

Transformation and Cross-Cultural Furniture from Time To Time With Its Trade Strategy

Examining the Development of Jepara and Malaysia Furniture in Each Development Period

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the development of the furniture industry in Indonesia and Malaysia. The furniture and the art of engraving in Jepara have a long history that makes Jepara the largest city of engraving art in Indonesia. While in Malaysia, engraving art has existed since the Neolithic period with evidence of artifacts in the form of barracks with simple engravings. Generally, various literature related to the furniture industry only discusses the value chain of furniture or its sales strategy. Yet, it is not less important to comprehend and document the changes experienced by the furniture industry in Indonesia and Malaysia as a form of cultural preservation. The research method used in this research is a qualitative research method with a historical approach. The primary data collection technique was conducted through interviews with Jepara engraving art historians and also furniture industry experts from Malaysia. There are three major categories: historical, educational conservation, and government support and trade strategies. The furniture industries in Indonesia are better than those in Malaysia in terms of their ability to sustain its existence. This research has potential limitations. The research result tends to be subjective since it is based solely on interviews conducted in a limited amount of time and only focuses on particular areas as the main topic of the study.

Keywords: *furniture industry, strategy, trade, transformation, cross culture*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji perkembangan industri furnitur di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Furnitur dan seni ukir di Jepara memiliki sejarah yang panjang sehingga menjadikan Jepara sebagai kota seni ukir terbesar di Indonesia. Sedangkan di Malaysia, seni ukir sudah ada sejak zaman Neolitikum dengan bukti artefak berupa gerabah yang memiliki ukiran sederhana. Berbagai literatur terkait industri furnitur, secara umum hanya membahas tentang rantai nilai furnitur atau strategi penjualannya, namun yang tidak kalah penting adalah mengetahui dan mendokumentasikan perubahan yang dialami industri furnitur di Indonesia dan Malaysia sebagai bentuk pelestarian budaya. Metode penelitian yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah metode penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan sejarah. Teknik pengumpulan data primer dilakukan melalui wawancara dengan para sejarawan seni ukir Jepara dan juga pakar

industri mebel dari Malaysia. Terdapat 3 kategori besar yaitu dari sudut pandang sejarah, pelestarian dari segi pendidikan, dan dukungan pemerintah serta strategi perdagangan. Industri furnitur di Indonesia mampu mempertahankan eksistensinya lebih baik dibandingkan industri furnitur di Malaysia. Penelitian ini masih mempunyai kekurangan dimana hasil penelitian masih bersifat subyektif berdasarkan hasil wawancara yang diperoleh dalam waktu singkat dan hanya fokus pada bidang tertentu sebagai kajian utama.

Kata kunci: industri furnitur, strategi, perdagangan, transformasi, lintas budaya

INTRODUCTION

The centre of furniture carving in Indonesia is Jepara and carving activities in Jepara are famous, especially in Indonesia. Its role as a furniture and carving region is tremendous because it can produce furniture on a huge scale. Furniture making and carving have become daily activities and economic drivers for the people of Jepara. This can be seen from the many furniture industries, kiosks, and workshops scattered along the gate of Jepara district to the city centre. Jepara is a regency town located on the north coast of Central Java (Gustami, 2000). It is located northeast of the city of Semarang. The west and north are bordered by the sea. The eastern part of the regency is a mountainous area and the famous mountain is Mount Muria (Nangoy & Yunida, 2013). Jepara Regency also includes the Karimunjawa Islands, a group of islands in the Java Sea. The two largest islands are Karimunjawa Island and Kemujan Island. Most of the Karimunjawa area is protected in the Karimunjawa Marine Reserve (Nangoy & Yunida, 2013; Jepara District Government, 2014).

The culture of furniture and carving is quite interesting to study because the carving profession has penetrated the Jepara

community like a mushroom that continues to grow and develop. Jepara furniture and carving have a long history. The carving or engraving techniques passed down through generations continue to be honed and developed. From what used to be self-taught, with the increasing number of people from within and outside the region interested in skilled labour, there are schools and educational institutions for furniture engineering, carving, and design today.

While in Malaysia, carving has existed since the Neolithic era with artifacts, such as pottery with simple carvings (Muntaz Mokhtar, 2018; Nasir and Asyaari, 2018). The heritage of Malaysian carving skills is found in Trengganu and Kelantan due to the descendants of the Patani and Langkasu communities not far from Patani (Hanafi, 2000; Nasir & Asyaari, 2018).

There have been many studies conducted by experts and academics on furniture, such as those conducted by the Australian Centre for Agricultural Research (ACIAR) focusing on finance in the Jepara furniture and carving industry and other institutions, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Furniture Value Chain (FVC), CIFOR, Jepara Local Government, Forestry Research and Development Agency

of the Ministry of Forestry, and national universities in Central Java. They only discussed the value chain of Jepara furniture. However, it seems futile because none of these institutions discuss Jepara furniture products.



Figure 1: Mantingan Ornaments
(Source: Bagus, Jati & Zainul, 2019)

METHODOLOGY

The research seeks to describe and map the development of furniture carving art in Malaysia and Indonesia. Regarding this, it uses qualitative methods with a descriptive approach because it is considered the most suitable for this research. In human relations, nuances are everything. Thus, a qualitative attitude is deemed more appropriate to deal with plural realities. The data can be obtained from documents such as books, articles, and newspapers, as well as catalysts and photos of existing cultural heritage objects from several sources, such as periodic data, time and travel records, data validity using source triangulation, and analysis with interactive models.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Development of Jepara Furniture

1. *The History Side*

Initially, the name Jepara came from the words *Ujung*, *Ujung Mara*, and *Jumpara*, which later became Jepara, meaning settlement where traders go to various regions (Nangoy & Sofiana, 2013). It indicates that the people of Jepara have worked as traders since a long time ago, although the commodity trade is not mentioned. However, it appears that Jepara carvings have traces from the reign of Ratu

Kalinyamat (1521-1546) in 1549. The queen had a daughter named Retno Kencono, who played a significant role in the development of carving. There was also a minister named Sungging Badarduwung, who came from Campa (Cambodia) in Jepara. The artefact found in the Mosque and Tomb of Sultan Hadlirin has 114 reliefs on white stone (Jepara Anniversary Writing Committee, 1984; Nangoy & Sofiana, 2013, Kusharyadi, 2016; Indrahti, 2022). These carvings are still used for the benefit of the palace. High-value products made on a single or limited basis (special order, palace tradition) are then often categorised as works of art and thus have no commercial value (Sahari, 2006).

After the death of Ratu Kalinyamat, Jepara carving craftsmen stagnated. The furniture and handicraft industry has existed since the golden age of the kingdoms in Java (Gustami, 2000). Then it developed again during the Kartini period with Western thinking that turned noble art into applied art without leaving aesthetics. Furniture is a work of applied art considering its function to support human activities. As explained below: A work of art reflects a system of values, traditions, environmental resources, life needs, and human behaviour or behaviour patterns, in which the art lives (Rohidi, 2000).

An important thing to note in the early 20th century is the role of Kartini who later became a national figure in pioneering the growth of women's emancipation and pioneering the development of the furniture world in Jepara. Born on 21 April 1879, Kartini's father, RMAA Sosroningrat, was a descendant of the great Tjondronegoro family who had served as regent in several places on the north coast of Java, namely Surabaya, Pati, Kudus and Demak. Shortly after RA Kartini was born, Sosroningrat was appointed Regent of Jepara (Sasroatmojo, 2005; Rosyadi, 2010; Manijo, 2013, Hartutik, 2015).

Kartini's role in developing the art of carving was also very significant. Kartini saw that the life of the artisans was stuck in poverty, and her mind was disturbed, so she was determined to raise the status of the artisans. She called several craftsmen from Belakang Gunung (now one of the hamlets of Mulyoharjo Village) under the leadership of Singowiryo to make various types of carvings, (Gustami, 2000; Hadi et al, 2013). It was even developed by Kartini, who had expertise in batik and drawing, using her designs. It was this expertise that made her always creatively seek innovation in the field of woodcraft design (Sahari, 2006).

During Kartini's time, carved furniture began to be commercialised by being traded to Semarang and Batavia (Jakarta), so it was finally known that the people of Jepara were good at carving (Nangoy & Yunida, 2013). Kartini even promoted her writing entitled *Van een Vergeten Uithoekje* or *The Forgotten Corner* and told it to her friends through letters or in person (Priyanto, 2010). So you



Figure 2: Botekan
(Source: Kartini Museum Collection)

could say that Kartini was the first to promote Jepara as a carving town. Kartini was also the first to export furniture abroad, such as frames, bottles, chairs, and jewellery boxes. The ornaments using Kartini's design for various items would be sent to the Netherlands (Sahari, 2006).

Since the 19th century, Jepara has been widely recognised as the leading furniture and carving region in Indonesia, as evidenced by the appreciation of some who say that Jepara is an integrated furniture and carving region (Nangoy & Yunida, 2013) even though it is still a collection of craftsmen. The development of the craft industry in Jepara was also noted by Raffles although not specifically, with the growth of silver and wood products around Juana, Jepara and Semarang that were exported to Batavia (Sahari, 2006).

While in Malaysia, Malay carving skills were influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist culture nurtured by the Campa Malay tribe

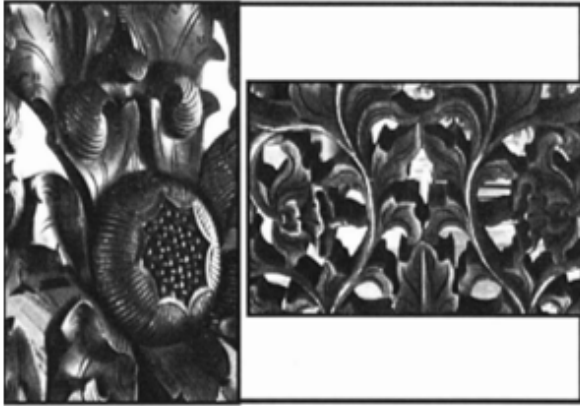


Figure 3: Carving Ketumbit
(Source: Hanapi et al, 2015)

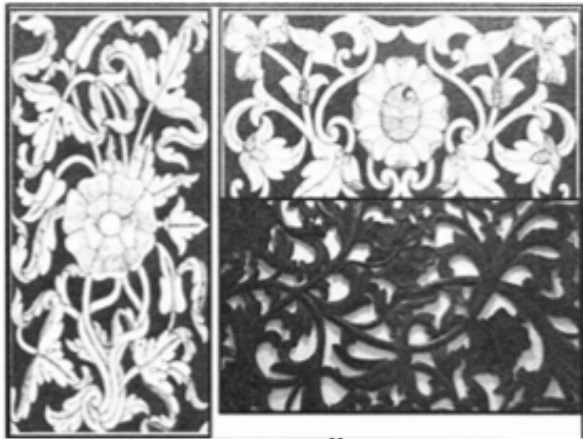


Figure 4: Ketamguri Carving
(Source: Hanapi et al, 2015)

(Nasir and Muhamad, 2018). However, the entry of Islam changed the art of carving from its motifs, the art of animal and god motifs was replaced with Arabic khat/plant motifs (calligraphy art) (Sari & Yuszaid, 2022; Said & Abdullah, 2021). Malay carving itself has received Islamic changes for approximately 13 centuries. Its legacy can be seen in the Great Hall of Kelantan (Nasir, 2016; Sari & Yuszaid, 2022).

Consequently, it gave birth to new forms with Islamic characteristics such as geometric shapes, flowers, plant shoots and leaves, and was used to decorate the palaces of kings,

great and famous people, houses of worship, gates and so on (Nasir, 2016; Sari & Yuszaid, 2022). On the other hand, the Kelantan carving motif itself was influenced by the carving of the Langkasu Kingdom whose shape was inspired by the Ketumbit and Ketamguri plants (Inagda et al, 2012; Sari & Yuszaid, 2022).

However, with the passage of time and the development of culture in Malaysia, woodcarving in Kelantan has declined due to the lack of skilled woodcarvers (Sari & Yuszaid, 2022). However, Kelantan and Trengganu woodcarving did not develop rapidly because their geographical location made Kelantan and Trengganu somewhat isolated from the outside world (Nasir and Asyaari, 2018).

1. The Education Aspect

Jejaya as a city of carving in the field of education also has Kartini's involvement. Kartini had established a "women's intelligence" school, which not only equipped students with knowledge but also with various craft skills. The female intelligence school model later inspired the establishment of vocational schools after independence (Sahari, 2006). Vocational education was also in line with the idea of JH Abendanon (husband of Kartini's best friend) Rosa Manuela Mandri. In 1904 Mr JH Abendanon as Director of Education and Crafts, proposed to improve and expand the education of indigenous people in Java, that drawing and weaving subjects be included in the lower school curriculum. This was followed up by sending several indigenous people to a craft school in Haarlem, Netherlands. A carpentry school



Figure 5: Pajajaran Motif, Majapahit, Cirebon
(Source: Widagdo, 2021)

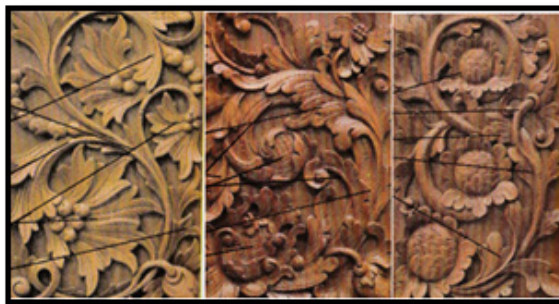


Figure 6: Jepara Motif, Pekalongan, Yogyakarta.
(Source: Widagdo, 2021)

with majors in furniture and carving in Jepara was first opened under the name “Openbare Ambachtsschool” in 1929, on 1 July 1929, to be precise (Nangoy & Yunida, 2013; Indrahti, 2022). From the Ambachtsschool, new creations began to emerge on Jepara furniture with carvings of royal motifs.

Ambachtsschool only until 1931, then changed its name to Ambachtsschool Yakin Inlanders 1931-1932, then changed to Ambachtssleergang 1932-1942, and during the Japanese colonial period changed its name to Kosyu Gakko 1942-1945. During independence, it became the Carpentry School 1945-1950, the First Technical School 1950-1955, and the State Technical School 3 in 1955 (Indrahti, 2022). Since independence, regional motifs began to emerge.

The carving skills of the Jepara



Figure 7: Guest chairs with traditional motifs
(Source: Kartini Museum Collection)

community were further enhanced with the establishment of the Ornamental Carving High School in 1959 by the district government (Aristita & Witasari, 2020; Alex Yusron al-Mufti. Et al., 2023). In 1980, it became the Ornamental Carving Technical High School, which developed into the Craft Industry High School with four majors: Wood Crafts, Metal Crafts, Textile Crafts, and Ceramic Crafts. Then it became SMK 2 Jepara, 2000 - Present (Aristita & Witasari, 2020).

Along with the existence of SMK, furniture and carving crafts are widespread among the community. More and more children are entering the SMK for furniture making and carving crafts to acquire skills in furniture and carving. With the increasing number of carving motifs mastered by Jepara craftsmen, Jepara furniture and carvings are increasingly in demand. Traders began to take advantage of this opportunity to acquire new goods to meet consumer demand, both domestic and foreign.

At the university level in Indonesia, higher education can support the quality of Jepara furniture, by which many Jepara

children attending universities such as ISI, ITB and so on. In 1993, a higher education institution was also established in Jepara managed by the Nahdlatul Ulama Education Foundation and had two departments, namely wood industry management and interior design (Suarno, 2021), which has now turned into Unisnu Jepara (Product Design Study Programme). Education has significantly improved the capabilities of Jepara’s human resources. It is because the creative power of employees, experts, scholars or artists can only be developed, through improving the quality of their work in terms of technique and conception.

Steps to advance the field of furniture and carving are also taken in Malaysia, although not as massive as in Indonesia, for example, by establishing both public and private universities, such as UiTM of Art and Design, University of Malaya, Limkokwing University, University of Monash and others (Mumtaz Mohtar, 2018). Overall Malaysia, there are only a dozen universities that specialise in art. UiTM is taking a bold step as it has a furniture design department.

2. Historical Flow of Jepara Carving from the Side of Education

(Look at figure 8).

3. The beginning of government and commerce

In 1932, a furniture company was initiated by the Regent of Rembang and the Regent of Jepara named Jepara’s Houtsnijwerl En Meubelmaker (JMH) to accommodate Ambachsschool graduates. After that, private furniture entrepreneurs emerged. Well-known

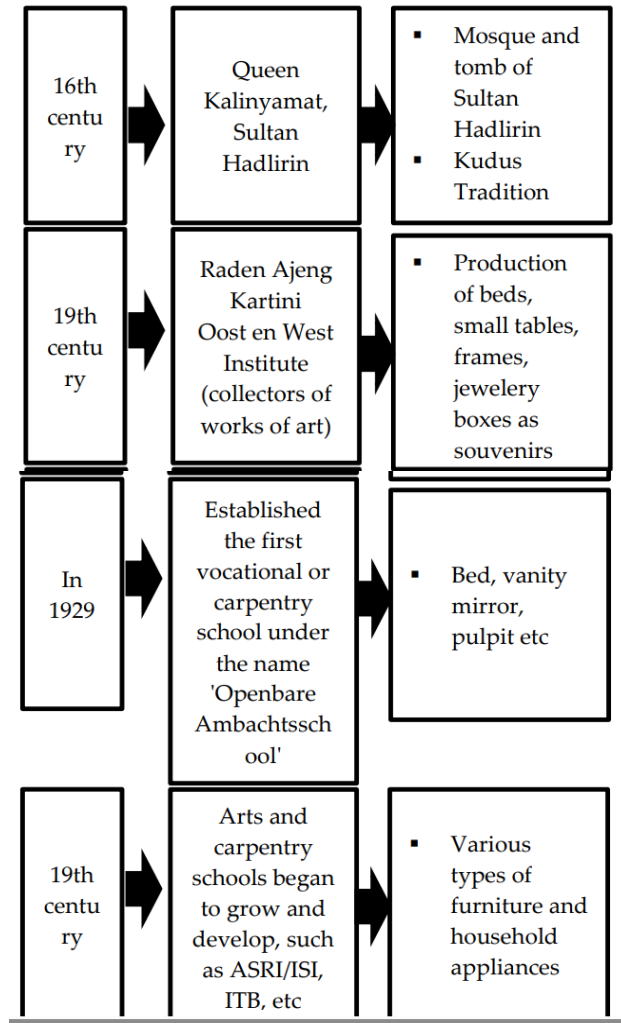


Figure 8: History of Jepara Carving

indigenous entrepreneurs were Haji Umar and the merchant Thio Gwan Ien, whose company named Toko Pandjang still stands today (Indrahti, 2022).

The development of the carving industry can be said to have entered a new phase around the 1980s, the starting point of the influx of orders from abroad, including Singapore (Kompas, 27 August 1980 p. 12). In terms of Jepara government policy, in 1989, the Regent of Jepara, Hisom Prasetyo, together with government officials and the Indonesian Furniture Association, Jepara wanted to do something so that the Jepara carving industry

could penetrate the international market. The method was to hold an exhibition introducing Jepara carving products to the outside world (Murdiyani. M. et al., 2015).

The effects of this policy began to be felt in the 1980s when foreign buyers and entrepreneurs arrived in Jepara. They came from Korea, Denmark, and Germany because of the previous government cooperation, so they came to Jepara. The arrival of foreign entrepreneurs was also able to influence the growth of the value added of the national small and craft industry (Zainal Abidin, 2020).

The presence of foreign entrepreneurs since 1991 also brought new designs from Western Europe, which eventually began to affect furniture products in Jepara. It was because foreign entrepreneurs brought their own designs from their countries and then worked on them in Jepara so that inevitably Jepara entrepreneurs only worked on orders from foreign entrepreneurs. Yet, it is undeniable that designs from abroad could increase the ability and knowledge of Jepara carving and furniture craftsmen.

The year 1998 coincided with the reformation. The severe economic crisis has led to crises in various fields. However, this was not felt in Jepara. During the 1998 economic crisis, exports of furniture and handicrafts increased because the products used relatively few imported materials that had to be purchased in dollars (Sahari, 2006). In a slightly different vein, Jepara also experienced a wave of reform (2001). The reform wave in Indonesia was also accompanied by an economic crisis. However, it did not affect Jepara because in 1999-2001 there was a tremendous boom in the carving



Figure 9: Western Style Furniture (Rococo)
(Source: Gunawan & Amelia, 2018)



Figure 10: Garden Furniture
(Source: Widagdo, 2022)

industry in Jepara. Because wood is a classic material widely used for furniture (Damas Prastiyan, 2017).

The increase in the sculpture industry is due to the entry of many new design models, namely Garden Furniture, which is relatively easy to work on and does not require special skills. As a result of the influx of garden furniture designs, many garden furniture business centres have sprung up in various areas in Jepara.

Thus, during the reformation period, the Jepara carving and furniture industry experienced a golden age. The negative impact of this business is that there is a lot of inefficient wood processing waste or a lot of wood is wasted with a large enough size to cause

a shortage of raw materials. Therefore, the selection of materials needs to be considered so that their use is appropriate and suits the theme. The golden age of the Jepara furniture and carving industry did not last long because in 2002 many foreign industry players from Jepara moved outside the Jepara area. The reason was that the declining wood quality in the furniture world also affected heat resistance and product durability. The declining volume of Jepara industry players was overcome by the establishment of industrial centres. In 2003 the government designated Mulyoharjo Village as the Mulyoharjo Sculpture Centre. The centre aims to restore the strength of the Jepara carving industry. The Mulyoharjo village area, which has many craftsmen, has a lot of potential for the Jepara carving industry (Mundofar. M, 2014).

The furniture industry remains the largest contributor to Jepara exports, contributing more than 34.87% of the Gross Regional Domestic Product or USD 190 million (GRDP). Indonesia's exports of wood-based furniture reached USD 1.8 billion (Salim & Munadi, 2017; Department of Industry 2022). So it can be understood that Jepara can contribute more than 10% of the value of Indonesian wood furniture exports. However, the existence of Jepara in the world of furniture has not been able to lift Indonesia's ideals in the world of furniture because Indonesia's ranking as a furniture exporter continues to fall. In 2000, Indonesia was ranked 5th but continued to fall to 21st in the world in 2022, although the value of Indonesian furniture trade continues to increase (Salim & Munadi, 2017).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, government

intervention is not as strong as in Indonesia. Therefore, the art of wood carving in Kelantan is diminishing due to the lack of reliable wood carvers (Sari & Yuszaid, 2022). Carvings in Malaysia are severe basic carving components commonly used in traditional houses. The basic carving component has been classified into three types, which are a single pattern (Pola Bujang), a frame pattern (Pola Pemindang), and a complete pattern (Pola Lengkap) (Irfan Ullah, 2018). However, in this modern era, few problems regarding the application of the carving components in new buildings occur as people try to make any building look modern. These include the absence of skilled craftsmen, problems in maintenance, and extra high costs. These issues make carvings seem infrequently remained functional in structures nowadays (Zuraini et al., 2015)

However, in Malaysia, the art of carving is starting to be abandoned because the younger generation is less interested in carving, the younger generation prefers jobs related to technology and machines that have no artistic value at all (Muhamad, 1982). Therefore, Kelantan and Trengganu carving art did not develop rapidly because it did not reject modernisation brought by the West, instead, the geographical location made Kelantan and Trengganu somewhat isolated from the outside world (Nasir and Muhamad, 2018). Yet, that does not mean there is no effort to preserve the culture. The craftsmen, who are also part of the local population, created a group of interested students which was expected to learn the skills and techniques of the carving craft gradually. This would depend on the interest and creativity of

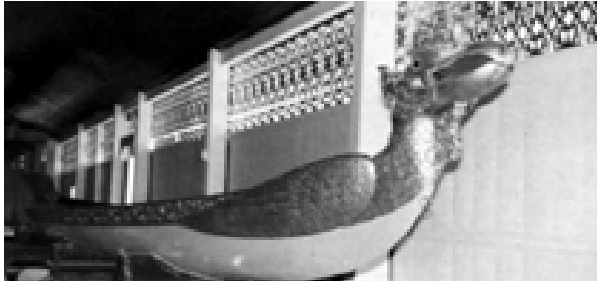


Figure 11: The Royal Boat of Kelantan, Pertala Indera Pertala Sari Kelantan or Sri Mahkota
(Source: Nasir & Muhamad, 2018)

the students determined to learn the craft. Because of the attractiveness of the craft, and other conditions like the improvements in the economic situation, certain individuals were actively involved in the study of this craft (Belo, 2017).

To maintain the culture of carving, in Kelantan, the “Puja Zaman” ceremony is held in which there is a competition for decoration and carving on boats (Nasir & Muhamad, 2018). The carving competition at the Age Puja ceremony greatly influenced Kelantan’s carving art because the winner would most likely be appointed as a palace sculptor or called “Orang Raja” (Nasir, & Muhamad, 2018).

Learning the art of carving is not easy and requires perseverance, coupled with the lack of government efforts to preserve the culture of carving for the younger generation (Muhamad, 1982). However, due to objective studies and current awareness, carving companies have received attention from financial institutions, higher education centres, the tourism sector, the trade sector, organisational figures. Many of them order carvings so that carving entrepreneurs survive (Muhamad, 1982).

Even the involvement of the Dewan Amanat Rakyat (MARA) has taken strategic steps to advance the art of carving by establishing carving companies outside the kingdom of Kelantan (Muhamad, 1982).

Relations with foreign countries through trade channels facilitated by the government so that Kelantan carvers no longer only receive orders from within the country. The carvers in Kelantan are open to new forms ordered by buyers who bring their own drawings. The carvers in Kelantan are no longer inferior to carvers from other countries such as Italy, Taiwan, America, Thailand and so on (Muhamad, 1982).

Malaysia is starting to consider the creative economy where carving is part of the steps taken, such as KL International Kraf Malaysia (23-26 Nov 2017), CENDANA to support performing arts, Karya Kriya, Seni Budaya launched on 6 Sep 2017, SDN BISNIS KREATIF, BHD (2012) government investment to support creative industries in Malaysia. Yayasan Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN) (2010) builds policies, funds and charities focusing on the creative industries. All of them can advance carving crafts in Malaysia (Mohtar, 2018). These steps have made Malaysia experience a significant surge in the furniture trade in the world, proven by Malaysia being able to rank the 17th largest furniture exporter in the world in 2022. (Salim & Munadi, 2017).

CONCLUSION

What is noteworthy in the transformation process of furniture works in Indonesia &

Malaysia is the persistence of classic traditional styles. Although it has undergone several developments, its traditional characteristics still survive to this day. Based on the existing research, it can be explained that furniture culture in Indonesia and Malaysia can be likened to a large discourse on the culture of the archipelago, and in it there is a process of cultural transformation, especially to adjust to market desires in the world of furniture. The shift that occurs is a synthesis process between donor culture and local culture which then becomes a new visual figure in furniture design. This transformation process occurs thoroughly in every region that develops, produces, and uses furniture design works. In these centuries there was a process of revitalisation of more modern production techniques and also a process of removal of aesthetic values and functions that did not go through a steady synthesis process. The research shows that the aesthetic value of tradition must be compromised with the furniture industry that prioritises function and accelerated production to fulfil market needs. However, the development and maintenance of cultural preservation is easier and more tangible in Indonesia than in Malaysia. This is because there are more people who support the culture in Indonesia than in Malaysia. Although Indonesia can maintain the sustainability of its culture and its existence, in terms of commerce it is not able to maintain its existence at the level of the world furniture trade. On the other hand, Malaysia must compromise with the outside world because Malaysia's main market is exports. Thus, the interference from the outside world makes

Malaysian furniture even more developed and not only maintains its existence but can grow rapidly and even compete with Indonesia so that Malaysian furniture export commodities continue to be increasingly able to compete in the global market.

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