

Malay Cultural Identity In “Akal Di Mata Pisau” Juhari Said’s 1997

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ABSTRACT

Juhari Said is a prominent Malaysian print artist who incorporates Malay cultural motifs and proverbs into his prints. Woodblock printing is an essential medium in the development of Malaysian visual arts since it not only focuses on technical issues but also serves to document the Malay community's cultural identity and values. This study aims to identify and analyse the representation of Malay cultural identity in the work “Akal Di Mata Pisau” (1997) through the use of Malay symbols and proverbs. The study also focuses on the application of symbols, metaphors, and Malay proverb elements to convey Malay cultural meaning. This qualitative study analyses selected works to see how the Malay community's beliefs and ideologies are expressed in visuals. In addition, this study employs an iconological approach to interpret the work's apparent and hidden meanings. Juhari Said's art preserves Malay cultural identity by processing traditional symbols related to moral values and cultural memory within the Malay community. The use of woodblock print techniques maintains the connection between traditional history and contemporary art. This research also helps to clarify the significance of print art in sustaining Malay cultural identity and heritage in the context of contemporary Malaysian visual art.

Keywords: Malay Cultural Identity, Juhari Said, Symbolism, Cultural Memory, Contemporary Malaysian Printmaking.



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1 INTRODUCTION

Printmaking has a significant role in the development of Malaysian visual arts, conveying cultural values and community identity. According to Noor et al. (2023), the term "printmaking" refers to a variety of media used to describe the process of creating different prints. Printmaking is a diverse visual art media characterised by its visual language, materials, and procedures (Noor et al., 2023). Traditional and modern printmaking artworks are now created employing a wide range of printmaking processes and themes that change through the years. Juhari Said is an artist who incorporates Malay cultural themes with contemporary Malaysian printmaking through the use of symbols, visual metaphors, and traditional proverbs in his work. In 1997, he created woodblock prints with processed image ideas brimming with cultural significance to express the tight relationship between visual arts and Malay culture.

However, there is a limitation of literature and artwork that explores Malaysian printmaking and its relevance to Malaysia's cultural identity, particularly in the creation of modern printmaking artworks. According to Noor (2023), certain segments of Malaysian society now make little effort to debate issues such as culture and activities that support societal values. As a result, applying ideas such as Malaysian language, values, disciplines, and spirit may prove difficult. This involves getting an

awareness of culture through visual representation in visual arts like printmaking. Malay cultural identity is the most essential feature of Juhari Said's works, which include values, beliefs, and a philosophy of life. Juhari Said has transformed Malay proverbs into symbols that can be understood by modern civilisation. As a result, this strategy has the potential to protect and strengthen Malay cultural identity in a period of globalisation.

As a result, the goal of this research is to identify and analyse the representation of Malay cultural identity in the work "Akal Di Mata Pisau" (1997) using Malay symbols and proverbs. The study additionally studies the use of symbols, metaphors, and Malay proverb elements to convey Malay cultural meaning. Other than that, to look at how Juhari Said's printed artwork from 1997 represents Malay cultural identity. This study also explains how cultural symbolism and meaning are used to preserve Malay history and culture in contemporary printed art.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Symbolism of Malay Culture in the Works of Juhari Said

According to (Deraman, 2001; Noor, 2023), Malaysian culture is divided into two types: material culture, which comprises of living equipment like as houses, boats, and weapons. Or a non-material culture made up of beliefs, traditions, and laws. According to Kim (2009), the diversity of the Malaysian race is not complicated, but it includes all aspects of the country's political, economic, religious, social, and educational life. Based on the principles above, the characteristics that define Malaysian culture are explored from a variety of aspects.

Juhari Said's woodblock art works are mostly inspired by Malay culture symbolism, which is expressed via the processing of pictures, traditional objects, and Malay proverbs. Juhari Said uses visual representations to interpret the Malay community's talents, which are rich in symbolic value. Noor (2003) argues that his artworks serve as both beautiful objects and a means of communicating the Malay community's cultural values and lifestyle philosophy.

His art incorporates the usage of Malay proverbs as a visual image production tool. Proverbs are a cultural inheritance for the Malay community, containing guidance, moral values, and life experiences passed down through generations (Ismail, 2014). *Gunting Dalam Lipatan* and *Bagai Gergaji Mata Dua*, both from 1997, use visual metaphors such as saws and scissors to convey the meanings of proverbs. Furthermore, the symbols utilised serve more than just as functions for items; they also convey deeper meanings about wisdom, human attitudes, and social ties in Malay society.

In conclusion, the Malay cultural symbolism in Juhari Said's work demonstrates the artist's efforts to enhance cultural legacy through printmaking. According to (Assmann, 2011), the incorporation of symbols and Malay proverbs in the work gives meaning to the work and can even help to maintain cultural identity and preserve the memory of the Malay people through visual art.

2.2 Representation of Malay Cultural Identity

Juhari Said's woodblock prints from 1997 incorporate elements of Malay cultural identity. He used symbols, Malay proverbs, and traditional objects to express the values, beliefs, and life philosophy that serve as the foundation of Malay culture. This cultural identity is also passed from generation to generation by values, ways of thinking, and experiences (Hall, 1990). In the context of visual arts, cultural identity is described through a society's cultural aspects and conveyed through images, symbols, and visual narratives to ensure the continuity of cultural legacy in a changing environment (Abdullah and Elham, 2019).

Juhari Said gained inspiration from Malay proverbs, which are both linguistic expressions and intellectual treasures that reflect the moral ideals and perspectives of the Malay people. Furthermore,

Malay proverbs serve as a medium for communicating cultural information and play a significant role in the development of community identity. Bagai Gergaji Mata Dua (1997) uses the image of a saw not just as carpentry equipment, but also as a cultural symbol representing human behavior and social interactions. The selection of cultural symbol images in Malaysian print art is more based on nature, common objects, and legacy, as these are methods for expressing cultural meaning and creating community identification through artwork.

Next, Juhari Said's work highlights Malay cultural identity through the use of woodblock printing medium. This is due to the intimate interaction between woodblock printing processes and carpentry traditions, which shape the Malay community's material culture. In this approach, Malay cultural legacy can be converted into a visual language that is relevant to modern society. Juhari Said's art portrays the Malay community's cultural beliefs and experiences through the use of symbols, proverbs, and print media. The works highlighted as artistic expressions can even serve as a means of maintaining cultural history and strengthening Malay identity in contemporary Malaysian visual art.

2.3 Malay Proverbs as Cultural Memory

Malay proverbs are a type of cultural heritage that helps preserve and share information, moral values, life philosophy, and the Malay community's experiences. These proverbs give many lessons that show how the Malay culture regards human relationships, the environment, and everyday life. As a result, these proverbs function as both a language expression and a means of preserving the Malay community's cultural memory and identity (Yusuf et al., 2023; Khadiz et al., 2025).

Juhari Said's works demonstrate how Malay proverbs are transferred from verbal to visual language via print art. He used everyday things as symbols to convey hidden meaning in Malay proverbs. Juhari Said has translated proverbs from text to visual metaphors, allowing audiences to understand Malay culture's values through art. The transformation of proverbs into visual language through print art serves as a cultural preservation medium. Despite the fact that modern culture is moving away from oral traditions, Juhari Said's use of symbols makes the meaning of proverbs clear. As a result, this method has transformed this artwork into a combination of traditional traditions and modern artistic expression.

Finally, the Malay proverbs applied in Juhari Said's work serve as a form of cultural memory that connects the past and the present. In this way, he is able to preserve Malay culture in contemporary art.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative approach to investigating representations of Malay cultural identity in Juhari Said's woodblock prints from 1997. The qualitative technique helps researchers gain more knowledge of the meaning, symbols, and cultural values reflected in artwork. The study data was collected from exhibition catalogues, journal articles, and books about Juhari Said's printmaking and Malay culture.

In presenting Juhari Said's work, the researcher used Erwin Panofsky's iconological technique to interpret its significance. Erwin Panofsky's iconology has three levels: pre-iconographic description to identify images and forms, iconographic analysis to identify cultural symbols and themes, and iconological interpretation to understand meanings related to values, philosophy, and Malay cultural identity (Panofsky, 1955). As a result, this approach helps the study better understand how Juhari Said's woodblock prints from 1997 convey Malay cultural identity through symbolism and proverbs.

4 ANALYSIS OF MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITY IN “AKAL DI MATA PISAU” JUHARI SAID’S 1997

The work's analysis aims to understand how Juhari Said's woodblock prints from 1997 portray Malay cultural identity through the use of symbols, proverbs, and visual metaphors. Juhari Said's work

draws heavily on Malay cultural influences. The majority of his works blend traditional woodblock printing techniques with Malay cultural thinking, which includes proverbs, customs, and Malay community life philosophy.

To investigate the meaning implied in the selected works, this study used Erwin Panofsky's (1955) iconological approach. This method is used to identify the cultural meaning behind the visuals and symbols displayed. By taking this method, the analysis of this work can demonstrate how the Malay cultural identity is developed, portrayed, and preserved through the medium of woodblock art.

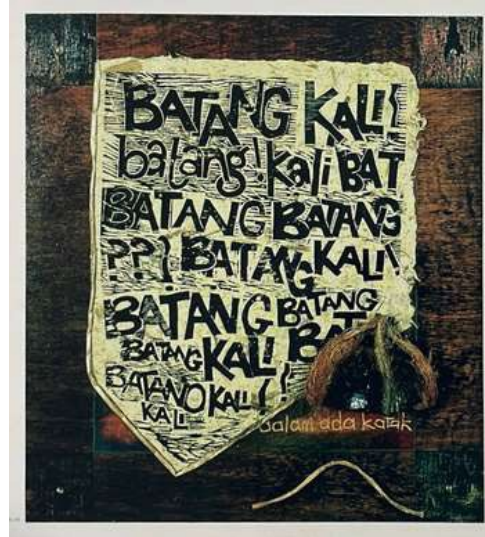


Figure 1 Katak di Bawah Tempurung, 1997

(Source: Akal di Mata Pisau Books, 2003, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

Katak di Bawah Tempurung was created in 1997 as part of Juhari Said's Malay Proverbs Series, which highlights Malay cultural heritage through the art of woodblock printing. This work employs woodblock printing techniques while also experimenting with mixed media such as handmade paper, collage, and real objects. The experiments demonstrated not only the process of visual reproduction, but also a conceptual medium for conveying cultural meaning (Rosiah, 2013). Next, this work displays a simple composition with several symbolic aspects. This artwork is primarily concerned with the organic shape of the frog and coconut shell. The choice of basic shapes helps the observer focus on the main symbol. Juhari Said's work uses old proverbs to visually represent Malay cultural values. He mostly draws inspiration from Malay oral heritage when creating printed artwork (Mohamed Saat, Omar, & Arshad, 2021).

The saying, "*katak di bawah tempurung*" refers to someone who is naive, unable to learn new knowledge, and is unconcerned about the advancements around them. In Malay culture, this expression has been utilised as an educational instrument to convey guidance using symbols. As a result, this work serves as a medium for the preservation of Malay cultural heritage.

According to Erwin Panofsky's Iconological theory, during the pre-iconographical description stage, the viewer can recognise formal aspects in the work such as a frog image, a coconut shell, wood texture, carved lines, and the work's visual composition. These elements are derived from observations of the shape, color, space, and arrangement of things in the work, without regard for cultural interpretation.

Next, at the iconographic analysis step, the picture of a frog and a coconut shell represents the Malay saying, "*katak di bawah tempurung*". This proverb refers to someone who has limited experience or understanding because they live in a small environment and are unconcerned about the getting more complex surroundings of today. As a result, the chosen symbol represents Juhari Said's utilisation of nature as a source of inspiration in Malay culture. Furthermore, the iconological interpretation of this work reveals a deeper meaning regarding the Malay community's concept of life. Juhari Said used the symbol of a frog and a coconut shell to criticise mindsets that resist change,

someone who does not seek knowledge and refuses to see a greater and more complex reality. According to Panofsky (1955), the meaning of a work is determined by the interaction between the visual sign and the cultural context of the society in which it appears. The work *Katak di Bawah Tempurung* represents Malay cultural ideals such as open-mindedness, desire of knowledge, and intellectual progress. Thus, the symbols utilised serve as cultural memory, preserving historical knowledge through visual art.

Finally, *Katak di Bawah Tempurung*, created in 1997, demonstrates Juhari Said's ability to mix his unique woodblock printing techniques with the symbolism of Malay proverbs to create an artwork full of cultural meaning. Through Erwin Panofsky's iconological method, this art can be understood symbolically while still manifesting Malay cultural identity.



Figure 2 *Gunting Dalam Lipatan*, 1997

(Source: *Akal di Mata Pisau* Books, 2003, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

Juhari Said produced the work *Gunting Dalam Lipatan* in 1997 as part of the Malay Proverbs series. This work makes use of Juhari Said's primary media, woodblock printing. This woodblock printing technique begins with carving an image on a wooden block, which is then printed on paper. The printed results will have a rough texture, visible wood grain characteristics, and black and white contrast. In addition, the artist uses negative space and an expressive arrangement of things to achieve a dramatic impression. This work features an uneven but balanced composition.

The proverb "*gunting dalam lipatan*" refers to someone who claims to be good while having bad intentions or commits betrayal in secret. Juhari Said has used scissors and other sharp tools, such as knives and axes, as visual metaphors to convey a message on the nature of human lies and conflict. This method demonstrates how he raises Malay history into contemporary art using simple symbols with multiple cultural implications. Proverbs in Malay society serve as an instructional tool, conveying ethical principles and life philosophy through symbolism rather than just speech.

According to Panofsky's iconology (1995), this work was created before iconography and shows sharp tools such as scissors, knives, and axes on a black and white textured background. In addition, there is a black triangle in the center of the artwork, creating a dramatic appearance. At the Iconographic level, the objects employed in this work are tools for everyday usage. In the Malay cultural context, scissors refer to the proverb "*gunting dalam lipatan*" which represents those who hide bad intent behind a nice manner. The picture of the knife and axe represents dangers and conflicts that can result in real or metaphorical harm. As a result, each object in this work serves as a cultural icon, communicating a moral message to society. This work explains the Malay community's emphasis on principles such as honesty, trust, and social interactions. Juhari Said uses this carpentry instrument as a metaphor for dangerous human behavior. According to Afiah (2024), the meaning of this work comes from the relationship between symbolism, cultural legacy, and the Malay community's philosophy of life, as conveyed through the art of printing.

Finally, Juhari Said's 1997 work titled *Gunting Dalam Lipatan* is full of meaning since it mixes woodblock printing methods, legendary symbolism, and Malay cultural philosophy. Thus, this work has demonstrated that contemporary printmaking is a relevant medium for conserving Malay cultural legacy today.



Figure 3 Bagai Gergaji Mata Dua, 1997

(Source: Akal di Mata Pisau Books, 2003, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

Juhari Said's work, *Bagai Gergaji Mata Dua*, produced in 1997, uses printmaking to highlight Malay proverbs. The work is produced using the woodblock printing technique, which is Juhari Said's favorite medium. Furthermore, the limited choice of colors such as black and the natural hue of the wood surface create a strong contrast with the object. The focus on a single form shows that Juhari Said values the power of symbols. This work is minimalist in nature when showing a large image of a saw filling the compositional space.

The proverb, "*bagai gergaji mata dua*" refers to someone who benefits from two different sides or situations at the same time. Using the metaphor of a double-edged saw, this work shows how human behavior uses two opposing sides.

According to Panofsky's iconology (1995), at the pre-iconographic stage, identify the image of a black saw that appears only in the work against a wood texture. As a result, the emphasis on color contrast, jagged lines, and simplistic composition has been transferred to the primary object. Next, at the iconographic level, the saw is a carpentry tool, but in Malay culture, it refers to the Malay proverb *bagai gergaji mata dua*. This proverb refers to someone who gains from both sides in their own interests. As a result, the relationship between the object and the proverb has transformed the saw into a symbol that conveys a moral message to society. At the iconological level, the image of the saw is more than just a physical tool; it is a symbol of the Malay community's philosophy of life, which rejects selfishness and dishonesty. Juhari Said chose this symbol to elevate the proverb as a cultural memory conveying ethical ideals and traditional wisdom, while also preserving the identity of Malay culture in contemporary art (Panofsky, 1955).

Bagai Gergaji Mata Dua in 1997 has shown Juhari Said's ability in combining woodblock printing techniques, proverb symbolism and also Malay cultural philosophy in one work. As a result, this art not only depicts objects, but also functions as criticism, message, and teaching based on the life experiences of Malay society (Noor, R. M., 2013).

CONCLUSION

Juhari Said's 1997 woodblock print artwork *Akal Di Mata Pisau* represents Malay culture through the use of symbolism, proverbs, and visual metaphors. Juhari Said has not only placed Malay cultural history to the highest levels of contemporary art, but ancient knowledge has also been transformed into this significant visual form.

Furthermore, the creation of this piece demonstrates Juhari Said's mastery of woodblock print techniques and the processing of simple yet important forms. Malay proverbs serve as a cultural memory tool, preserving experiences and moral values of the Malay people. In Juhari Said's work '*Akal Di Mata Pisau*', the act of translating proverbs from oral to visual can help to preserve cultural heritage and pass it on to future generations. This method is consistent with Juhari Said's work, which frequently uses Malay proverbs to create community awareness and address humanitarian and societal issues through print art (Khoo J., Rahman M., 2020).

Overall, Juhari Said's work in '*Akal Di Mata Pisau*' from 1997 is more than just print art; it is also a statement of Malay cultural identity, combining art, language, and cultural memory in visual form. This work demonstrates how woodblock printing may preserve cultural heritage, strengthen Malay identity, and preserve traditional ideals in contemporary Malaysian visual art. As a result, Juhari Said's work has an important role in ensuring the long-term viability of Malay culture in contemporary Malaysian art (Mohamed Saat, M. K. bin, Omar, M. A. bin, & Arshad, M. F. bin., 2021).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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