

# VISUAL FORMS OF CARVED COMPONENTS IN TRADITIONAL TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

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**ABSTRACT:** Malay traditional timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu are normally adorned with decorative carved components which represent excellent carvings in its specified design motif, shape, size and layout. Various carved components with specific features are fabricated according to its placement and configuration in the interior as well as exterior setting of the houses. Woodcarving as an embellishment is a significant unifying architectural element between the house forms and its building components. This paper presents an explorative study of the visual forms and placement of carved components in the vernacular houses of Kelantan and Terengganu which denotes its significant attributes and uses. A set of 13 case studies, nine houses in Kelantan and four houses in Terengganu were referred to as the research base. The methods of investigation include analytical review of measured drawings and reports of the Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses from the Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM) at the Department of Architecture in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and narrations from the prominent woodcarvers on art and crafts of woodcarving. Apart from these methods, interviews with the allied professionals for scholastic information on art and architecture of the Malay world were also conducted. The analysis of the documents revealed that several types of carved components with distinctive visual forms in two and three dimensional composition were placed in certain orders within the fabrics of the houses. Wall, door and window ventilation panels, railings, gate panel and stringers are types of components characterized by the shape of perforation and incision with relief and/or non-relief carvings. These components were crafted in relation to the house form and architectural elements such as wall, door, window, stair and gate. The significant aspect of the placement of the carvings in the houses is that it enhances beautiful ambiance and signifies regional identity to the vernacular architecture of these two states.

**Keywords:** Woodcarving, traditional timber house, architectural elements, visual forms, carving motifs and visual orders

## **Introduction**

Woodcarving is considered as an integral component to the vernacular Malay houses of Kelantan and Terengganu which are located in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The fabrication of the woodcarving as carved ornament reflects the specific style of Malay architecture which spring from the east coast region. According to Farish and Eddin (2003) the architecture of this region has possibly originated from the Langkasuka as early as 14<sup>th</sup> century. As such, the development of house design in this region has given identity to a vernacular type of architectural forms of its own. The regional identity of this house is enriched by the Malay woodcarving in a beautiful spectrum of ornamentation. From the design aesthetics, Raja Bahrin (1988) and Syed Ahmad Jamal (1994) note that the carvings from Kelantan and Terengganu are the most refined and beautiful of all Malay woodworks in terms of shape and carving techniques which exhibit a degree of beautification not found elsewhere. Carvings from this region are distinctly different from those found in other traditional Malay houses. The carvings were crafted with certain characters, showing their regional identity and often much-admired for its distinctive beauty.

Beauty in the carving form is discernible by the rhythm of curvilinear and rectilinear lines, textures and shapes of motifs, pattern, perforation and depth of incision. Carving techniques and arrangement of motifs faithfully follow shapes and layouts in traditional Malay woodcarving, the most common being perforated panels with relief and non-relief carving in horizontal rectangles. Visually, the forms of motifs and patterns, types of perforation and incisions of the carvings give the distinct characteristics and features of carved panels which are fused with the designated use as house components. These carved panels are produced for decorative as well as functional components. Carvings for the houses are crafted in a variety of forms including wall ventilation panels, door and window panels, wall panels, railings, panels of gable ends, gate panels and stringers. The physical forms are in parallel to the architectural elements and its placement and distribution in the interior and exterior fabrics of the houses. Carving forms were made out as integral components to the Kelantan and Terengganu timber Malay houses with a distinct composition and configuration.

The aim of this paper is to present a preliminary finding of the various forms of carved components in relation to its layout and significant uses in the traditional timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu. This initial stage of research highlights the visual

description and interpretation of the carvings with the specific features within the context of its placement and configuration in the interior as well as exterior setting of the houses. The focus of this paper is considered as the early version of the preliminary study of the 13 houses from a total of 30 houses. On this basis, the study reveals the physical forms, visual attributes and principles of composition that are apparent in the carved components of the selected houses.

## Method

This study was conducted as explorative and interpretive research, where a significant number of required information was gathered from three sources: (1) measured drawing and reports of timber houses from the Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM) at the Department of Architecture in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), (2) personal communication with two woodcarvers on art and crafts of woodcarving, and (3) informal interview with the professional architect on traditional art and architecture of the Malay house. The data from the KALAM documents was triangulated with information gathered from two woodcarvers and the architect for the data reliability (refer to Figure 1.0). As noted by (Neuman, 2000; Patton, 2002; Berg, 2004) the purpose of triangulation method is to relate the multiple data-collection methods leading to the reliability of data. The information gathered from the experts was needed to substantiate the results obtained from the analytical review.

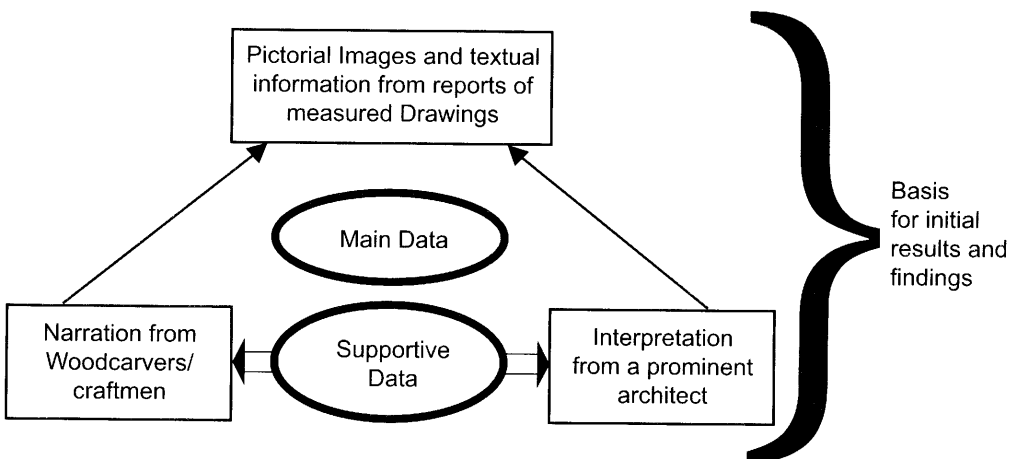


Figure 1: Sources of data in triangulation

## VISUAL FORMS OF CARVED COMPONENTS IN TRADITIONAL TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

### Analytical Review on Archival Documents

The analytical review was conducted on thirteen prominent Malay timber houses. Nine houses are located in Kelantan and the other four houses are sited in Terengganu. Table 1.0 highlights the information of the selected case studies including the types of architectural forms and year of construction, owners and locations of the houses. Several factors determine the selection of the houses which include: (1) the houses represent the type of dwelling architecture that originated from the east coast region, (2) the houses were decorated with excellent carvings which are regional and distinctive in character, (3) the houses provide a good collection of carved components which are relevant for visual analysis purpose.

**Table 1:** The Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses as the case studies

No	Type of House	Year Built	Owner	Location of House
1	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1920's	Encik Hassan B. Mohd Amin	Jalan Pengkalan Chepa, Kota Bharu, Kelantan
2	Rumah Bujang Berserambi Dua Beradik	1850's	Tuan Hj. Mohamad Dobah (Tuan Hj. Mohamad Abdullah)	1408, Jln. Post Office Lama, Kota Bharu
3	Rumah Bujang	1800's	Wan Aisyah	Jalan Sultanah Zainab, Kota Bharu
4	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1920's	Hj. Wan Ahmad Hj. Abdullah	Jalan Post Office Lama, Kota Bharu, Kelantan
5	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1930's	Hj. Yaakub Mohammad	2623, Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu
6	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1937	Wan Hussain Bin Wan Abdul Rahman	4962, Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu
7	Rumah bumbung perabung lima	1933	Hassan Bin Yusof	4963 Lorong Tukang Perak, Kampung Sireh, Kota Bharu
8	Twelve-pillarded house/ Long-roofed house	1800's	Tok Yakub	Kampung Belongan, Bachok, Kelantan
9	Rumah bujang berserambi dua beradik	1920's	Haji Wan Sulong	Jalan Sultanah Zainab, Kota Bharu, Kelantan

No	Type of House	Year Built	Owner	Location of House
10	Rumah Bujang Berkembar Dua Beradik	1882?	Hjh Mariam Hj. Mat	168, Kampung Hiliran Masjid, Kuala Terengganu
11	Rumah bujang berselasar	1850's	Hj. Awang	Kampung Losong Haji, Su, Kuala Terengganu
12	Rumah bumbung limas	1914	Dato' Biji Sura (Nik Mohamad bin Hitam)	Duyong Kecil, Kota Duyong, Kuala Terengganu
13	Rumah bujang berserambi dua beradik	1800's	Tok Ku Paloh	D62, Paloh Makam Tok Ku, Cabang Tiga, KT, Terengganu

A set of measured drawings which consist of plans and elevations of the thirteen houses including crossed sectional and detail drawings were referred for detailed eddescriptive analysis to identify the types of carved components and determine its physical attributes including visual forms and ordering principles of composition. These measured drawings and the reports were produced and documented by the students of architectural programme from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Editing and reproduction of a few documented drawings were made to improve its visual quality and accuracy for the purpose of analysis and data display. The objects which provide raw materials for visual investigation must be also viewed, understood, or placed in some analytical framework before they can be regarded as data (Emission and Smith, 2000).

## The Interviews

Personal interviews were conducted with the two prominent woodcarvers for obtaining information on art and crafts of woodcarving. The first woodcarver interviewed was Norhaiza Nordin from Kampung Raja in Terengganu and the second one was Muhaimin Hasbullah from Temerloh in Pahang. Apart from these, informal interview was conducted with a professional architect from Terengganu, Raja Datuk Kamarul Bahrin Shah who is well-known for his direct involvement with the preservation of East Coast Malay architecture. Narration and interpretation from the craftsmen and professional architect were needed to support the main data gathered from the KALAM. Their opinions and inferences serve as verification and supplementary information to the analyse the data.

# VISUAL FORMS OF CARVED COMPONENTS IN TRADITIONAL TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

## Initial Findings And Interpretation

The traditional Malay timber houses represent the significant craftsmanship of the past tradition. According to Lim (1987) the traditional houses represent the skills and aesthetics of the traditional craftsmen and builders which have been passed down from generations to the following ones. Most of the embellishments found in the houses are done by the Malay craftsmen who also built them. The vernacular forms of the timber houses are built to meet specific needs of the users according to their ways of life based on regional cultures and values. Gokhan (2002) defines vernacular architecture as the forms of architecture built for the common people and it is an embodiment of common characters, materials and aesthetic value of a particular region. The Malay timber houses are reflection of the ways of life of the cultures that produce them (Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1997).

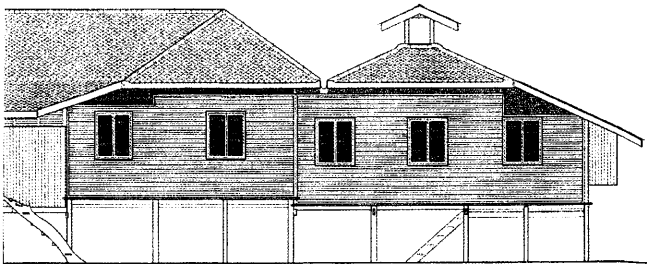
The Kelantan and Terengganu timber houses are considered as vernacular architecture which exhibit distinct regional characteristics. These dwelling architecture which are situated in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia exhibit distinct regional characteristics with its own identifying building features including carved ornaments. This architecture represents the simple vernacular forms in the use of local materials. Most of the old traditional houses are made of cengal (*Balanocarpus heimii*). Cengal is a heavy hardwood species used for structure of Malay houses and carvings (Lim, 1987; Ismail, 2005). According to Raja Bahrin (1998) the task of constructing the timber houses was a difficult and long process. This is because most of the construction process including the search for the hardwood timber was dependably carried out by the used of manpower.

## House Forms and Layout of Spaces

Raja Bahrin Shah (1988) posits that Kelantan and Terengganu traditional timber houses are appreciated for two reasons. First, its building forms are efficiently designed to suit local climate condition and timber-based construction materials. Second, the embellishments in forms of intricate carvings on various panels are found in integral with the architecture of the houses. *Rumah perabung lima* (five-ridged roof house) and *rumah bujang berserambi/berselasar* (verandah house) were the most common types of houses found in Kelantan and Terengganu. *Rumah perabung lima* is characterized

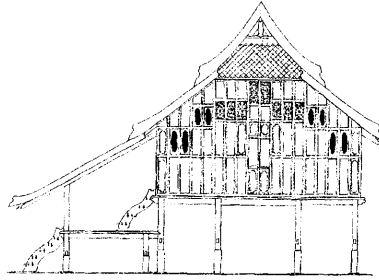
by the hipped roof. Most of timber houses in five- ridged roof type were identified in Kelantan as highlighted in Table 1.0. For example, Hassan house as shown in Figure 1.0 exhibits the timber house form with hipped roof, raised on stilts and with wall made of timber. *Rumah bumbung perabung lima* is a type of house with pyramidal roof and it was the first type of house with the roof form introduced in Kelantan (Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1996).

*Rumah bujang berserambi* was the most common type of house found in Terengganu, for example, *Rumah Tok Ku Paloh* as illustrated in Figure 2.0. One of the dominant features for this type of house is a long single-ridged roof with two gable ends. The two ends of the long roof have curved frames known as *pemeleh* fixed to the roof edge. The term of *pemeleh* is used to refer to the decorative frames for the gable ends of the roof (Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1996). Another distinctive feature found at *rumah bujang berserambi* is convex wall panels fixed on the wall facades of the house. The convex wall panel was made of thick wooden frames in a vertical layout and usually equipped with carved panels within the wall. Convex wall panels have become one of the most noticeable features of *rumah bujang berserambi* where carvings in forms of perforated ventilation panels are normally found here and usually on the upper part of the wall. For example as appeared on the wall facade of rumah ibu found at Rumah Tok Ku Paloh as shown in Figure 2.0. The houses with this type of architecture were the oldest dwelling form identified in Kelantan and Terengganu. Many of them were constructed in the early nineteen century that had reached over a hundred years old. The earliest type of Terengganu traditional Malay house has a high, steeply sloped and single-ridged roof with a ridge cover running the length of the house (Raja Bahrin Shah, 1988).



**Figure 1:** Front elevation of Hassan house

## VISUAL FORMS OF CARVED COMPONENTS IN TRADITIONAL TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU



**Figure 2:** Front elevation of Tok Ku Paloh house

Most of Kelantan and Terengganu traditional Malay houses were equipped with basic areas including *rumah ibu*, *pelantar*, *serambi/selasar* (long verandah) and *dapur* (kitchen). This basic layout of spaces with simple concept of living was evidence in the two types of house form. Both types of house possessed the simple layout of spaces to accommodate the family way of living and needs with *rumah ibu* as the largest and principal area that serves most of household activities such as sleeping, praying or gathering. *Rumah ibu* is the main part or core of the traditional Malay house (Lim, 1987; Abdul Halim and Wan Hashim, 1996). The *serambi* (verandah) is an area situated next to the *rumah ibu* as appeared in *Rumah Tok Ku Paloh*. *Serambi* was also known as *selasar* which means the reception area (Raja Bahrin Shah, 1988). *Serambi* is the transition space between the public and private domains of the house. This is where the *rumah berserambi* (verandah house) differs greatly from the concept of space configuration of *rumah perabung lima*. It is most common for *rumah perabung lima* to be equipped with *pelantar* as entry porch where most of guests are greeted here. The *pelantar* is the transition space that leads up to the core area of the house, *rumah ibu*. It is an important focal point that serves as the principal entrance where stairs is located. Most traditional timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu have stairs at the front and rear entrances that lead up to *pelantar* or *serambi* and kitchen. The traditional Malay house can be divided into the front and back portions which are centered around the *rumah ibu* and the *dapur* (Lim, 1987)

### Location of the Traditional Houses

Eight of nine Kelantan timber houses were located in Kota Bharu, the capital state of Kelantan. The remaining one house was situated in a district of Bachok which is



located not far from Kota Bharu. All four Terengganu timber houses were located in Kuala Terengganu. The two states of Kelantan and Terengganu are located on the Peninsula's East Coast. Figure 3.0 shows the location of the houses in the two states. Detailed information on the timber houses are shown in Table 1.0.

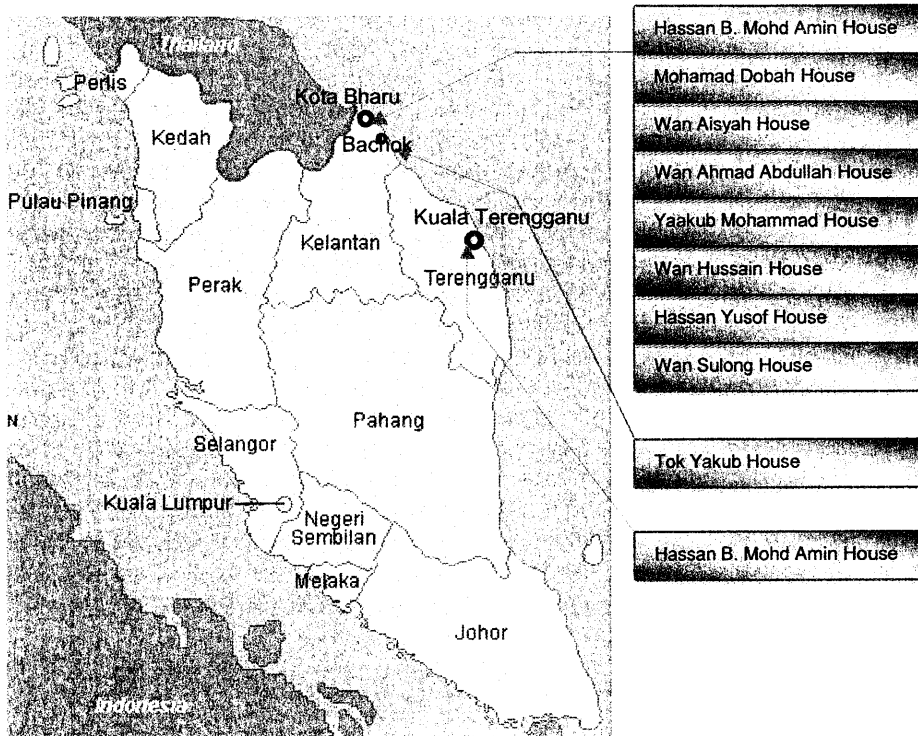


Figure 3: Location of the traditional houses in Peninsular Malaysia

### Architectural Carved Components

The analysis revealed that several forms of woodcarvings with distinctive features were found in the timber houses of Kelantan and Terengganu. The visual forms of the carved components were fabricated with specific carving motifs, types of incision, shapes, sizes and layouts. The distinctive forms of the various carved components are apparent with respect to its placement and layout in the interior as well as exterior fabrics of the timber houses. A variety of carved panels with interesting visual forms and layout were juxtaposed on various components of the house such as walls, doors, windows, railings, stairs, gates and roof. The placements of the carved components

## VISUAL FORMS OF CARVED COMPONENTS IN TRADITIONAL TIMBER HOUSES OF KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

were fixed within the specific arrangement and significant purpose. The various types of the carved components found in the houses are shown in Table 2.0.

**Table 2:** Carved components found in the selected timber houses

No	Name of house	Types of Carved Components found in the Timber Houses												
		Window ventilation panel (WVP)	Door ventilation panel (DVP)	Wall ventilation panel (PWVP)	Window railing (RP1)	Railing at serambi / Sorong (RP2)	Railing at Staircase (RP3)	Wall panel (WP)	Door leaf (DP)	Stringer (S)	Gate leaf (GP)	Roof eave (REP)	Bracket (BP)	Gable end (GEP)
1	Hassan Mohd Amin	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
2	Mohamad Dobah	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	Wan Aisyah	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
4	Wan Ahmad Abdullah	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	Yaakub Mohammad	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
6	Wan Hussain Wan Abdul Rahman	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
7	Hassan Yusof	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
8	Tok Yakub	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	Hjh MariamMat	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	Kampong Lososng	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
11	Dato' Biji Sura	2	6	0	1	3	1	1	1	0	3	0	0	0
12	Wan Sulong	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
13	Tok Ku Paloh 1	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

### Patten of Distribution in the Houses

The analyses signified a certain pattern of distribution of carved components in each house and its compositional motifs in relation to the architectural elements and the house form (see Table 1.0). It appears that the carved components were widely found on walls at rumah ibu. Most of them are in forms of ventilation panels fitted on the upper sections of walls as well as on top of doors and windows. From the analytical review of the reports and measured drawings, the timber houses from both states exhibited distinctive carvings with excellent features which differ from those found in

traditional houses of other states in Peninsular Malaysia. A large quantity of carvings with high levels of artistry and technique could be found in Kelantan and Terengganu (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1994).

**Table 3:** Layout of carved components and types of motifs

No	Name of House	Area of placement	Carved components	Types of Motifs							
				Flora	Calligraphy	Geometry	Fauna	Cosmos	Abstract	Combination	
1	Yaakub,	Main bedroom's door	DVP1								✓
		Above rear door (kitchen)	DVP2	✓							
		External walls ( <i>rumah ibu</i> )	PWVP1	✓							
		Doorway to kitchen	DP1		✓						
		Stairs at front and rear verandah	S1							✓	
2	Mohamad Dobah	Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP1	✓							
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP2	✓							
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP3	✓							
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP4	✓							
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP5	✓							
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP6	✓							
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP7			✓					
		Rumah Ibu (front and rear wall)	PWVP8	✓							
3	Hassan Mohd Amin	Above window at guest area (male)	WVP1	✓							
		Bedroom 's front door	DVP1								✓
		Wall at Guest area (male)	PWVP1	✓							
		Roof eaves at front façade	REP1								✓
4	Wan Aisyah	Wall at Serambi lelaki	PWVP1	✓							
		Wall at Serambi lelaki	PWVP2			✓					
		Walls at Serambi perempuan	PWVP3	✓							
		Doors at Serambi lelaki	BP1								✓
5	Wan Ahmad Abdullah	Main bedroom's front door	DVP1	✓							
		Walls at Ruang tamu and ruang tengah	PWVP1	✓							
		External walls next to anjung	PWVP2								✓