portals are an important element of a royal palace as well of homes of dignitaries. Portals would always be opened and closed accordingly as the palace was not only the administrative centre and royal residence, but it also held many government secrets. If it is constantly opened it would invite intruders or government spies to enter. However, the arch would be opened at certain times for folk to enter the palace in order to watch great ceremonies held there such as installation ceremonies, royal weddings or for the king’s birthday ceremonies (National Museum, 2012).

Traditional portal is rich in meaning. According to a master craftsman, Norhaiza Nordin portal is a metaphor for the anatomy of the human body. It covers the head, body and legs, and thus in principle, the construction of

the arch must be seen as a shape of a man standing erect like a protector to protect the house (Ibid). In term of style, according to Nasrulamiaam Mohd Nasir (2015), Malay traditional portals were influenced by Patani style. Examples of Patani elements in Malay traditional portals are ‘*pemeleh*’, ‘*gunungan*’, ‘*buah buton*’ and ‘*sulur bayung*’ motif.

Method

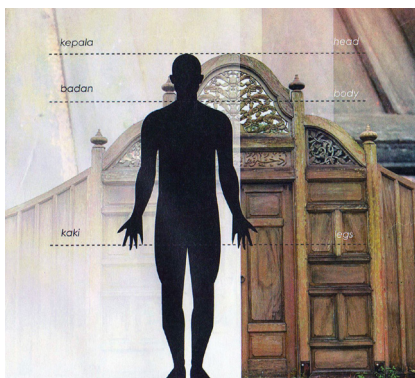


Figure 2.7: The metaphor of human anatomy at the portal (National Museum,2012)

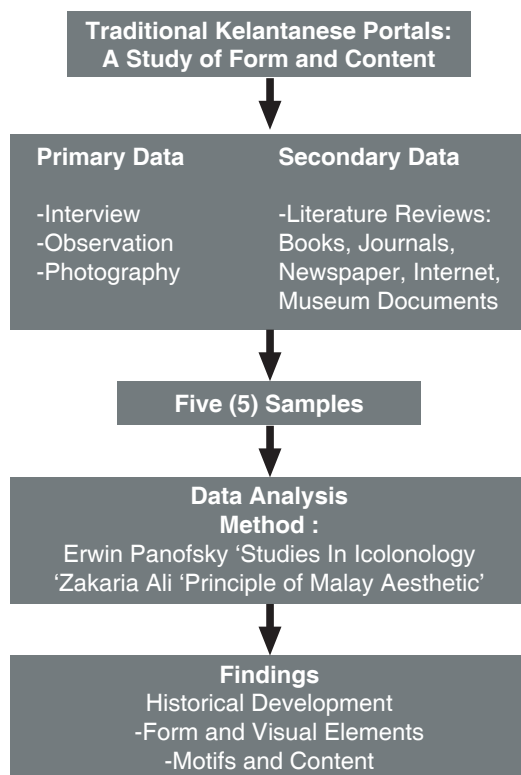


Figure 1.1: Research framework

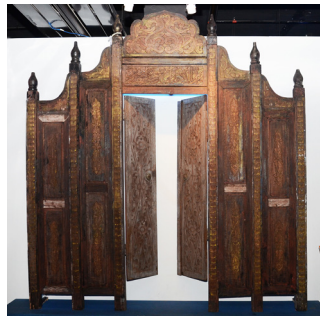
A. Case Study on Malaysian National Museum Collection

This study only focuses on the collection of the National Museum of Malaysia. All five (5) traditional Kelantanese portals in the collection have been chosen for the analysis. This study will examine in detail the form and content of the selected portals. Emphasis will be given on the aspects of visual elements, structure and motifs in order to characterize and understand the functions and meaning of the portals.

SAMPLE 1



SAMPLE 2



SAMPLE 3





















SAMPLE 4





















Findings

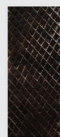







This study shows that in terms of history, traditional Kelantanese portals were influenced by the Patani Langkasuka style as Kelantan historically used to be under the rule of that government. Basically, traditional portal consists of four basic forms of architecture which are the pillars, wall, door and the head of a door. There are four categories of motifs namely flora, fauna, cosmos, and calligraphy. Each of these motifs have different meaning and most of them are related to Malay philosophy and aesthetics, as well as cultural and religious belief. The motifs are illustrated in the following table.

Floral Motifs




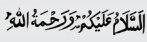




Name	Illustration	Outline of motif	Meaning	Remarks	Sample no.
Bunga Cina			Women decoration Symbol of friendliness in Malay culture.	Bloom flowers, beautiful, fragrant, fresh and unique. Often found in traditional Malay <i>pantun</i> about love	1
Bunga Melur			-Symbol of friendliness in Malay culture. -Symbolise purity and cleanliness. -Symbol of friendliness in Malay culture.	-Bloom flowers, beautiful, fragrant, fresh and unique. -Often found in traditional Malay <i>pantun</i> about love.	2
					3
Bunga Tanjung			-Symbol of divinity and nature. -Symbol of welcoming guest and friendliness in Malay culture. -Symbol of closeness of Malay people with nature and environment.	-Bloom flowers, beautiful, fragrant, fresh and unique. -Often found in traditional Malay <i>pantun</i> about love. -Motif in banquet hall Istana Negara.	1
					2
Bunga Teratai			-Symbol of strength of faith, purity, fortitude and harmony -Symbol of divinity and nature. -Symbolize the universe and the earth.		5
					5
Bunga Matahari			-Related to the symbol of the sun. -Symbol of power, strength, rebirth, protection and something eternal that determine life journey.		1
					4

Name	Illustration	Outline of motif	Meaning	Remarks	Sample no.
Bunga Cempaka			-Decoration on women hair and in traditional dance makyong. -Symbol of welcoming guest and friendliness in Malay culture. -Value on traditional medicine	-Often found in traditional Malay pantun about love. -Motifs in entrance door and hall banquet.	4
					4
Bunga Ketam Guri			-Has value on traditional medicine. -Growth in garden weeds and have been transformed through time and barely similar to their real life.		2
					5
Sulur bayung			-Sulur that bowed down mean relationship between human and God. -Symbol of the belief that all the existence is tied to one source, Allah. -Nature of <i>sulur</i> is the Malay identity of repaying the kindness of people.		5
					4
Buah Buton <i>Buah Buton Jenis Bersegi Lapan</i> <i>Buah Buton Jenis Kudup Bunga</i>			-As a status symbol. -Symbol of warrior. -Symbol of existence of higher being in spiritual world. -Symbol of beauty. -Symbol to the concept of 'diversity and nature'. -Have magical element that can expel ghost. -Symbol of part of human body which is 'head'.		1
					2
					3





Fauna Motifs

Name	Illustration	Outline of motif	Meaning	Remarks	Sample no.
Sisik ikan			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Believed it brings fortune and related to folk games such as 'fighting fish'. -As a sign of devotion love for pets. -Believed able to bring the fortune to the owner. -In Hindu beliefs, fish considered as faithful messenger, symbol of strength and pride. -In Hindu legend and Arab folklore, fish is considered connector between two lovers who love far different continents. 	Influenced from Hindu motifs.	1
					5
Sisik Naga			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Symbol of status, house decoration. -Symbol of the nature of God -Symbol of strength, power, justice and supernatural powers. -Symbol of happiness and avoid danger, fortune and fertility. 		2
Kepala Cicak			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Symbol of strength and courage. -As 'penyeri' on house. -Giving spirit to owner and protects from bad things. 	-Two type of <i>kepala cicak</i> which are 'L' type and 'T' type.	4

Calligraphic Motifs

Name	Illustration	Outline of motif	Meaning	Remarks	Sample no.
Sisik ikan			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -"In (or with) the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful." -Greeting word, "May peace be upon you." -Zikr means "Glorious is God." -Not from al Quran word. Considered as decoration. -As a sign hosts are Muslims. -To get blessing and avoid unpleasant things. -To prevent ghost and devil. 	Islamic nature. Appreciating the Quran and Islam.	1
					2
					5
					3

Cosmic Motifs

Name	Illustration	Outline of motif	Meaning	Remarks	Sample no.
Star Motif			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Meaning beauty, perfection, movement time, rebirth and justice in the earth and the sun. -Calmness and beauty of women. -Symbolizes the purity of Islam. 		1
Gunungan Motif			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Symbol of earth, compliment to the world and determination. -Symbolize status, nature and divinity. -Gunung is triangle shaped symbolic of Allah, rahman, and rahim. -Symbol of place of abundance of His mercy and His loving. -In terms of human life, it's a symbol of strength, durability, pride, and personal superior. 	Related to Meru mountain which is in Hindu Buddha motif . Malay phrase " <i>tiada lari gunung dikejar, hilang kabus nampaklah ia</i> ".	4

Conclusion

A. Historical Development

In terms of historical development, the history of the traditional portal started at royal palaces where only the royalty and nobility could have the portals. It is still uncertain for the exact date of the existence of portals except for the record written in Sulatus Salitin. The recorded Kelantan's traditional portals mostly built from the 18th century, however, there are others which existed earlier but already destroyed due to the short durability of the wood. In terms of the style, the traditional Kelantanese portals were influenced by Patani Langkasuka style.

B. Form and Visual Elements (Structure)

In term of structure, portals consist of four main structures which are the pillars, wall, door and the head of the door and each of the structure has beautiful decorative carvings. The structure of portals is similar to the humans' body. In term of colors, the mostly used in portals is the original color of the wood itself which is brown and other colors such as black and golden yellow symbolize the guard and royal family.

C. Motifs and Meaning

The motifs in portals consist of fauna, floral, cosmos and calligraphy. Floral motifs such as '*bunga melur*' and '*bunga tanjung*' are the mostly used. Both of these flowers have closed relation with Malay society thus being a symbol of friendliness. Others floral motifs like *bunga cina*, *bunga teratai*, *bunga matahari*, *bunga cempaka*, *bunga ketam guri*, *motif pucuk rebung* and *buah buton*.

The motifs of fauna used are '*sisik ikan*', '*sisik naga*' and '*kepala cicak*' that have been neutralized and abstracted to hide the original figure, in addition to the abstract nature of Islamic art and the rejection of realistic depictions of subject matters. This shows that Malay wood carvers at that time were so creative. They invented new motifs by stylizing the subject matters into interesting form and shapes without eliminating the appearance of the original subjects or motifs.

For cosmic motifs, there are two types of motifs used in Traditional Kelantanese Portal which are star and *gunungan* motifs. Both of these have meanings in terms of Malay philosophy and symbolic to Allah creation as to remembrance Him.

There are two types of calligraphic motifs in the traditional Kelantanese portals. The first one is the writing taken from verses of the Quran and the second one is sentences not from verses of the Quran but is located at the portals as a decoration. It serves as a religious symbol for the Malays, calligraphic motif indicates that the householders are Muslims. This is also as a symbol of appreciation to the Quran and Islam itself.

D. Common Motifs Used

The most common used motifs are *gunungan*, *buah buton*, floral motifs such as *bunga melur*, *bunga tanjung*, *sulur bayung* and motifs of calligraphy. The motifs of *gunungan* and *buah buton* are the main motifs in which *gunungan* is located at the head of the door while *buah buton* motif at the peak of pillars. Other than that, floral motifs such as *bunga tanjung* and *bunga melur* are mostly placed at the pillars panel, the panel of '*sesiku keluang*' placed on the doors as well as the head of the door. *Sulur bayung* motif is also usually used in the *gunungan*, '*sesiku keluang*' and door. The calligraphic motif consists of verses from the Quran and zikr which are located at the head of a door as a sense of respect to the verses.

E. Characteristics and Identity of Traditional Kelantanese Portals

Traditional Kelantanese portals are influenced by the motif elements from Patani. This can be seen from the applied motifs. Motifs which are normally used are the *gunungan*, *buah buton*, and *sulur bayung*. The second characteristic is the floral motif which was taken from plants such as *bunga tanjung* and *bunga melur*. The chosen flowers are those which have the attraction to the society for their characteristics and contain traditional values such as being used in medicine. The third characteristic is the motif of calligraphy. The motifs of calligraphy used are in the form of verses from the Quran or zikr and sometimes being used as a decoration without having any meanings.

It can be concluded that from here, there are three main characteristics that become identities for traditional Kelantanese portals which are (1) the motifs from the influence of Hinduism, (2) floral motifs which represent Malay identity and (3) calligraphic motifs that serve as the symbols of Islam and Malay aesthetics, cultural life and religious belief. All of these characteristics become a complement to the identity of traditional Kelantanese portals and also to Malay heritage in general.

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Interview:

Associate Professor Dr. Norwani Md. Nawawi, Interview with The Researcher, at Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM, 15 December 2015, 3.00 pm.

En Ruslee Bin Ariffin (Director of the National Textiles Museum, Malaysia), Interview with The Researcher, at the National Museum, Kuala Lumpur, 28 October 2015, 1.00 pm.

Encik Nasrulamiazam bin Mohd Nasir, Interview with The Researcher, at The National Museum, Kuala Lumpur, 28 October 2015, 10.00 am.

Prof Dr Hj. Rahimi Osman, Discussion with the Supervisor, Prof. Dr. Mulyadi Mahamood, on the 16th of December 2015.

Tuan Haji Harun Abdul Rahman, Discussion with the Supervisor, Prof. Dr. Mulyadi Mahamood, on the 14th of December 2015.

Tuan Haji Mohamed Yusof Abdullah, Discussion with the Supervisor, Prof. Dr. Mulyadi Mahamood, on the 14th of December 2015.