Cut out Carving: An Innovation of Malay Heritage Design Pattern (Labu Sayong)

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Abstract: Labu Sayong or also known as labu ayor or labu picit is one of Malay pottery heritages that originated from the state of Perak Darul Ridzuan. This hand-crafted work has a specialty of its own. The water stored inside the clay pitcher is colder than regular water and it is believed to refresh the body when consumed. Labu Sayong is an adaptation of a gourd and a symbol of Malay intellectuals in the past. It is produced through several traditional process in stages and takes some time to complete. Furthermore, the imprint motifs decoration technique on the surface of the clay pitcher has failed to give a variation to its design pattern. This might be the reason why new generation is less interested to own Labu Sayong, thus it is in the brink of its own extinction. To overcome the problem, Labu Sayong entrepreneurs have switched to a new innovation in the manufacturing process. Now, Labu Sayong is produced using moulds and called labu acu. This innovation can produce a more commercial product and more productive than the old way. The impact of the innovation can also be seen on the decorative motifs of the cut out carving technique that is popular among clay pitcher entrepreneurs. The finding of qualitative research is in the birth of carved design motifs derived from local nature. An analysis of the technical aspects finds that moulding managed to improve the quality of the cut out carving.

Key words: Innovation • Cut out carving • Moulding • Labu Sayong

INTRODUCTION

The art of carving is one of traditional crafts which is synonymous with Malay community. Wood carving is an activity to tear off the wood surface by using various types of tools such as carving chisels and knives. The motifs of flora, fauna, geometrical cosmos and calligraphy are usually carved on wood. The carving process on wood surface is almost similar with tebuk timbul [1] or layang [2] that is required to shape the intended motifs of the carving artisan.

Carving techniques also applied on other crafts such as Labu Sayong. It is one of traditional Malay potteries other than Mambong and Terenang. Labu Sayong is an adaptation of a gourd. Clay is the primary ingredient used by the pandai labu [3] to produce clay pitcher using picit cubit [4] technique and therefore it is also known as labu picit. In the past, carved Labu Sayong was unpopular and only produced upon request. But now, the cut out technique is the most performed by Labu Sayong entrepreneurs. Cut out carving is a technique that use a sharp knife to cut through the clay surface and produce holes that displays decorative motifs (Picture 1). The combination of motifs will produce a beautiful pattern. The function of the carved Labu Sayong is not as a water container but as a decorative vase or lamp base only.

Literally, the art of carving on the surface of Labu Sayong is to add aesthetic value by controlling the creation of pattern of nature. The pattern produced is made up of natural resources inspired by the love of the artisan towards the beauty of nature. The beauty of nature is then translated through the artisan’s ingenuity in producing the art of carving through his patience and perseverance. Plants motif is the most widely used as carving motif on Labu Sayong. The selection of this motif is based on the study and observation of the pandai ukir labu [5] towards the environment of God's creations.

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Technically it is not easy to cut out a pattern based on nature on the surface of clay if compared to the surface of wood. Physical properties of clay that is soft during semi-dry stage and the uneven thickness of wall makes it hard to carve. Therefore, firstly the artisan will apply the embossed carve pattern on the surface of Labu Sayong. To overcome this problem, an innovation is introduced to the manufacturing of Labu Sayong that is the moulding technique. The moulded clay pitcher is also known as Labu Acu. This innovation allows the artisan to carve the curls and twists of nature on the surface of Labu Sayong.

**The Innovation of Cut Out Carving:** The effort to add the advantages of the moulded clay pitcher resulting in the aesthetic value of Labu Sayong based on motif of nature through cut out carving technique on clay pitcher is an effort to maintain the beauty of nature. There are several attributes of moulded clay pitcher that differentiate it with pinch clay pitcher. Among the attributes are the density and the even thickness of the wall gives Labu Sayong entrepreneurs the advantage of applying the cut out carving technique successfully. This is because the solid wall is not easily cracked when cut through using a carving knife.

Additionally, the clay pitcher has an even moisture rate from the base to the mouth and this gives an ability for the artisan to carve swiftly and faster. Compared to the pinch clay pitcher, the moisture rate is uneven and the body part which is made earlier than the top part is harder. The body part is intentionally made harder to support the neck part. Therefore carving technique was given less attention by local clay pitcher entrepreneurs in the past.

Based on the experience of one carving artisan Mohd. Fadzli Zulyadi, it is difficult to carve on pinch clay pitcher because usually the body is a little harder due to its semi-dried surface. A longer time taken when producing the pinch clay pitcher is also a major factor to the hardened of body due to air exposure. Therefore, the moulded clay pitcher is more suitable to carve compared with the pinch clay pitcher. The agility of carving process inspires him to carve and create various types and motifs arrangement. Indirectly, this technique can also give a new dimension of Labu Sayong and succeeded in adding the beauty to the clay pitcher.

The agility of carving technique because of the even thickness and firmness of the clay wall makes Labu Sayong entrepreneurs more passionate and easily gets the idea to create a variety of new motifs. However, according to one pandai labu Zamri bin Pandak Ahmad, the motifs created are not permanent and sometimes disappeared without getting documented for future reference. A motif can last up to six or eight months based on the market demands. Besides, there are imitations or plagiarism of motifs among Labu Sayong entrepreneurs. If too many entrepreneurs are using the same motifs, a new motif needs to be created to avoid competition in the market. However there are also some creative entrepreneurs who use original motif and try to further diversify it while maintaining the quality of the motif produced.

**New Motif Based on Flora & Fauna:** Implications from the advantages of the moulded clay pitcher resulting in the new creation of a variety beautiful motifs of flora [6] and fauna [7]. With efficiency of hands, the carving artisan will carve the curls and twists of motifs on the surface of Labu Sayong. The combination of motifs will produce a beautiful pattern of nature in the end.

**Bunga Senduduk Motif (Melastoma):** Formerly known as bunga kedudut, it is now recognized as bunga senduduk, a synchronization of ’bunga kedudut’. The originality of kedudut is a mystery because no one knows the exact part of a plant it is whether a tree, a fruit or flowers. Based on interviews with Labu Sayong entrepreneurs, none of them knows the origin of bunga kedudut. A clay pitcher expert Rofiah Pandak Ahmad says kedudut might be a...
type of white or purple wild flowering plant in the family Melastomataceae known as keduduk or senduduk. The generation at present is more comfortable calling this motif as ‘senduduk’.

Based on the writer’s observations, bunga kedudut and bunga senduduk motif have similar characteristics. Both of the motifs display flower buds at the center and blooming petals on the left and right. The only difference is the flower petals of bunga senduduk is at the same level with the flower buds unlike bunga kedudut which is lower. From the technical aspects, the bunga senduduk motif is produced in such a way so that the cut out motifs are still connected to each other. This will strengthen the surface of Labu Sayong even though the holes is aplenty. Bunga kedudut motif is produced on the surface of Labu Sayong using cut out carving technique. The thickness and density of the moulded clay pitcher convinces the artisan to carve the motifs repeatedly without the clay wall collapsing or cracking (Diagram 1).

**Bunga Lawang Motif (Star Anise):** As a result of the even wall thickness of Labu Sayong from the moulding process, bunga lawang motif can be cut out and the pattern can be diversified. However, carving artisan still retains the basic traditional bunga lawang motif that has big pointed segments layered with small flower buds. However, there are also modern bunga lawang motif with eight identical segments similar with the actual star anise. The cut out carving motif of bunga lawang is larger in size and carved four or five times repeatedly around the body part of Labu Sayong. When the bunga lawang motif is produced using cut out technique, the resulting image is in three-dimensional form. The motif can be made embossed by using fine lines to emphasis the look of star anise. Among the new versions of bunga lawang motif created are the three segments motif, four segments of the ‘x’ and ‘t’ version and the eight segments motif (Diagram 2, 3, 4 and 5).

**Bunga Padi Motif (Paddy Flower):** Bunga Padi Motif is also given a new looks which emphasizes the grains of rice, similar with traditional bunga padi motif that shows the rice attached to the stem. The difference between the traditional and modern motif is the modern one has a pointed end to soften the looks of the grains of rice and the stem is carved to look willowy from side to side or upright. The number of grains also limited to only five or six because the size of grain is carved bigger. Compared with traditional bunga padi motif produced using imprint technique, the size is much smaller and apparently static to the left or to the right. However, the traditional bunga padi motif is more clear-cut to resemble the actual form of paddy (Diagram 6).

**Pucuk Rebung Motif (Bamboo Shoot):** Implications of modern manufacturing techniques, motifs such as bunga padi and pucuk rebung can also be created by using cut out carving and incising. In the creation of traditional Malay pottery motifs, pucuk rebung motif based on geometric shapes is one of the most popular motifs applied on the surface of the pottery. Pucuk rebung motif is created in various looks by each of the potters based on their own imagination or from environmental influences. However, the basic look is still the same which
is elongated triangular (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1986:108). Pucuk rebung motif can be seen on the pottery surface such as geluk Kuala Pilah, geluk Ulu Tembeling, geluk-buyung Kelantan (Kg. Laut), geluk-buyung Labu Sayong, geluk-buyung Labu Pulau Tiga and geluk Perlis (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1986:111). The motifs were produced using imprint technique or incised using a sharp tool.

The original elongated triangular shape of pucuk rebung motif is still retained and developed in different variations such as the tilted pucuk rebung motif that soften the looks of the motif. Additionally, engobe can also be used to produce pucuk rebung motif; the engobe is brushed on the clay surface, it is then scraped or incised to highlight the image of pucuk rebung. Pucuk rebung motif is based on geometric shapes; therefore the accuracy in arranging the repetition of the same motif encircling the Labu Sayong is crucial and highly prioritized by the carving artisan. In case of inaccuracy in the repetition of motifs, the carved Labu Sayong had to be destroyed to maintain the quality of the carved motifs (Diagram 7).

To overcome this problem, usually the carving artisan will calculate the girth and size of the motifs to be carved. A pattern for motif is prepared in advance and traced on the surface. For surface painted with engobe, a mistake can be corrected by brushing a layer of engobe on the wrongly drawn motif. There is also a creation of new pucuk rebung motif that is tilted or slanted to the left or right (Diagram 8).

**Bunga Kemboja Motif (Frangipani):** Once again part of a plant such as flowers and leaves are chosen as a new motif. Based on descriptions of the motifs creators, the inspiration to create a new motif came from the sources around them, likewise the inspiration of the traditional motifs creator. Bunga Kemboja or frangipani is always associated with cemeteries in Malaysia. Frangipani tree is rarely planted at courtyard because of its large size. Frangipani flower is white and yellowish in color with five petals, fragrant and the size is about 8 cm. The flower will fall to the earth before wilting.

According to the motif creator Mohd. Fadzli Zulyadi, the easily falling nature of frangipani inspired him to create a floral motif that has a characteristic of movement which adds the aesthetic value. The uniformity of thickness and moisture level of the wall of Labu Sayong is important to allow the process of cut out carving run smoothly. The swiftness of action is indirectly giving him more focus on carving the graceful curves of the motifs. The accuracy in arranging the motion of the motifs needs to be done carefully to avoid messiness that makes the end product looks imperfect (Diagram 9).

The swiftness of action while carving can also calms his emotions. Focus and emotional stability is important because he carves spontaneously without prior sketch. In a way, it is more fun for him to carve and makes him more enthusiastic to create new motifs through cut out carving technique. Among other motifs created by him are the bunga raya berganda motif, bunga geti or turi, daun tanduk rusa, daun selasih hutan, rama-rama, ikan sekawan, ekor merak and kepak rama-rama.

Besides Mohd Fadzli, there are other entrepreneurs who created a motif based on frangipani such as bunga kemboja bulat motif that portrays the actual blooming frangipani flower. The arrangement of flower which is connected to each other also describes the nature of frangipani flowers that bloom in a bunch. (Diagram 10).

**Bunga Raya Berganda Motif (Double Petals Hibiscus):** Hibiscus is a shrub plant originated from western Asia and also known as bunga sepatu. Hibiscus or its scientific name Hibiscus Rosasinensis blooms all year round and planted as an ornamental plant. Hibiscus is declared as the national flower of Malaysia on July 28, 1960. The original flower is large with five red petals, woody stem and fragrantless. Various studies have been carried out and eventually produces other color hibiscus like white, yellow, brick yellow and soft pink with five or ten petals. Double hibiscus is also known by the name Kingkalakua (Wikipedia, 2007). Bunga raya berganda motif on Labu Sayong is a set of petals which consists of six to eight petals. However, the hibiscus design
applications as a motif is vague because only the number of petals and style represents the actual shape of hibiscus (Diagram 11).

**Bunga Geti Motif (Scarlet Wisteria):** Geti or turi with its scientific name sesbania grandiflora is a traditional vegetable. Scarlet wisteria is a medium sized plant originated from Southeast Asia and grows in hot and humid areas. Rural society loves to eat the shoots or young leaves and it is usually cooked with coconut milk or sweet soup. The juice and flower is said to reduce inflammation and itchy nose and cure cough. A concoction of the boiled root is said to be able to relieve cough and reduce phlegm (Wikipedia, 2007).

Scarlet wisteria is not foreign to Sayong population because they eat it like a vegetable and also treat it as a laxatives or fiber. The stylized floral motif looks just like the original scarlet wisteria flower which has three petals, easily falling to the ground and always attached to the stem. The floral motif composition is usually arranged in mirror image to make the clay pitcher surface looks full with motifs. If a single motif produced, a large hole will displayed and the surface will be empty. This is because the flower only has three petals and by doubling the motifs it is indirectly creating an array of motifs which is more interesting to see (Diagram 12).

**Bunga Matahari Motif (Sunflower):** Sunflower plant or its scientific name Helianthus annuus is an annual plant native to the Americas and it is in the family Asteraceae. The flower is very popular and easily recognizable by its single large circular flower heads. The stem of the flower can grow up to 3 meters and the flower is yellowish-orange in color which can expand up to 30 cm in diameter. At the center is the disk flower that contains the seeds of the flower (Wikipedia, 2007). Bunga matahari motif on Labu Sayong only applied on the body of the clay pitcher. This is because the large size of the flower requires a relatively large surface for carving. The shape of the petals is well formed even though it is only a layer to represent the characteristics of sunflower. The disk flower is clearly portrayed by using incising technique to actualized the sunflower motif (Diagram 13).

**Bunga Melur Motif (Jasmine):** Jasmine or its local name melur or melati is a genus of shrubs and vines in the olive family. It tends to creep and cling to the support structure or a trellis built for the plant to climb. There are around 200 varieties of species and can be easily found in tropical and warm climates. The leaf of the plant looks simple with three branched veins, slightly waxy and dark green in color. Jasmine flower are usually in two colors that are yellow and white and it has five to six petals. The flower
is very fragrant (Wikipedia, 2007). Bunga melur motif is successfully produced by maintaining the original form of jasmine. The shape of jasmine is clearly portrayed from the fine lines incised at the surface of the clay pitcher. The fine lines is indirectly successfully translating the motif of jasmine (Diagram 14).

**Bunga Siantan Motif (Ixora):** Ixora or its local name bunga siantan is also called bunga pecah periuk and bunga jejarum. Ixora is usually planted in residential areas and gardens and it is also suitable to be used as a natural fence. The tiny flowers blooms in cluster at the end of the stem. The color of the flower for both species including red, orange, yellow and pink. The four flower petals is successfully adapted as floral motif on the surface of the Labu Sayong. The simply stylized bunga siantan motif has a resemblance to the traditional motifs of Labu Sayong that is bunga pecah empat (Diagram 15).

**Buah Manggis Motif (Mangosteen):** The mangosteen fruit also known as the 'queen of all fruits' is well known for its tasty and delicious flesh. The rind is thick and inedible but the white and sweet flesh can be eaten raw. The fruit is capped by calyx at the stem end. The sap of the mangosteen rind can stain the fabric and it’s hard to wash off. Buah manggis motif is one of the motifs favored by Labu Sayong entrepreneurs to be applied on the body of Labu Sayong.

At a glance this pattern looks similar to bunga kemboja motif. However, the motif has been successfully stylized to look like a real mangosteen fruit from the top part of the calyx. The bigger circle represents the fruit and the four smaller pointy edge represents the calyx. The accuracy in arranging each motif is important so that the number of motifs is adequate to the surface area of the Labu Sayong (Diagram 16).

**Isi Sukun Motif (Breadfruit):** Breadfruit or its scientific name Artocarpus Communis is from the same family of jackfruit. Breadfruit tree is believed to have originated from Polynesia and it can reach a height of up to 20m. In Malaysia, breadfruit consists of two types that are with seeds and seedless. The seedless breadfruit usually found in the jungle and the commonly eaten is the one with seeds. The fruit is round or slightly oval and often harvested before ripening. If the breadfruit is too ripe, the flesh can get mushy (Wikipedia, 2007).

Breadfruit is often prepared into a variety of dishes such as fried fritters, chips, porridge or boiled sukun. Breadfruit can also be cooked with coconut milk and eaten like vegetable. It is very rich in starch that can be made
Based on the fronds, pakis tanduk rusa motif is uniquely created. The arrangement of motifs to create holes of motifs is the type of orgee [8] arrangement. After cut out carving the motifs on the surface of Labu Sayong, holes of motifs is displayed. It is an evidence of the successful moulding techniques that makes the wall of Labu Sayong very strong because it is not collapsing even though we can see holes aplenty on the surface of Labu Sayong (Diagram 18).

**Daun Puding Motif (Garden Crotons):** Garden Crotons is believed to have originated from the island of Fiji, Australia and the Moluccas. The plant has no flower, but the colorful and unique foliage makes it suitable to beautify a big courtyard. The plant is easily managed and a proper care can further highlight its beauty. The commercial plant is relatively cheap and can easily cultivated through its cut stem (Max, 2008). Daun puding motif on Labu Sayong is created by combining cut out carving with incising technique to produce lines. These lines enhance the structure of the leaf. The position of the leaves is close and connected to each other. To apply these features, the motifs are arranged overlapping and swaying to the left and right or upright (Diagram 19).

**Diagram 19: Daun puding motif.**

**Kupu-Kupu Motif (Moth):** Kupu-kupu or moth is an insect in the order Lepidoptera. The color of moth is less diverse and less bright, active at night and attracted to lights. The moth’s antennae is furry thick and it will spread its wings while at rest (Wikipedia, 2007). There are three kupu-kupu motifs created for Labu Sayong. The shape of the moth is clearly visible through its open wings and the motifs are in symmetrical balance (Diagram 20).

**Diagram 20: Kupu-kupu motif.**

**Rama-Rama Motif (Butterfly):** Rama-rama or butterfly is an insect in the order Lepidoptera. Most butterflies are bright in colors, more attractive and active during
daylight. Most of the butterflies have a slender pair of antennae with club-shaped ends. The wings are closed upright on the body while at rest. Unlike kupu-kupu motif, rama-rama motif displays only one wing and in asymmetrical balance. The motif portrays the state of butterfly while at rest with its wings closed upright. The oval pointy edge shown in the motif is an adaptation of patterns found on the wings of butterflies and moths (Diagram 21).

**Ekor Merak Motif (Peacock Feather):** Peacock is also known by its special name Blue Peacock or Indian Peacock and also by the scientific name Pavo Cristatus. It is a species of bird that has beautiful dark blue and shiny feathers. Large adult males can reach 230 cm in length with a very long green metallic train of feathers. In mating season, males will display its feathers in front of the female. The elongated feathers are raised into a fan and quivered in a display, showing blue eyespots on each feather. There is a fan-shaped crest on the head.

The female is smaller than male, with duller plumage which is greenish brown with black lines and without a train of feathers (Wikipedia, 2007).

The beauty of male peacock feathers is chosen to be adapted as a motif on Labu Sayong. The motif is carved on the body because the size of motif is a little wider and somewhat similar to the male peacock feathers while opening. To ensure the motif is clearly visible on the surface of Labu Sayong, same motifs are carved carefully on the clay body only twice. The pattern of motifs is carved in symmetrical balance and the pointy edge oval is actually representing the eyespots on the peacock feathers (Diagram 22).

**Ikan Motif (Fish):** At a glance we can clearly say the motif resembles a fish shape. The fish motif looks almost similar to staghorn ferns motif. The difference is the fish motif has the shape of head and eye. The fish is then developed to different sizes portraying fishes trapped in fishing net. Once again the strength of the wall structure is
evidently displayed even though we can see lot of holes on the Labu Sayong even on the upper part of the body. The lines produced helps in depicting the actual shape of a fish through incising technique. The density of the clay from the moulding technique does not create cracks in between motifs (Diagram 23).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are new motifs of Labu Sayong existed after the acquisition of innovation in the manufacturing processes. The existence of diversified motifs has proven that Malay is indeed alert and inseparable from elements of nature. The stylized element of nature made into motifs looks visibly similar with its original form. This goes to show that the motif creator is highly imaginative while working with the elements of nature to make the motifs look simple yet beautiful. The advantages of this innovation appear encouraging the creativity of clay pitcher entrepreneurs to enrich the variety of design patterns of Labu Sayong. Thus, the innovation can also uphold Malay carvings even though it is only on the clay surface. These works of art are getting ceases to exist in the world of modernization that ignores the value of this legacy. Hopefully the integration of the carvings and moulded clay pitcher can attracts new generation to learn and continue the skills of Malay heritage.

Notes:

- **Tebuk timbul** is a carving technique of producing embossed pattern on wood.
- **Tebuk layang** is a carving technique of using the blade to incise lines motifs on wood surface.
- **Pandai labu** is a nickname of the expert who produces Labu Sayong using pinching technique.
- **Picit cubit** is a traditional technique of forming a Labu Sayong.
- **Pandai ukir labu** is a nickname of the expert who produces carving pattern on Labu Sayong surface.
- **Flora** is part of a plant such as flower, leaf, flower buds, fruits etc.
- **Fauna** is animal, bird or insect.
- **Orgee** arrangement is one of the motifs arrangement techniques

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