

Review of the Issues in Traditional Woodcarving (**BITARA**) East Coast of Malaysia and the Potential Area for Design Strategy

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary data from an ongoing study that investigates design strategies to revitalise Malay traditional woodcarving craft. Hence ensuring craft viability, as a culturally significant product, in the future. The central questions are: 1; What are the issues and challenges in the Malay traditional woodcarving craft industry? 2; How can the Design for Sustainability (DFS) strategy contribute to revitalising culturally significant products such as traditional woodcraft? This initial research paper will focus on findings from the literature review revolving around the significant issues and relationship between craft, sustainability, and design. The literature review was analysed through data triangulation, and the results and recommendations were developed based on the findings. The research consists of three main components: (i) Background study on crafts, (ii) identifying wood carving craft as a selected research area, and (iii) investigation of issues of concern on the woodcarving craft industry in the research area. The practice of traditional wood carving craft and the issues in the craft industry were investigated. There are two significant results discussed in this paper: (i) the diminishing awareness and popularity of traditional craft need to be addressed, and there is a potential to involve stakeholders such as designers in revitalising craft and (ii) the opportunity to explore the DFS approach, especially in regards to utilising the intrinsic value and personal meaning in craft revitalisation strategy. Traditional crafts such as Malay woodcarving rich with values that align with sustainability. The revitalisation strategy involving multidisciplinary stakeholders may contribute toward the positive development of the traditional craft industry.

Keywords: Malay woodcarving, design strategy, traditional craft, design for sustainability.

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Introduction

Wood carving is a type of handicraft that has long been done in Malay civilization and has been affected by way of life as well as religious belief and sense (Abdul Halim, 1987). Sustainable development is defined as a development that fulfils the current needs without putting the future generation at stake (Brundtland, 1987). The triple bottom line of sustainability design by John Elkington establishes the bedrock for a long-term scheme that includes social, environmental, and economic aspects, which later added a fourth bottom line by Walker which is personal meaning (Elkington, n.d.; Walker, 2011, 2017). The decline of heritage woodcarving craft has been considered vanished because of industrialization and the production of lumber items and design is now increasingly geared towards minimalist and modern principles (Isahak et al., 2022; Mohamed Yusof & Walker, 2018). Furthermore, Malay woodcarving has become extinct owing to a lack of expertise, carvers, and desire even a lack of knowledge of the significance of Malay carving designs (Azmin et al., 2021). Number of research papers urged the preservation of the Malay woodcarving craft to overcome the absence. Commonly, designers contribute to implementing heritage woodcarving crafts, modern product design, or even modern house design (Azmin et al., 2021; Isahak et al., 2022; A. Shuaib & Olalere, 2013). Despite these suggestions of preservation towards sustainability, design for sustainability has progressed to a more holistic understanding that is seen as critical to bringing about transitional change that is more focused on human personal values (Niedderer & Townsend, 2014).

This paper presents the initial findings of an ongoing research project exploring methods and the potential strategy for preserving wood carving crafts in northeast Malaysia. The key question is: 1; What are the challenges and issues facing by woodcarving craft industry in Malaysia? 2; What are the potential areas for revitalisation strategy for the Malay woodcarving craft industry? The study has three primary components: (i) Background study on crafts; (ii) identifying the presence of wood carving craft in the selected specific research area; and (iii) investigation of issues of concern on the woodcarving craft industry in the research area.

Definitions

UNESCO suggests heritage refers to something transferred from an individual or group of past generations. Heritage represents the collective memories of a nation's whole existence and, in turn, represents its culture. It is generally split into two primary types, namely tangible cultural heritage, and intangible cultural heritage, which contribute to forming a community's cultural heritage. Intangible cultural legacy is the opposite of tangible cultural heritage, which is something that remains visible and can be held in a static or mobile position (UNESCO, 2022b). Through creative uses and/or comparisons with other cultures, heritage crafts can gain great significance, bringing legacies into vivid perspective. While certain groups and cultures continue to practise creating in its original, true form, global change (e.g., politics, technology, and climate) is influencing how craft is produced, and hence how modern culture is shaped (Shales, 2017). Craft may be defined as a talent or craftsmanship, a product or artefact, a culture, a creative, deliberate process of skill and craftsmanship, techniques and materials, and a complex interplay of these factors (Väänänen & Pöllänen, 2020). Craft, according to Zhan et

al., is distinguished by specialized knowledge, locality, ethics and sincerity, and the continuity of traditions; it is considered as 'compatible with the concepts of sustainability' (Zhan et al., 2017).

Sustainability according to Merriam-Webster dictionary means; capable of being sustained of, or a resource that is not permanently depleted (Sustainability, n.d.). Sustainability is a worldwide goal for the twenty-first century (Agenda 21) that calls for a shift toward more considerate human actions (Brundtland, 1987). Economists defines *sustainability* as a method that optimizes ecosystems and human well-being per capita by focusing on human capital, natural and environmental capital, artificial capital, and social capital (Charter et al., 2002; Pearce, 2007).

Research Method

The project's goal is to produce efficient design operations or strategies that contribute to the future of the craft sector while adhering to sustainability principles. During the early stage of the research, it will be based primarily on a literature review. This primary data will undergo analysis to develop conclusions and recommendations for further research into the design strategy for the revitalization of Malay wood carving craft. Triangulation theory – It includes the use of different theory aiming to analyse and understand the data. Through this process, the researcher can adopt and support the findings (Charter et al., 2002).

Background To Craft

Classification Of Craft in Malaysia

The Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Malaysian Handicraft) was founded under Act 222, the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation Act (1979), by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC). The Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation distinguished handicrafts by classifying them into five categories: textile, metal-based, forest-based, earth-based, and miscellaneous crafts. Based on the Annual Report 2020, the total number of craft entrepreneurs is 6,042, with a significant number specialising in forest-based crafts at 2,222 entrepreneurs (Kraftangan Malaysia, 2021).

Table 1: Sales Value by Craft Field

Field	Sales	No. of Entrepreneurs
Textile	89,334,854.07 (38.3%)	1,841
Forest-based	54,159,241.12 (23.2%)	2,222
Metal-based	38,335,769.97 (16.4%)	784
Earth-based	30,079,803.36	253

	(12.9%)	
Various Craft	21,408,462.84 (9.2%)	942
TOTAL	233,318,131.36	6,042

When it comes to politics, economics, and even social life, Malaysia has long explored its many different ethnic populations. The census data survey includes both major and minor group counts in analysing demographic diversity. The wide variety of Malaysia's cultural art crafts directly results from the country's diverse different ethnic groups. Art crafts in Malaysia include wood carvings, pottery or ceramics, *pua kumbu*, silver and gold embroidery, *labu sayong*, woven mats, woven *songket*, beads, jewellery, production of copper and many others (Nagaraj et al., 2015; Thani, 2021).

Malay Wood Carving

Malay wood carving craft is a sort of handicraft that has long been practiced in Malay civilization (Abdul Halim, 1987). To survive, Malay crafts were largely inspired by their lifestyle, as they only needed functional crafts to thrive. As time went by, Malay people moved from one location to another in quest of comfort and convenience, giving them more free time. This extra time leads to an aesthetic desire. As a result of this change in lifestyle, the value of their crafts increased, ultimately expanding to incorporate decorations and arts (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan, 2009). Ever since the early stages of Malay civilization in the 14th century, the Malays have formed a wide range of skills and expertise in arts and craft works, including architectural motifs and decorative elements in wood carvings, batik, and songket attire for the royals and the laypeople, woven materials for household essentials, and metal and silver works for instruments (Azmin, 2007). As Malay woodcarving was influenced by the way of life, they were mirrored from living things such as flora, animals, natural elements, cosmos, and Islamic patterns shaped the forms and motifs long has been existed in Malay wood carving. Even though Malay wood carving includes fauna components, it truly opposes Islamic teachings. Islamization has resulted in various adjustments to motifs and shapes, such as the need for fauna themes in carvings to be hidden so that they do not portray the real-life form while retaining the element's uniqueness (Abdul Halim, 1987). In Malay culture, woodcarving masterpieces range from the tiniest coconut scraper in the kitchen to the biggest home and river watercraft, as well as the simplest ladle for everyday use to the most intricate keris hilt as a sign of identity (Othman, 2010).

Sustainability

Sustainable development was described by the World Commission on Environment and Development as “development that meets existing needs without undermining future generations' abilities to fulfil their own needs”. The notion of sustainable development may be understood in a variety of ways, but at its heart, it is a method of development that seeks to

balance many, often conflicting needs against an understanding of our society's environmental, social, and economic constraints (Brundtland, 1987). Economists describe sustainable development as a route leading to greater human well-being per capita. Here, the emphasis is on the capital processes of total wealth. These are human capital, natural and environmental capital, man-made capital, and social capital (Pearce, 2007). The triple bottom line of sustainability design by John Elkington establishes the bedrock for a long-term scheme that includes social, environmental, and economic aspects. (Elkington, n.d.). Sustainability according to Charter, is described as "the preservation or enhancement of both ecosystems and human health, while also simply proper management.". Though, industries are constantly exploring sustainability as a means of growth and development. People, earth, and profit are all part of the 'Triple Bottom Line' approach to sustainability (Charter et al., 2002). Walker argues that sustainability needs another aspect than just from the Triple Bottom Line. Another aspect is the personal value which contains a vast number of scenarios and behaviours that are intimately connected to human personal meanings (Walker, 2011, 2017).

Relationship Between Craft and Personal Meaning

Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) by Walker tackles the absence of personal means in Elkington's Triple Bottom Line. This aspect provides the unique craft or objects a personality, making it imperishable instead of just perishable if the item means nothing to the owner (Walker, 2011, 2017). Craft is claimed to have originated from the human way of life, which is based on natural surroundings and materials, but we forget that the human body's interaction with the natural world and its life-giving and irreplaceable resources is possibly the most fundamental. The sensory and instinctive play with materials using hand or manual tools, which principally becomes the core of perceptual aesthetic enjoyment and expression of self, is included in the unification of physical and mental (Niedderer & Townsend, 2022). Human body interaction contributes to a craft towards symbolic significance and depicting motifs that convey human emotions and spiritual concepts (Niedderer & Townsend, 2019; Walker et al., 2018). We need to contribute to product design thoughts that include a radical component of sustainability as a way of subverting the present strictly naturalist materialist ideology and tuning into the new systemic, holistic, and ecological paradigms of modern post-industrial society (Pantaleão & Pinheiro, 2017).

Identifying The Study Site - Where Woodcarving Craft Exists

Woodcarving Craft Worldwide

The creative sector is growing despite global economic concerns. Creative goods development, manufacturing, and distribution expanded 7.34% from 2003 to 2015. Creativity improves international trade. In 2015, exports of creative goods declined by 14% compared to 2014. Recent declines in cultural exchanges may be due to reduced demand in industrialised nations, more significant political and economic conflicts, and a complex international atmosphere (UNCTAD, 2018). Globalization threatens traditional traditions of handicrafts, like other

intangible cultural treasures. The 2003 Convention focuses on craftsmanship skills and knowledge, not goods. Instead of preserving craft pieces, efforts to protect and preserve should encourage craftspeople to make crafts and continuously pass on their expertise. The traditional craft is possibly the most significant indication of intangible cultural heritage. Many craftspeople struggle with large-scale manufacturing, whether by international corporations or regional cottage enterprises (UNESCO, 2022a).

Woodcarving Craft in Malaysia

Traditional Malay houses dating back more than a century may be found mostly in the Peninsular Malaysian states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Negeri Sembilan. The Kampung Laut Mosque in Nilam Puri, Kelantan, was constructed 180 years ago from Cengal wood and is still standing today (Azmin et al., 2021). Woodcarving, particularly on the Malay Peninsula, may be classified as an evergreen art form since it grows with time, thought, and present niche while being rooted in Malay woodcarving's fundamentals (Nordin, 2010). According to Aida, the late master craftsman Wanpo said that the particular philosophy refers to thoughts or encouraging advice concerning the Malay community's culture as well as the Malay belief in God, — in other words the hidden meaning beneath the concepts (Azmin, 2007). Woodcarving is currently experiencing a decline in popularity in Malaysia, as people today value contemporary lifestyles, resulting in a reduction in demand for woodcarving and cultural artifacts (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020).

Existence of Woodcarving Craft in East Coast of Malaysia

The east coast region of Malaysia consists of three states, namely Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang and they are renowned as the birthplace of culture because of its diverse inheritance of tangible and intangible cultures (A. Shuaib & Olalere, 2013). The Carved component was also revealed as one of the architectural defining traits for traditional buildings found in Kelantan and Terengganu, which is the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kamarudin & Said, 2010). Master craftsmen Nik Rashidin Nik Hussein said woodcarving was begun in Langkasuka, which some interpret as Kelantan, some said it was Pattani and some claims in Kedah. However, what matters most is the cultural inheritance that preserves the spirit, its heritage and tradition (F. Noor et al., 2012).

Investigation on Woodcarving Crafts in East Coast of Malaysia

Woodcarving Craft Practice in East Coast of Malaysia

According to A. A. Shuaib initial research, woodcarvings in the eastern part of Peninsular Malaysia indicate the equality of timeless and universal rules and principles (A. A. Shuaib, 2010). The motifs of woodcarving in the east coast region of Malaysia, notably in Kelantan and Terengganu, are fairly similar in look due to environmental circumstances, skills, knowledge, craftsmanship, and culture. In Kelantan, most motifs are repetitious since most carvers refuse

to express carvings in surrealism concepts and refuse to copy nature directly. However, the final design is in abstract form, which transcendent the Creator's creation. (Wahid et al., 2021). The author added, motifs utilised in Terengganu woodcarving are discovered to be more intricate and complex than carvings in Kelantan since artisans in Terengganu perceived carving as artistry, resulting in a more prominent and refined carving technique in terms of quality and outcomes. Terengganu carvers also emphasised the precision and quality of the finished product (Wahid et al., 2021). Kelopak Melayu daun hidup or the Malay petals that are part of the living leaf (kelopak hidup).

This pattern was created around 1800, and it is most similar to the carving styles of Pattani, which is in southern Thailand, and Kelantan, which is on the Peninsula of Malaysia. Unlike the traditional Malay motif, this motif is based primarily, or more than 70% of the time, on natural elements or nature-inspired motifs. (Hussin et al., 2012).

Challenges And Issues Faced by Woodcarving Craft Industry

As cited in Mohamed Yusof & Walker, there were over 5000 active craft makers registered in Malaysia as of 2015, with a substantial portion of them specializing in forest-based crafts. However, the sustainability of intangible heritage in Malaysia, which comprises skills, traditional knowledge, and informal transmission of these to succeeding generations, is rarely discussed, even though it is a crucial challenge (Mohamed Yusof & Walker, 2019). Kraftangan Malaysia has updated the statistics and determined that the total number of craft entrepreneurs registered with Kraftangan Malaysia in 2020 will be 6,042, an increase of 3.9% compared to the number of craft entrepreneurs registered in 2019. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of craft sales dropped by 55.1 percent in 2020, from RM519.7 million in 2019 to RM233.3 million (Kraftangan Malaysia, 2021).

As cited in Isahak et al., according to their case study conducted, there are three major issues in the Malaysian woodcarving industry: a significant ideological gap between modern and traditional product design, a manufacturing technology challenge, and finally market value and competitive pressure between contemporary and traditional product design (Isahak et al., 2022). Traditional handicraft, including Malay traditional crafts, are frequently seen as outmoded or unnecessary in light of contemporary, mass-produced alternatives. Except for a few professionals and masters of traditional handicraft, the skills necessary to create these objects and the knowledge associated with their creation is all but forgotten (Abdul Halim, 1987). It is necessary to address the ongoing loss of experienced artisans connected to Malaysian handicraft production (Marof & Fariborz, 2011). Without the involvement of the next generation, the future survival of indigenous knowledge is at risk. According to Mazlan Che Soh and Siti Korota'aini Omar (2012, p. 31), effective promotion is required, especially to spark interest and motivation among the millennial population to engage in traditional craft.

The late Nik Rashidi, a great woodcarver, also brought up this subject. He was familiar with the wealthy elite and businesspeople in the capitals who wanted to purchase his woodcarving masterpieces to adorn their residences and apartments as they viewed them as indicators of wealth and status. They didn't, however, have a profound or educated understanding of the craft itself (F. A. Noor, 2004). Traditional woodcarving is deemed "on the verge of extinction," as it is becoming decreasing popular among younger people and is no

longer viewed as a source of profit (F. Noor et al., 2012). Traditional crafts in Malaysia, in general, rely on local labour, locally sourced raw materials, and traditional production techniques that involve minimum technology (Marof & Fariborz, 2011). In cases where the woodcarver is willing to pay a premium price for the desired grade of raw material, logging businesses frequently export high-quality wood. To save money, some artisans may hire others to look for high-quality raw materials in the forest.

Many consumers believe that high-quality woodcarving products are out of their price range. The main reason for this is the significant cost of the raw material. All of the makers admitted that most of their expenses are incurred in acquiring raw materials. Good-grade wood is becoming increasingly costly and challenging to obtain, and sawmills prefer to export it rather than selling it on the local market. Shahrul discovers a lack of facilities and resources, such as a scarcity of high-quality raw material sources.

Furthermore, artisans cannot collaborate to solve problems unless they have a pleasant workplace environment and the support of the craft community. The tangible and intangible components and atmosphere that promote woodcarving production include the craft community and support. They resemble the significance of the craft community's support network for craftspeople to safeguard craft production. Many of Mohamed Yusof respondents highlighted the relevance of the craft ecosystem and encouragement for the artisan community, both internally and externally (Mohamed Yusof, 2021). Issues in woodcarving can be overviewed by grouping them into two categories: tangible and intangible.

Table 2: Current Issues in Traditional Woodcarving Craft in East Coast of Malaysia

Tangible	Intangible
Lack of raw material	Diminishing sense of belonging between generation
Inadequate facilities	Lack of awareness
Incompatibility with technology	Low motivation as career path
No physical promotion	Lack of knowledge

Conclusion and Recommendations

Woodcarving craft in Malaysia has a long history of displaying the culture's way of life and cultural values. There is a need to incorporate designers as a link between producers, supporters, and purchasers in enhancing sustainability and revitalising the woodcarving craft. Next, collaboration and knowledge transfer are needed to develop a complete craft sector support system and enhance awareness of traditional crafts toward a diverse audience. Knowledge transfer could be a seminar, apprenticeship, or workshop. Finally, while crafts are mentioned as being important to sustainable development in this century, awareness of sustainability in crafts is lacking – at this stage. To effectively address sustainability concerns in the next stage, the relationship between design for sustainability and localisation is crucial and must be stressed in the field of commercial craft-product design – so this is a focus for the next stage of research. This might be followed up by asking, "To what extent can the design contribute in revitalising Malay traditional craft?"

Figure 1: Issues in Traditional Woodcarving Craft in East Coast of Malaysia and the Potential Area for Design Strategy

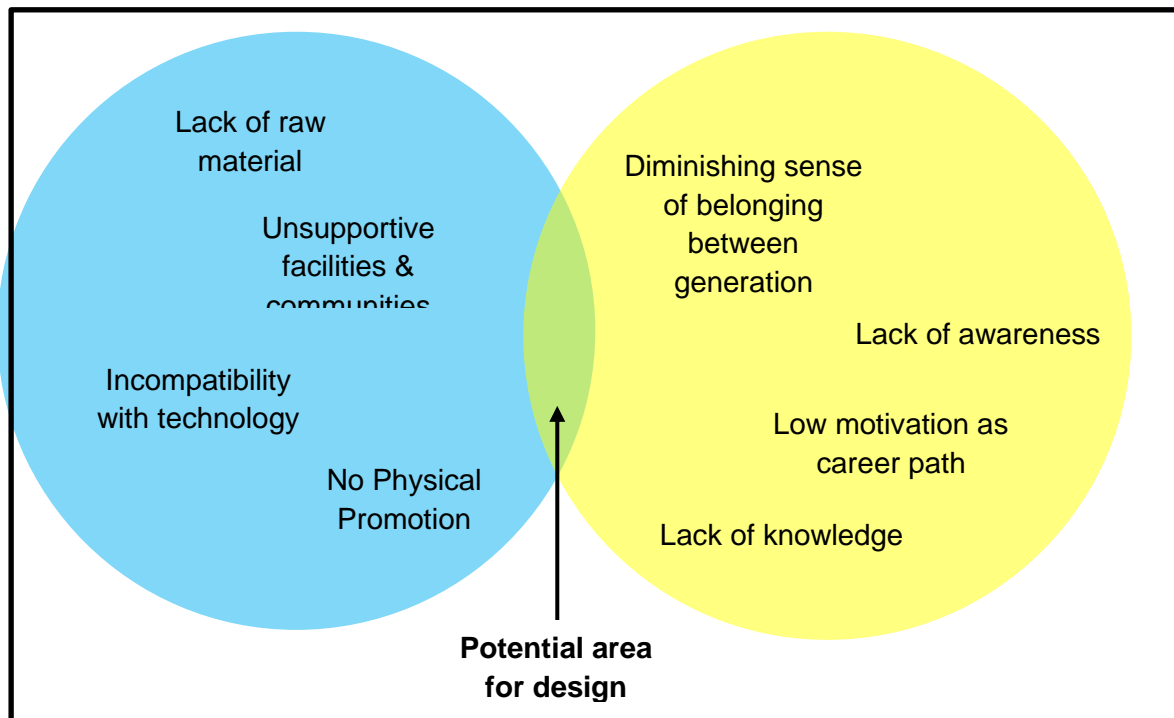


Figure 1 summarises the Issues in Traditional Woodcarving crafts in Malaysia's East Coast and the Potential Area for Design Strategy based on the literature review from this study. It opens up the possibility of future design strategy as a stakeholder in traditional craft. However, field research is required to validate the difficulties discovered. This study focuses on one specific craft, woodcarving, as one of Malaysia's primary craft categories. As a result, this study discovered the critical obstacles and issues in the woodcarving craft, which might serve as a case for a revitalisation plan.

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