



CALLIGRAPHY ORNAMENTS AS ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN THE BUBUNGAN TINGGI AND THE GAJAH BALIKU HOUSE, TELUK SELONG, SOUTH BORNEO, INDONESIA

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ARTICLE INFO

Volume: 8

Issue: 3

Page: 795-805

Received: February 25th, 2024

Accepted: July 13th, 2024

Available Online: June 30th, 2025

DOI: [10.18860/jia.v8i3.26272](https://doi.org/10.18860/jia.v8i3.26272)

ABSTRACT

Islamic values are applied in architecture by avoiding motifs of living creatures, yet use floral motifs and Arabic calligraphy instead. Each ornament has a specific shape and meaning. While floral ornaments in traditional Banjar architecture are well-researched, studies on Arabic calligraphy are limited due to their complexity. This research aims to reveal the forms and meanings of Arabic calligraphy in traditional Banjar architecture, especially in the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* houses. This understanding can help preserve and pass on the art of Arabic calligraphy and its values to future generations. The research employs an interpretive qualitative analysis method. Each letter, word, sentence, and geometric pattern that makes up calligraphy is identified to understand the form of calligraphy. Visual reconstruction was performed by simplifying the calligraphy to obtain certain sentences to match with their equivalents in the Quran and Hadith. The research found that the forms of Arabic calligraphy used included Quranic verses, monotheistic statements, prayers, names of the Prophet's companions, and protective prayers. The meanings conveyed statements of Allah's oneness, belief in Prophet Muhammad, and requests for protection from Allah. All Arabic calligraphy is placed on the *tawing halat*, indicating the homeowner's identity and social status, thus showcasing the Islamic identity of the architecture.

Keywords:

Calligraphy; Bubungan Tinggi; Gajah Baliku; Identity; Meaning Ornament

1. INTRODUCTION

The Banjar Kingdom, one of the Islamic kingdoms in the Nusantara, was founded in 1512. It is located in the North Kuin, Banjarmasin City [1] [2]. Islam imparts important life values to the people living in the Banjar Kingdom area [3]. These Islamic values influence social life and the traditional Banjar architecture that emerged and developed in the Banjar Kingdom [4] [5] [6]. Banjar traditional architecture has eleven types [7] [8] [9] [10], namely: (1) *Bubungan Tinggi* type, (2) *Gajah Baliku* type, (3) *Palimasan* type, (4) *Palimbangan* type, (5) *Gajah Manyusu* type, (6) *Balai Laki* type, *Balai Bini* type, (7) *Tadah Alas* type, (8) *Cacak Burung/Anjung Surung* type, (9) *Lanting* type, (10) *Joglo Banjar or Bangun Gudang* type, and (11) Banjar Mosque Type. However, traditional Banjar architecture is now difficult to find because, since the 1930s, the Banjar people have not built this type of architecture again [11]. The *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* types are the rarest; the number of *Bubungan Tinggi* houses can be counted, and there is only one remaining *Gajah Baliku* house [12] [13][14]. Therefore, it is important to study everything that comprises traditional Banjar architecture, including Islamic values in its architectural form.

One of the Islamic values applied in traditional Banjar architecture is the prohibition on using ornaments that depict animals or other living creatures [3] [15] [16]. As a result, all decorative elements feature floral motifs and Islamic (Arabic) calligraphy. Each ornament carries a specific form and meaning. While floral ornamentation in Banjar architecture has been extensively studied [6][10][16], the research on Arabic calligraphy remains limited due to its complexity. Arabic calligraphy is among the most prominent forms of Islamic art, originating from the revelation of the Quran and is enriched by a long historical tradition [17][18]. Previous studies have largely

acknowledged the presence of Arabic calligraphy in traditional Banjar architecture [3] [15][16], but researchers have not thoroughly examined its forms and meanings. Some calligraphic carvings are difficult to read or interpret due to the weathered condition of the wooden materials used. In certain cases, repainting of the calligraphy alters the shapes of the letters, potentially changing their meanings. These factors highlight the need for further research on this topic.

This research aims to reveal the forms and meanings of Arabic calligraphy ornaments in the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* houses. Understanding this is crucial because Arabic calligraphy is integral to traditional Banjar architecture, expressing both the spiritual and aesthetic values of the Banjar community. A better understanding of Arabic calligraphy in these houses can aid in maintaining and restoring structures containing calligraphic elements, thereby preserving the integrity and authenticity of traditional Banjar architecture. Research on Arabic calligraphy as an ornament in traditional Banjar architecture enriches our knowledge of art and culture. It plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and strengthening social identity. Ultimately, this research aims to facilitate the comprehension and transmission of the art of Arabic calligraphy and its associated values to future generations.

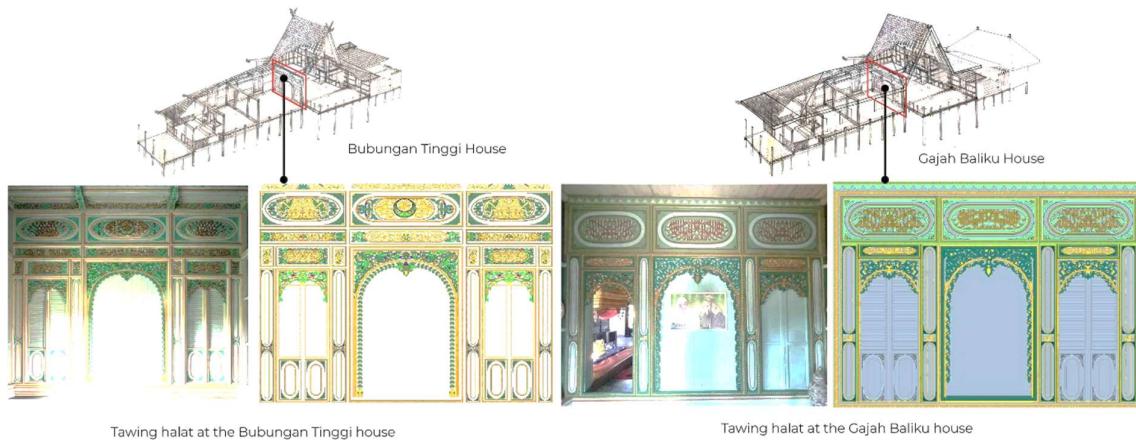
2. METHODS

This research uses an interpretive qualitative analysis method to analyze the Arabic calligraphy ornaments in the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* houses [19]. A case study approach was used to obtain concrete, in-depth, and detailed examples. The selected case is the traditional Banjar architecture with the largest number of ornaments. Most traditional Banjar architecture is decorated with ornaments. The higher the architectural status, the more ornate it is. The types of traditional Banjar architecture most decorated with ornaments are the *Bubungan Tinggi* type and the *Gajah Baliku* type. These two types are rare; the number of *Bubungan Tinggi* houses can be counted, while only one *Gajah Baliku* house remains. Therefore, the cases to be explored are the ornaments in the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* traditional Banjar architecture located in Teluk Selong Ulu RT. 03, Sungai Batang, West Martapura Sub-district, Banjar Regency, South Kalimantan (Fig. 1). The *Bubungan Tinggi* house is thought to have been built in 1867 AD by Muhammad Arif and Fatima. The *Gajah Baliku* house was built by Jalil and Esah, descendants of Muhammad Arif and Fatima, around 1880 AD. Currently, both are almost 160 years old. It is well maintained because it has been designated as a cultural heritage building since 2008 [8] [16].



Figure 1. Location maps for case studies: 1. The *Bubungan Tinggi* house; 2. *Gajah Baliku* house

After determining the case, the next step is to select the unit to be analyzed. In this research, the unit of analysis chosen is the *tawing halat* (see Fig. 2). The *tawing halat* is a significant feature because it is the only part of both the *Bubungan Tinggi* and the *Gajah Baliku* house that includes Arabic calligraphic ornaments [11][15][20][21][22]. This element is crucial for understanding the integration of Islamic artistic values within traditional Banjar architecture. Following the selection, a meticulous identification and observation process is carried out. This process involves detailed visual inspections and documentation of the *tawing halat* to capture the intricacies of the calligraphic designs. It also includes noting the condition, style, and calligraphy variations. These steps are essential to ensure that the analysis is comprehensive and that the significance of the Arabic calligraphic ornaments is thoroughly understood in the context of Banjar architectural heritage.

Figure 2. *Tawing Halat* as a unit of observation and research analysis

The process of identification and observation commenced with the systematic collection of data on Arabic calligraphic ornaments found in each selected case. Data acquisition was conducted through a combination of direct field observation, manual sketching, and photographic documentation. Photographs were taken from multiple angles, including close-up shots, to ensure a comprehensive visual record of the calligraphic elements. In instances where certain details were initially overlooked, additional documentation sessions were carried out to complete the dataset. Subsequently, the documented Arabic calligraphy was analyzed and reconstructed, with each element classified according to its linguistic structure, such as letters, words, and sentences, as well as its associated decorative features, including geometric or symmetrical patterns. This process enabled a detailed understanding of the formal characteristics and compositional principles of calligraphic ornamentation.

The subsequent stage involved the interpretation of meaning embedded within the Arabic calligraphic ornaments. This interpretive process began with a visual reconstruction, wherein the calligraphic forms were simplified to facilitate the identification of specific words and sentences. These reconstructed textual elements were then systematically compared with corresponding passages found in the Quran and Hadith to verify their sources and meanings. This comparative analysis is essential, given that Arabic calligraphy is not merely a form of aesthetic expression but also serves as a medium for conveying sacred Islamic texts [17][18][23]. The practice of calligraphy often involves the artistic rendering of Quranic *ayah* (verses) or Hadith excerpts, making it crucial to ensure accuracy and contextual relevance in the interpretation process.

The final stage of the research focuses on comprehending the underlying meanings associated with the use and spatial placement of Arabic calligraphic ornaments in traditional Banjar architecture. This phase involves a combination of literature review and qualitative interviews with relevant cultural experts, religious scholars, and local artisans. The purpose of these methods is to contextualize the calligraphic elements within the socio-religious and architectural traditions of the Banjar community. The data obtained from both primary and secondary sources are then analyzed and synthesized to formulate comprehensive conclusions regarding the forms and meanings of Arabic calligraphy ornaments in the *Bubungan Tinggi* and the *Gajah Baliku* House.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY ON THE BUBUNGAN TINGGI HOUSE AND THE GAJAH BALIKU HOUSE

Since the arrival of Islam in Indonesia, Arabic art and culture were introduced to the local population; Arabic calligraphy or *khat* is the most notable one. *Khat* was one of the earliest forms of Islamic art to be recognized and served as a symbol of Islam's entry into the Indonesian archipelago [23]. Arabic Calligraphy not only functions as a decorative element but also serves as a means to deepen the understanding of Islamic teachings, especially the meaning of the Quran [24].

The calligraphy on the *Bubungan Tinggi* and the *Gajah Baliku* houses is written using beautiful Arabic writing styles called '*khat tsuluts/thuluth*' and '*khat jaly tsuluts/thuluth*'. These styles are carved into the surface of ironwood. Calligraphy carved on a wooden surface is a work of art created using hand tools by talented and skilled carvers who have cultivated their abilities from an early age [25]. Below are the results of identifying the form and meaning of the Arabic calligraphy used on both the *Bubungan Tinggi* house and the *Gajah Baliku* house:

A. 1. A PART OF SURAH HUD, VERSE 88.

The calligraphy on the left and right of the first line of *the tawing halat* of the *Bubungan Tinggi* house and *Gajah Baliku* house is engraved with a fragment of Surah Hud, verse 88: *wa mā taufiqî illâ billâh* (see Fig. 3).

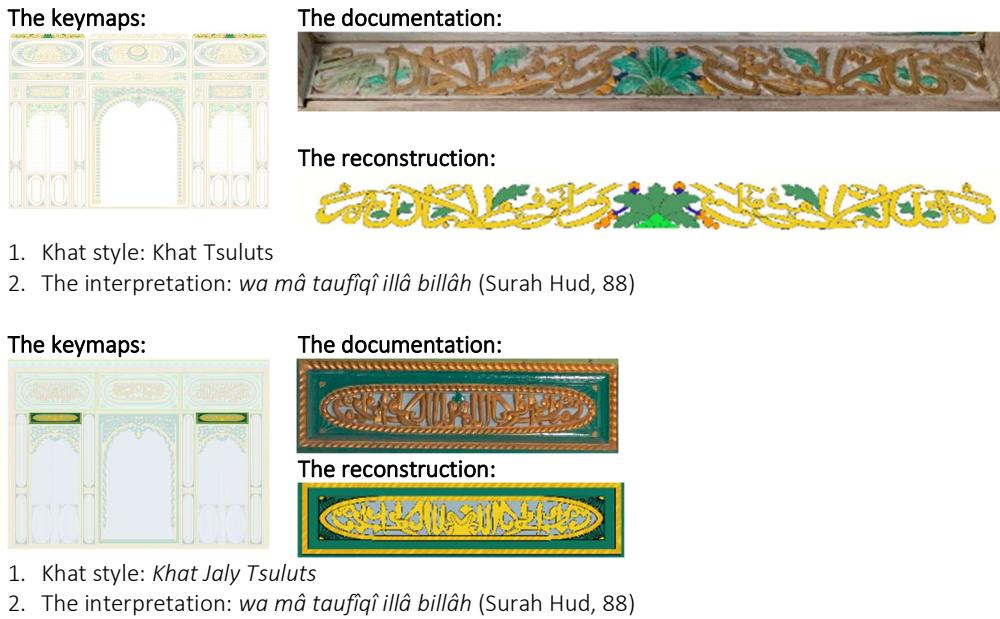


Figure 3. A part of Surah Hud, verse 88

Surah Hud in the Quran, verse 88 states: '... qâla yâ qaumi a ra'aitum ing kuntu 'alâ bayyinatim mir rabbî wa razaqanî min-hu rizqan hasanaw wa mâ urîdu an ukhâlifikum ilâ mâ an-hâkum 'an-h, in urîdu illal-ishlâha mastatha't, *wa mā taufiqî illâ billâh*, 'alaihi tawakkaltu wa ilaihi unîb...!'

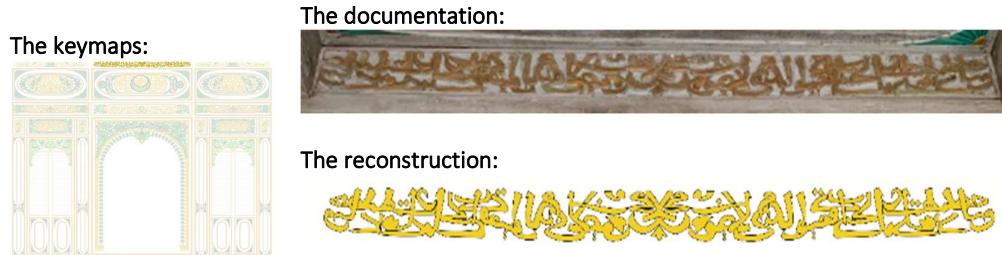
The translation is: '...He answered: "O my people! What do you think? If [it be true that] I am taking my stand on all clear evidence from my Sustainer, who has vouchsafed me goodly sustenance [as a gift] from Himself - [how could I speak to you otherwise than I do]? And yet, I have no desire to do, out of opposition to you, what I am asking you not to do: I desire no more than to set things to rights in so far as it lies within my power, but the achievement of my aim depends on God alone. In Him have I placed my trust, and unto Him do I always turn! [26]

A particular note in this verse is the phrase '*wa mā taufiqî illâ billâh*', which is translated into "and my success is only through Allah." This expression signifies a profound acknowledgment that all forms of success, guidance, and achievement ultimately originate from divine will and assistance. In the context of traditional Banjar architecture, the incorporation of this verse, often through Arabic calligraphy, may reflect the homeowner's religious beliefs. It is particularly their belief in the absolute reliance on Allah the Almighty for help and success. Such an inscription serves not merely as a decorative element but as an embodiment of faith and humility, expressing the owner's spiritual values and orientation toward dependence on Allah the Almighty.

A. 2. A prayer for protection for oneself and one's family

The Arabic calligraphy located at the center of the upper row of the *tawing halat* (interior front wall) in the *Bubungan Tinggi* house contains a prayer for the protection and well-being of the homeowner and their family. This particular form of calligraphic ornamentation is unique to the *Bubungan Tinggi* typology, which is not found in the *Gajah Baliku* house. As previously noted in several studies [11] [15][20], the quantity and complexity of ornamental features in traditional Banjar houses are often correlated with the social status of the homeowner.

The *Bubungan Tinggi* house, traditionally associated with nobility or individuals of higher social standing, tends to exhibit a richer and more elaborate array of decorative elements compared to the *Gajah Baliku*. Consequently, the presence of more numerous and complete ornaments, such as the protective calligraphy on the *tawing halat*, serves not only an aesthetic and spiritual function but also operates as a visual marker of the homeowner's elevated social position within the Banjar cultural hierarchy.



1. Khat style: Khat Tsuluts
2. The interpretation: *Hashantuu wamalii wa Ahlii Rabbii bi Al Hayyul Qayyum Alladzii Laa Yamuut*

Figure 4. A prayer for protection for oneself and one's family

The protective prayer inscribed on the *tawing halat* of the *Bubungan Tinggi* house says: '...*Hashantuu wamalii wa Ahlii Rabbii bi Al Hayyul Qayyum Alladzii Laa Yamuut*'. It may be translated as: '... I fortify myself, my family, and everything that God has given me with Al Hayyul Qayyuum (The Almighty who lives eternally and is the Almighty Manager of His creatures) who will never die forever...'. This invocation reflects a deeply rooted belief in divine protection, emphasizing the homeowner's reliance on Allah the Almighty for the safety and security of both material wealth and familial well-being.

In Banjar culture, *doa* (prayer) functions as a vital spiritual practice to seek protection and blessings from Allah the Almighty. The prayer for safety (*doa selamat*) is not merely recited during religious rituals but has become an integral part of daily life, particularly before undertaking significant endeavors [27]. One common practice is the "*selamatan*", a communal prayer ceremony performed by families as a means of invoking divine protection and ensuring that planned activities proceed safely and successfully.

The inscription of the protective prayer on architectural elements such as the *tawing halat* reflects an expression of Islamic spirituality, wherein architecture becomes a medium for continuous remembrance of and dependence upon God. This act is particularly meaningful, given the socio-economic background of the *Bubungan Tinggi* house owners, who are often affluent traders; some of them engage in commerce beyond regional and national boundaries [3][12][13]. For such individuals, inscribing prayers that seek protection over one's wealth and family is not merely symbolic. It is a deliberate cultural and spiritual strategy for safeguarding one's livelihood and legacy.

This tradition of seeking metaphysical protection predates Islam and can be traced back to earlier belief systems practiced in the region, particularly during the Hindu period. However, over time, these practices have been assimilated into Islamic teachings, resulting in a syncretic yet theologically consistent expression of Banjar religiosity [27]. Thus, the carving of protective prayers onto residential architecture represents both a continuity of ancestral tradition and an affirmation of Islamic values in the daily lives of the Banjar people.

A. 3. *Lafaz* (an expression) '*Laa Ilaha Illallah*'

The second row of Arabic calligraphy, located on the upper ornamental section of the *tawing halat* in both the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* houses, features the inscription "*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*" (see Fig. 5). This phrase, which is translated into "There is no god but Allah," is a fundamental declaration of *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) in Islamic theology. Commonly referred to as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), the recitation of *Lā ilāha illā Allāh* holds profound spiritual significance, as it affirms the absolute monotheism at the core of Islamic belief.

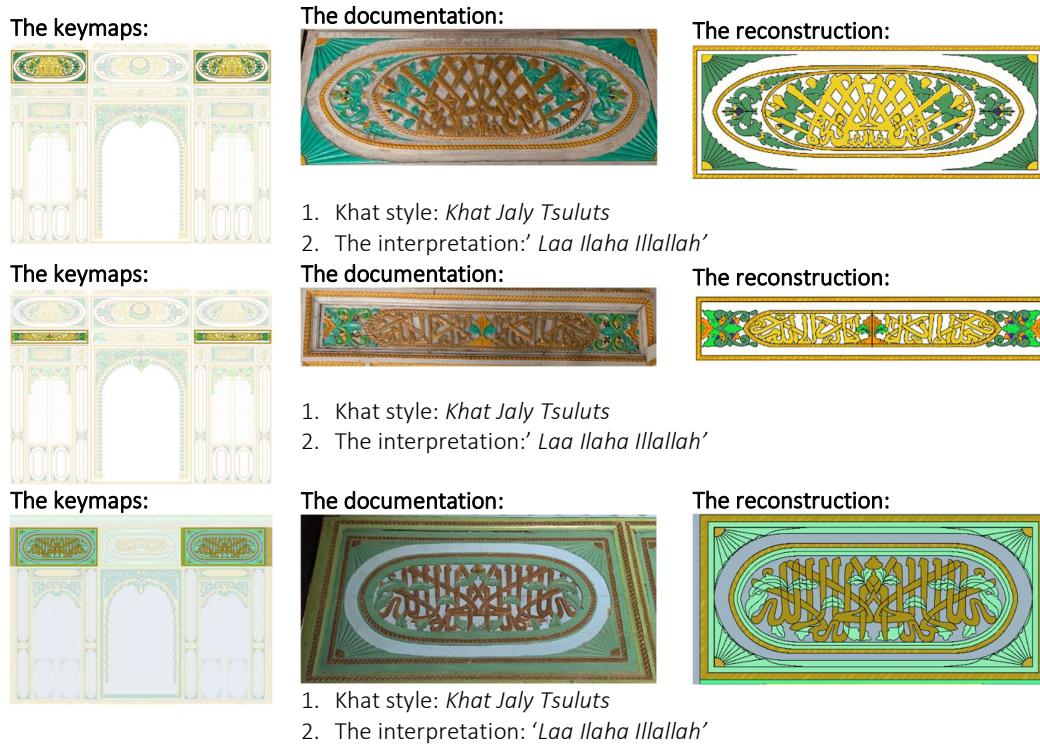


Figure 5. *Lafaz Laa ilaha illallah*

Laa ilaha illallah constitutes the first part of the *Shahāda*, the Islamic testimony of faith, which forms the foundation of the Five Pillars of Islam. Its inscription within the domestic architectural context, specifically on the *tawing halat*, represents more than decorative artistry. It signifies the homeowner's declaration of unwavering faith and submission to Allah the Almighty. The visual presence of this *tahlīl*, a declaration affirming both the oneness of God and the messengership of Muhammad, on the primary interior wall of the house transforms the space into a site of constant spiritual reflection, embedding religious identity directly into the lived environment. In this way, the calligraphy functions not only as an aesthetic element but also as a tangible expression of the Islamic testimony of faith within Banjar's traditional architecture.

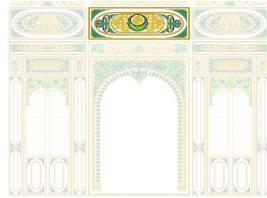
A. 4. *Lafaz 'Muhammad Sallallahu alaihi wasallam'* and *'Muhammadur Rasulullah'*

At the center of the uppermost ornamental section of the *tawing halat* in the *Bubungan Tinggi* house, Arabic calligraphy is inscribed with the phrases '*Muhammad Sallallahu alaihi wasallam*' and '*Muhammadur Rasulullah*' (see Fig. 6). *Shalawat* is a form of prayer offered to Rasulullah PBUH to seek blessings from Allah the Almighty. *Shalawat* and *Salaam* represent perfect grace, embodying the completeness of mercy for His beloved. It is called perfect grace because no blessing was created except through the Prophet Muhammad PBUH [28].

The second phrase, '*Muhammadur Rasulullah*' (Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah), constitutes the second part of the *Shahāda*, the Islamic testimony of faith, and forms an integral component of the *tahlīl*. As one of the core tenets of the "Five Pillars of Islam", this expression affirms doctrinal allegiance and spiritual identity.

Notably, this particular calligraphy is found exclusively in the *Bubungan Tinggi* house, and it is not found in the *Gajah Baliku* house. This distinction aligns with the socio-cultural hierarchy embedded within Banjar's traditional architecture as identified in previous studies [11][15][20], which is why the ornaments on the *tawing halat* are more numerous and complete. The inclusion of such calligraphic inscriptions not only enhances the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of the interior space but also serves as a visual affirmation of the homeowner's piety, status, and alignment with Islamic values.

The keymaps:



The documentation:

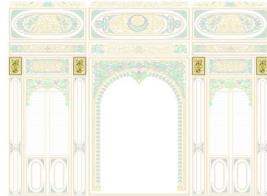


The reconstruction:

1. Khat style: *Khat Jaly Tsuluts*

2. The interpretation: 'Muhammad Sallallahu alaihi wasallam'

The keymaps:



The documentation:



The reconstruction:

1. Khat style: *Khat Jaly Tsuluts*

2. The interpretation: 'Muhammadur Rasulullah'

Figure 6. *Lafaz 'Muhammad Sallallahu alaihi wasallam'*

A. 5. The names of the four companions of the Prophet, and *Lafaz Radhiyallahu anhu*

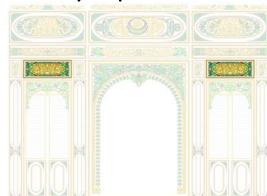
The fourth row of Arabic calligraphy, located on the left and right sides of the *tawing halat* in the *Bubungan Tinggi* house, is inscribed with the phrase 'Radhiyallahu anhu,' which includes the names of the Prophet's four companions (see Fig. 7). The phrase "Radhiyallāhū 'anhu", which is translated as "May Allah be pleased with him", is a formulaic expression of respect and honor, traditionally recited after mentioning the names of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. In this context, the calligraphy features the names of the first four caliphs: Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī, figures who are highly esteemed in Islamic history for their close companionship with the Prophet and their pivotal roles in the early development of the Muslim *ummah*. This particular calligraphic element serves not only as a decorative feature but also as a spiritual and ideological marker, reflecting the homeowner's reverence for foundational figures in Islamic leadership.

Importantly, this type of calligraphy is exclusive to the *Bubungan Tinggi* house and does not appear in the *Gajah Baliku* variant. The *Bubungan Tinggi* households have a higher status than the *Gajah Baliku* houses [11][15][20], which is why the ornaments on the *tawing halat* are more numerous and complete. The inclusion of calligraphy referencing the *al-khulafā' al-rāshidīn* not only enhances the religious character of the domestic space but also signifies the homeowner's alignment with Islamic values.

The documentation:



The keymaps:

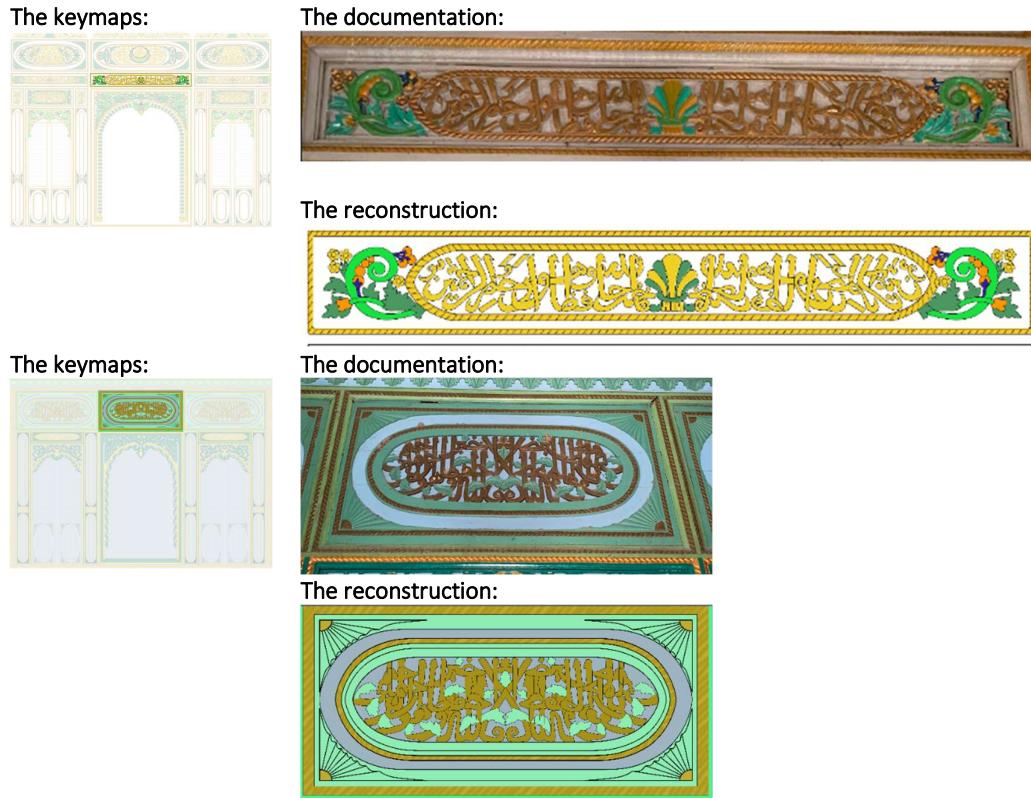


The reconstruction:

1. Khat style: *Khat Jaly Tsuluts*2. The interpretation: The names of the four companions of the Prophet and *Lafaz Radhiyallahu anhu*Figure 7. The names of the four companions of the Prophet, and *Lafaz Radhiyallahu anhu*

A. 6. A part of Surah Yusuf verse 64

The central calligraphic inscription on the third row of the *tawing halat* in the *Bubungan Tinggi* house features a partial verse from Surah Yusuf, verse 64 of the Quran (see Fig. 13). Surah Yusuf in the Quran, verse 64, states: '... *fallâhu khairun hâfidhaw wa huwa ar-hamur-râhimîn...*'. The translation is: '... But 'only' Allah is the best Protector, and He is the Most Merciful of the merciful' [26].



1. Khat style: Khat *Jaly Tsuluts*
2. The interpretation: '...*fallâhu khairun hâfidhaw wa huwa ar-hamur-râhimîn...*'

Figure 8. A part of Surah Yusuf, verse 64

The engraving of Surah Yusuf, verse 64, also conveys a request for protection from Allah the Almighty. By including this verse in the homes, the homeowner expresses a profound desire to be under the safeguard of Allah the Almighty, both in their daily life and in the eternal hereafter. This carving of the verse into the *tawing halat* is a continuous reminder of the homeowner's reliance on divine guidance and protection, illustrating a deep connection between their spiritual beliefs and their living environment. The presence of Surah Yusuf, verse 64, reflects the homeowner's hope for divine intervention and blessing in all aspects of their life.

B. THE MEANINGS OF ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY ORNAMENTS IN THE BUBUNGAN TINGGI AND GAJAH BALIKU HOUSES

One form of Islamic culture that influences Banjar traditional architecture is the art of ornamental carving found in the *tawing halat*, a significant dividing wall between the *Panampik Besar* (public area) and *Palidangan* (private area). It has a semi-permanent construction, allowing it to be dismantled and reassembled. The walls of the *tawing halat* feature two *lawang* (doors) on the right and left for access between the two rooms. The more ornaments present on a *tawing halat*, the higher the social status of its occupants is [11].

As stated, the *tawing halat* is a significant feature because it is the only part of the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* houses that includes calligraphic ornaments. In the images below (see Fig. 8 and 9), you can see the identified Arabic calligraphy found on the *tawing halat* of both houses. The intricate carvings and calligraphy on the *tawing halat* are not merely decorative; they serve as a cultural and religious statement. These elements reflect the deep connection of the Banjar people to their Islamic faith and their reverence for religious texts and expressions.

The *tawing halat* also signifies the house's occupants' identity as the followers of Islam [11] [15]. The inclusion of Arabic calligraphy comprises Quranic verses, monotheistic statements, prayers, names of the Prophet's companions, and protective prayers. This practice highlights the importance of religion in daily life and the cultural heritage of the Banjar community. Furthermore, the placement of calligraphy on the *tawing halat* is a marker of the homeowner's identity and social status, thus showcasing the Islamic identity of the architecture.

The detailed ornamentation and Arabic calligraphy serve not only as an artistic expression, but also as a means of spiritual protection and blessing for the household. This dual purpose of aesthetic beauty and spiritual significance underscores the holistic approach of Islamic art in Banjar architecture. The carvings are meticulously crafted, often requiring skilled artisans who understand their work's artistic and religious significance. In essence, the *tawing halat* is more than just a structural element; it is a testament to the Banjar people's rich cultural and religious heritage. It embodies their values, beliefs, and social structures, making it a vital component of their traditional homes. Through preserving and continuing this practice, the Banjar community expresses their faith in a visible and meaningful way.

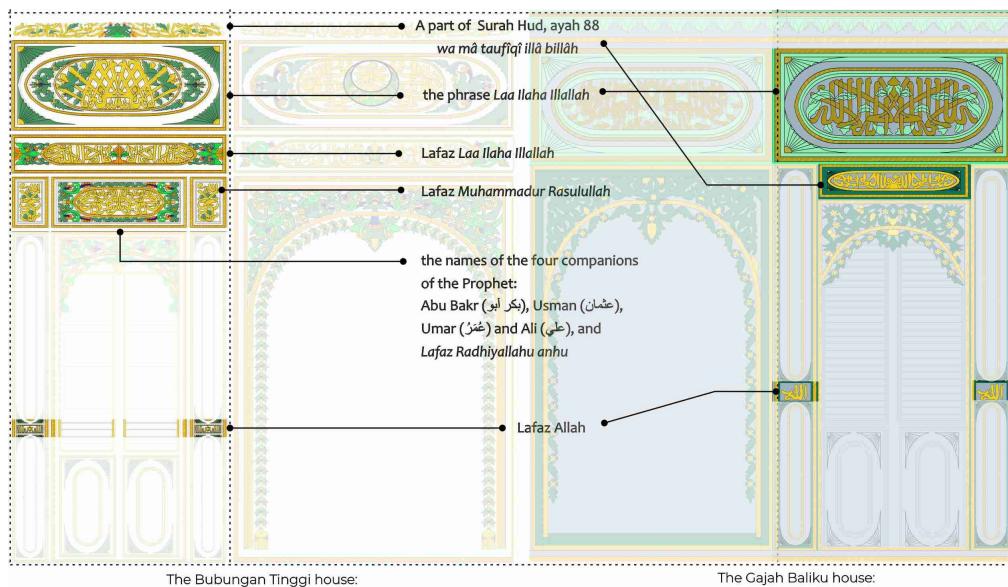


Figure 9. Calligraphy on the right and left sides of the *tawing halat*

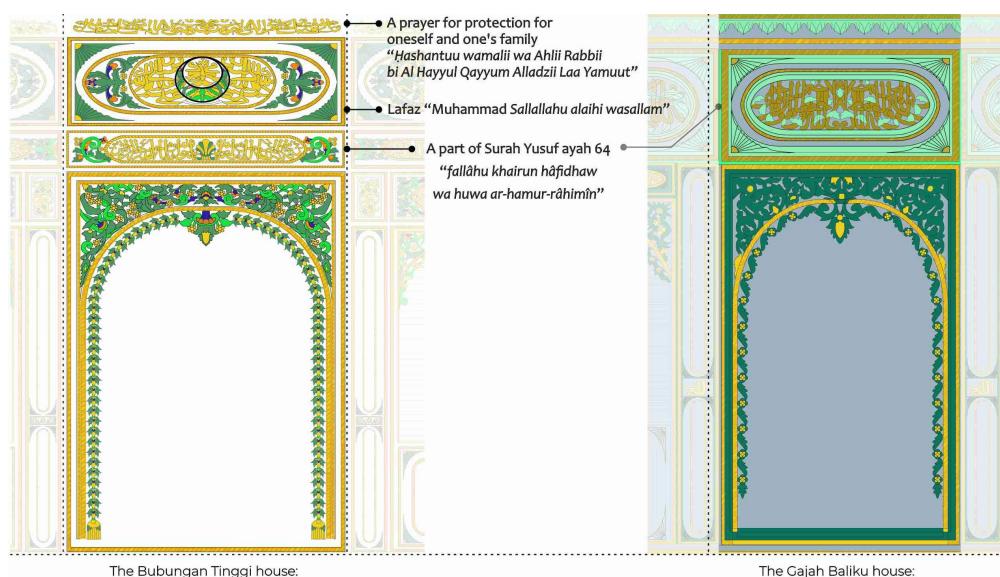


Figure 10. Calligraphy in the middle of the *tawing halat*

4. CONCLUSION

Arabic calligraphy's presence in the *Bubungan Tinggi* and *Gajah Baliku* houses is highly significant, especially for the Banjar community. This is due to the rarity of these two-house types, as they only feature calligraphic ornaments on the *tawing halat*. Arabic calligraphy serves as a form of Islamic identity and a testament to their faith in Allah the Almighty and His Messenger, Muhammad PBUH.

Arabic calligraphy includes Quranic verses, statements of monotheism, prayers, names of the Prophet's companions, and protective supplications. The meanings conveyed express the oneness of Allah, belief in Prophet Muhammad, and requests for divine protection. All calligraphy is placed on the *tawing halat*, reflecting the homeowner's identity and social status, thereby showcasing the Islamic identity inherent in the architecture.

Further study is strongly recommended to explore these calligraphic practices' cultural significance and variations within the Banjar community. Given the importance of calligraphy as a part of the community's identity and traditions, in-depth research can provide insights into how this art form functions within social, religious, and cultural contexts. Additionally, understanding the variations in style and application of calligraphy across different regions or generations can help uncover deeper meanings and the relationship between the Banjar people and their cultural heritage. Thus, this research will not only enrich our knowledge of Arabic calligraphy but also contribute to a broader understanding of cultural dynamics in Indonesia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by Lambung Mangkurat University (ULM) under the coordination of the ULM Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM ULM). We also express our gratitude and appreciation to all members of the research team, as well as to the resource persons and other parties who cannot be individually mentioned, for making the results of this research possible.

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