

# CULTURAL SYNTHESIS: ISLAMIC ART AND WOOD CARVING IN MALAY ARCHITECTURE

Mohd Zamri Jusoh<sup>1</sup>

Ilham Rustam<sup>2</sup>

Mohd Saiful Najib Ismail@Marzuki<sup>3\*</sup>

Muhd Azri Abdul Razak<sup>4</sup>

Ahmad Izzat Mod Arifin<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Electrical Engineering, College of Engineering, UiTM Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, Malaysia

(E-mail: mohdz530@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup> School of Electrical Engineering, College of Engineering, UiTM Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, Malaysia

(E-mail: ilhamr480@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>3</sup> School of Electrical Engineering, College of Engineering, UiTM Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, Malaysia

(E-mail: saifulnajib@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>4</sup> School of Electrical Engineering, College of Engineering, UiTM Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, Malaysia

(E-mail: mdazri053@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>5</sup> School of Electrical Engineering, College of Engineering, UiTM Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, Malaysia

(E-mail: ahmadizzat@uitm.edu.my)

\*Corresponding author: saifulnajib@uitm.edu.my

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**Abstract:** *The application of Islamic monumental architecture has started to reveal influences from classical heritage as well as from various regions around the world. This phenomenon has resulted in the integration of several elements into Islamic architecture, creating divine masterpieces that can be observed and appreciated globally. Essentially, the key elements of Islamic architecture can be categorized into three types of patterns: calligraphy, geometry, and floral designs. Islamic architecture initially focused on mosque decoration and later expanded to include palaces, tombs, madrasas, and private residences from that era. Notably, Islamic architecture emphasizes three-dimensional features that can be appreciated from multiple perspectives. Islamic architecture encompasses various art forms, including construction, drawing, and carving. The influence of Islamic art and architecture is also seen in Tanah Melayu, where many structures, including palaces and private homes, are adorned with wooden carving panels and decorations inspired by Islamic artistic elements. However, local environmental factors have led to subtle adjustments in design, as the flora of Tanah Melayu differs from original floral design concepts, resulting in unique wood carvings. This paper first explores the history and development of floral-patterned wood carving in Malay architecture, rooted in Islamic architectural traditions. It highlights existing examples of heritage buildings*

*decorated with wooden carvings, illustrating that such carvings are integral to Malay architecture. The paper then provides details on the types, shapes, and patterns of wood carving, as well as the diversity of floral elements and motifs commonly used by Malay woodcarvers to create these decorative masterpieces.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic architecture, wood carving panels, floral pattern, decorative panels*

## Introduction

Islamic architecture is characterized by the integration of various elements that collectively represent the essence of Islamic civilization. It was developed and refined to showcase the strength of the Islamic empire's economic, political, social, and technological achievements (Blair et al., 1994). Simply put, Islamic architecture can be seen as a reflection of the environment and cultural influences of the people who built these structures, expressing their way of life. It encompasses several art forms, including construction, drawing, and carving (Lambourn & Tombstones, E., 2008). One of its most significant features is its expression of military power, which has been prominent since the 7th century, with the development of Islamic architecture progressing rapidly through various phases around the world. Initially focused on mosque ornamentation, Islamic architecture later expanded to include palaces, tombs, madrasahs, and even private residences (Ismail et al., 2023). Notably, Islamic architecture emphasizes three-dimensional features visible from all angles. For example, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which has an octagonal plan, exemplifies the aesthetic and architectural sophistication of early Islamic design (Delius, P. & Hattstein, M., 2004). This paper seeks to investigate the influence of Islamic art and architecture on Malay woodcarving, especially focusing on floral motifs. While Islamic principles have significantly shaped the stylistic and symbolic aspects of these floral patterns, there is a need to understand how local environmental conditions and cultural contexts have contributed to the distinctive adaptations seen in Malay woodcarving. The study aims to uncover how these external factors including surrounding natural environment, social and lifestyles have influenced the evolution and customization of Islamic-inspired motifs, resulting in unique visual and decorative styles that are specific to Malay architectural tradition. By exploring these dynamics, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the hybrid nature of Malay woodcraft, where Islamic influence blends with indigenous and environmental factors to produce culturally significant and locally distinctive artistic expressions. This research adopts a qualitative approach, integrating ethnographic methods, interviews, comparative analysis, and visual analysis to thoroughly explore the influence of Islamic art and environmental factors on Malay woodcarving motifs. The ethnographic approach involved fieldwork at sites featuring traditional Malay architecture, allowing direct observation and documentation of woodcarving techniques and design elements in their cultural and environmental contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with key practitioners, notably the late Mr. Norhaiza bin Noordin from Syarikat Seni Ukir Bakawali, whose insights have provided valuable perspectives on the traditional craft, design principles, and cultural significance of floral motifs. Comparative analysis was employed to examine variations in motifs with local natural environment, highlighting how the cultural conditions influence design adaptations. Additionally, visual analysis was used to study the stylistic features, motifs, and symbolic meanings of the carvings, supported by photographic documentation of existing structures. This mixed-method approach aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between Islamic influence, local environmental factors, and cultural practices shaping Malay woodcarving traditions. For the visual analysis and comparative study, several key sites and locations were visited to observe and document the diversity of Malay woodcarving motifs and architectural

styles. These sites included traditional houses in Kota Lama Duyong, Terengganu, which showcase indigenous woodcraft and design variations; Masjid Kampung Laut in Kelantan, renowned for its intricate wooden elements; Masjid Abidin in Kuala Terengganu, which features traditional Islamic architectural influences; and Masjid Kampong Keling in Melaka, representing historical blends of local and Islamic artistic styles. Additionally, visits were made to some local woodcarving artwork exhibitions to examine contemporary interpretations and preservation of traditional motifs. Finally, product inspections at Seni Ukir Bakawali and other traditional woodcarving companies nearby in Kampung Raja, Besut, Terengganu, provided insights into current craftsmanship practices, design adaptations, and the influence of environmental and cultural factors on woodcarving production. These sites collectively offer a comprehensive overview of the stylistic and structural variations within Malay woodcarving, enabling detailed comparative and visual analysis.

### History and Concepts of Woodcarving in Malaysia

Over time, the concepts of woodcarving have evolved and improved periodically. The tradition of decorating wood with carvings is believed to have started as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century. There are four main calyx: Calyx of God, Virtual Calyx, Real Calyx, and Contemporary Calyx. The Virtual Calyx emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was further developed into the Real Calyx in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Grabar,O., 1987). The latest concept, the Contemporary Calyx, has been in use since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Figure 1 shows the time map for the type of calyx across from 6<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Calyx of God is the oldest style and is rarely practiced by Malay woodcarvers today. It primarily focuses on the power of nature rather than authentic floral elements, reflecting strong beliefs in the divine forces of soil, water, fire, and wind. Historically, this concept was prominent in places like the Majapahit Kingdom in Eastern Java, influenced by Hinduism, and also during the Ayutthaya Kingdom in Thailand (formerly Siam) (Gallop,A.T., 2007). The concept gradually evolved into the Virtual Calyx during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where woodcarvers gained the ability to adapt to their natural environment, especially surrounding floral elements (Rashidi et al., 2022). They often incorporated these elements as minor details, using their imagination to enhance the designs. The resulting woodcarvings from this period were highly aesthetic, combining natural inspiration with the creative skill of artisans. Two centuries later, the concept shifted to the Real Calyx, where woodcarvers began creating carvings that closely resembled real plants and trees (Noor,F. & Khoo,E.,2003). During this phase, it is believed that about 30% of the design was based on imagination, with the rest rooted in realistic depictions of floral motifs (Mariam et al., 2024). By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by a blend of Western and Eastern cultures and civilizations, Malay woodcarvers started incorporating modern elements into their work (Nasir,A.H., 2024). This led to the development of a new concept known as the Contemporary Calyx, which reflects a fusion of traditional and modern influences. Modern woodcarving artistic typically exist in form of calligraphy pattern, geometry pattern, floral pattern or the combination of any of them (Tohid et al.,2015).

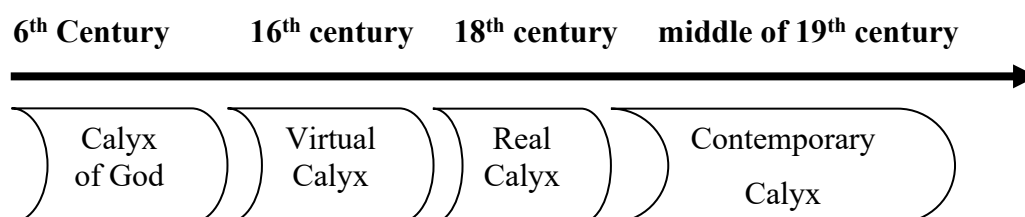


Figure 1: Type of Calyx from 6<sup>th</sup> Century to Modern Century

### Calligraphy Pattern

In Islamic architecture, calligraphy patterns are predominantly the main characteristic. These patterns are believed to represent the translation of sacred words from the Qur'an into an artistic form that adorns various structures (Muhammad,S.A. & Rosdi,N.M., 2023). However, the nature of calligraphy suggests that it shares a close relationship with geometric patterns (Khanzadeh,M., 2024). The development of calligraphy played a significant role not only in fostering reverence and praise for the Holy God but also in serving as a tool for missionary efforts. Different styles of calligraphy, such as Kufic, Naskh, and Thuluth, vary across regions (Gharipour,M & Shick,I.C., 2019). Over time, calligraphic art has been integrated with floral motifs initially through mosaics, stone, and marble, and later also through woodwork, enhancing the decorative appeal of Islamic architecture.

### Geometry Pattern

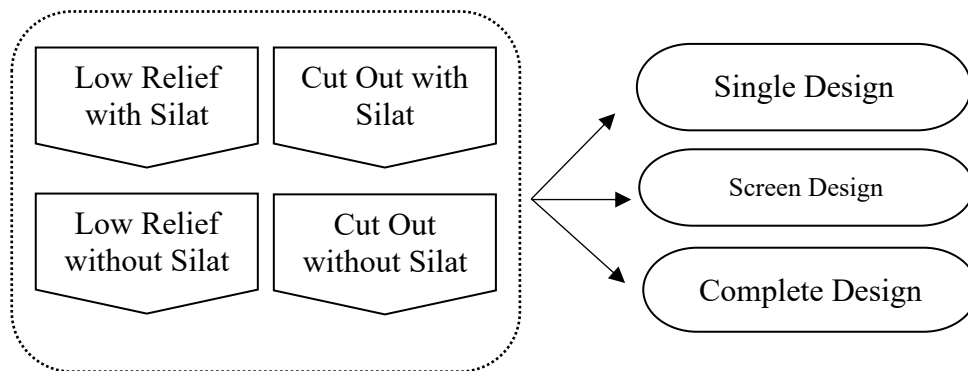
Geometric patterns in Islamic architecture primarily stem from critical thinking and mathematical concepts developed by Islamic scholars and philosophers. These patterns are characterized by symmetry and repetition, which add complexity and aesthetic beauty to architectural designs (Malik&Farouk, 2023). One advantage of geometric patterns is their scalability, which they can be applied to various materials suitable for both the exterior and interior of buildings. Basic geometric shapes include circles, squares, triangles, pentagons, hexagons, and octagons, often combined with star shapes through multiplication, repetition, and symmetrical rotation (Mohamed,E., 2024). The visual impact is further enhanced by the use of colorful glass and marble, a technique that also adapted into woodcarving panels in Islamic structures.

### Floral Pattern

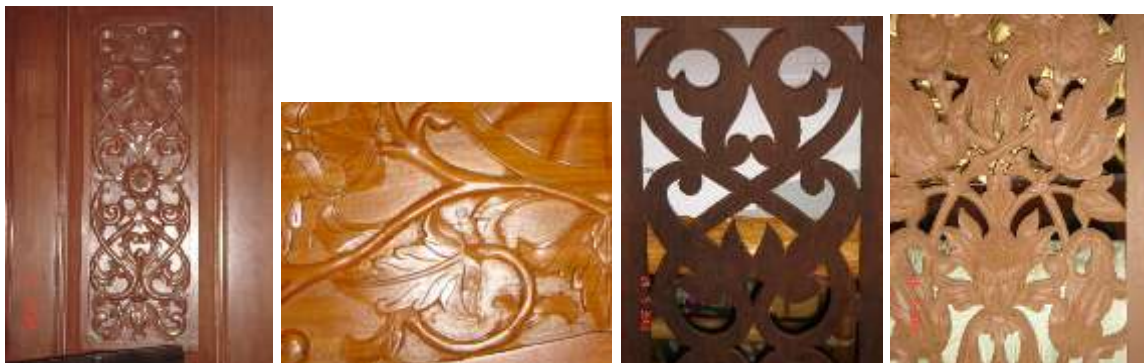
Another important element in Islamic architecture is the floral motif, which originated from several great Islamic empires such as the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal (Rashidi et al., 2021). During those times, Islamic artists were able to observe nature with fidelity and reproduce it with remarkable accuracy within architectural decoration (Mohd Din,N.H. et al.,2022). For example, trees and flowers serve as primary motifs, reminiscent of European botanical drawings (Hussin,H. et al., 2012). However, following the Mongol invasions in the 13th century, the depiction of floral patterns declined in regions like China. Nevertheless, these floral designs continued to evolve and persisted into the 14th century across regions such as India, Persia, and Turkey, becoming an integral part of Islamic ornamentation (Grabar,O., 2006). These regions are believed to be the original sources that contributed floral motifs to South Asia, including Malaysia.

There are two main types of woodcarving techniques: piercing (cut-out) and low relief. An additional technique involves adding 'silat' (a layered technique) to enhance the beauty and intricate patterns of the woodwork (Nasir,A.H. 2016). Then the woodcarving can be in form of single design, screen design or complete design. **Figure 2** depicts the type of woodcarving techniques and the designs that is common in Malay woodcarving. **Figure 3** shows some examples of woodcarving with different techniques.





**Figure 2: Malay woodcarving techniques and design**



Low Relief with Silat

Low Relief without Silat

Cut Out without Silat

Cut Out with Silat

**Figure 3: Examples of Malay Woodcarving with different techniques**

Single design typically a freeform, shaped by the carver's style, and often depict a single flower or small clusters of leaves and stems (Jasmani, I. et al., 2019). This design is usually small, isolated, and exhibit discontinuity. The next type is the screen design, which is more intricate compared to single design. It incorporates detailed floral and botanical elements, often carrying symbolic meanings and employing complex techniques (Kamarudin, Z. et al., 2020). Screen design is commonly used as wall partitions, intermediate frames, or small fences along verandas in traditional Malay houses and palaces. They usually feature repeating motifs with symmetrical arrangements and lack silat techniques, resulting in smooth surfaces suitable for exterior installation. **Figure 4** shows some examples for single design, screen design and complete design.



Single design

Screen design

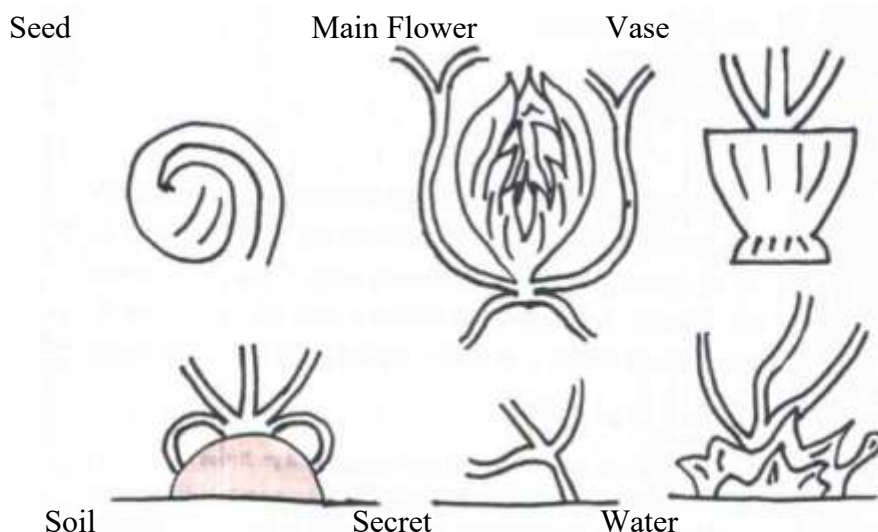
Complete design

**Figure 4: Examples of Malay Woodcarving Designs**

The most elaborate is the complete design, which encompass all parts of a plant or tree, including the roots, stems, branches, leaves, fruits, and flowers (Shaffee, N. & Said, I., 2013). This design aims to depict the entire plant from top to bottom. Any skilled craftsmen may adapt and stylize these botanical elements, adding modifications to create aesthetically pleasing and meaningful masterpieces. A complete design can have either smooth or intricate surfaces, depending on the design. In Malaysian woodcarving, floral motifs are among the most beautiful and popular designs. Typically, woodcarvers draw their inspiration from the natural floral elements found in their environment, skill-fully interpreting them into intricate carvings. A talented carver can enhance the motif by incorporating their own stylistic touches and techniques, often making the floral designs more striking and elaborate than their real-life counterparts (Mariam, T. et al., 2024). Many Malaysian woodcarvers contribute significantly to this art form, with most carvings showing only 10% to 25% of an actual floral element, then creatively modifying or abstracting for the rest through imagination (Kraftangan, M. 2009). Sometimes, floral motif become unrecognizable because only small portions are used for decoration. Generally, only the artisans himself/herself can fully understand the origins and details of their craftsmanship. The design, style, and technique of floral woodcarving varies according to the individual carver's skill and understanding. For example, the same species of flower may be carved differently by different artisans, but the fundamental principles of drawing and carving remain consistent across Malaysia. At its core, floral patterns are based on all parts of the flower from the tops, stems, leaves, and fruits which all naturally occurring and representative of the flower's true physical characteristics. The combination of these elements in woodcarving aims to replicate the authentic appearance and essence of floral life, from roots to the tiniest branches, reflecting the beauty of nature in every aspect. The influence of Islam has significantly transformed the activities of the Malay community, including the design and concept of craft and woodcarving. Furthermore, Malay woodcarvers drew inspiration from their environment and living creatures; however, over time, this has been restricted to certain motifs and shapes. In Malaysia, there are five main motifs used in woodcarving including calligraphy motif, geometrical motif, floral motif and cosmos motif (Ahmad, J.A., 2025). While in other countries, animal and human motifs are highly favored, but Malay woodcarvers tend to focus on calligraphy, floral, and geometric motifs. This is because Islamic teachings prohibit depictions of living beings, making such motifs less suitable and rarely used in Malay woodcarving (Said, I., 2008). Instead, Malay artisans faithfully observe nature and skillfully reinterpret it through floral motifs, primarily consisting of flowers and trees. Woodcarvings can be created in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. Two-dimensional carvings are viewed from a single flat surface, commonly used for wall decorations, doors, windows, and screens. In contrast, three-dimensional carvings can be appreciated from any angle and are often found in arch-shaped designs, as well as on tools and household items.

### **The Source in Floral Pattern**

The source is a crucial component in any woodcarving featuring floral pattern. They refer to the initial or foundational element from which the entire floral design originates. Typically, floral motif are inspired by natural objects such as soil, vases, water, seeds, or the main flower itself. The process of designing these carvings often begins with one of these elements. However, in some cases, the floral pattern is not based on any identifiable natural source. In such instances, the source is considered a secret source which is hidden and not depicted in the drawing. This means the entire floral design might be a creative interpretation or modification by the wood carver, without a direct reference to any specific natural element. **Figure 5** illustrates the common sources used in wood carvings with floral motifs.



**Figure 5: Common Source In Malay Woodcarving With Floral Motif**

Some sources in Malay woodcarving are rarely based on natural elements like those previously mentioned. Instead, a few skilled woodcarvers have used fantastical or extraordinary flowers as inspiration for their floral patterns. The skill, understanding, and experience of the carver greatly influence the intricacy and beauty of the final piece. For example, one carving features a large, prominent flower in the centre, serving as the main source from which all other floral elements originate. Another crucial element in floral patterns is the stem, which relates to branches, sticks, and twigs of trees. The thickness or diameter of the stems is less important than their shape and direction, as these aspects contribute to the realistic depiction of the floral motif. The stem's role is vital in connecting various floral components, such as the source, leaves, fruits, and blossoms, and giving life to the entire design. It also provides a framework for the carver to expand their creativity, allowing for adjustments and placement of the other elements. Sometimes, stems and branches cross, creating dynamic, visually striking compositions. Leaves are another essential aspect of floral carvings. They serve both decorative and structural purposes, filling empty spaces and enhancing the overall design. The skill of the carver is often demonstrated in how they modify and decorate the leaves, shaping them in ways that may differ from their real-life counterparts. These modifications often reflect cultural stories or the artist's personal style, emphasizing creativity and imagination. In Malay woodcarving, leaves symbolize the softness and diligence of the Malay people. Their movement, swaying in different directions, signifies the resilience and vitality of Malay culture, which has endured for centuries. The portrayal of leaves often embodies values like moderation and harmony, which are central to Malay life and philosophy. Through these elements, the woodcarver not only demonstrates technical skill but also communicates cultural identity and the enduring spirit of Malay civilization through the woodcarvings.

### **Common Flowers in Floral Pattern**

The flower element is the focal point in any woodcarving featuring floral pattern, as flowers are regarded as the most beautiful aspect of the design. Sometimes, the entire panel can be referred to as "flowers of carve," emphasizing their significance. Within these carvings, multiple flowers are typically positioned either at the centre or arranged symmetrically throughout the panel. However, some floral carvings lack actual flower elements altogether,

consisting solely of sources, stems, branches, and abundant leaves. These patterns tend to be less visually striking since they do not feature prominent flowers, focusing instead on foliage. It is widely believed that the highest quality floral woodcarvings showcase elaborate and stunning flower motifs. Moreover, the other elements which are the stems, branches, and leaves are generally derived from the same botanical source, and their characteristics often mirror those of the flowers. Since different flowers have unique shapes and sizes, with some trees having sharp and elongated leaves and others featuring small, rounded foliage, the leaves usually match the particular flower depicted. It is rare to find a panel that combines flowers and leaves from different tree species. However, skilled and experienced carvers can creatively merge various types of flowers and leaves in a single piece, resulting in a more complex and intricate design that can be challenging for viewers to interpret or understand fully. The floral elements often derive from flowering trees closely connected to human life and cultural practices. Humans are naturally drawn to beautiful and colourful flowers, especially those with distinctive shapes and fragrances. In Malay culture, the flowers chosen for woodcarvings are frequently based on their aesthetic appeal, fragrance, and their uses in traditional cuisine, medicine, and rituals. These flowers are selected not just for their visual beauty but also for their cultural significance, making the carvings richer in meaning and symbolism.

#### **Flower with Beautiful Characteristic**

The species of beautiful flower commonly found throughout Malaysia have inspired many Malay woodcarvers. In recent years, numerous woodcarving products have been created based on the distinctive features of these flowers. These flowers hold deep cultural significance for Malays, often symbolizing gratitude and reverence, which is reflected in the artwork produced by local artisans. Some of the most popular floral sources for inspiring these carvings include Bunga Raya (Hibiscus), Bunga Matahari (Sunflower), Bunga Teratai (Water Lily), Bunga Kerak Nasi (Nasi Kerak Flower), and Bunga Tikam Selendang. These flowers not only showcase natural beauty but also serve as meaningful motifs in traditional Malay woodcarving, embodying cultural identity and spiritual expression.

#### **Flower with Good Smells**

Flowers with strong fragrant qualities, commonly found throughout Malaysia, hold a special cultural significance. For centuries, these fragrant flowers have been so highly valued that their names were often used for people's names and personal identification within Malay communities. These flowers thrive in tropical climates and are rarely found in European or Western countries. Prominent examples of such fragrant flowers frequently incorporated into Malay floral wood carvings include Bunga Melur (Jasmine), Bunga Cempaka (Magnolia), Bunga Kenanga (Ylang Ylang), Bunga Tanjung (Sea Mango), and Bunga Melati (Jasmine, often different from Bunga Melur). Their strong scent enables their essence to be extracted for use in perfumes and oils. Deeply intertwined with Malay culture and daily life, these flowers are ubiquitous across Malaysia and are often key features in the floral elements of traditional woodcarvings, symbolizing beauty, spirituality, and cultural identity.

#### **Flower as Spices and Herbs**

Another group of flowers frequently used as models for woodcarving with floral pattern are those associated with traditional spices and herbs. In Malay culture, many dishes and cuisines incorporate these flowers to enhance flavor and aroma. Examples include Bunga Lada Hitam (Black Pepper Flower), Bunga Ketumbit (Cumin Flower), Bunga Ketumbar (Coriander Flower), Bunga Senduduk (Purple Trumpet Flower), and Bunga Keledang (Moraceae). While spices and herbs typically derive from seeds and fruits, their floral representations serve as



symbolic elements in woodcarvings, highlighting their significance. Several hundred years ago, before modern medicine like penicillin became widespread, many herbs were used in traditional Malay medicine to treat illnesses. Flowers such as Bunga Senduduk and Bunga Keledang played important roles as herbal remedies and medicinal plants. Overall, these flowers are deeply rooted in Malay culture and daily life, making them popular motifs for woodcarving artisans. Their symbolic value and cultural association inspire intricate floral patterns that reflect the community's traditions, history, and natural environment.

## Conclusion

The Malay woodcarving with floral element based on Islamic culture and architecture has been elaborated and also various of floral element that has been practically used by Malay wood carver to design and carve such wood carving with floral element. Malay woodcarving has evolved from ancient representations of divine and natural themes to incorporate modern, artistic, and cultural influences, particularly through floral motifs. Rooted in Islamic principles and traditional values, these carvings emphasize stylized botanical elements including the flowers, stems, and leaves that symbolize resilience, harmony, and cultural identity. The artistry reflects both technical mastery and imaginative interpretation, resulting in intricate pieces that embody the natural beauty and spiritual essence of Malay heritage. The piercing techniques, patterns, styles and motives are the major elements that existed in woodcarving with floral pattern. The major element of the wood carving with floral element is the flower which can be based on various type and species of flowers. The flower element should be the main factor to generate an idea for the Malay woodcarver to decorate and design and woodcarving with floral element.

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