

# BEYOND ANIMISM AND MYSTICISM: A STUDY ON SYMBOLS AND FUNCTIONS OF WOOD SCULPTURE IN PRESENT SOCIETY AMONG THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY AT KG. KUALA TERBOL, KUALA KRAU, TEMERLOH PAHANG, MALAYSIA

Suraya Sukri<sup>1\*</sup>, NH Azmi<sup>2</sup>, AWR Radzuan<sup>3</sup>, NA Jabar<sup>4</sup>, MS Suliman<sup>5</sup>  
<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>Heritage Department/Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage,  
University Malaysia Kelantan  
Kelantan, Malaysia  
[suraya@umk.edu.my](mailto:suraya@umk.edu.my)<sup>1\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This research studies the symbols and functions of Jah Hut wood sculptures in Kg. Kuala Terbol, Temerloh, Pahang. The research presents the challenge of lacking scientific documentation on the symbol and functions of wood sculptures in present society. Additionally, globalisation has indirectly impacted the continuity of the indigenous heritage practices, thus highlighting the significance of this study. This research sets the objective to study the history, symbolism, and the use of these wood carving statues by the Jah Hut tribe in present society. This method also uses an ethnographic approach where the researcher conducts interviews and field observations using probability sampling through snowball sampling. Consequently, data will be analysed using thematic analysis. The finding shows that although the wood sculpture was previously used as part of the ritual, healing and animistic practices, in present society, it serves aesthetic and economic functions.

**Keywords:** *Animism, Belief, Function, Indigenous, Jah Hut, Ritual, Symbol, Wood Sculpture.*

*\*Corresponding Author*

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## A. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is rich in the cultural legacy due to the diversity of ethnicities and communities living under the same roof. The ‘Orang Asli’, or indigenous communities, are some of the first groups to have been in Malaysia and had their own cultures and ways of life. These locals hold a high superstitious belief. They believe a spirit in the natural world around them which can guide them through their daily activities. Additionally, the ‘Orang Asli’ community also possessed the skill in handicraft making due to their nature of living in a natural world, hence being creative in reusing daily waste. Living in a remote area stimulates them to think creatively and develop handicraft skills to live daily (Mustafa, 2013). ‘Orang Asli’ is the original people who live in the Malay Peninsula and have

eighteen tribes. The largest tribe is the 'Senoi', and one of them is the Jah Hut tribe. Jah means 'people', and Hut means 'forest' (Carey, 1976). However, different connotations are understood by the Jah Hut themselves, by which Jah means 'people' while Hut means 'no'.

The art of carving proliferates in the Malay and indigenous communities because of the abundance of wood in the forest. It is because wood is a natural material that is commonly used in arts and crafts. The art of carving is not only focused on how the carving is done but on the use and function of the carving produced for a society (N. E. B. A. Sani, 2016). In the meantime, the art of carving is generally defined as forming a design on wood with the process of gouging, scratching and sculpting using a chisel (N. E. B. A. Sani, 2016). For the carver, the carving work is produced on wood material as a way of appreciation projected through emotions and creativity. The techniques used by sculptors are also independent and not tied to any art. In the culture of the indigenous people, they believe that the art of wood carving is a way of connecting them to the realm of natural and supernatural.

Moreover, in the indigenous community, women are believed to have skills in producing handicrafts. In their view, all the materials in their environment, whether waste materials or forest produce, must be used in the best way possible. Meanwhile, the men are skilled in wood carving and often used in ritual ceremonies to treat diseases or exorcism ceremonies. Therefore, the Jah Hut natives are also famous in traditional medicine as they use wood carvings made from various types of wood such as "cengal", "merbau", "kemuning" and others (Mustafa, 2013). In the meantime, this wooden carving is also a source of income for them. The art produced by the sculptors was driven by religious discernments (N. E. B. A. Sani, 2016). Generally, the concept of a symbol is something that has a hidden meaning. Therefore, the meaning of a symbol is a representation of something expressed in an object or statue (Frans & Wardani, 2015). Although this symbol represents elements of the universe, such as air, water, moon and so on, it still has a particular symbolic meaning. Each carving produced has a specific meaning and purpose. In order to get the meaning of an object, it needs to be seen in terms of pattern, structure or shape. The pattern is one value system that describes the thoughts and values produced by wood carvers. The form is the thing that exists from the structure seen physically at work. Therefore, structural patterns and shapes will influence each other when producing a sculpture to unravel the symbolic meaning behind the work (Frans & Wardani, 2015).

Nevertheless, in the cultural practice of the Orang Asli community, symbols are an essential component because they store various meanings, attitudes, considerations, beliefs and specific experiences and are applied in a form that will be understood and shared. This is because symbols are

a means of storing or expressing the meanings or beliefs of the community in the form of objects such as wooden carvings (Adisukma, 2019).

Next, the function of an object or statue has its purpose. In the community of the Orang Asli Jah Hut tribe, this wooden sculpture has its uses. Each sculpture produced is based on the environment and their imagination. The produced carving has a deeper function and gave the Jah Hut Indigenous people a deeper meaning. The wooden statue helps them recover from illness and be a guardian of their lives—the statue function as a mediator between humans and the supernatural for medical and religious purposes. However, additional meanings are practised nowadays as wood carvings serve as a means of income (N. E. B. A. Sani, 2016). Statues are usually envisioned from three dimensions: image, character and the human figure. Producing statues is to give appreciation, respect or recognition to services and contributions (Abidinazir, 2014). Other scholars argue that the statue is to be used as a guide of faith that creates a distance between the realm of reality and the supernatural. Society creates "something" as a statue, with symbols that are difficult to express in words or seen by the naked eye (Saragi, 2008).

The arrival of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia has shown that the Orang Asli have lived for almost 7000 years. Some of them also come from the Khmer or Cambodian regions. Their daily activity is hunting and finding food in the forest. JHEOA 2002 stated that before 1960, the Orang Asli was an ethnic category that did not exist. Various indigenous minority communities in Peninsular Malaysia do not see themselves as a homogeneous group, nor are they aware that they are ethnic markers. Therefore, to facilitate administration at that time, the Orang Asli were divided into three categories: culture, language and geographic location. The Negrito Natives have dark skin and curly hair and live as hunters. Meanwhile, the Proto-Malay 'Orang Asli' have an even skin tone and straight hair and carries out farming activities. The last category is the Orang Asli Senoi, who have various skin colours, and curly hair and carry out activities as hunters and traders. The Orang Asli Senoi are also considered to originate from the mixing between Negritos and East Asians (Masron et al., 2013).

Generally, the Orang Asli people in Peninsular Malaysia live in the northern part of Malaysia-Thailand up to the Straits of Johor in the South. Among their settlement areas are Kelantan and the Ttiwangsa Range. The rest live in low-lying settlements near Malay villages. Therefore, some Orang Asli lives in villages, and some live in settlement areas provided by the government (Md Adam & Yusop, 2020). Pagar Ruyung is the original place for the Jah Hut community. The Jah Hut community is on Minangkabau descent from Pagar Ruyung. In 1862 the Jah Hut community had fled because of

the Rawa rebellion, and they lived around the Sematan River area, the Krau Valley. Because of that, they moved to the Krau Valley and settled in that area until today. However, there is a different view from (Couillard, 1990), who says that the arrival of the Jah Hut Aboriginal people to the Peninsula is because of the population density in their place of origin, which forces them to leave that place. However, the Jah Hut community has fled to the hinterland due to the presence of the Malay community in Kuala Krau (Md Adam & Yusop, 2020).

Wood carving, like any other artwork, is a form of expression or a symbol of art that resembles a symbolic function. It is a metaphor, images that are born or have a deep literal meaning. In other words, the symbol of art is an absolute image, an otherwise irrational picture, because it is truly indescribable. In many cases, symbols in the art can give meaning to anything, such as fertility, purity, rebirth, femininity, love and cruelty. Hence, the use of artistic symbols lies at a different semantic level from the artwork that contains them (Correia, 2019). Nevertheless, knowing the function of symbols is very important because without understanding them, it is difficult for people to adjust and adapt, as symbols only appear when people go through the learning process. This is because the development of culture happens when people learn from something. Therefore, the symbol becomes a benchmark or an innovation in society. Consequently, a statue is a symbol of performance art or a presenter, and it should be understood that it is not just a statue but has a deeper and more extensive meaning (Saragi, 2008).

## **B. METHOD**

In carrying out a study of the symbols and functions of Jah Hut wood carvings in Kampung Kuala Terbol, Kuala Krau Temerloh, Pahang, the researcher has chosen an ethnographic approach to study the cultural history and heritage of Jah Hut Orang Asli wood carvings. This ethnographic research is a form of qualitative research where it describes, analyse, and interprets a cultural sharing in a society or a group, such as behaviour, belief, language, economy, political structure, interaction, life and style in relationships (J W Creswell, 2014; John W Creswell, 2009). Therefore, this ethnographic research reflects the researcher's interest in learning and understanding a particular culture. The researcher used snowball sampling, a non-probability technique, to identify the potential informant. This snowball sampling technique is used for hard-to-reach informants. Hence, a gatekeeper is needed. In this study, the chosen gatekeeper is Intan Sazima A/P Sarip, a native of the Orang Asli Jah Hut community who resides in Kampung Kuala Terbol, Kuala Krau Temerloh Pahang. She is also one of the researcher's students who live in Kampung Kuala Terbol. The gatekeeper is the

first individual interviewed, followed by another informant based on the first informant's recommendations. In this research, eight informants were interviewed. Among them are two men who are wood carvers believed to have a deep understanding of wood carvings. In the meantime, two others are 'Tok Batin' (village headman) and 'Tok Mudim'.

Afterwards, this research used thematic analysis to analyse data to form patterns and themes collected from interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis is very effective when a detailed study is conducted on qualitative data to explain the extent to which a phenomenon can occur through researcher observation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2017).

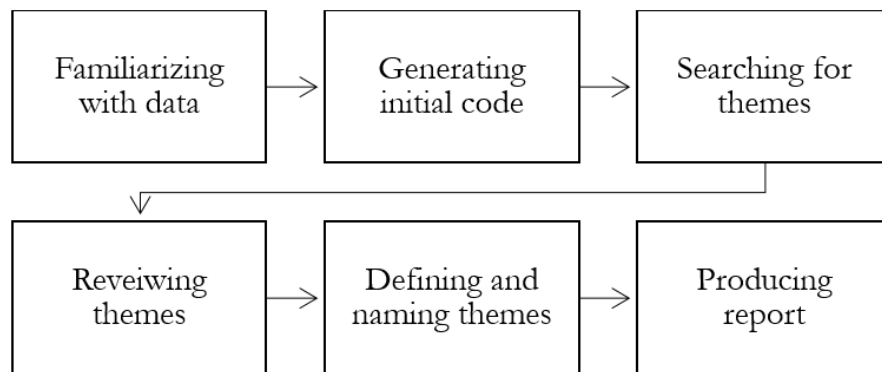


Figure 1. Proses to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Based on Figure 1, steps to thematic analysis require a researcher to familiarise themselves with the data where transcription of the audio data to text is carried out. It is followed by researchers reading the transcription text to familiarise themselves with the dialogue. It then began generating initial code formed through research objectives or literature reviews. A process of theme searching started, followed by reviewing themes in case of redundancy where defining, naming and renaming themes were required. Finally, the last stage will involve report writing, where triangulation was carried out between all other data accumulated from this research, such as observations and reviewing the past literature.

### C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The presence of Jah Hut wood carvings in the Malaysian art landscape in the early 1960s caused excitement, surprise and recognition of artistic expression. However, this phenomenon raised doubts and criticism as some people question its authenticity as it is believed to be a copy of other cultures. It is because there was no clear research and information about Jah Hut wood carving statue at that time (Werner, 1997). According to N. E. A. Sani & Arif (2021), making wood carvings among the Jah

Hut people was crucial as they practised animism and believed everything around them had dwelling spirits, whom they asked for their help to facilitate their daily lives. The demand for the Jah Hut woodcarving started with tourists coming to the settlement, where they asked the villager to produce wood carving of "sepilih" in a larger form. Originally, "sepilih" was produced in a smaller form and intended for medicinal purposes as stated by informants below:

*"There used to be white people come here, when I was near kg koi, this is my father's story, when I was still small, he saw "sepilih" under the tree and asked 'what is it?' My grandfather told me it was a 'sepilih for medicinal use', then he asked my grandfather if it was okay if I made the statue larger. It was strange at first. It was never done before, so the white man begged, so my grandfather tried to make it with his other friends...."*  
(18, November 24, Field Study 2021)

The statement given by the informant has been supported by a previous study where according to (N. E. A. Sani & Arif, 2021), this Jah Hut wood carving statue began to attract the attention of tourists in the past and was in high demand. Not only that, but The Jah Hut indigenous community also began to receive orders from government departments and agencies to be used as an exhibition. In the beginning, this carved wooden statue started as a statue for the medical ceremony of the Jah Hut tribe, and they called it a 'Sepilih' statue. According to Werner (1997), an analysis and classification of hundreds of spirits was not an easy task. In his research findings, 'Sepilih' is used for medicinal purposes in the Beni Soy ceremony led by Puyang (Shaman), where Puyang gives instructions to prepare 'sepilih' as quickly as possible, so the result is neither neat nor beautiful. This 'Sepilih' is said to be dangerous because it involves the supernatural, and we will never know the existence of spirits or ghosts that are in 'Sepilih' earlier. According to the informant, the size of 'Sepilih' is only the size of one's finger, its small size and its design that resembles the shape of an animal, a long tongue, big teeth and so on (See figure 2).



Figure 2. Example of “Sepilih” used in medicinal practices of Beni Soy  
Source: Fieldwork, 2021

The skill in producing wood carvings is not only among the Jah Hut people, but also the Mah Meri. The only difference between these two is that the Jah Hut people are less known than the Mah Meri because they coped with the current technological changes and upgraded their production through a machine that helped them produce neat works. This argument has also been supported in previous studies where the Jah Hut people are less known than the Mah Meri people because they are more prominent and good at using available opportunities (N. E. A. Sani & Arif, 2021). In addition, the craft skills of wooden carvings are not only mastered by men but also by women. Women are often associated with handicrafts such as mengkuang mats, basket making, and so on. This argument is supported through interviews conducted with eight informants who are quite knowledgeable in the carving of statues of the Jah Hut people and have explicit knowledge about the Beni Soy ceremony. According to one informant in this Kuala Terbol village, a female carver is also exceptionally skilled in carving.

*“In this village, both male and female can do it. Ya Adak” is her name. She is even better than me in making these statues, I am just ordinary.. she is the wife of Puyang (Shaman)”.*

It is important to note that the Jah Hut people learned their skills only through observation based on the interview session conducted with informants. It is possible as they are raised by family

members who have skills in producing other handicrafts. Due to the length of time and complexity of the process involved in becoming good at constructing a statue, it is essential to have a strong interest before beginning to study a handicraft talent. Therefore, we can see that those who have skills in producing these wood carvings do not have formal education where they only learn from observation methods, passing down as a family's heritage.

*"Uhhh, it has been many years, I have learned to do it on my own, starting from seeing my father, my husband, my brother, and then I did it on my own..." (18, November 24 Field Study 2021)*

The wood obtained in forests serves as the main component of this wood sculpture. Because these indigenous villages are located in the interior, obtaining wood from the neighbouring forest is handy. Woodworkers regularly use "merbau" wood, "pulai" wood, and "rengas" wood, to name a few. The ability to bend easily or not distinguishes several varieties of wood from one another. "Merbau" wood is tough and simple to mould into the desired shape. In the meantime, since "pulai" and "rengas" wood are delicate, care must be taken when crafting them to prevent the wood from breaking easily.

*"Look "merbau" wood and "rengas" wood. "Rengas" wood is a little tricky, because it has a little pattern on it, a kind of beautiful vein in the wood, the colour of the "rengas" wood is a little red, if the "rengas" wood is a little soft. Meanwhile, the "merbau" is a little strong. With "rengas you have to be very gentle, or else the wood will break, if you don't know how to handle. It it's "merbau" you do not have to worry because it is hard"*

*(14, November 21 Field Study 2021)*

Aside from using a gouge to make holes in the wood, wood carvers also use sandpaper grades 1 through 32 to smooth the statue's surface. Pickaxes or saws are used to cut wood on trees, small chisels are used to sculpt statues, and shellac coats statues to make them both beautiful and durable. However, it is different from the 'Sepilih' statue, where the carver only uses a folding knife or a sharpening knife because of its small size and does not require neatness. The "sepilih" statue is used as a conduit to move the evil spirit from the patient's body, which will subsequently be thrown into the forest. Consequently, preserving the statue's aesthetic perfection would likely be a waste of time (Werner, 1997). The "sepilih" statue does not need to be ornate because it is just meant to be used in traditional medicine.

Taking into account the understanding of the symbolism behind the "sepilih" statue, it takes almost a year to carve a wooden sculpture, according to the informant. This is because it calls for passion and patience to finish the artwork. Depending on the statue's size and style, it should only take a skilled craftsman two weeks to construct. Longer production times result from consumer



requests for more significant sizes and intricate artwork.

According to Werner (1986), It is important to stress that these indigenous people hold highly revered beliefs and possess exceptional healing powers. Hence, their wood carvings signify their religious convictions and perspectives on the supernatural (N. E. B. A. Sani, 2016). Consequently, it is said that the "sepilih" statue has a symbolic meaning because a symbol is defined as something with a hidden meaning, a representation of something, and a depiction of supernatural aspects (Frans & Wardani, 2015). In addition, (Adisukma, 2019), Objects like wooden carvings can be used as symbols to represent or express the meanings or beliefs of a group. As a result, according to the Jah Hut community, the "sepilih" statue's design embodies "Bes". This "Bes" is a genuine spirit that humans did not send; it originated in the forest and is harmful and capable of bringing illness (Werner, 1997). As a result, the Jah Hut community thinks that the 'Bes' is to blame for any illnesses they experience. As a result, "Sepilih" serves as a conduit to return the "Bes" sickness to the heart of the forest. According to informants, three residents of Kampung Kuala Terbol.

Bomoh, also known as Puyang in the Jah Hut community, is a specialist in traditional medicine who has complete mastery over all evil energies, enabling him to predict the future, provide warnings, and advise people to take precautions against any potential adverse events. The 'Puyang' or shaman must first determine what sort of 'bes' is in the patient's body to create a 'Sepilih' statue for the Beni Soy ritual. This "Puyang" will connect the realms of reality and the invisible. To create a "sepilih" statue to be utilised in the Beni Soy ritual, informant four claims that he must wait for orders from the Puyang. In the meantime, there were 1600 "Bes" are allegedly present in Sepilih. There are several sorts of "Bes," some of which having two heads, long tongues, long fangs, and other features. Each "bes" also has a hidden symbolism or significance within the actual "sepilih." (Werner, 1997)

The Beni Soy' ritual must be performed to determine what has to be carved by the wood carver for the chosen statue before it can be used. According to N. E. A. Sani & Arif (2021), Beni Soy' is a treatment carried out in the Jah Hut community, which includes worship accompanied by spells and objects interspersed with various songs has elements of worship. This 'Beni Soy' ceremony is held for two or three nights in a row, and the "Puyang" will act as an intermediary between the spirits that will be expelled later (Werner, 1997). The Beni Soy ceremony will be performed if someone is sick, and the puyang will ask for assistance from the spirits or the spirit from the spirit of a tree known as Jah Sla' Naho; if called for no reason, Puyang can become seriously ill.

In the meantime, we can clearly see that Jah Hut's carved statue, a 'sepilih' statue, is used

during traditional medicine, the Beni Soy ceremony. 'Sepilih' transfers the disease 'Bes' from the patient's body into a 'sepilih' statue (Werner, 1997). Nevertheless, if the chosen statue is carved incorrectly, then the ceremony performed earlier will not take place. This is because the 'bes' can only be moved if the statue used is correct with the disease experienced by the patient. In addition, the production of selected statues does not charge a fee because the sculptors make them for free and consider helping the community. According to the informant interviewed in Kampung Kuala Terbol regarding the issue of the use of these wood carvings of the Jah Hut tribal community.

*However, often, you have to do another ceremony if something goes wrong or does not work. In the patient's first night, Jah Sla Nabo will explain what "bes" is close to "puyang". If it is incorrect, then the "sepilih" is incorrect. "Sepilih" is like a new home; we lock it in there to prevent it from emerging again after it leaves the patient's body (18, November 24, Field Study 2021)*

The subsequent use that we can see in Jah Hut society where this wooden carved statue can be used as a source of their income. The high demand makes this wood carving statue popular among foreign tourists and agencies, whether private or government (Sasajima, 2013). This wood carving statue is sold for RM 500.00 to MYR600 in sizes two up to three inches. In addition, the statue's price will be more expensive if the statue is bigger and more complicated to produce and can reach the price of thousands of Ringgit per statue. Therefore, according to informants, eight Jah Hut communities in the 90s responded that some of them are rich from selling these wood carvings.

*Sometimes the price of this statue is uncertain, and there are MYR500 to MYR600. The most expensive one is MYR1000. The size requested was approximately between 2 inches to 3 inches depending on the person's request and how big the statue is" (14, November 21, Field Study 2021)*



Figure 3. An example of Jah Hut wooden carvings produced by carvers  
Source: Field Study, 2021

Other than that, Teoh (2014) says that the Jah hut community practices the belief of animism, which believes that every place on earth has a spirit that they associate with ‘semangat’. Among the ‘semangat’ are:

Table 1. List of spirits and meanings

No	List of ‘semangat.’	Meaning
1	Semangat orang	the spirit that controls one's self, whether towards good or evil
2	Semangat Angin	a spirit that wants the freedom to control passions
3	Semangat Hantu	control one's self from fearing ghosts
4	Semangat Rusa	the spirit that gives rise to a sense of bravery at night. Jah Hut people believe that a person who has died, his soul will become a deer
5	Semangat Babi	spirit of courage. Those with this spirit are not suitable for farming
6	Semangat Lalat	brave spirit during the day where it is said that husband and wife who die separately but will still come back together
7	Semangat Iblis	the spirit that drives people to do evil. The signs that show a person has the devil's spirit are envy, pretence and evil intentions.

Source: (Werner, 1997)

However, some of the people of Kampung Kuala Terbol have recently embraced two religions, namely Islam and Christianity. A change of religion will also affect a person. The belief

of the Jah Hut community is tribal; they have no religion but customs and beliefs of animism. According to an informant from Tok Batin Kampung Kuala Terbol.

*If I am not mistaken, there are two religions here. Christianity and Islam are the only ones I know. There is also a church with a prayer hall nearby, but it is not too big or too small. It is enough for the people here. Moreover, some have no religion (Atheists) (I2, November 17, Field Study 2021).*

If they were sick in the past, they tended to use traditional medicine, but times have passed, and some are open-minded and some still hold to Jah Hut customs and beliefs. According to the eight informants interviewed:

*Yes I believe it. I grew up with this 'beni soy' medicine, my husband is a 'puyang', but not now. I do not do it anymore, if my children say they are sick / or if I am sick, we just go to the hospital or clinic and take medicine, I just go with it (follow that the children say), I'm old, I can't resist, I will just follow my son's words like that, but I still believe (in the sepilih) But nowadays people no longer use sepilih at part of treatment methods..*

*(I8, November 24, Field Study 2021)*

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Jah Hut community's wood carving customs have steadily evolved due to globalisation, religious missionaries, and embracing new religions like Islam and Christianity, which oppose atheism and animism. Consequently, it also altered the community's scientific conviction in healing principles. The younger generation enforces this attitude, and suffice it to state that most young people are unaware of the functions that "sepilih" play in curing illnesses. While this is happening, the elderly try to preserve the status quo by continuing to create "sepilih" sculptures for other uses that cater to the public's need for aesthetic appeal by selling the artwork to others outside the neighbourhood. By removing the spiritual components of wood carving, this aesthetic and economic role appears to benefit the Jah Hut people and the continued recognition of wood carving's artistic value.

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