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Songket and “Light”: from Philosophy to Practice

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Abstract

The motifs of *songket* function as vehicles that can bring forward the awareness of the relationships among the divine and spiritual realms with the physical world. The Malay community has translated this appreciation of God’s beautiful creations in *songket* through the weavers’ minds and souls. This research will analyse the *songket* motifs that can be seen as the “light” that symbolically represents the Supreme Creator of the universe. It is equally important to the function of light as a physical entity. The research methods used are qualitative in nature, including visual data documentation as well as interviews with the scholars and experts on the *songket* motifs and lighting designers. Observations were made on the cultural aspects of Malay inclusive of the religious, the social and the environmental issues, for connections to light and its meaning. This relationship with the Malay community including the aspects of culture, beliefs and divinity, opens up the minds to spiritual existence and in relating it to light and in appreciating humanity. With this acquired knowledge, the art of contemporary lighting design as an enhancement to the intellectual capability of man from philosophy, ideas to practice (science and technology) can be implemented. If beauty were the result of a creative art, then it would not be wrong to say that the Supreme One wills us to create objects of art or beauty, with contemporary lighting design falling into this category. This study of spiritual values through material culture brings a renewed perception of the study of *songket* within the spirit of humankind, time and space. This can be achieved by observing the transformation of spiritual beliefs in the cultural meaning in contemporary lighting design. It is an embodiment of *songket* in an art form that is philosophical and rich in cultural meaning.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the bamboo shoot motif which is a manifestation of cooperation between man and nature, as found in the behaviour of Malays in their daily lives. The identity exhibited in the *songket* motif gives Malays a sense of belonging and a distinction that differentiates the Malay race from other races. Through this study of *songket*, we not only understand a little more of Malay culture, but it also evokes universal spirit of life. The element of nature, adapted and transformed by the Malay community into the *songket*, has gone through changes over time, while retaining its own identity, principles, philosophy and style. This research also illuminates the concepts of light and lighting in human life, by using the basis and philosophy of *songket* motifs. *Songket* is therefore a reflection, an identity, a symbol, and the ethos of culture and race. It is the core of this research on the philosophy and concept of, and the transformation into contemporary lighting design in the search of a true identity.

1.1. Methodology

The research methods used are qualitative in nature, including visual data documentation as well as interviews with scholars and experts on the *songket* motifs and lighting designers. An observation was made of the cultural aspects of Malay inclusive of the religious, the social and the environmental issues, for connections to light and its meaning. These methods were chosen to complement one another in order to satisfy the objectives and of this study. Qualitative data has been collected successfully, each contributing to the study. The entire finding explains important elements, such as notes from meetings and interviews, to support the scenarios, which are further supported by visual evidence. Results of the discussion and analysis will be analysed globally, to benefit future in-depth studies.

1.2. *Bamboo Shoot Motifs Tell Stories about the Malays, Their Spirits and Beliefs, Leading to the Meaning of Light and Its Interpretation.*

According to Maxwell, the motifs of *songket* are seen as a branch of Malay community art as an important material in ritual and religious ceremonies (Maxwell, 1990). Maxwell explained that after the arrival of Islam, these motifs underwent a change in their meaning and concept to reflect the adherence and teachings of Islam. The motifs of *songket* represent the weavers' appreciation of their surroundings, guided by their beliefs and religion. Their form and appearance, as well as the meaning of Malay art in *songket*, are influenced by the natural talent of the craftsmen, as well as their faiths and beliefs. As explained by Deraman, the sources of Malay form and spirit are religion, history, oral and written tradition, surviving culture and belief in incantations, amulets, legends and myths (Deraman, 2001). The art form seen in the motifs of *songket* not only reflects the Malay cultural aspiration, but it is also a spiritual communication tool of the community during that time.

In this research the bamboo shoot motif has been identified as a key motif to the Malays. This initial concept must be understood to follow the ensuing detailed study in this paper. Wan Yahya, a cultural expert in Malaysia who studied the motifs of *songket*, explained that the bamboo shoot is an important floral element synonymous to the life of the Malays. Within this floral element lies the meaning, philosophy, faith, belief and identity of Malay life. He mentioned that cooperation between man and nature is manifested in how the Malays conduct their daily lives. In the Malay community, the flora represents the tree of life, which symbolises "*semangat*" or spirit. From this, the motifs of *songket* are adapted in Malay textiles and herein began the philosophy on human existence in the natural and supernatural worlds. Wan Yahya further explained that old Malay sayings also portrayed the bamboo shoot as a "world". He sang this verse during the interview:

The earth broad as platters
The sky wide as an open parasol
The large world then becomes small
And the small world then disappears

He presents this verse as showing that the Malays see life as involving the visible and invisible worlds, as evident through their belief in the cosmic elements, namely earth, water, fire and wind. However, according to Hamid (1985), the adoption of the concept of art through the motifs of *songket* in Islam should lead to the concept of

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