

Enhancing Contemporary Home Furniture with Malay Tangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Product demand has been transformed from quantitative consumption to perceptual consumption along with the arrival of an era that revolves around concept development. Therefore, functionality of a product now lies between two entities; technical and emotional function. Technical function is how product works, while emotional function is how product makes user feels. Hence, engaging emotion as a partner to technology will deliver the next market place products that will captivate customers. However, it's only when the formal attributes (colour, shape, form, etc.) of an object come together to act as a medium for an emotion does an object become expressive. The tangible heritage of Malay is not only known for uniqueness, but also the realistic traditional concept of art in Malay. It is a reflection of the splendor and beauty of aesthetical elements or ornamentations adorning them that carry deeper philosophical and sacred meanings. Thus, integrating elements of Malay tangible cultural heritage into contemporary home furniture is seen as an approach towards creating products that has emotional and spiritual contents coupled with aesthetic appeal. Therefore, this paper seeks the knowledge regarding the global trend in home furniture design, the Malay cultural heritage and also practically illustrates by example how the elements of Malay tangible heritage can be integrated into contemporary home furniture.

Keywords: Emotion; Home Furniture; Malay tangible heritage

1. Introduction

Oxford English Dictionary (1999) defines emotion as an intense feeling contrasted with reason. According to Carson (1997), emotions differ from moods in term of time and physiological effects; emotions elicit a sharp change with a physiological change while moods are longer and less intense. Emotions tend to be closed to probabilities and likelihoods and to be absolute in their judgments and have control over the action system. They are elicited by events appraised as real, and their intensity varies according to the level of reality attributed. However, a sincere emotion is involuntary (Mark Twain, 1835-1910), it's only when the formal attributes (colour, shapes, etc.) of an object come together to act as a medium for an emotion does an object become expressive.

The tangible heritage of Malay is known to be a reflection of the splendor and beauty of aesthetical elements or ornamentations adorning them that carry deeper philosophical and sacred meanings. This is because the Malay craftsmen are highly artistic and skillful, endured with strength and inspiration to transform the traditional design elements into unique and aesthetically pleasing pieces that carries a wide variety of messages. Thus, integrating elements of Malay tangible cultural heritage into contemporary home furniture is seen as an approach towards creating products that has emotional and spiritual contents coupled with aesthetic appeal. Therefore, this paper seeks the knowledge regarding the global trend in home furniture design, the Malay cultural heritage and also practically illustrates by example how the elements of Malay tangible heritage can be integrated into contemporary home furniture.

2. Trends in Home Furniture Design

Furniture is the mass noun for the movable objects intended to support various human activities such as seating and sleeping. Furniture is also used to hold objects at a convenient height for work (as horizontal surfaces above the ground), or to store things. Furniture can be a product of design and is considered a form of decorative art. In addition to furniture's functional role, it can serve a symbolic or religious purpose. Furniture can be made using a variety of woodworking joints which often reflect the local culture.

Furniture industry has a tremendous market potential locally and internationally considering the world population reaching over 7 billion people (7,065,514,277) according to February 2013 estimate by US Census bureau (2013). However, the past decade has been known for some trends in furniture design. The trends are seen as the undercurrents that drive what we see. Abe (2013) analyzed top ten (10) furniture trends for the decade; these include

- i. *Furniture going Green*: Technology has been an integral part of our lives, the globe seems to be shrinking and there is a rising concern for the environment. Therefore, green furniture now seems to be going mainstream (Abe, 2013). The environmental concerns such as awareness of how deforestation affects climate change and the effects of toxic finishes on the air inside homes have led furniture buyers to demand green furniture.
- ii. *Furniture with a smaller Profile*: Since our living spaces are shrinking, this decade preferred furniture with a smaller profile. Large furniture piece now seems out of place in today's shrinking homes.
- iii. *Multifunctional Furniture*: Although multifunctional furniture is not a new concept by any means, but it has really come into its own as there is a rising demand for it. This, according to Abe (2013) could also be as a result of the smaller space living. Space at a premium needs furniture that can perform multiple tasks.
- iv. *Technology Driven Furniture Design*: Furniture design has been greatly influenced by the use of modern technology during the last decade.
- v. *Popularity of Vintage Furniture*: Buying vintage furniture has been a feasible choice in the last decade; this is as a result of the hard economic times. However, by buying or using

inherited vintage furniture, we rescue it from going to landfills thereby encouraging sustainability.

- vi. *Globally Inspired Furniture*: According to Abe (2013), the idea of bringing the world to our homes is catching on. This is because the globe seems to be shrinking and other cultures no longer seem as distant or foreign. Therefore, people are search for exotic and romantic furniture from other parts of the world and gone-by eras.
- vii. *The Growing Importance Outdoor Furniture*: Casual furniture or outdoor furniture has made leaps and bounds in the last decade (Abe, 2013). This is as a result of consumers discovering they could significantly add to their existing spaces by using outdoor areas as well.
- viii. *Custom-made Furniture*: Customization of furniture seems to be a trend that is catching on where customer provides specifications for fabric, colour, patterns or leg and arm style.
- ix. *Specialty Sleep Surfaces*: Specialty sleep surfaces began with waterbeds and has grown and developed over the years so that specialty sleep products now make up a sizable share of the sleep market (Abe, 2013).
- x. *Leather Furniture*: Leather known as an old favorite now has a new face. There are now colours and designs that were never seen before in leather. Some other advantages of leather is that it is easy to maintain and clean and retains its appeal much longer than fabric (Abe, 2013).

3. Malay Tangible Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations (UNESCO, 2012). Tangible heritage includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture. The Malay tangible cultural heritages are explained below based on the forms, patterns/motifs used.

3.1 Malay Tangible Heritage Forms

Forms are specific shape or quality an artistic expression takes. It can also be explained as the three-dimensional composition or object within a three-dimensional composition. Form can either be geometric (man-made) or organic (natural). It may be created by combining two or more shapes and can be enhanced by tone, texture and colour. It can be illustrated or constructed. The Malay tangible heritage forms are combination of lines, curves and geometrical shapes. Some of them are illustrated below;

- i. *Bendul*: *Bendul* is a Malay word for a specially designed wooden beam (Fig. 1). This beam (bendul) is one of the elements of the Malay traditional house that serve to secure the structural framework of the house. Without it, the pillars of the house would not be stable. In Kelantan, bendul is the frame at the outer end of the floor. It is made to encircle the house,

and served to separate the different portions of the house such as the veranda, the main house, the passage way and the kitchen (Wan & Abdul, 2011).



Fig. 1: Image of *bendul* wooden frame

- ii. *Sulur Bayung*: *Sulur* means the branch of a locally found creeping plant, the root that grows from the main trunk of a tree or a piece of metal wire. According to Abdullah (1990), *sulur bayung* refers to a decorative element on the roof. Has explained by Abdul Rahman (2000), *sulur* means the shoots of ivy like plant while *bayung* is termed as a kind of decoration representing the long beans type of plant. The carvings are found on the four corners of a hip roof; they are either made of ceramic or cement plaster (Fig. 2). Has described by Abdullah (1978), this type of decoration in traditional Malay architecture looks like an image of a dragon, but according to craftsman in Kelantan the protruding element at the hip roof is called *ekor itek*..



Fig. 2. Images of *ekor itek* and *sulur bayung* crept at the hip roof

- i. *Gunungan*: *Gunungan* is one of the ancient legacies in Malaysia. Similar to the Balis, ancient Malays held on to religious and cultural traditions of Hinduism. Therefore, the tops of their doors are design with *gunungan* (having motifs of their god's image), which is similar to the Bali. However, in line with the development of Islam, the concept of *gunungan* was still maintained but the gods shaped image motifs were removed and replaced with flora elements (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: *Gunungan* with flora motif

- ii. *Tunjuk Langit*: In terms of functionality, *tunjuk langit* has no role except for establishing identity. It is widely available in Terengganu and Kelantan. There are two significant forms of *tunjuk langit* ; straight vertical shape (*Jenis batang*) and pumpkin-shaped (*jenis bulat*). *Jenis Batang* is atype of *tunjuk langit* are formed using a piece of timber in an upright position at the tip of the gable end (Fig. 4a), while *Jenis Bulat* is commonly used on hip or pyramid type of roofing. They are positioned at the middle and top of the roof and most are made of carved timber or cement (Fig 4b).



Fig. 4: (a) *Tunjuk Langit .Jenis batang*; (b) *Tunjuk Langit.Jenis bulat*.

- iii. *Tiang Gantung*: According to Rashid & Amat (2008), other names for *tiang gantung* are *buah butung*, *sakabuntung*, *tiag bunting*. Yaakub (1996) defines *tiang gantung* as hanging column while Halim (1985) describes it as hanging column constructed on the bottom of the gable end of the roof (Fig. 5). It has a round shape looking very similar to bees' nest (Rashid & Amat, 2008). Also Utaberta et al, (2012) described it as a wood measuring about 60cm to 100cm mounted on the roof. It is a badge or symbol of a construction formwork, just like a gravestone on the tomb. Halim (1985) refers to it as a symbol of power and might of the house and its owner. It is commonly believed that if this form of decoration falls, it indicates bad omen to the occupant of the house (Rashid & Amat, 2008). Therefore, to avert the bad omen, a gathering or a special ceremony must be held to reposition the fallen *tiang gantung* to its original place.

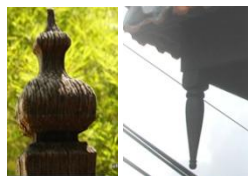


Fig. 5: Picture of *Tiang Gantung*

3.2 Malay Tangible Heritage Patterns/Motifs

A pattern in general can be defined as a discernible regularity in the world or in a manmade design. As such, the elements of a pattern repeat in a predictable manner. In art and architecture, a pattern can be achieved by combining and repeating decorations or visual motifs to form patterns designed to have a chosen effect on the viewer. The inspiration for motif compositions in art of Malay is from five plant sources which include leaf, stalk, flower, fruit and tendrils. According to Haziyah et al (2012), leaf compositions are usually composed from the odd

numbers of one, three, five, and so on depending on the surface of the carving. The patterns usually comprise leaves splits into two, three and five. The motifs used are usually from plants which are vital in Malay society; having aesthetic, medicinal and nutritional values. Examples are *sesayap leaf*, *telinga kera*, *telipot*, *kerak nasi*, etc. These motifs are commonly used in Metalwork (Fig. 6a), Pottery (Fig. 6b), but mostly used in wood carving (Fig. 6c).



Fig. 6. (a) metal work; (b) pottery ware; (c) woodcarving

Motif carving technique is usually based on two forms; two dimensional or three dimensional. Two dimensional motifs are usually associated with flat surface which can only be seen from one angle. This type of motifs is commonly used as wall decorations, door-leaf, and louvered screens in traditional Malay buildings. An example of this is *tebuk tembus* wood carvings and is usually found above the entrance between two different functional spaces. It is also available in the wall for ventilation and natural lighting. The carving often have floral motif of scented flowers (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. *Tebuk tembus* to facilitate ventilation.

However, three-dimensional motif form emphasizes the forms that can be appreciated from all angles (Fig. 8). These motifs are usually found in ceremonial items, agricultural implements, household equipments and row of post (*tiang larik*) in traditional Malay house.



Fig. 8. Three dimensional motifs form

Apart from carvings motifs, some patterns are also created by arranging pieces of wood in a regular or irregular repeated manner to create a design pattern. An example of this is *dinding janda berhias* (Fig. 9). *Dinding janda berhias* is a wall panel, usually made with wooden material. These walls are usually found in the house of high social status in ancient Malay.



Fig. 9. *Dinding janda berhias*

4. The New Direction for Furniture in the 21st Century

With the emergence of cross domain disciplines like outsourcing, we are witnessing a trend towards creative knowledge, rational application and innovation. We are now progressing from an era that was information-dependent towards the era (21st century) that revolves around concept development which will be dominated by new senses (design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning) thereby creating a need to diverge from the current reliance on linear and sequential algorithmic practices in outsourcing and to adopt cognition based approaches (Patki, T., Patki, & Kulkarni, 2009).

We are now moving from an economy and a society built on logical linear, computer like capabilities of “the information age” to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities called “The Conceptual Age” (Pink, 2005). Therefore, the future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind; that is, creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers. These people (artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers) will now reap society’s richest rewards and its greatest joys (Pink, 2005). With the great transformation taking place this present time, consumers are now shifting from materialistic needs to emotional needs. Therefore, people will get richer, wealthier and smarter but will seek more on spiritual products (Rolf, 2009).

However, Rolf Jensen’s theory has raised the question if the upcoming 21st century will be the end of mass marketing era; because, focussing on small brand and individualism, producer would become smaller in quantity but still uphold their unique traditional way. With these added values, price will be high, but notwithstanding, the money is believed to be paid willingly and happily by future consumers who want to consume not just product but the story. Research by Boatright & Cagan (2010) revealed that people pay for products that address their emotional needs in all types of business; that means product emotion is critical to the long-term success of any product that consumers interact with directly or indirectly.

Malay tangible cultural heritage is known to be a reflection of splendour and beauty, emotionally and spiritually engaging and also rich in story and meanings that have emotional impacts. Therefore, integrating Malay tangible heritage into furniture design is seen as an attempt towards creating products with emotional and spiritual contents that will meet the 21st century demand.

4.1 The Fusion of Malay Tangible Heritage into Furniture Design

Based on some of the Malay tangible heritages explained earlier, this section illustrates by examples how these tangible heritages can be integrated into furniture design.

Figure 10 below is an illustrative diagram of a ceremonial chair with Malay tangible heritage features. Some of these tangible heritage features are the *gunungan* shape integrated at the top and lower part of the chair, *tebuk tembus* decorative design and the flora motifs (Fig. 10). *Tebuk tembus* design and the flora motifs are produced by woodcarvers (Fig. 11). Malay woodcarvers are highly artistic and skillful, endured with strength and inspiration to transform the traditional design elements into unique and aesthetically pleasing pieces. Therefore, the structure of work carries a wide variety of messages and meanings.

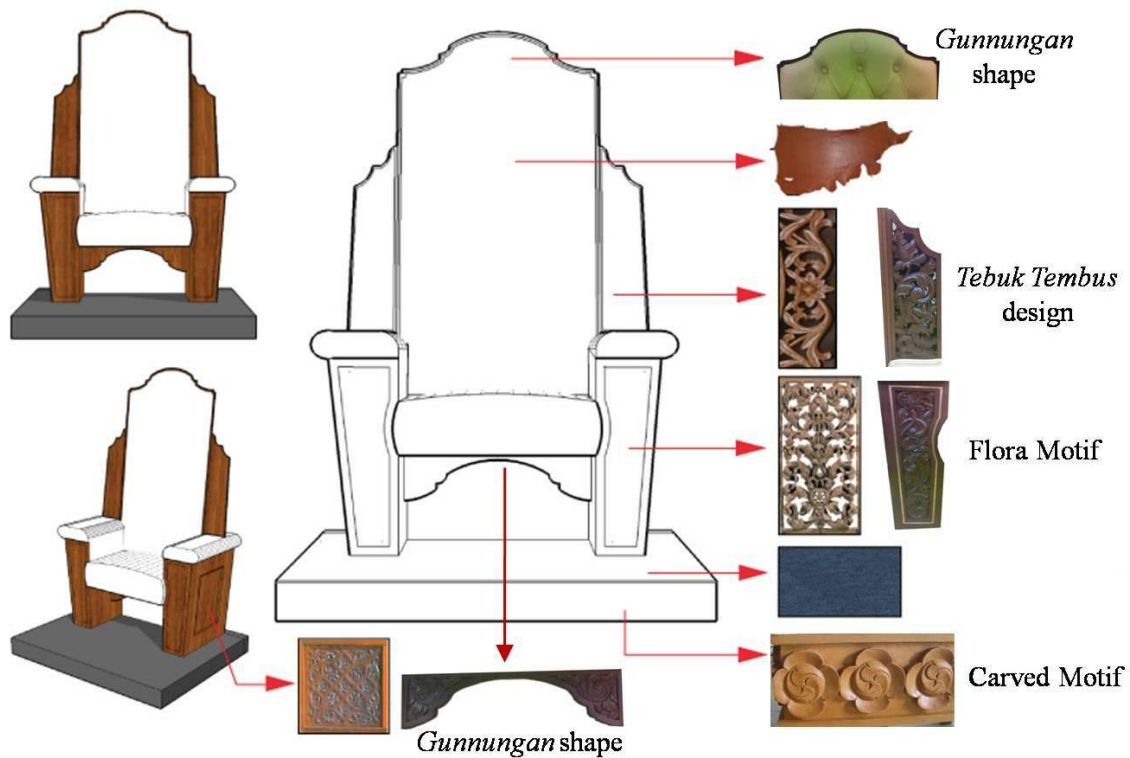


Figure 10: A Diagram of a chair with tangible heritage features



Figure 11: Malay wood carver

According to Haziyah et al. (2012), Malay wood carving is a reflection of the beauty of the soul and culture of Malay society which can be discerned from the arrangement and composition of the leaf, stalk, flower, fruit, and tendrils in a particular carving. The ornaments found in Malay carvings are also connected with particular meanings and stories associated with the carvings

Conclusion

In order to produce best quality furniture, manufacturers needs to adopt a design with universal values that will cater for the global market; also invest on skill workers and state of the art production technology. With the artistic and talented designers; rich tangible cultural artefacts and the availability of varieties of timber species that can be exploited, Malaysia is believed to have the potential to be a competitive edge in furniture design. Most works of old in Malaysia have spiritual contents and craftsmen in those days made things spiritually involved; therefore, all products were passionately crafted with strong attachment to belief system. Hence, since choosing a product is largely an emotional process, contemporary product that has emotional and spiritual contents coupled with aesthetic appeal will indeed be a boutique quality for the upcoming era (conceptual age).

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