



THE SYNERGY OF THE TRADITIONAL PLANT MOTIF AND ITS CULTURAL VALUES IN ENHANCING PLACE IDENTITY OF THE MUSLIM ROYAL TOWN

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Intan Khasumarlina Mohd Khalid

Department of Art and Design,
Faculty of Art, Computing and Creative Industry,
Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI),
Perak, Malaysia.

Nor Atiah Ismail

Landscape Architecture Department,
Faculty of Design and Architecture,
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Malaysia

Corresponding Author:

noratiah72@yahoo.com.sg

Osman Mohd Tahir

Landscape Architecture Department,
Faculty of Design and Architecture,
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The fast-changing growth of new developments in a Malay Royal Town to create new attractions with various forms of architectural expressions has given a direct impression on the street level, affecting the survival of the buildings along a heritage area. As a result, it will tarnish the original character of the place and disappear the image. A deficit of visual representation for injecting place attachment through the traditional plant motif symbolizes cultural value. This paper aims to identify the qualitative responses to the visual representation of plant motifs in enhancing the royal Town of Kuala Kangsar, conducted semi-structured interview participants based on purposive sampling, including professionals, policymakers, and skilled practitioners categories. The data was analyzed through qualitative coding using Atlas ti 8.0. The significant findings reveal that the Kalumpang Flower motif, the Melur Flower Motif, and the Motif of Asam Batu leaf is the plant's motif element categorized under the royal image motif, which has a specific meaning related to the historical and cultural background. Most importantly, this finding contributes to assessing the details of the plants' motif representation to assist the city council in preserving the unique and valuable historical heritage of the place image of the Royal Town Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

KEYWORDS:

Traditional Plant Motif; Cultural Value; Place Identity; Muslim Royal Town

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is among the countries facing the globalization of building transformation. The building transformation would influence the image of the place. Consequently, it will cause the loss of the identity of place and weaken meaning, attachment, and place experience [1]. The same situation goes for the Royal Town, Kuala Kangsar, Perak, Malaysia, almost eroded by uncontrolled urban development and modernity. The pace of globalization will cause local features are alarmingly fading and be replaced by more generic ones to be found almost everywhere on the globe [2].

Moreover, the identity and characteristic of Malay Royal towns is still unclear and threatened by tremendous changes due to rapid industrialization, economic development, and urbanization [3]. Consequently, it affects necessary elements such as the town's identity, sense of place, and physical elements of the Malay Royal Town [4]. As a result, Botschen et al. [5] propose participatory place branding practices to bring the established and intended place brand to the surface in order to design a contemporary place identity. Therefore, this paper is to identify the distinctiveness of Traditional plant motif

attributes for reinforcing place identity in the Royal Town of Kuala Kangsar.

The Royal town of Kuala Kangsar, Perak, is one of the Royal Town in Perak among eight Royal Town in different states in Malaysia. This town has been selected as a study area because it has acted as the administrative center of the state in the past and holds the Perak royal heritage, customs, and royal instruments. According to Othman [6], this Royal Town is essential for its heritage values and valuable tourism resources.

However, over the years, there has not been much tourism development in Kuala Kangsar because of the limitation of space and the elimination of the boundaries to keep Royal Town Kuala Kangsar as a tourist attraction [7]. Furthermore, there is a need to apply the Royal Town element, especially at the entrance of the Royal Town, and the design of other buildings needs to be reserved more efficiently [8].

Based on direct observation, it is due to the lack of uniformity development, no continuity of streetscape elements from the main road to the town, and entrance to Iskandariah Palace of the Royal Town. Previous research also indicates that the uniqueness of

the royal town of Kuala Kangsar is essential as it visualizes and portrays the value of the royal cultural heritage and the existence of the monetary institutions [9]. The plant is one of the elements of cultural heritage for a place. The fragrant plant is believed to represent paradise which is said to have a pleasant fragrance [10]. However, the traditional plant has beneficial to people not as a multi-purpose plant but as an ornamental through the motif design. The major parts of vegetation, such as flowers, shoots, fruits, seeds, roots, and calyxes, became the basic motif to create patterns [11]. This can be utilized to create patterns for decorations in creating or enhancing the identity of place. Each part of the plants has its uniqueness and beauty inspired by craftsmen to create adornment on the building and hardscape elements such as the streetscape and architectural structure of a Royal Town. Hence, it can avoid the similarities of places that do not provide uniqueness and identity.

Issues and Problem Statement

Malaysia generally has shown limited interest and funding in preserving heritage cities. This is shown in the planning decision, which is insensitive to preserving heritage values and properties [8] [12]. The concern of preserving city place identity through physical attributes and historical significance in a Malay Royal Town has been discussed by Shukri S. et al. [3]; the physical components and qualities of the Royal Town [13]; the concept of the Malay landscape through the traditional plant in their research and publications. Nor Atiah, et al., [14] discussed the influences of the cultural heritage landscape represent human personality and behavior. The importance of traditional landscapes for maintaining the value of identity and the attractiveness of landscaping is also discussed by Dagdanova. et al [15]. Ivanova. et al [16], highlighted the issues of preserving. Therefore, the local community needs to be educated on the cultural and historical resources and the conservation and maintenance of the area [17], as well as reinforcing the identity of a place.

Nowadays, industrialization in cities is viewed as a significant problem in Malaysia. It has contributed towards rapid urbanization within heritage-valued areas such as the royal towns in the country [13]. As a result, it will continuously affect valuable elements of identity and characteristics of these towns and their valuable heritage contents [3], [4]. As for the Royal Town Kuala Kangsar, the town's local authority, the Kuala Kangsar Municipal Council (MPKK), has reported that the town is losing its royal character due to the growth of industrialization, uncontrolled development, and modernity [4]. In addition, new developments have somewhat affected the town's visual character. These include the lack of uniformity in development and lack of continuity in streetscape elements, especially from the main road to the town and from the town entrance to the main palace, the Iskandariah Palace. Due to these issues, the town needs to be given due attention to avoid the loss of its unique identity and heritage as

an important seat of the Perak royal institution.

In response to the gradual loss of Malay cultural identity, positive efforts have been implemented by the government to encourage the awareness of the spirit of nationalism towards the identity of Malay, such as by re-introducing and transferring past knowledge to the present and future generations. However, as voiced out by Mohamad Tajuddin [18], it is essential to discover the changes and dynamism of place identity. Therefore, apart from re-introducing and transferring past knowledge, there is also a need to investigate plant characteristics' role in enhancing the royal town's place identity. This is in light of past actions where direct borrowing and duplicating foreign ideas in the town visual embellishment elements without concerns of their origin have resulted in the gradual disappearance of local traditions. Therefore, preserving the traditional plants as ornament is important for creating a sense of place. This in line with culture, art & tourism on the 10-10 MySTIE framework, highlights the leverages on the diverse cultural heritage and natural resources of expression and application of creative content and artworks to boost an economic sector through the tourism sector in Malaysia.

Place Identity

The search for a place identity is related to the journey of past, present, and future. Place not only enhances the community but also preserves its cultural heritage, which consists of physical form, activity, and meaning. The study of place found the relationship between place and identity. Lynch [19] defines place identity as the extent to which a person can realize or remind of a place as being distinct from other places. Cities should have character and distinctions. They are like individuals where flavor is made up of various characteristics or identifiable elements.

Place identity refers here to the contribution of place to one's identity through the meanings and values symbolized by place features. Place identity pays particular attention to aesthetic quality. Mason (2002) asserts that places with aesthetic quality are often associated with sensory perceptions such as smell, sound, and appearance of a place. Aesthetic and imageability include social considerations, the discourses, and the meaning shared by the local people [20]. Danaci [21] in a study about a cultural landscape, divides aesthetics into two categories – the formal and the symbolic. The formal aesthetic is described as natural characteristics: forms, proportions, rhythm, scale, level of complexity, color, lighting, and shadowing. On the other hand, the symbolic aesthetic is the potential symbolic meaning for the people. These are expressed consciously or unconsciously to the people for the symbolic meaning in the built environment through the identity of the place or group.

Place identity evolves from local traditions and customs. These should be guarded and preserved, especially in view of the rapid growth of

industrialization in the area. Nowadays, industrialization in cities is viewed as a significant problem in Malaysia. It has contributed towards rapid urbanization within heritage-valued areas such as the royal towns in the country. As a result, it will continuously affect valuable elements of identity and characteristics of these towns and their valuable heritage contents [3],[4]. The identity and characteristics of the town are developed by the image of the specific object. The imagery of a specific object and the city is formed based on experience [22]. Thus, the experience of the people of the town will influence the visual appearance of the town. This includes image formation based on the traditional background, for example, the choice of the traditional plant that may represent a place's identity.

The practice of using plant names in a place has been started long ago in Malaysia. It has been used in many states, cities, and countries, such as Pulau Pinang name from Pinang Tree; Melacca State from Melaka Tree; Kangar City from Kangar Tree; Ipoh City from Ipoh Tree; Kuala Kangsar district from Kangsar Tree; Dungun District from Dungun Tree; Macahang region from Macang Tree and Putat District in Sabah from Putat Tree. The traditional plants have been used as symbols in a decorative motif to show a place's identity, especially the historical place and a city.

The Traditional Plant

Plant resources have remained an integral part of human society throughout history. The part of a plant plays an essential role for a Malay craft maker as a subject matter for embellishment on their craft. Each part of the plants has its uniqueness and beauty inspired by craftsmen to create adornment for hardscape elements such as streetscape and architecture. It was chosen because of the benefits to traditional Malay society in their daily lives. Some of the plants are well known in a certain place; for example, the traditional plants are used as multi-purpose plants by the local people and develop the local identity through the attachment between the plant and the place.

The Traditional Plant for a Subject Matter in a Motif

The plant is a part of humanity's cultural treasure, either considered traditions or religion throughout history until the present day. Traditional Malays believed that the medicinal properties of plants could also be incorporated through their depictions in artworks such as carvings. People who own these art pieces are believed to benefit from the power of the art depictions. Therefore, the plants have been chosen as an element for adornment. These plants highlighted parts include the flowers, roots, leaves, fruits, and bark [23]. The landscape concept for Kuala Kangsar is based on a historical royal town concept [8]. Thus, the National Landscape Department has developed guidelines for landscape replanting appropriate to the royal town. These include the types of ornamental plants that take into account plant parts such as tree

trunks, as well as twining roots. This root is also known as the sulur paut or kerawang, or sulur bayung by Malay traditional craftsmen. In addition, plants with attractive colors and fragrant flowers are also considered in selecting decorative motifs for local craft designers.

Plant motifs are developed from important plants in Malay society due to their aesthetic, medicinal, and nutritional values. The plant parts used for this purpose include the leaf, stalk, flower, fruit, and tendrils. Motifs are usually selected based on the close relationship between the Malays and their environment. They treat the environment as essential in providing them with basic needs such as food, medicine, culture and customs, arts, clothes, education, agriculture, merchandise, and even beliefs [24]. Shuaib & Enoch [25] discuss traditional Malay aesthetic elements possessing intrinsic features and recognizable as a meaningful part proven through its timeless culture and beauty. Additionally, integrating the aesthetic element (either directly or adaptively) into contemporary designs is an approach to sustaining the Nation's heritage values.

Previous researches on ornament establish that motifs can identify and locate, tell or communicate, remind and organize actions, guide attention, express and individualize, generate experience, beautify as well as represent. Plant motifs can indicate the meaning or the importance of the concepts to visualize the identity of location [26] and affect the visual appearance. In the context of plant iconography, it may provide important information on the naturalistic and symbolic value of plants in the various historical periods. In Malay traditional craft, motif acts as a messenger to deliver the thinking of the artisan. This is because the motif contains inner meaning, use, and philosophy that can benefit, provide lessons, and remind Malay society. Nasir also agrees that the beauty of a motif which includes its inner meaning involving morals and animism element, plays a role as a visual education tool indirectly other than nurturing love and appreciation towards Malay heritage.

METHODOLOGY

Research Area

The research area is located in The Kuala Kangsar Royal Town, Perak, Malaysia, which has several streets highlighted as potential tourism interests and holds a unique heritage of the Perak Malay Sultanate. The Street is Bukit Chandan streets; Jalan Taiping, Jalan Daeing Sedili, Jalan Istana, and Jalan Syahbandar. The Royal Town of Kuala Kangsar is located in Perak and the north of Peninsular Malaysia between Ipoh and Taiping. The town today is bypassed by the North-South Highway and has become a backwater of tourism. It is 35km north of Ipoh, the State Capital, and situated on the Perak River's western bank. From Ipoh, the highway passes through karst topography dominated by rounded limestone hills blanketed in unique vegetation that can survive harsh conditions.

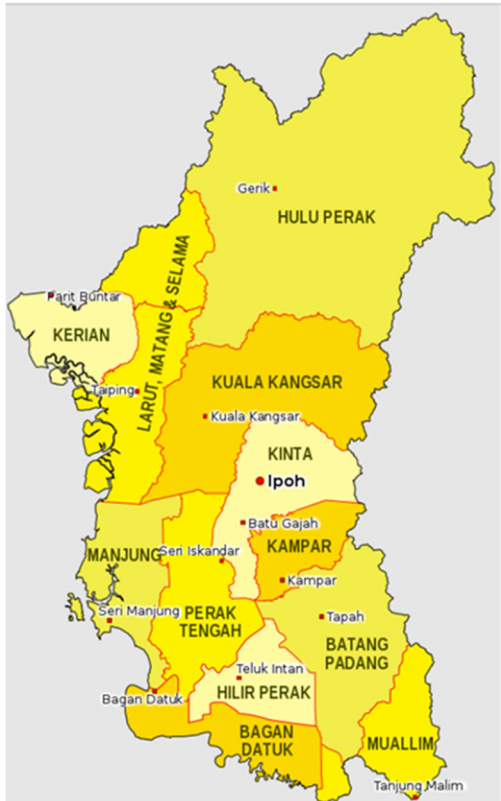


Figure 1. Perak State Map



Figure 4. Ubudiah Mosque
(Sources: Author)



Figure 5. Sultan Azlan Shah Gallery
(Sources: Author)

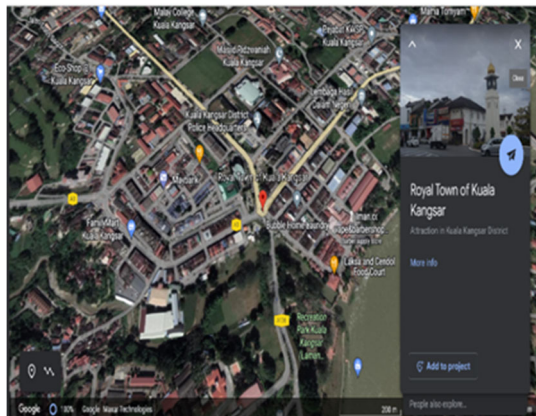


Figure 2. Royal Town of Kuala Kangsar, Perak
(Sources: google earth)



Figure 3: Iskandariah Palace
(Sources: Author)

The method used in this research is the qualitative method engaged with a semi-structured interview. The participants are categorized into three groups: professionals, policymakers, and skilled practitioners. The interviews were conducted over three months. The respondents answer the questions based on their knowledge, experience, place background, and observation of the Kuala Kangsar environment. This method collects problems on the traditional plant motif that influences reinforcing the place identity, which then found the concept of good plant motif for representing an image of the Royal Town of Kuala Kangsar, Perak. This concept includes the decorative element involving the plants' motif that can visualize an image of the place, namely: the traditional plants of Kuala Kangsar, the part of plants as well as the flower, roots, the leaf (color, size, and shapes), fruit, seed, bark, shoots, calyx, and stem that represent as a motif in this study area. The motif created from the traditional plant also has been used as an ornamental plant, a medicinal plant in the Kuala Kangsar community. The focus is on the streetscapes near Bukit Chandan streets; Jalan Taiping, Jalan Daeing Sedili, Jalan Istana, and Jalan Syahbandar. This study focuses on exploring the context of place identity and originality of the royal town regarding the traditional plant represented as a motif to embellish the city's streetscapes. This study identifies the importance of

the plant motif used as an image to represent the people, background history, and socio-culture influences in the plant's selection for the Royal Town of Kuala Kangsar, Perak.



Figure 6. Jalan Istana (Sources: google earth)

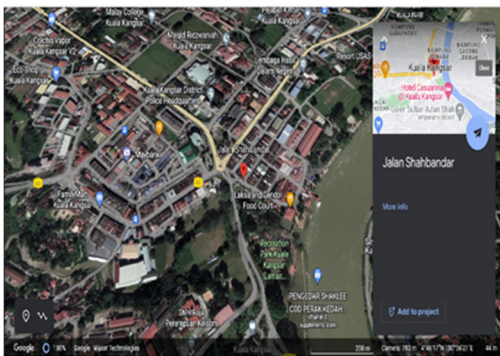


Figure 7. Jalan Shahbandar (Sources: google earth)

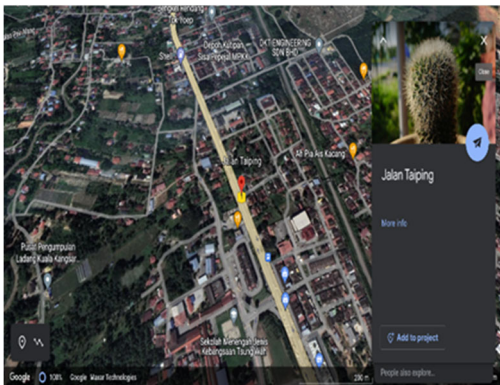


Figure 8. Jalan Taiping (Sources: Google Earth)

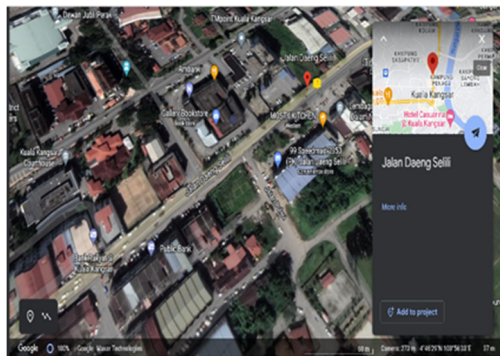


Figure 9. Jalan Daeing Sedili (Sources: google earth)

The collected information was further categorized and analyzed in three main areas, namely, data concerning the place identity of the royal town, information concerning the factors related to plants and their relationship with place, the authenticity of the plants as an image of a place, and the plant motif symbolize the identity of the royal town Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

The data analysis procedure consists of four stages. 1) Preparing data for analysis; 2) Exploring the data; 3) Analyzing the information, and 4) Presenting the data analysis. Each step of the analysis consists of a detailed process of developing the results, as shown in Figure 10 below.

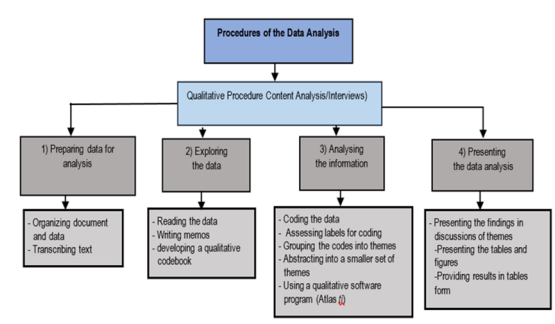


Figure 10. Shows the process of data analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The plant motifs needed to visualize the image of the royal town are categorized by respondents into three groups. These are i) a particular character, ii) a specific symbol, and iii) a visual image. The respondents agreed that the royal image should be used as a specific character to envisage the royal town. It should begin with the type of plants selected for the real nature of the royal town. At the same time, the design of Malay traditional houses adorned with plant motifs can also contribute to the royal town image (PM1, PR1, PR5, PR4, SP1, and SP2). Also, respondents suggested that the Perak River is an essential element of the Perak Sultanate. This is because most of the royal ceremonies require the use of the River as part of the formalities, such as the mandatory use of water from the tributaries of the Perak River during the installation of the new Perak Sultan ceremony (PM1, PR1, PR5, PR4). Most respondents (44%) identified the Bunga Kalumpang as having that distinct character. It has deep meaning for the people of the town and the Perak royalties besides its aesthetic value. When he enquired about the magnificent tree, he was told it was the Kalumpang tree (PM1, PM2, SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, PR5). According to this respondent;

"Usually, for the Perak royaltie, emm..they used Kalumpang flower as a motif." (PR5)

The respondent identified the Bunga Melur motif (40%) as having a specific character that can symbolize the royal town of Kuala Kangsar. This floral motif is normally found adorning the royal palace and on the Songket cloth of the Sultan's official costume.

(PR5, PR4, PM1). One of the respondents mentioned; "I was informed by the court that Almarhum brought together the culture of Perak. Almarhum has brought art to Kuala Kangsar in his cloth. That is why the pattern I have used you. It is true that the motif of the state is because the people were determined to use the type of flower. It is only famous near the state of Perak. Using the country's flowers." (PR5)

Many respondents agreed that Asam Batu (16%) motif has a distinctiveness value for the study area. The respondent confirmed this motif is relatively consistent with the cultural background of the Perak State. The motifs originate from the herbaceous ornamental plant used by villagers. (PM1, PR1, SP3, PR2, PR3, PR5). One of the respondents said;

"Last time I make a motif of Asam Batu for the royal costume. Usually they want a wider image of the motif" (PR1).

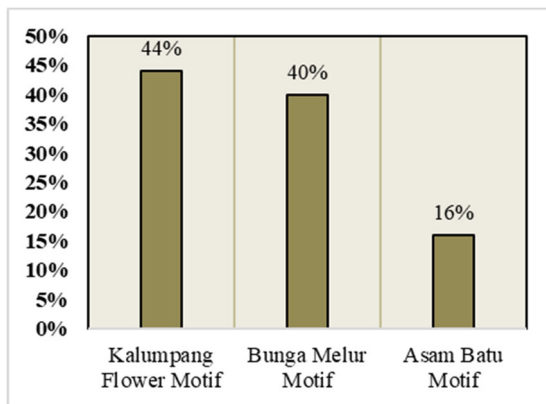


Figure 11. Result of traditional Plant Motif related to Cultural Value for Muslim Royal Town



Figure 12. Kalumpang Flower motif [27]



Figure 13. Melur Flower motif [28]



Figure 14. Asam Batu Leaf motif [28]

Summary of the Discussion

The particular character of the plant motif expresses the visual image of the royal town as the second factor under the legibility of the plant motif. To the expert, this factor needs to be regarded as a main attraction of the study area. The result confirms the theme proposed for the particular character of the plant motif as described in the following: Having similar images as the ornaments found inside and outside the palace. This is in line with Antrop, who remarked that the traditional landscape expresses the unique sense or spirit of place (*genius loci*) that helps to define its identity—using similar motifs as found on the official royal costume and his dignitaries.

The development of a plant motif starts with the simplest visual element, such as dots, lines, and colors, and the pattern usually comprises leaves split into two, three, and five [25], and factual meaning of a visual object. The application of the Kalumpang flower motifs on buildings related to the Sultanate, such as the Ubudiah mosque, the Sultan Azlan Shah Gallery, and the Kenangan Palace. Shuaib & Enoch[25] mentioned that traditional Malay aesthetic elements possess intrinsic features and are recognizable as a meaningful part proven through its timeless culture and beauty.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings show that the three prominent physical characteristics of the plant motif provide the intimate connection between trees, people, and places to emphasize the enduring value of the Royal Town Kuala Kangsar. In addition, the components interconnect with each other, emphasizing the place identity of the Royal Town of Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

The type of plant motif related to Kuala Kangsar was the Kalumpang flower motif, Melur flower motif, and Asam Batu Leaf Motif. These motifs were used as adornments in the Perak Royal costumes, often used in official ceremonies. These motifs are also known as the traditional motifs that have been embellished on the local craft of Kuala Kangsar. These plant motifs have special meanings and are capable of creating their particular royal ambiance and identity.

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