

## Malay Woodcarving as Decoration on Traditional Boats in Peninsula Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, <sup>2</sup>Othman Yatim,

<sup>1</sup>Mohamad Zain Musa and <sup>1</sup>Zuliskandar Ramli

<sup>1</sup>Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation,

The National University of Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** In the Malay world, the word perahu in Malay/Indonesian language generally refers to water transportation regardless of its size. To differentiate the types of perahu, another word is added to the word perahu such as perahu jalur, perahu kolek and so on. Traditional perahu are boats without engines and may have sails. The sources of information on types of traditional Malay perahu can be found from the study of classical literature, museum exhibits, ethnography and samples which can still be seen along the coast. Perahu are decorated by painting or woodcarving. Today, a decorated perahu is usually a perahu used as fishing boats in the East Coast of the Malay Peninsular that is Terengganu, Kelantan and Southern Thailand. The decorations can be found in seven parts of the boats namely; Bangau, Okok, Cagak, Koyang Ekor, Kepala (head) and Caping. The motifs or themes of carvings or decorations are characters from wayang kulit (shadow puppet theatre), myths, legends, flora and fauna and usually in a stylised form.

**Key words:** Perahu, Malay Peninsular, wayang kulit, Malay, woodcarving

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### INTRODUCTION

One interesting aspect of the culture of the Malays in Malaysia and in other parts of the Malay world, whether it is maritime or agrarian society is their prahu. In the Malay world, prahu is a Malay/Indonesia word which refers to all types of water transportation, regardless of its size or shape. To differentiate one type of prahu from another, a name will be placed after the name of the prahu. Thus, names like Perahu Kolek (dinghy), Perahu Nade, Perahu Besar (big prahu) and many other prahu were born. In the past, research on prahu was often small and limited. It is most likely that historians and anthropologists did not realize how significant research on the prahu could provide data that could give a new perspective on the cultural, socio-economic of a society. Studies on the boat should not be viewed as a peripheral aspect of the maritime community. It covers not only the history of maritime but also changes in the aspects of boat construction, navigation, reconstruction of water commerce infrastructure, culture and society.

Thus, there exists an awareness to conduct research on prahu. Apart from that, traditional boat slowly becomes extinct as new engines would replace the sails. Consequently, fishermen progressively start to replace their sails with engines on their prahu. Studies on prahu

is expected to contribute to the data on navigation knowledge, the origin, types and functions of prahu as well as changes in the technology and structure, myths and legends, trade and trade routes, ups and downs of a maritime kingdom and especially to be a lesson to the young and future generations on a tradition that is now facing extinction.

### DECORATED BOAT

One interesting aspect in the research on prahu in the Malay world is the search for decorated prahu. One of the reasons, we are looking for decorated prahu is not only because it's beautiful to look at as it is part of traditional Malay arts but the prahu is also a source of information about religious beliefs and other aspects of the culture of a maritime community in the Malay world which can provide from the studies of its decorative motifs and design found on a prahu.

Indeed there is an urgent need to find a decorated prahu in view of tradition of building a decorated prahu is slowly forgotten. Hence, the boats should be immediately sought and investigated in order to ensure that the richness of the tradition of a maritime culture of the Malay world can be discovered.

## **MALAY ORNAMENTAL CARVINGS AS DECORATION ON A TRADITIONAL PRAHU**

Decorated prahu is a prahu decorated with paintings and carvings. It is not restricted to one type of prahu only; it includes Perahu Ikan (fishing boat), Perahu Perang (war boat), Perahu Lumba (racing boat), prahu for a particular ceremony such as Perahu Raja (king boat) and also Perahu Dagang (commerce boat). The main sources of information of the research on a decorated prahu consisted of data from the following sources: Classical Malay literature, such as the Sejarah Melayu and the Misa Melayu, archaeological and ethnological data, images, museum exhibitions and prahu that still exist in many parts of the Malay world.

Classical literary sources have contributed many data on various types of prahu and sailing boats in addition to their functions and sizes. Sometimes, the data regarding the prahu's owners and their social status are also meaningful. The origins of the boat types can also be determined.

Although, the source of classic literature usually focuses on the early kingdoms in the peninsular, the text also discussed about the early kingdoms international relations. Thus, texts regarding the prahu are not only limited to domestic prahu but also international prahu.

**Archaeological data:** There are a number of archaeological findings in relation to the ancient prahu. Some of those prahu are intact and some others are partially ruined. Among these archaeological sites where the prahu were found are Kuala Selinsing, Perak Malaysia, Pontian Johor, Lembah Bujang Kedah Malaysia, Sambas in West Kalimantan and Palembang, Jenderam Hilir and Selangor Malaysia where archeologists have found various types of paddle but no prahu was found. The most completed ancient prahu discovered so far was in Lembah Bujang.

Not all prahu found were given a date. The Kuala Selinsing site dates is from 200 BC to the 10th century AD. It was confirmed that the prahu found in the lowest layer was dated 200 BC, based on Carbon-14 dating (Abdul Rahman, 1991). Pontian prahu on the other hand is estimated to exist in 6 century AD. The date was obtained through comparison with the assessment of pottery date but from the radio-carbon dating the prahu existed in 60-293 century AD (Gibson-Hill, 1954; Ramli and Abdul Rahman, 2010). The remaining prahu from Palembang, Lembah Bujang and Kalimantan on the other hand were dated earlier. By taking into account the findings of other artifacts together with the prahu from Palembang, the latter can be dated back to the 8th or 9th

century AD. Since, the prahu from Sambas was found along with blue-white porcelain which existed during the Ming era, the date of the prahu is thus referred to the Ming Dynasty at 14th century AD (Hawkins, 1982; Horridge, 1985,1986). Prahu from Lembah Bujang was not found along with any other artifacts but based on the depth of the over burden, it is possibly dated at 17th or 18th century AD.

Jenderam Hilir site, the place where an ancient paddle was found is known as a variety site. Paddle is believed to exist during the earliest Hoabinh era, believed to be the 5th century BC based on the carbon-14 dating which is from the Metal Age. The era is known as Dongson Age (Heng, 1989; Ramli and Abdul Rahman, 2010).

**Ethnographical data:** In some parts of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Riau-Linga and Borneo, Prahu existed on rivers and beaches. They were owned by the indigenous people, Orang Asli, Orang Laut and Dayak. Traditional prahu used by the natives in the hinterlands were the kind of prahu cut out of tree trunk. This kind of prahu is still being produced.

From the living data, researchers can observe how this type of prahu is made. Among the areas where these prahu are made are the Lake Chini, Pahang. Most people on the river banks and rural area know how to make this type of prahu. Thus, it is easy to collect information regarding the technology used in this prahu-making. Also, the changes and sustainability of this technology can be seen.

**Image data:** Data on prahu and sailing boats can be collected from old paintings and pictures. Pictures and drawings can be obtained from books and magazines. However, they are not specific to any particular subject. Such pictures might appear in a travel book that promotes certain destination. Sometimes old paintings and pictures of prahu can be found hanging in hotel rooms and traditional houses.

But, the paintings and drawings cannot provide complete information about a prahu, especially on its technology and interior design. But, it can provide information about the shape and type of a prahu. To use the images and drawings data, researchers should refer to Maritime Museum and a traditional ship builder as a reference.

**Museum exhibitions:** There are several museums in the Malay world that display Malay prahu. Among them are Museum of Jambi, Palembang, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Melaka, Taiping and Ngah Ibrahim Complex in Matang, Taiping and Kedah. Most exhibits are in a good

condition. It represents the prahu from different eras. Each exhibit is given a label that contains general information, such as the location where the items were found, age, type and function. There are also exhibits containing information on manufacturing technology.

Two museums in Malaysia have the exhibit on prahu from Malaysian traditional period. The museums are in Pahang and Terengganu. Both museums have received the prahu from several places in Pahang and Terengganu and have displayed the original prahu outside the museum's building. The history on prahu building technology in Terengganu is displayed in additional section inside the Museum of Terengganu and the exhibition was made up of models, pictures and captions. Museum of Pahang on the other hand does not have a big prahu like the one in Museum of Terengganu but it has the exhibition on prahu owned by fisherman, Orang Asli and rural area people. The Pontian Prahu frame is also displayed there.

The exhibits are very useful for researchers on traditional prahu and sailing boats in understanding their aspects, type, technology, decoration and functionality. It is a very fortunate to have prahu kept in museums so that they won't just disappeared from the world. The museum's farsightedness may help to safeguard one of our very important heritage.

### **LIVING HERITAGE OF TRADITIONAL PRAHU AND SAILING BOATS**

Besides museum, traditional prahu and sailing boats are still visible in some areas of the Malay world. In the past, they were found in some traditional ports. Today,

they are not allowed to enter the ports where large ships dock. However, it can be seen at some fishing villages, boat building areas, small ports and in open seas. In Southern Thailand, they can be seen in Chaiya, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Pattani, Phuket, Takaupa and Thaba. The most popular boat-building place in the peninsular of Malaysia is in Duyong, Terengganu. However, traditional prahu without sail can be seen in the fishing villages in every state in Malaysia. Among them are Bachok, Perupok, Besut, Pekan, Pontian, Mersing, Kuala Sedili, Muar, Melaka, Port Weld, Kuala Muda, Kuala Perlis, Pulau Tioman and several other places.

In Indonesia, the traditional prahu and sailing boats can still be seen at some of the ports like Kali Baru (Jakarta), Sunda Kelapa, Kali Mas and Gersik (Surabaya), Madura, Ujung Pandang (Sulawesi), Benoa in Southern of Bali, Ampenan (Lombok), Sumbawa Besar, Bima, Sape, Ende, Maumere, Larantuka and Lamalerap. Several islands in the Riau-Lingga also have a traditional prahu and sailing boats building (Horridge, 1985, 1986).

### **TRADITIONAL PRAHU AND SAILING BOATS IN MALAY CLASSICAL LITERATURE**

Review sources from the Malay Classical Literature such as the Sejarah Melayu, Misa Malay, Tuhfat Al-Nafis, Siti Zubaidah and Siak War poetry, reveals 82 names of traditional prahu and sailing boats (Table 1).

### **DECORATED BOATS IN THE MALAY PENINSULA**

The search for decorated boats in the Malay Peninsula has brought us to places like Pattani, Nakhom

Table 1: List of traditional prahu and sailing boats in Malay classical literature

No.	Prahu and sailing boats	No.	Prahu and sailing boats	No.	Prahu and sailing boats	No.	Prahu and sailing boats
1	PiluJPilau	22	Ghalias	43	Sampan	63	Keruis
2	Telumba/Telemba	23	Bersayap Semangka	44	Sampan	64	Bidar
3	Tongkang Peraihikan	24	Jurung	45	Pencalang	65	Pergata
4	Genting	25	Balok	46	Pintak	66	Kerancak
5	KeLulus Tambang	26	Sarnbuk	47	Sekoci	67	Sampan Borlah Tunda
6	Lancaran	27	Lanchang	48	Kura-kura	68	Kerakah
7	SeLur/Kayuh/kayuhan	28	Sampang Balang	49	Padewekan	69	PerahuKolek
8	Dendang	29	Penjabab	50	Selub/Selup	70	Sampan Kotak
9	Jong	30	Kakap	51	Senat	71	Lanca
10	Tidar berceteri	31	Payar	52	Top/tob	72	MewLangbang Panjang
11	Data bengan	32	Ghurab/Ghurub	53	Sampan	73	Ceucuh BidukIBidok
12	Banting Jaga-jaga	33	Bahtera	54	Barangai	74	Cipan
13	Pembujangan	34	KecilKaci	55	Belah	75	Jalia
14	Penanggahan	35	Perahu	56	Menuar	76	Sampan
15	Lelanang	36	Wangkang	57	Pukat	77	Babur
16	Pmangkah	37	Sampang	58	Pinis	78	Gempang
17	Jokong/Jongkong	38	Jalur	59	Berik	79	Rayang
18	Pilang/PeLang	39	Gebeng	60	Anjiman	80	Kakap
19	Sum	40	Katar	61	Feluka	81	Geliang
20	Ghali	41	Nadiah	62	Sekunar	82	Bidar
21	Fusta	42	Perahu				

Sithamarat, Chaiya, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Perak, Kuala Perlis, Melaka, Johor and Kuala Kedah. The boats cannot be well observed in the open sea, thus the perfect place to see it is in ports or in fishing villages or at the museum.

Among the decorated perahu, either decorated with paintings or carvings are:

- Perahu Raja (The King's boat)
- Perahu Lumba Laju (Racing boat)
- Perahu Nelayan (Fishing boat)
- Boat models used for shaman activities

These boats can only be seen in the East coast states of Peninsular Malaysia such as Terengganu and Kelantan and Southern Thailand from the Chaiya to Golok river. Almost all of the boats are of Perahu Nelayan (fishing boat).

But, if we go to Istana Balai Besar, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, we will be able to see two boats with a very attractive decoration owned by the King of Kelantan. The first boat was named as Pertala Indera Sri Kelantan as it is an Indera Sri vehicle. It is decorated with carvings coated in gold in the form of Jentayu bird, a myth bird existed in the story of Ramayana (Fig. 1). The bird had become an assistant to Rama in the fight against Ravanna after Rama's wife, Sita is abducted by Ravanna. Jentayu lost the fight but managed to tell Rama where Sita was sent to. In this context, the influence of the Ramayana story in Kelantan Sultan's succession can be seen without us realizing it or not.

The size of the first perahu is 25 feet long, 3 feet wide and 14 inches high. Head and tail of the bird are coated



Fig. 1: Jentayu

with gold and its ivory is also coated with gold and suasa. The size of the second perahu is 47 feet long, 7 feet wide and 1.5 feet deep (Coatalen, 1982). The boat was a gift from a mandarin of the King of Siam named Phya Sokong in 1846 to King Sultan Muhammad II. The boat was named as Pertala Wati by the Sultan.

The carvings on the head of the boat resemble a duck originated from China known as the Peking duck or Manila duck (*Anas Moschata*). The eyelids of the duck are colored in red while its body is decorated with stone copper. The other type of decorated boat is a racing boat or speed boat or opponent boat.

In the Malay Peninsula, the perahu lumba (racing boat) exists in Penang in the years after the 1950s. In Nakhon Si Thammarat also exists dragon boat race. Similarly in Kelantan, the dragon boat races were also organized.

The body part of the racing boat is decorated with the images of Hanuman and his mermaid wife. While, the head of the boat is decorated with carvings of mythological beasts, Hastilinga, a composite animal of bird and elephant. It is said that the birds eat the elephant.

The third type of the boat is the fishing boat. It consists of different types and sizes. Size of decorations on the boat depends on boat size. Large boat usually has a steering column and at the back it has two boards, a prominent one in the front and another one placed behind. Both boards are decorated with paintings and carvings.

### THE DECORATED/ENGRAVED PARTS OF THE BOAT

The hull is usually decorated with paint. Fishermen painted the boat using bright coloured paint and coated the parts with several layers of paint from the upper part reaching the bottom and divide the painted area by using parallel lines. At the same time, the fisherman makes carvings on seven types of the boat's parts. The parts consisted of the following eight or iron nails (Fig. 2).

**Bangau (stork):** Bangau is a board shaped like a hooking stork. The design has the function to hold the sail when it is not in use to avoid it from falling into the sea. It is placed on the left side of the head or front of the boat. Board to be carved with stork has a flat surface with the thickness of 2 inches normally. It is placed 90° in an opposite direction of the boat length. Normal Bangau is larger than okok by 2 inches to 2 feet length (Fig. 3).

Stork is attached to the boat by using wooden pegs. Large fishing boat is known as the kolek *Buatan Barat* (West or Siam made kolek). Other types of decorated fishing boats are: Kolek, Small Kolek, Big Sekoci, Small Sekoci, Kuel.



Fig. 2: Perahu terengganu (Decorated parts by the Malay Peninsula East coast dialect)

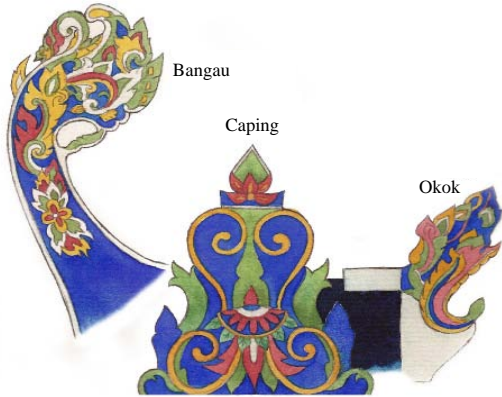


Fig. 3: Decorative of Bangau

**Okok:** Okok is the place to put the anchor when the boat set sail. Okok is located at the front right side of the boat. Okok is flat unlike stork. It is smaller than the stork from 2 inches to 2 feet. Decorations are made on two parts of a plank and carved with the shape of bass-relief like stork. It is made using a board with a stork or sometimes made separately. Decorations are made only in the part facing the wak-wak of the boat and not the part facing the sea. Now-a-days, okok sometimes replaced by bamboo. Okok actually comes from the Malay word bongkok (bent). It is linked to personality or character in the wayang kulit named Semar, the bent man from heaven.

**Caping:** Caping is located at the front side of the bangau-okok. It shaped like betel but the end of the betel is pointing towards the sky. Caping is part of a piece of wood which is attached permanently to the keel of the boat and the wood is a wooden frame at the bow. So, it is impossible to remove the caping without destroying the bow. Caping can be found in dinghy and West dinghy boat. It is considered as the heart of a boat. That's why, sometimes there are pieces of areca nut, lime and flowers tied to a caping. The purpose of placing these objects in caping is as an effort to protect the crew from the sea ghost interference.

Bangau-okok can be distinguished from caping in the following aspects:

Bangau-Okok	Caping
Coupled	Single
Equal in size and simitrikal	Symetrical
Not attached	Attached
Two decorated surfaces	One decorated surface
Physically functional	No specific function

Caping was formed from the instruments used by little girls to cover their private parts. It is made of silver or gold.

**Koyang:** Koyang is the steering column of the boat. It is placed at the rear side of the boat and tilted for about 60°. A long paddle is tied to koyang as a rudder and then tied with rope.

**Head and tail:** Head and tail is a carved or decorated board located at the front (head) and tail (rear) and extruded out.

### DECORATIVE CARVING THEME

The theme of decorations or carvings found in the aforementioned seven sections is influenced by the environment including flora and fauna. From the aspect of fauna, there are decorations or carvings of different types of birds whether the birds come from a certain area in which the J carving decoration was inspired by or it has links with the myths and legends. Some of the decorations and carvings have the theme of animals. On the other hand, flora decorations or carvings exhibit all sorts of plants either in its natural form or had been stylised.

Humans, spirits or shadow puppet personality also has been made as the theme for carvings. Sometimes there are decorations or carvings of extra-terrestrial figures from the imagination of the creator. The creator of the decorations or carvings is usually the builder of the boats himself.

### CONCLUSION

Studies on a decorated and carved boat should start now due to the fast extinction of the boat as a result of changes in technology from using of sail to engine. Similarly, a skilled boater who understands the

philosophy and the world view of decorations and carvings also cease to exist. The interest to produce an art of decoration or carvings is reduced little by little because of this work of art does not pay well looking into the hard labor and time consumed in producing it.

To study the decorations and carvings, researchers need to appreciate every ornament or sculpture and understand the philosophy and the world view of society they study. It should be remembered that all decorations and carvings are the art symbol of a society or individual and cannot be used as a measure of the progress of a society.

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