

The Symbolism and Philosophy of *Pucuk Rebung* Motifs as Culture Material in Traditional Malay Society

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ABSTRACT

The Pucuk Rebung (bamboo shoot) motif is one of the most enduring and recognisable visual elements in Malay material culture, appearing extensively in traditional architecture, textiles, woodcarving, ceramics, manuscript illumination, and decorative arts. Despite its widespread use, existing studies have largely examined the motif within individual artistic disciplines, resulting in fragmented interpretations of its philosophical and symbolic significance. This article aims to explore the philosophical and symbolic meanings embodied in the Pucuk Rebung motif through a conceptual review of existing literature. Employing a qualitative desk study approach, the research synthesises evidence from scholarly publications, books, historical manuscripts, museum collections, official heritage documentation, and archival sources from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Borneo. The findings reveal that the motif represents multiple layers of meaning, including growth, resilience, humility, moral cultivation, spiritual aspiration, cosmological beliefs, and cultural identity. Drawing upon Symbolic Anthropology as the theoretical framework, the study interprets the motif as a cultural symbol through which Malay society expresses its worldview, ethical values, and relationship with nature. The review demonstrates that the enduring significance of the Pucuk Rebung lies not only in its visual form but also in its ability to communicate shared cultural meanings across different artistic media and historical contexts. This study contributes to the understanding of Malay decorative traditions and provides a holistic interpretation of one of the most significant motifs in Malay visual culture.

Keywords: *Pucuk Rebung, Malay motif, Symbolic Anthropology, Malay philosophy, material culture, traditional ornament, cultural symbolism.*



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1 INTRODUCTION

Traditional decorative motifs are more than aesthetic embellishments; they embody the cultural values, beliefs, and worldview of the societies that create and preserve them. In the Malay world, the *Pucuk Rebung* (bamboo shoot) motif is one of the most recognisable and enduring decorative forms, appearing extensively in traditional architecture, *Songket*, *Batik*, woodcarving, manuscript illumination, ceramics, and other forms of Malay material culture. Characterised by its distinctive triangular form, the motif has long been associated with ideas of growth, resilience, moral development, humility, and spiritual aspiration, reflecting the close relationship between nature, culture, and belief in traditional Malay society. It asks a simple but consequential question: why has this motif endured so successfully across regions, materials, and periods?

Previous studies have examined the *Pucuk Rebung* motif from various disciplinary perspectives, including textile studies, architectural ornamentation, decorative arts, and heritage conservation (Legino & Ruslan, 2016; Zakaria, Latif, & Bahauddin, 2018; Ahmad & Abd. Aziz, 2022). These studies have documented its visual characteristics, historical development, and applications across different media. However, the philosophical and symbolic meanings embedded within the motif are often discussed only briefly or within the context of individual art forms. Consequently, there remains a need for a comprehensive synthesis that brings together these diverse interpretations to provide a more holistic understanding of the motif within Malay cultural thought.

The aim of this article is to explore the philosophical and symbolic meanings of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif in Malay society through a conceptual review of existing literature. Drawing upon studies from architecture, textile research, art history, manuscript studies, museum collections, and heritage scholarship, the paper synthesises current knowledge to examine how the motif reflects Malay philosophies of life, ethical values, cosmological beliefs, and cultural identity. By integrating perspectives from multiple disciplines, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the *Pucuk Rebung* as more than a decorative motif, demonstrating its significance as a visual expression of the philosophical principles and symbolic traditions that have shaped Malay civilisation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Pucuk Rebung* as the Malay Culture Material

Historically, the motif is best understood as a layered form rather than the invention of one court or one period. Evidence strongly supports its presence in the pre-colonial Malay decorative repertoire and in related Nusantara triangular border traditions, but the precise moment when the specifically Malay term *Pucuk Rebung* became standardised is not securely documented. What is documented is that in courtly textiles such as *Songket*, *Ikat Limar*, and later *Telepuk*, the motif acquired high prestige and was repeatedly placed in the *Kepala Kain* or *Punca Kain* (Legino & Ruslan, 2016). By the seventeenth century, Malay gilded cloths and luxury weavings were already associated with royal and aristocratic contexts; by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the motif is visible in surviving east-coast Malay *Songket*, Palembang *Songket*, southern Thai/Malay textiles, and regional house ornament. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it moved beyond court exclusivity into batik, embroidery, interior decoration, branding, fashion accessories, and heritage preservation, including Malaysia's UNESCO inscription of *Songket* in 2021.

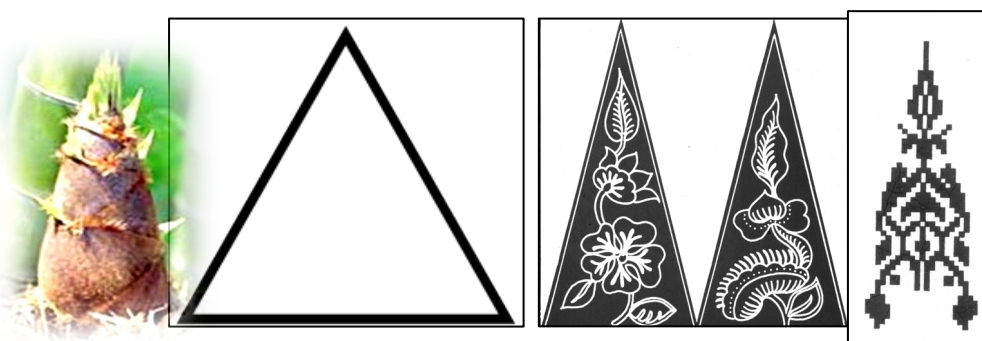


Figure 1 Bamboo shoot, Basic triangle form and *Pucuk Rebung* motif in *Batik* and *Songket*

Source: *Motif-motif Etnik Malaysia, Kraftangan Malaysia* (2023)

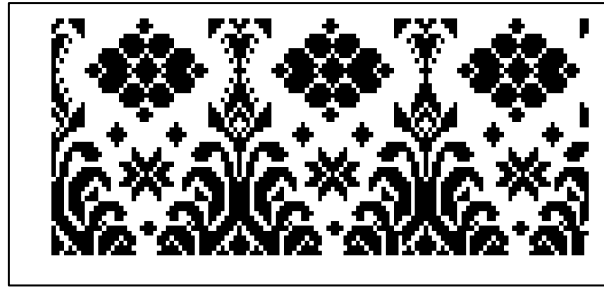


Figure 2 Example of *Pucuk Rebung Lawi Ayam, Bunga Bintang* at the *Kepala Kain Songket*
Source: Norakmal Abdullah et.al. (2015)

The triangular motif pattern produced on the bamboo shoot motif is believed to be closely related to the '*Gunungan*' motif from the pre-Islamic era. It is said to be a '*Gunungan*' motif because its overall silhouette resembles a mountain or mountain range. During the pre-Islamic Nusantara period, historians and anthropologists state that early Malays practiced animism, believing that all of nature possessed spirits and inner power, and they worshipped ancestors and descendants. They also considered mountains to be sacred places. (Rosnawati Othman, 2005). The motif of the mountain (*Gunungan*) is the dominant form found on *Batu Aceh* carvings and wooden grave markers (*Nesan*). Othman Yatim (1990), in his discussion on the symbolism of *Batu Aceh*, associates it with the forms of lotus flowers, *Mihirabs*, and vases.



Figure 3 *Ukiran Tembus Tak Bersilat* on the window frames of Aur Mosque, Teluk Manok, Patani uses a basic triangular shape with Langkasuka style motifs.
Source: Farish Noor & Eddin Khoo (2003)

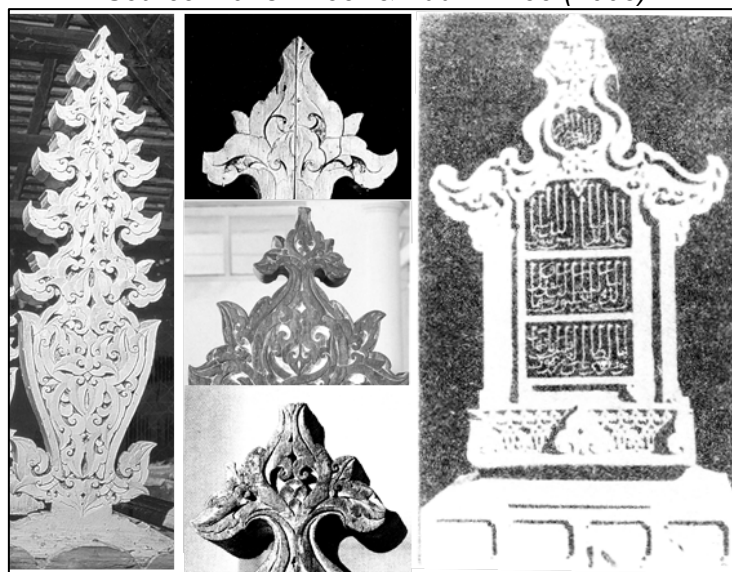


Figure 4 The '*Gunungan*' shape on *Batu Aceh* (right) and several wooden grave markers found in Kelantan and Terengganu.
Source: Othman Yatim (1990)

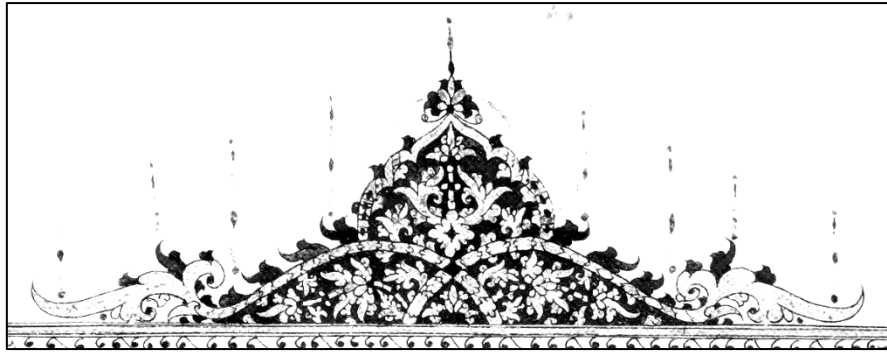


Figure 5.0 Example of the 'Gunungan' motif found in the decoration of 19th-century handwritten Al-Quran manuscripts from Terengganu. Source: Museum of Islamic Arts, Kuala Lumpur

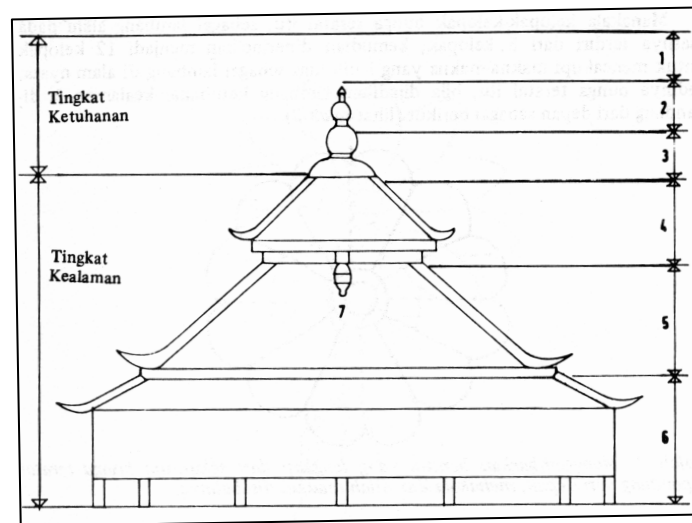


Figure 6 Cosmological interpretation of Masjid Kampung Laut roof form
Source: Abdullah Mohamed (1985)

In the context of traditional Malay architecture, the image of a mountain peak is also found in a roof design called '*Bumbung Limas*' (also referred to as *Atap Tumpang*), which is pyramid-shaped and sometimes tiered. The '*Bumbung Limas*' roof design is widely used in Southeast Asia, particularly in mosques and suraus throughout the Malay world. (Mohamed, A., 1985)

In the Malay ceramic art, traditional pottery such as *Labu Sayong* (Perak), *Labu Besar* (Negeri Sembilan), and Terenang Kuala Tembeling (Pahang) consistently incorporate the *Pucuk Rebung* motif, reflecting its widespread use across Malay craft traditions. Rather than serving as mere decoration, the motif is integrated into the vessel's form, reinforcing the relationship between ornament and function. It is typically positioned on structurally significant areas, including the neck (*leher*), shoulder (*dada*), and upper body (*badan*), where repeated triangular bands emphasise the vessel's proportions while creating rhythm and visual balance. Its simple triangular geometry lends itself to incision, stamping, and carving, enabling continuous decorative friezes on curved surfaces. Similar to its use in *Songket* borders and architectural ornamentation, the *Pucuk Rebung* functions as a framing device that organises composition while demonstrating its adaptability and enduring significance across diverse forms of Malay material culture (Ayob, 2011 & Ismail, 2000)



Figure 7 Terenang Kuala Tembeling (Pahang) *Pucuk Rebung* motifs at neck and body.
Source: Salwa Ayob (2011)

2.2 The Structural & Physical Analogy of Pucuk Rebung

The *Pucuk Rebung* typology is organised by base shapes, structural placements, and detailed pattern variations.

1. The Three Structural Elements (Glosari Kraf-Kraftangan. 2023)

Every traditional *Pucuk Rebung* motif is made of three main parts:

- The Body (*Tampuk*): The tall isosceles triangle resembling the bamboo shoot.
- The Borders (*Pucuk*): Zig-zag lines running up the sides of the triangle.
- The Base (*Kaki*): Horizontal stripes that ground and frame the triangle at the bottom.

2. Typology by Placement (Glosari Kraf-Kraftangan, 2023)

In textiles like sarongs, the *Pucuk Rebung* is not placed randomly. It is organised into two main zones:

- *Kepala Kain* (Head of Fabric): A wide central panel where the *Pucuk Rebung* motifs are clustered tightly together. This is the main focal point of the garment.
- *Badan Kain* (Body of Fabric): A border of smaller, alternating triangles that run along the top and bottom edges of the cloth.

3. Typology by Stylisation (Design Variations) (Glosari Kraf-Kraftangan, 2023)

The basic triangle is often modified by master weavers using distinct names and sub-motifs:

- *Pucuk Rebung Lawi Ayam*: Triangles featuring elongated, sweeping tips that resemble rooster tail feathers.
- *Pucuk Rebung Siku Keluang*: Triangles with sharp, angular, step-like geometric lines.
- *Pucuk Rebung Gigi Bota*: A border variant where the tips of the triangles look like sharp, saw-like teeth.
- *Pucuk Rebung Tunjuk Langit*: Upright, slender triangles that point strictly upwards toward the sky.

2.3 Summary of Previous Research

Recent research on *Pucuk Rebung* and related Malay ornamental traditions may be grouped into five clusters. The first concerns lexicon and morphology. Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka's terminology entry is especially valuable because it gives a cross-media definition of *corak Pucuk Rebung* within *kesenian Melayu Nusantara*, linking the motif to symbolic forms such as *Gunungan*, *Mahameru* and *Pohon Hayat*. Regional studies further show related terminology and usage in Malay, Acehnese and

Minangkabau contexts. More recent design studies identify *Pucuk Rebung* as a geometric and triangular compositional motif found in Malay textiles such as songket, batik sarong and limar cloth. Legino and Ruslan (2016) study specifically analyses the geometric character of the traditional *Pucuk Rebung* design in Malaysia, while Abd Razak, Legino and Samuri (2020) show how floral and *Pucuk Rebung* motifs may be expanded into complex visual compositions.

The second cluster addresses *Songket* history and transregional movement. Research on Malaysian *Songket* stresses that its origin is difficult to determine because of limited historical documentation, while also noting the roles of trade, migration and political marriage in bringing *Songket* weaving to the Malay Peninsula from at least the fifteenth century. Scholarship on *Sambas Songket* further frames *Songket* as a vehicle of translocal Malay identity. Wendy Mee (2010) argues that intra-Malay cultural exchange reframes *Sambas Songket* from a localised cultural form into a wider Malay “cultural heritage” to be preserved, performed and consumed. This body of work is crucial because it discourages narrow, essentialist and nation-bound interpretations of *Songket* and its motifs.

A third cluster studies architecture and ornament. Work on traditional Malay houses shows that plant-based motifs continue to structure Malay architectural identity through woodcarving, façade treatment, ventilation panels, door heads and roof-related elements. Recent research on *Rumah Limas Bumbung Perak* notes that woodcarving motifs in Perak houses operate as cultural signifiers expressing identity, belief systems and connections with the natural environment. (Abd. Rashid et, al,2019). Studies of traditional Malay houses in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan similarly identify flora, fauna, geometry, still life and combination motifs, showing that Malay woodcarving remains an important element of architectural expression. (Ahmad, 2022). This literature is useful because it shows that a motif may retain cultural meaning even when it is abstracted, recomposed or transferred from textile to architectural ornament.

Fourth, studies on Islamic and manuscript aesthetics suggest that Islamisation did not erase earlier motif traditions but redirected them into vegetal, geometric and cosmological abstraction. Research on Islamic influence in Johor Malay woodcarving shows that floral motifs dominate the sampled houses and concludes that Islam is a major influence on motif selection. Related studies on religious impact in Malay woodcarving explain that Muslim carvers developed floral, geometric and abstract designs in ways that did not contradict Islamic guidelines. Annabel Teh Gallop’s work on Malay manuscript art describes illumination through floral, foliate, arabesque and repeated geometric patterns, confirming that Malay-Islamic visual culture often privileges ornamental rather than figural representation (Gallop, 2019).

Fifth, a growing body of research addresses contemporary adaptation and commodification. Studies of *Songket* innovation in Malaysia discuss attempts to revitalise songket by training younger weavers, broadening usage and producing contemporary high-quality *Songket* applications. Research on Riau batik branding shows how *Pucuk Rebung* is mobilised in contemporary branding, modern product styling and promotional strategies aimed at younger audiences and local creative industries. Recent work on modified *Pucuk Rebung* batik in interior contexts also indicates that the motif is being adapted across wall panels, built-in furniture and other interior elements. This literature shows that *Pucuk Rebung* is not merely an object of preservation but also a medium of design renewal, branding and market reinvention

2.4 Symbolic Anthropology Theory

Symbolic anthropology is a foundational approach within cultural anthropology that treats culture as a system of symbols and meanings shared by a social group. The approach emphasises how symbols, signs, rituals, and narratives organise perception, social action, identity, and worldviews. Clifford Geertz’s program of symbolic anthropology centres on thick description and the analysis of culture as a web of symbols that people use to make sense of their world. This orientation foregrounds meaning,

context, and the interpretive generation of cultural knowledge rather than purely functional or causal explanations (Saifuddin, 2014; Siegel, 1993; Reis & Veríssimo, 2023).

Culture is not simply a collection of customs or behaviours but a system of shared symbols that shapes human understanding and social interaction. Geertz described culture as "webs of significance" woven by individuals and communities, in which symbols provide meaning to everyday life, beliefs, and social practices. Turner further emphasised that symbols are dynamic and often possess multiple layers of meaning, allowing them to communicate religious, social, political, and moral values simultaneously. From this perspective, cultural artefacts, rituals, architecture, and artistic expressions are interpreted not merely as functional objects but as symbolic forms that embody collective knowledge, identity, and worldview.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative desk study using a conceptual review approach to explore the philosophical and symbolic meanings of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif in Malay material culture. The study synthesises existing knowledge from diverse documentary sources rather than collecting primary data. Since the topic spans history, culture, and art, the review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, museum publications, historical manuscripts, official heritage documentation, government publications, dictionaries, and visual records from museum collections and archives across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Borneo.

The documents were analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes related to the motif's symbolism, philosophy, morphology, historical development, and cultural significance. Comparative analysis across different media—including architecture, textiles, ceramics, woodcarving, and manuscripts—enabled a holistic interpretation of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif within the broader context of Malay material culture.

Table 1 Summary of literature sources

No.	Reference (First Author)	Year	Publication Type
1	Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (PRPM)	2026	Online Dictionary / Government Reference
2	National Heritage Board Singapore	2026	Museum Collection / Heritage Documentation
3	Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia	2026	Government Archive / Manuscript Catalogue
4	UNIMAS & Sarawak Sources	2018–2026	Institutional Reports / Heritage Documentation
5	Ahmad	2022	Journal Article
6	Hermendra et al.	2022	Journal Article
7	Glosari Kraftangan Malaysia	2023	Government Glossary / Online Reference
8	UNESCO	2021	Official Heritage Documentation / UNESCO Archive
9	Abd Razak et al.	2020	Journal Article
10	Asian Civilisations Museum / Roots	2020	Museum Collection / Online Museum Database
11	Hafilah et al.	2020	Journal Article
12	Kamarudin et al.	2020	Journal Article
13	Ab Rashid et al.	2019	Conference Proceedings (IOP Conference Series)
14	Legino & Ruslan	2016	Journal Article
15	Abdullah et al.	2015	Conference Proceedings (Springer)
16	Norakmal Abdullah et al.	2015	Conference Proceedings
17	Jabatan Muzium Malaysia	2013	Museum Bulletin / Government Publication
18	O.B. Ruzaika et al.	2012	Conference Proceedings (SIMPORA)

19	Ayob	2011	PhD Thesis
20	Kheng	2011	Master Thesis
21	Mee	2010	Journal Article
22	Rosnawati Othman	2005	Journal Article
23	Farish Noor & Eddin Khoo	2003	Book
24	Ismail	2000	Conference Paper / Seminar Proceedings
25	Gallop	1991	Book
26	Othman Mohd. Yatim & Halim Nasir	1990	Book
27	Abdullah bin Mohamed (Nakula)	1985	Book Chapter / Museum Publication
28	Wan Hussin Wan Ismail	1985	Journal Article

Source: Author

4 FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Botanical and Ethical Symbolism

The literature consistently identifies botanical and ethical symbolism as one of the fundamental philosophical meanings embodied in the *Pucuk Rebung* motif. Across Malay scholarship, bamboo is recognised as a plant of enduring value, with every stage of its life—from the young edible shoot (*Rebung*) to the mature culm (*Buluh*)—serving practical, social, and cultural purposes. This life cycle has become a metaphor for human development, where growth is understood not merely as physical maturation but as a process of moral and intellectual cultivation. The well-known Malay proverb, *Melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya* ("bend the bamboo while it is still a shoot"), reinforces this philosophy by emphasising that character, values, and discipline should be nurtured from an early age. Similarly, studies from Riau interpret the triangular form of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif as symbolising steadfastness in upholding *Adat* (customary law) and the cultivation of *Akhlak* (moral character). Collectively, these interpretations suggest that the *Pucuk Rebung* motif transcends its botanical origin to represent guided personal growth, ethical refinement, and the continuous cultivation of virtuous character.

4.2 Resilience and Generative Vitality

A second recurring theme in the literature is the association of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif with resilience and generative vitality. Museum records, heritage documentation, and design studies consistently interpret the motif as symbolising hope, prosperity, strength, vitality, and continuous growth. These meanings derive from the botanical characteristics of bamboo, a plant renowned for its flexibility, durability, and rapid regeneration. Consequently, bamboo has become a cultural metaphor for perseverance and adaptability. This symbolism is reinforced by the motif's strategic placement within Malay decorative traditions. Rather than occupying neutral spaces, the *Pucuk Rebung* frequently appears at beginnings and transitional elements, including the *Kepala Kain* (head panel) of *Songket*, architectural gables, thresholds, and decorative borders. Such placement signifies protection, continuity, and new beginnings while visually framing important parts of an object or structure.

4.3 Cosmological Symbolism

A third philosophical layer revealed in the literature is the cosmological interpretation of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif. Several studies relate its triangular form to the *Gunungan* of *Wayang Kulit*, also known as the *Pohon Hayat* (Tree of Life), a symbol associated with the origin of life and the structure of the universe. Similar interpretations are found in Javanese and Indonesian traditions, where the related *Tumpal* motif represents Mount *Meru*, fertility, and the cosmic order. In Minangkabau culture, the triangular form has been interpreted as a symbolic mediator between the upper and lower worlds. Although these interpretations originate from different cultural traditions, they share a common

understanding of the triangle as a representation of ascent, creation, and the interconnectedness of the natural and spiritual realms.

4.4 Islamic Reinterpretation

The literature further demonstrates that the symbolic meanings of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif evolved alongside the Islamisation of the Malay world. Rather than replacing earlier symbolic traditions, Islamic influence reinterpreted the motif within a new theological framework. Malay design studies associate the ascending triangular form with the hierarchical stages of existence—*Alam Syahadah*, *Alam Mithal*, and *Alam Arwah*—culminating at the apex in the Divine Essence (*Zat Allah*). Other scholars similarly interpret the motif as representing the relationship between creation and the Creator through the principle of *Tawhid*. As Islamic artistic traditions discouraged figurative representation, geometric and vegetal motifs became increasingly prominent in Malay decorative arts, allowing existing visual forms to acquire new spiritual significance (Mohamed, 1985). This process illustrates how cultural symbols remain meaningful by accommodating changing religious worldviews while preserving visual continuity.

4.5 Social Status and Political Identity

Another significant theme emerging from the literature is the relationship between the *Pucuk Rebung* motif and social status. Historical records indicate that the motif frequently appeared on luxury textiles such as *Songket* and *Telepuk*, where the use of gold thread was historically restricted to rulers, members of the royal household, and high-ranking officials. Consequently, the motif became associated with prestige, authority, and political legitimacy. Museum collections across Southeast Asia further demonstrate its role in elite courtly dress, where the arrangement of decorative motifs contributed to the visual communication of rank and status. Within this context, the *Pucuk Rebung* functioned not only as an aesthetic ornament but also as a symbolic marker of social hierarchy, reflecting the close relationship between material culture and political identity in traditional Malay society.

4.6 Gender and Cultural Identity

The literature also suggests that the symbolic meanings of the *Pucuk Rebung* motif are shaped by social context rather than being inherently gendered. Traditional *Songket* weaving in the Malay Peninsula and Sarawak has historically been associated with women, while *keringkam* embroidery represents feminine identity, refinement, and social status. In several Malay communities, weaving skills were regarded as indicators of virtue and marriageability. Nevertheless, the *Pucuk Rebung* motif is also found on men's ceremonial attire, architectural ornamentation, ceramics, and woodcarving, demonstrating that its symbolic significance extends beyond gender-specific contexts. From a Symbolic Anthropology perspective, the motif participates in broader systems of cultural production and social identity, where its meanings are continually negotiated through different practices, functions, and material expressions rather than being confined to a single social group.

Table 1 Summary on the philosophical meaning of *Pucuk Rebung*.

Aspect	Symbolic Meaning
Shape (Triangle)	Spiritual elevation, looking upward to God, and a grounded community base.
Soft Shoot (<i>Rebung</i>)	The importance of early childhood education and moral shaping.
Adult Stalk (<i>Buluh</i>)	Attaining wisdom and practicing humility (bowing down).
Flexibility	Adaptability, resilience, and surviving adversity with grace.

Source: Author

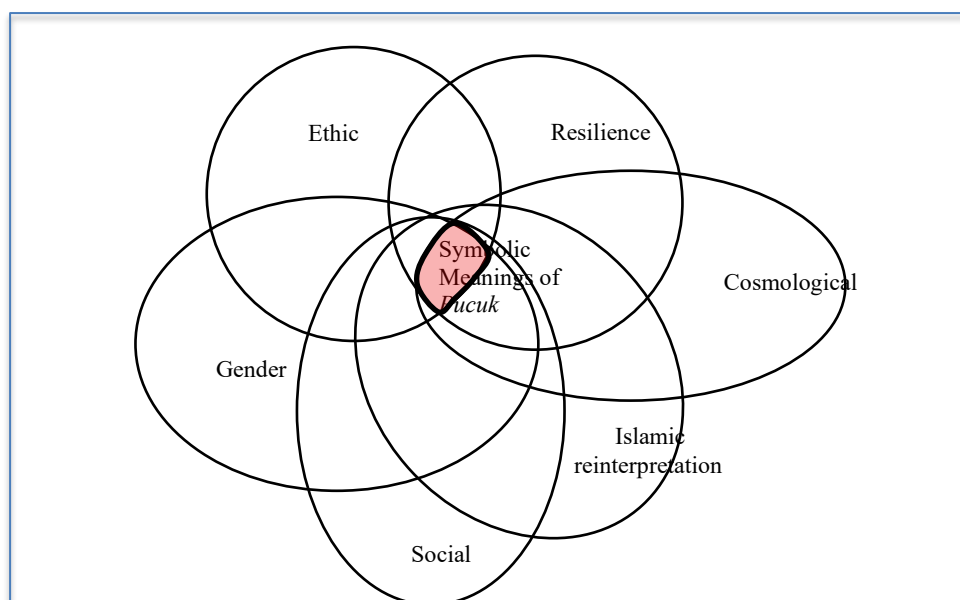


Figure 6 Meanings and philosophical frameworks of *Pucuk Rebung* motif.
Source: Author

CONCLUSION

The *Pucuk Rebung* motif is far more than a decorative ornament in Malay material culture. This conceptual review demonstrates that the motif embodies a rich system of philosophical and symbolic meanings that has been continuously interpreted and expressed across diverse artistic traditions, including architecture, textiles, woodcarving, ceramics, manuscripts, and decorative arts. Through a synthesis of literature from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Borneo, the study identified several recurring symbolic themes associated with the motif, namely botanical and ethical values, resilience and generative vitality, cosmological beliefs, Islamic reinterpretation, social status, and gendered cultural identity. Together, these themes reveal the *Pucuk Rebung* as a multidimensional cultural symbol that reflects the Malay worldview and its evolving relationship with nature, society, religion, and artistic expression.

Viewed through the lens of Symbolic Anthropology, the *Pucuk Rebung* motif functions as a shared cultural symbol through which Malay communities communicate collective knowledge, moral values, and philosophical beliefs. Its enduring presence across different media demonstrates that traditional motifs are not merely aesthetic embellishments but symbolic forms through which cultural meanings are preserved, transmitted, and continually reinterpreted across generations. The persistence of the motif also illustrates the adaptive nature of Malay visual culture, where existing symbols acquire new meanings in response to changing religious, political, and social contexts while maintaining their recognisable identity.

This study contributes to the scholarship on Malay material culture by providing a holistic synthesis of the philosophical and symbolic meanings of one of its most significant decorative motifs. Rather than examining the *Pucuk Rebung* within a single artistic medium, the review brings together evidence from multiple disciplines to demonstrate its broader cultural significance. It is hoped that this study will provide a useful reference for future research on Malay decorative arts, architectural ornamentation, heritage conservation, and symbolic interpretation, while encouraging further comparative studies on the evolution of traditional motifs across the wider Malay world.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors made equal contributions towards the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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