



WOODCARVING PANELS IN JOHOR TRADITIONAL MALAY HOUSES INFLUENCED BY THE ISLAMIC PRINCIPLE

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ABSTRACT

Woodcarving can be influenced by numerous aspects, including religions and beliefs, which may be comprised of the selections of motifs and also woodcarving panels. In Johor, Malay is one of the major ethnic groups and is considered the majority of the state's population, contributing to the significant heritage, including architecture. Traditional Malay houses in Johor have instilled woodcarving into some placements of the houses, including windows on *jerejak* panels. This paper aims to identify the typology of woodcarvings panels and the percentage of usage among the panels found in Johor Malay houses to identify its influence. 72 Johor traditional Malay houses with distinctive woodcarvings were selected to do inventory, photographed, and analyzed. Interviews were conducted while the samples taken were discussed and verified by woodcarving experts. Results show five-piece panels take the highest percentage while six-piece panels come in second in the overall statistic where it is concluded that the Pillars of Islam/*Rukun Islam* and Pillars of Faith/*Rukun Iman* have been the influence on the findings. The findings show that the Islamic religion is the most significant influence contributing to the justification of choice. This study can bring recognition to Johor woodcarvings and contribute valuable guides for woodcarvers to apply these panel typologies to their future works to sustain and cherish the Johor houses' woodcarving identity.

KEYWORDS:

Wood Carving; Malay Woodcarving; Malay Woodcarving Panel; Johor Traditional House.

INTRODUCTION

Johor is a state in Malaysia that owns several ethnicities, races, cultural diversity, and valuable heritage. The majority of the population in Johor is Malay which can be considered the leading ethnic group that contributes to the important heritage, including architecture and woodcarvings. Woodcarving is acknowledged as the symbol of Malay art and heritage intended to provide convenience while enhancing Malay cultural art [1].

Johor traditional Malay houses are usually decorated with woodcarvings on several placements with beautiful motifs and design compositions conferring their affordability. These traditional woodcarvings must be distinguished, treasured, and preserved. Unfortunately, massive urbanization eventually made an enormous but devastating impact when the old traditional house was seen as an eyesore. They were renovated with colossal exploitation, mixed with contemporary architectural elements in chasing modernisation and rapid development to keep up with the current trend [2][3][4]. Henceforth, it is significant to carry out a study on woodcarvings that were there in traditional Malay houses.

ISSUES AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Among the biggest problems in preserving and maintaining the Malay traditional houses in Johor is the scenario of deserting and abandoning these houses, specifically those that come with authentic and intriguing woodcarving. It is such a waste to see them being destroyed, and that heritage will be vanished, demolished unappreciated, and worst, undocumented. Malay traditional houses are being wrecked almost every day, eventually making it tougher to dig in the historical artifact and value from them. A study on motifs has been done, and a study on woodcarving panels is equally important as the motif. This is because there is more than one type of panel found that may become a typology on woodcarving panels for Johor traditional Malays houses. These typologies are important to be revealed, coded, and documented to prevent the loss of Johor identity.

From the motif study done in the previous research paper, the findings formulated that the preferences of motifs in Johor traditional Malay houses are influenced by religion inspired by Islamic belief. Apart from motifs, the urge to know whether Islamic thought has also influenced the selection of woodcarving panels design composition in Johor traditional Malay houses as what

it did on motifs is significantly desired. Malay woodcarving is an art of having the cultural and belief value where the selections of the motif as well as the panel design compositions are associated with the period of carving, whether it falls under which era or religion, apart from the status of ownership and skills of craftsmen [5].

The issue of an identity crisis, as well as the influence, arose because local woodcarvers in Johor have not yet done any detailed research or revealed any typology on woodcarving that have been existed in Johor houses for more than 100 years [6]. Due to that, the objectives of this paper are to identify the typology of woodcarvings panels and the percentage of usage among the panels found in Johor Malay houses to support the aim of identifying the woodcarving influences.

METHOD

The methodology used in this research focused more on a case study where the data collection methods particularly elaborated on field study and interviews. The investigation began with finding all the data and evidence regarding the traditional Malay houses that were built throughout the state. Site visits and inventory were conducted to more than 100 traditional Malay Johor houses, and from there, only 72 houses were chosen for the case study. These houses, along with their woodcarvings, were inspected, studied, photographed, and documented.

All 72 Johor traditional Malay houses were chosen based on age and woodcarvings at window railing / *jerejak tingkap* placement. The houses must be at least 50 years old and above while the woodcarvings should be genuine and authentic and originally built approximately the same year as the house.

Interviews were done with the house residents to gain information on when the house's woodcarvings were built and the influences. Photographs of houses and woodcarvings and also measurements were taken. Interviews and analytic reviews were then conducted with woodcarving experts as well as local woodcarvers to justify, validate and rationalize the findings and analysis.

From the site visits, all the information collected was analysed. Analysis was triangulated with narration and interpretation from Johor's local woodcarvers. The photography images and sketches of woodcarving panels were produced and discussed with experts for opinions and verification, followed by a typical percentage of statistical analysis review.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Entirely 72 case study houses owned woodcarvings, and the findings, analysis, and interpretations of the results are as follows:

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS ON WOODCARVING PANELS

From the inspection and thorough investigation of all 72 case study houses, it is revealed that there are seven different types of panel composition. These seven compositions can be recognized as the typology of woodcarving panels in Johor traditional Malay houses. Gathering typologies is important because it can be useful evidence, an approach to increase the practical value of intervention research. Having typologies also can be the reference for the recent or event future woodcarvers to follow and sustain the existing heritage so that it would not disappear [7].

All 72 case study houses were chosen for having woodcarvings on their window railings; according to the site inventory analysis, seven different types of panels were found.

Figure 1-7 shows all 72 window railings / *jerejak tingkap* from 72 case study houses, categorized under seven different typologies. These seven typologies were drawn, coded, and analyzed in the usage percentage. The drawings and codes are listed in Figure 8.



Figure 1. A total of 8 houses have four-piece panels on their window railing / *jerejak tingkap*,



Figure 2. A total of 37 houses have five-piece panels on their window railing / jerejak tingkap.



Figure 3. A total of 19 houses have six-piece panels on their window railing / *jerejak tingkap*.



Figure 4. A total of 3 houses have seven-piece panels on their window railing / *jerejak tingkap*.



Figure 5. A total of 3 houses have six-piece panels with five columns on their window railing / *jerejak tingkap*.



Figure 6. A total of one house has six-piece panels of column on their window railing / *jerejak tingkap*.



Figure 7. A total of one house has five-piece panels with horizontal panel on their window railing / *jerejak tingkap*.

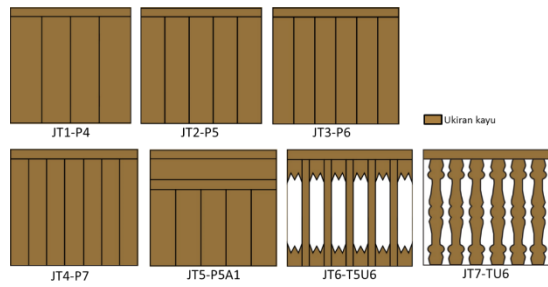


Figure 8. Woodcarving typologies of panel design compositions found on the window railing / *jerejak tingkap* in the 72 case study houses.

Figure 8 above shows a set of typologies consisting of seven different panel design compositions found on the window railing / *jerejak tingkap* in 72 case study houses. All seven typologies are drawn and coded for identification purposes and also for further analysis on the percentage of usage.

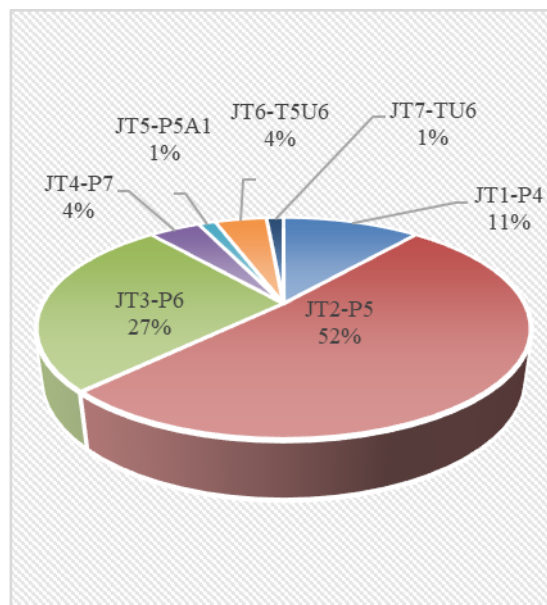


Figure 9. The pie chart shows seven typologies and the percentage of each existing within the 72 case study houses.

Referring to the pie chart in figure 9 above, the percentage for woodcarving panel typologies found in the case study showed the highest is five-piece panels that are being coded as JT2-P5. This JT2-P5 was found to dominate the percentage with 52%, followed by six-piece panels coded as JT3-P6 with 27% compared to other panel typologies.

Similar to the choice of motifs discussed in the earlier paper, the choice of panels is also believed to be influenced by religion and faith in Islam. This is because the earliest year of woodcarving in Johor was 1800, after Islam's arrival.

According to analysis, five-piece panels are found in 37 houses out of 72, contributing the highest percentage of 52%. The second highest is six-piece panels found in 19 houses which carries a percentage of 27%. Both five-piece and six-piece panels were discussed with woodcarving experts, and the numbers five and six are found to be related to Islamic belief. Five is the number of the Pillars of Islam / *Rukun Islam*, while six is the number of the Pillars of Faith / *Rukun Iman*. Due to these facts, it can be summarized here that the choice of panels used is due to the relationship with the religious belief, Islam.

Based on the findings, analysis and discussion explained above, it can be articulated here that the justification for designing the panels' composition in Johor traditional Malay houses is strongly influenced by Islamic belief. This is because the houses and all carvings were constructed after the arrival of Islam to the state. All 72 case study houses were built after the arrival of Islam to Johor, where Islam arrived in the early 14th century.

Apart from the urge to know where the influence came from, the research also desired to reveal the typologies. Aside from the five-piece and six-piece panels, there are five other typologies of panel design composition. The least / most minimum panels used that have been found are the four-piece panel coded as JT1-p4, while the maximum panels used that have been found are seven-piece panels coded as JT4-P7. JT1-P4 are found in 8 houses out of 72, while JT74-P7 are found in 3 houses. However, the most used are five-piece panels, coded as JT2-P5 found in 37 houses, and six-piece panels as JT3-p6 found in 19 houses. All these four typologies of panel design compositions are designed in a vertical manner as in an aligned arrangement among the panels. They are drawn and shown in Figures 10-13 below.

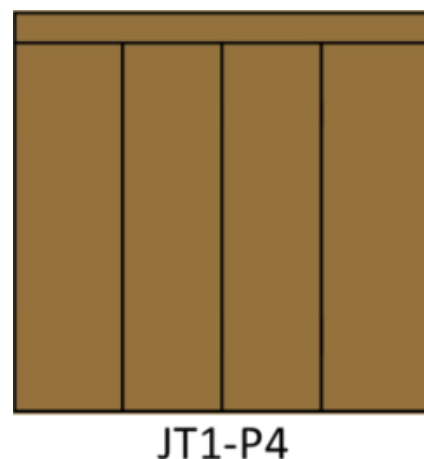
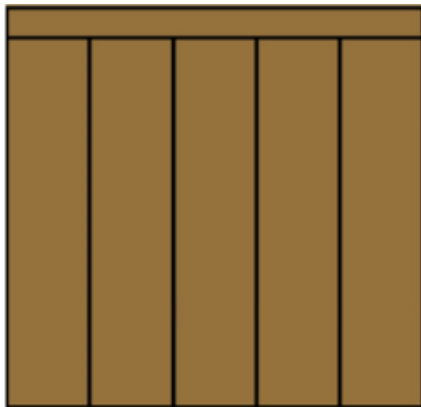
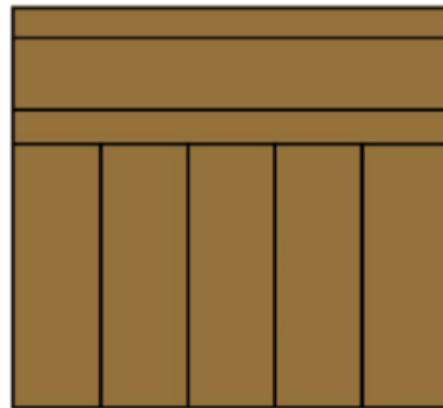


Figure 10. Typology code JT1-P4 of four-piece panels found in 8 houses (11%).



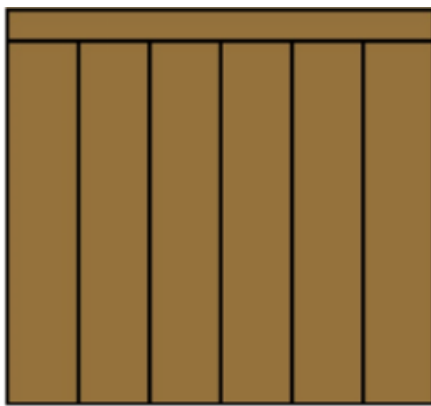
JT2-P5

Figure 11. Typology code JT2-P5 of five-piece panels found in 37 houses (52%).



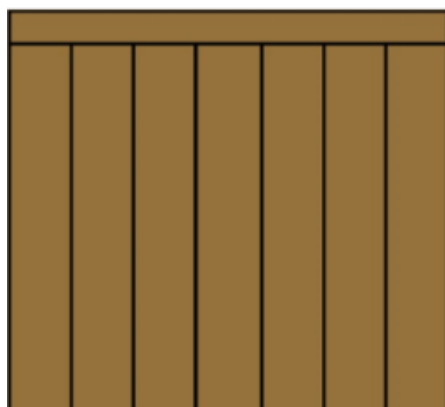
JT5-P5A1

Figure 14. Typology code JT5-P5A1 of five-piece vertical panels with horizontal panels on top are found in 1 house (1%).



JT3-P6

Figure 12. Typology code JT3-P6 of six-piece panels found in 19 houses (27%).

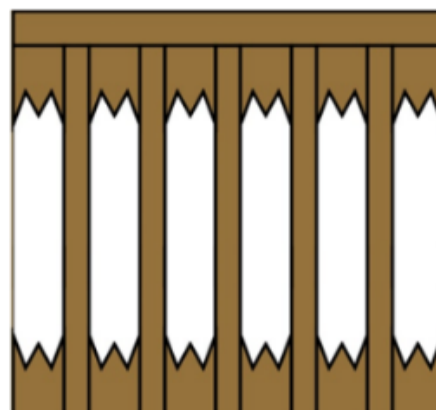


JT4-P7

Figure 13. Typology code JT4-P7 of seven-piece panels found in 3 houses (4%).

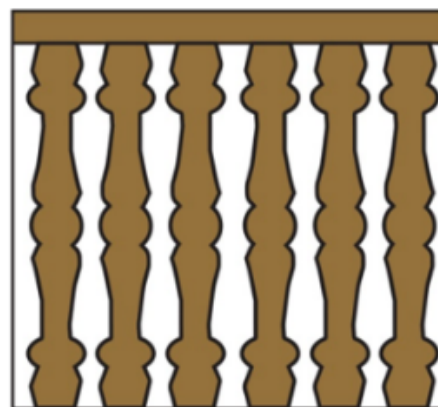
The other three typologies of panel design compositions are slightly different from the previous four, where one has horizontal panels on top of the five-piece vertical panels. This particular typology is coded as JT5-P5A1 and found only in 1 house. The typology is drawn and shown in Figure 14 below.

While other two typologies of panel design compositions are designed with more hollow parts than solid panels, and they are coded as JT6-T5U6, found in 3 houses, while JT7-TU6 is in only one house. Both typologies are drawn, JT6-T5U6 is shown in Figure 15, while JT7-TU6 is shown in Figure 16.



JT6-T5U6

Figure 15. Typology code JT6-T5U6 of six-piece hollow panels with five vertical panels found in 3 houses (4%).



JT7-TU6

Figure 16. Typology code JT7-TU6 of six-piece shaped panels found in 1 house (1%).

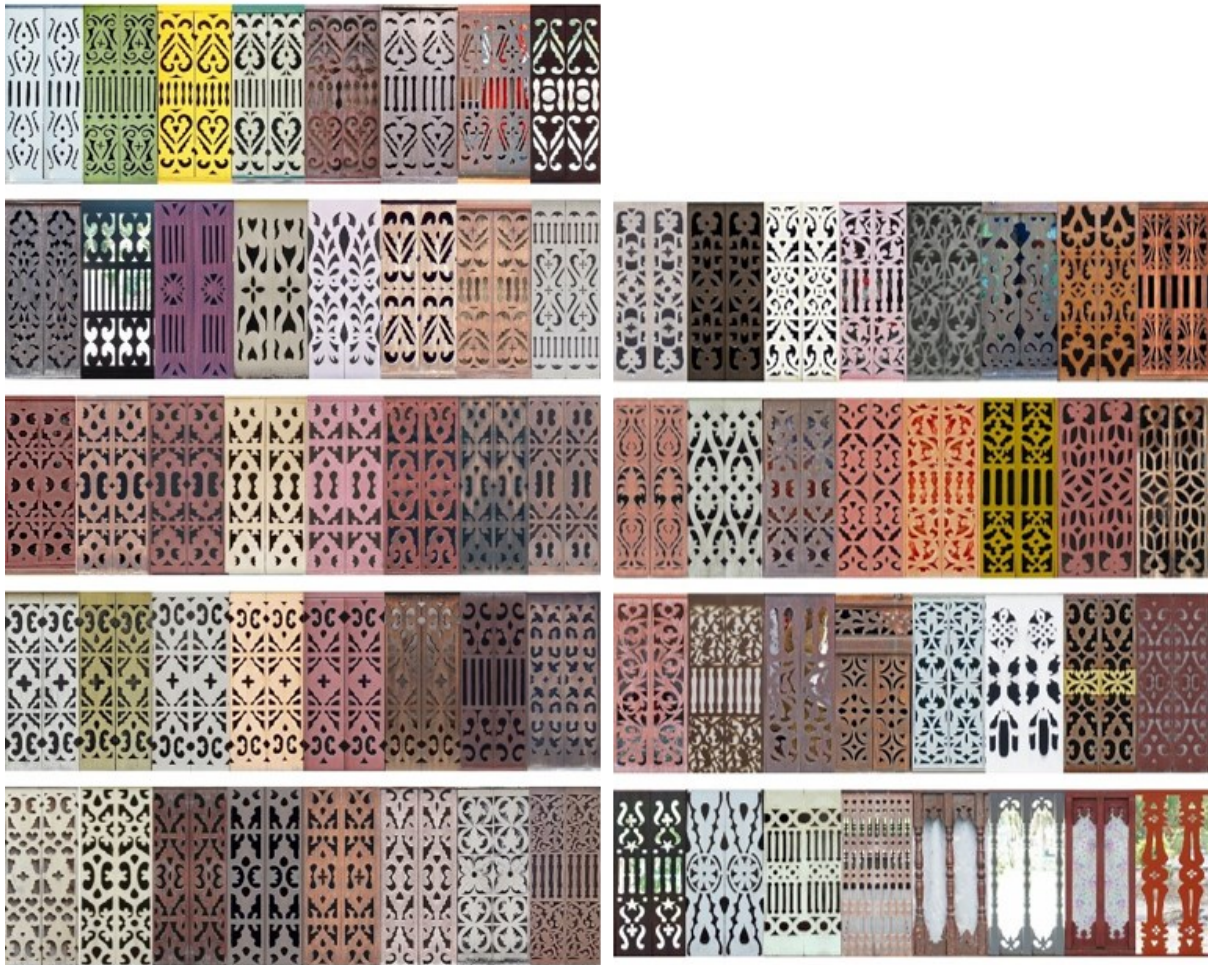


Figure 17. All 72 woodcarving panels from 72 case study houses fall under the floral and abstract motifs category.

All seven typologies that have been identified, analyzed, drawn, and coded were then discussed and interpreted with the assistance of local woodcarvers.

RESEARCH INTERPRETATION ON FIVE-PIECE PANELS

The finding of five-piece panels as the most found, which is 52%, can be formulated that it is the most chosen typology among all.

The local woodcarvers and the house owners responded that Johor woodcarving is influenced by Islamic belief that was brought by the traders [8][9]. Henceforth, the acquaintance with the religion and having the awareness and knowledge becomes a grasp in deciding the design compositions of woodcarving panels.

Since the five-piece panels being coded as JT2-P5 is the most favorable woodcarving panel typology in Johor traditional Malay houses, it can be proposed to be the identity of design composition for window railing / *jerejak tingkap* in Johor.

RESEARCH INTERPRETATION ON MOTIFS OF THE PANELS

Apart from the typologies of panel design compositions, a category of motifs has also been identified. However, the detailed interpretation of

each motif found has been made in previous research, while this category of motifs is to find the influence. Below are the motifs found on the panels of window railing / *jerejak tingkap* in all 72 case study houses.

The discussions and interpretations with the homeowners and local woodcarvers revealed that Islamic influence significantly influences the decision-making on the selection of motifs. This is seen through the category of motifs used in the woodcarvings on all 72 case study houses. Floral motifs and geometrical motifs dominated the selections in all case study houses. Even though the adaptations of different religions are influencing the evolution of woodcarvings in Malaysia, however, in the state of Johor, most of the woodcarvings started late, different from those in Kelantan and Terengganu. In Malaysia, a series of influences began with Hinduism, where the Hindu motifs inspired the majority of the woodcarvings found before the 14th century. It was then shadowed by the arrival of Langkasuka motifs, followed by Buddhism motifs right after the arrival of the Chinese. Colonial motifs were also brought in by the westerners who came and finally it all changed to a 'Malay motif' resulting from the strong Islamic influence [10][11]. These influences vary within each state, and the arrival of different religions transported numerous

movements of the community from other parts of the world to Malaysia and each state [12].

According to the analysis done on the site inventory and triangulated with both historical facts and interviews, the result showed that floral and geometrical motifs dominated the selection of carvings in all 72 case study houses. This is unquestionably because the houses in Johor were constructed and built after the arrival of Islam to the region where Islam arrived; the motifs progressively changed from mythical, mystical, or animism motifs to floral and geometrical motifs aligned with the Islamic belief. No human or animal motifs are found in any of the 72 samples, proving that they align with religious rules where Islam forbids portraying human or animal figurines inside buildings [13][14]. There is no doubt that religion has always had a significant impact on society and the community's lifestyle in Johor. Thus, religion certainly influences the culture, beliefs, and the community's civilization system, including determining the motif as it did to the panel design compositions. Woodcarving is aforesaid to have numerous design elements that also contain embedded values of principles, supremacy, hierarchy, religiousness, and versatility of its owners [15]. Due to that, it is not surprising that Islamic faith and value influenced the woodcarving as Islam is the religion of all the homeowners of the case study houses.

CONCLUSION

The research findings revealed that Islamic influence significantly impacts the decision-making on selecting woodcarving panels in Johor traditional Malay houses as it did in the selection of motifs. This can be seen through the typology of woodcarving panels design compositions used in the 72 case study houses. Five-piece panels coded as JT2-P5 dominated the percentage statistic.

According to analysis, five-piece panels are found in 37 houses out of 72, contributing the highest percentage of 52%. The second highest is six-piece panels found in 19 houses which carries a share of 27%. Both five-piece and six-piece panels were discussed with woodcarving experts, and the numbers five and six are found to be related to Islamic belief. Five is the number of the Pillars of Islam / *Rukun Islam*, while six is the number of the Pillars of Faith / *Rukun Iman*. Furthermore, all 72 panels are carved with either floral or geometrical motifs or combined. Due to these facts, it can be summarized here that the choice of panels and motifs used is due to the relationship with the religious belief of Islam.

Conferring to the analysis of the data from the house investigation and triangulated with the historical data and interviews, it can be articulated here that the Islamic belief clearly influences the justification for designing the panel composition in Johor traditional Malay houses. These are due to the houses and all carvings were constructed after Islam arrived in Johor.

All 72 case study houses were constructed and built after Islam's arrival in the early 14th century.

Religion is something important in human life that has continuously had a substantial impact on society and the community's lifestyle in Johor. Thus, Islam as the religion of the Malay community in Johor certainly influences the behavior, culture, beliefs, and civilization system, including in determining the panel design compositions and motifs.

These findings are significant to the architectural heritage body of knowledge, especially to Johor architecture. This is because it depicts the unity of the local people that have been there since 1820. This will help acknowledge Johor woodcarving's unique identity to be known, appreciated, preserved, and further used for future generations.

In addition, the drawings of all seven typologies have been drawn and coded. These will give valuable guides for woodcarvers to apply these panel design composition typologies to their future works. It will help nurture and sustain the heritage that eventually cherishes the Johor identity. Thus, the local identity of Johor and the authentic value of its heritage can be preserved.

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