

# Chapter 7

## Iconic Transformations from Hinduism to Islamic Art

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**Abstract** The strategic location of the Malay Peninsula at the Straits of Malacca became the key attraction to the successful trade route between the East and the West. It became the meeting point for traders who not only brought their trades but also their religious belief system. Since the beginning of the Christian era, other religious culture such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam had arrived the shores of the Peninsula. The coming of Hinduism in 500 AD has brought an end to animist culture of the Malay people. Gradually Indian belief system became the embodiment of Malay art and culture not only in the form of literary Sanskrit words but also in carved wood and textiles to fulfill religious devotions and the daily utilitarian needs. Therefore, the objectives for this paper are (1) to investigate how Hindu worldview influences the form and content of its artistic element in selected field-woodcarving and textiles, (2) to postulate the Malay-Islamic aesthetic principles derived from the Qur'an and hadith, and (3) to discuss the transformation from Hindu icons to Islamic worldview in art. The appropriate approaches that merged and integrated with the iconic elements of such transformations are determined. In addition, based from the key evolution factors of Hindu characteristics, several samples of iconic images were identified and classified. The samples presented justified when Islam came to the Malay Peninsula in the fifteenth century; it has brought Hinduism to an end. Indeed, through the whole Islamization process, Islam has transformed the body and soul of the Malay mind. It shaped both religious and spiritual vision of reality specifically in terms of artistic and cultural expressions.

**Keywords** Islamic art • Hinduism • Malays art • Iconic motifs

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## 1 Introduction

The Malay Peninsula's position where three ocean worlds came together was the key attraction to the successful trade route between the Indian continent and the Far East. It became the meeting point for traders who not only brought along their trades but also their religious belief system. Since the beginning of the Christian era, various religious cultures such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam had arrived the shores of the Peninsula. According to an eminent Muslim scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, the coming of Islam to the Malay world in the thirteenth century constitutes a momentous event that decisively shaped both the worldview and ethos of the Malay society [1]. Islam not only shaped the religious and spiritual vision of reality but also its artistic and cultural expressions of the Malays. Such influences were visible in various traditional forms including performance, literary, sound, and visual art. Specifically in traditional Malay art, the impact of Islamization of the Malay world has profoundly affected significant change in the iconography, morphology, and their functions in the Malay society. However, the shift of worldview from Hindu Buddhism to Islam did not result in a drastic change especially in the manifestation of the Hindu traditional art forms due to the ingenuity of Sufi masters who were able to accommodate what was permissible in Islam that gradually dovetailed with the new faith [2].

The impact of Islamic tradition of the Malay woodcarving and textiles is still pervasive after more than five decades when Malaysia gained her independence. Impressive woodcarving work adorned the interiors of grand palaces throughout the country. In the hands of traditional Malay woodcarver, it is the profound understanding and beliefs of the Malays' aesthetic principles that exude in their elaborate expressions and confounding patterns and composition that astonish the viewers. It is here that the local genius of traditional Malay woodcarver as the artist observes and interprets the ambience that surrounds him [3]. As posited by scholars, the traditional Malay art forms are but the visual embodiment of the spiritual and moral-ethical values of the Malay society. Apart from their importance as everyday ceremonial utilitarian artifacts, they have numerous other functions as religious hangings, royal insignia, sacred talisman, and others for they are all interconnected with religious and political organizations, marriage, social status, and exchange purposes. As a corollary, it is only by seeing these art forms in their cultural context that we can understand their true value and meaning [4]. Thus, this paper attempts to discuss iconic transformation from Hinduism to Malay-Islamic art forms specifically in woodcarving and textiles. First, it will delve briefly the historical background of these icons in the Malay Peninsula during the pre-Islamic period; this is to provide the background of such art forms before cultural transformation. Second, the coming of Islam and its worldview in art and culture of the Malay people will be elucidated. And third, this paper will postulate on the change and transformations of Hindu icons to accommodate the Islamic aesthetic principles.

## 2 Traditional Malay Art in the Pre-Islamic Period

Before the advent of Hinduism, the Malay Peninsula, like any other indigenous groups in the region, believed in animism. They had faith in the existence of spirits, which reside in all living things. Nothing was more meaningful to these people than to be able to live in harmony with nature and harboring deep respect to these spirits that in turn will be their perennial guardians. As a corollary, creative art activities among these groups are but their iconic visual interpretations expressing collective animistic beliefs inspired from living creatures from their immediate environment—be it in the form of wood, stone, fiber, textiles, and others.

## 3 Hinduism and Its Worldview

The coming of Hindu religion brought by the traders to the Malay Peninsula in 500 AD ended the pervasive animist culture. The Indianization was introduced by the Indian traders who were responsible for the spread of Hinduism in the Malay Peninsula [4]. It was spread by intermarriage alliances between traders, rulers, and the local people. Hindu culture and way of life was steadily absorbed into the culture of the Malays for centuries before the coming of Islam in the thirteenth century. The influence of Indian art and culture in the development of traditional Malay art is not only in the literary Sanskrit words, literature from Hindu epics, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, but also in the form of carved stone, wood, and textiles. Not only these forms were expressions of religious devotions but were made to fulfill utilitarian needs with exquisite beauty.

The Hindu belief system of Trinity or Trimurti resides in their three main gods who are responsible in the well-being of the universe. They are the Brahma, the Creator whose mount is the goose; Shiva, the Destroyer with the bull as his mount; and *Vishnu*, the Preserver with *garuda*, the mythical bird, as his mount. Hindu gods and heroes play a considerable role in artistic expression. For instance, more often than other gods, *Vishnu* and his mount, *garuda*, are pervasive in Hindu artistic forms—both in sculptural works and in paintings. This is simply because *Vishnu* is the god who is actively involved in preserving religious rites and everyday concerns of the Hindu's social life; see Fig. 7.1.

In addition, the elements found in the Indian cosmology also became significant icons, as in the notion of upper and lower worlds. The mythical birds, *garuda*, represents the upper world, while the dragon, *naga*, a significant icon in Buddhism (an offshoot of Hinduism), is considered the ruler in the lower world. Such revered icons the *garuda* and *naga* are prominent symbols associated with regalia throughout the Southeast Asian regions that appeared in various guises and materials [3]. However, these symbols are restricted only to royalty and the aristocrats in most Asian regions.

**Fig. 7.1** Trimurti of the Hindu god: from *left* Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu [13]



Notwithstanding, the Hindu perception of dynamic energy or vital life force embodied in all living things (i.e., continuously moving in a state of flux) exudes in all forms of its visual expressions. This is evidenced in the voluptuous of female figures symbolizing fertility (rather than eroticism to some!). Similarly such concepts of effervescence of energy and vital life force are all discerned in the treatment of living things—animals, flora, and fauna to the most natural and exuberant forms even to the minutest details. As Hinduism became further absorbed in the daily life of the Malays, the role and functions of textile objects also changed. They were dominantly used as religious and status symbols as in marriages and the inauguration of leaders or rulers. Till today, yellow, for instance, becomes the color preference for royal attires, and court regalia is still in practice.

#### **4 The Advent of Islam to the Malay Peninsula**

When Islam came to the Malay world in the thirteenth century, it brought the Hindu-Buddhist era to an end [4]. As yet, another social transformative experience was brought about by the new faith to the coastal areas of Malacca, Kelantan, and Terengganu. Similarly during the Hinduism period, in the second mass religious conversion, it was the Muslim traders, coming from as far west as from Arabia, Persia, and the west coast of India and as far north as China, who were responsible for the spread of Islam in the Malay world. Such mass conversion to Islam among the Malay commoners was attributed to the conversion of the royalties and leaders

who acted as their role models. Due to the subtleties of the Sufi teachers in integrating the preceding religious beliefs and practices with the mystical aspects of the new faith, Islam became a strong attraction to the rulers in the Peninsula and so was in the rest of the Muslim world. Parallel to Hinduism, the main emphasis in artistic creativity in Islam is also the visual manifestations of religious beliefs. That Islam became a dominant factor in Malaysian traditional art and a major “civilizing force” of the Malay culture is the opinions shared by many scholars, for instance:

The process of Islamization of the Malay Archipelago, which culminated in the 13–16th century, brought about the greatest, known Cultural Revolution in the region. It was the momentous event that transformed both the body and souls of the Malays. [1]

What is it that Islam brought to the Malay world that is artistically and civilizationally determining? According to Lamnya Al-Faruqi, Islam brought the holy Qur’an, the scripture of Islam, which provided a concrete model for artistic form and content. It also brought the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) literature [5]. It was from these core materials which came the transformation of the whole culture and civilization of the Muslim Malay [2]. It was often mentioned that Islam was disseminated to the general populace via the royal courts, as asserted by Osman: The spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago has been linked with the princely court since Islamic scholarship and Muslim prestige were associated with the royal courts. Not only were the Muslim traders and scholars from the West flocked to these centers but also the princely courts provided a base for proselytization by Muslims in the area [6].

## 5 Transition from Hinduism to Islamic Weltanschauung

Islam brought a new vision of reality. As a monotheistic religion, it defines God as a unique transcendent Being, which is inexpressible. Such concept of God is directly in contrast with the pre-Islamic Hindu religion, which is rooted in polytheism expressed through various depictions of Hindu deities as evidenced in religious monuments and architectures. As opposed to the iconographical nature of Hindu art, Islamic art, in the words of Nasr, “is essentially aniconic” (non-imaginary) in nature since in Islam the rendition of naturalistic or representational images is prohibited. Although the Qur’an itself does not explicitly prohibit pictures of human or animal form, a *hadith* is quoted stating that “he who makes images will suffer the most severe punishment on the last day... the angels of mercy do not enter dwellings where there are such images” [7]. While it is true that such images are avoided in a religious context like the mosque, however, outside of a religious setting, artists are happy to draw images of animals for the purpose of education or storytelling through pictures. Notwithstanding, most Muslim artists, however, resorted to the process of abstraction through stylization and denaturalization in their art forms. According to Sulaiman Esa, the Sufi *ulama*, guru, and saints were responsible in determining the form and direction of Islamic traditional Malay art [8]. This was

made possible through their metaphysical interpretations of the Qur'an concept of man nature and beauty that proved essential in the shaping of Malay worldview pertaining to the iconographical aspects of Malay art [9].

## 6 Tawhid as the Determinant Factor in Islamic Art Aesthetic

In the book of *Islam and Art* [5], Lamnya al-Faruqi has eloquently addressed how Islamic worldview determines the form and content of Islamic art. Art from an Islamic perspective, she maintains, "is primarily an abstract art. Since Allah (SWT) is so completely other-than-the natural world could stand a symbol for Him," (p.20). She further posits that the main function of Islamic art is to reinforce the concept of *tawhid*—that is, a visual manifestation of the meaning of the *Shahadah*—there is no god but Allah (oneness of God). But how could an artwork, a painting, for instance, reinforce the concept of unity of God? To answer this, we need to understand the message of *tawhid* with the idea of monotheism. Allah is other than His creation. He is inexpressible. As the Qur'an cites:

No vision can grasp Him,  
But His grasp is over  
All vision: He is Above all comprehension,  
Yet acquainted with all things. [10]

As a corollary, in the form of content, Islamic art is abstract in nature, as mentioned above; it is only rational that in order to intuit to the idea of God, an abstract Being or a *Dzat* as in Abdullah Muhammad's (Nakula) word, the most appropriate image has to be one that is equally abstract in nature. If otherwise (i.e., in representational image), it will in the end definitely lead the viewer to representational image immediately discerned in his/her mind. In the same book, Lamnya Al-Faruqi has stipulated three artistic devices to conform to the Islamic principles of abstraction processes. These are (1) stylization, (2) non-individuation, and (3) repetition. In stylization process, the object is simplified in order to revoke its natural appearance or becomes denaturalized. While the concept of non-individuation is the portrayal of images showing their lack of variations and/or individuality that they ceased to be portrayal of living things or persons, they are just blocks of colors, shapes, or textures in space [5]. The method of repeated images in symmetry denotes structures with meaning that needs to be interpreted. It provides another manner in conforming to the Islamic aesthetic to achieve abstraction principles. The transformation of realistic iconographic images into aniconic ones through stylization is thus genuine attempts created by the past Muslim artists to express the inexpressible. Notwithstanding, objects in symmetry are testament to the incredible creative energy which Jose Argüelles mentions as *an internal technology* of the artists since the abstraction process involves mathematical principles and art goes hand in hand. And this is pervasive in the Islamic world [7].

Another pertinent aspect of Islamic art aesthetic principles, as cited by Nasr, is that Islamic art does not add foreign elements to the shape of the objects, rather it brought forth their potential qualities. It is a method of ennobling matter. Through the creative process of ornamentation, artists unearthed the veil that hides its spiritual and divine qualities. An Islamic art thus becomes a cosmogram. Its archetypal and divine origin illuminates, purifies, and transforms the soul of the onlooker. A work of art is beautiful because it obeys cosmic order and therefore reflects universal beauty [11].

## 7 Transformation of Hindu Icons to Malay-Islamic Art

Since the coming of Islam, the process of transformation of artifacts from the preceding culture to the new faith has become phenomenal. In order to interpret objects into nonrealistic images from the natural world, human figures, for example, Muslim artists resorted to stylize and denaturalize their chosen motifs to accommodate to Islamic aesthetic principles as stipulated by Lamnya Al-Faruqi [5]. Such images are ubiquitously seen in the Persian miniatures and local treatment of figures as in *wayang kulit*, shadow play in Fig. 7.2, and its evolution from the Indian folktales in *wayang golek*, in Fig. 7.3.

**Fig. 7.2** Sri Rama,  
Wayang Kulit Hindu  
folklores [14]



**Fig. 7.3** *Wayang golek purwa* taking its stories [13]



**Fig. 7.4** The evolution of Hindu *makara* into *bangau* motif [3]

Another fine example of innovations and transformation of icons from the preceding culture is the mythical bird *makara* and its transformation in drawing as in Fig. 7.4.

This mythical sea monster of the Hindu period was the protector of fishing boats from the sea evil forces. It is located on the port side of fishing boats (to provide

**Fig. 7.5** The dematerialization of form via *awan larat* pattern on a *bangau* [14]



support for the masts when not in use). The process of Islamization saw such an image being transformed into intricate ornamentation of a *bangau*, an egret, in Fig. 7.5. It is no doubt an astounding adornment unveiling the concept of ennobling matter will bring forth the potential quality of the wood through complex lacelike embellishments. Further examples in the transformation of three-dimensional form of the Hindu myth can also be discerned in garuda icon that has been transformed into a pair of wings only with its new name as *merong* in Fig. 7.8.

Besides content, structure, and form as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the limitless of Allah, the concept of infinity, as proclaimed in His attributes is emphasized visually through infinite abstracts and motifs swirling endlessly without end nor beginning, which is locally known as *awan larat*, the Malaysian version of arabesque. Such a motif is believed to be an innovation and transformation of the dragon icon inherited from the previous culture. This image has evolved into an exquisite form of ornamentation of plant forms called the *awan larat*. Though such creativities have changed the auspicious symbol from its original characteristic, one can still discern its original structures of swirling motifs typical of the dragon image in Figs. 7.6 and 7.7.

Similarly in textiles art, in order to conform to the Islamic aesthetic, images from the natural world of fauna and flora have also been stylized into abstract ornamental motifs such as in Fig. 7.8, in which the mythical phoenix bird changed into decorative ornaments, with stylized garuda wings at the hemline.

The infinite repetitive *awan larat* motifs pervasive in traditional Malay art designs are but a visual reminder of an intuition of the infinite to Muslims in their daily life activities. Ismail Al-Faruqi maintains the unique function of ornamentations: Instead of being an unessential component added superficially to a work of art after

**Fig. 7.6** Dragon motif in *songket* textile influenced by Hindu-Buddhist period [15]



**Fig. 7.7** Transformations of the dragon icon into an abstract *awan larat* motif [3]



**Fig. 7.8** Stylization of the phoenix bird and *sawang*, *garuda* wings into decorative ornaments on batik sarong [16]

its completion, ornamentation is the core of the spiritualizing enhancement of the artistic creation and Muslim environment [11]. As an effort in the shaping of human ambience as proclaimed by Ibrahim T. Burckhardt [12], the *awan larat* which is the Malay version of infinite pattern is embodied in the architectural and interiors of built environment as well as in utilitarian materials of everyday use as in Fig. 7.9. Thus, the ubiquitously found arabesques patterns in Muslim environments are not the psychological avoidance of horror *vacui* as claimed by M.S. Dimand and many other western orientalists, rather it is the Muslim artists' expression of an intuition of God's attributes—infinity and transcendence! [9]. In tandem with Ismail al-Faruqi, Lamnya further posits: The beautiful, the significant in art, therefore, has been for the Muslim not an aesthetic portrayal of humanity. Instead this transcendence-obsessed culture sought, through the creation of the beautiful, to stimulate in the viewer or listener an intuition of, an insight into, the nature of Allah *subhanahu wa ta'ala* and of man's relation to Him [5].

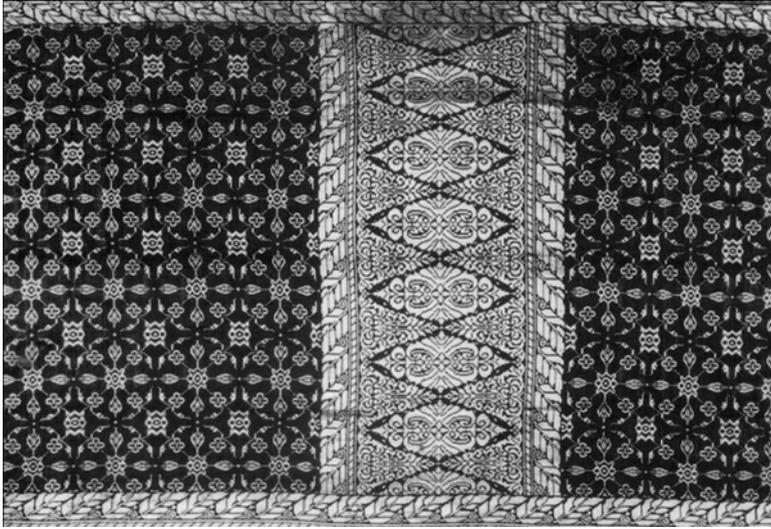


Fig. 7.9 Abstract geometric motifs with infinite concept in *songket* material [4]

## 8 Conclusion

Traditional Malay art will remain as human expressions of creativity and beauty. Its future depends on the artists' and designers' abilities in adapting to new needs, ideas, and technology. In order for the spirit of traditional values to become sustainable in this globalized world, there is an urgent need for these practitioners to generate expression of traditional art forms in contemporary *language* both in media and technology. This is to ensure that contemporary traditional Malay-Islamic art is not only moving in the same par with the mainstream art but also sustaining our art as a living tradition specifically from this region.

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