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DECORATIVE MOTIFS IN NUSANTARA QURAN MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION: A FORMALISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

This study examines the variations of decorative motifs in the illumination of Quran manuscripts in the Nusantara through a formalistic approach. The study employed a qualitative literature-based analysis of eight previous studies on illuminated Quran manuscripts. The selected studies were analysed to identify the types of motifs and the structural organisation of manuscript illumination. The findings identify 26 examples of decorative motif designs and four main structural components: text, colour, basic markings and format. The motifs are predominantly derived from natural elements, particularly floral, vegetal and tendril forms, alongside geometric, wavy, woven and other locally distinctive motifs. The analysis also shows that decorative structures commonly employ frames, domes, rectangular panels, headpieces and tailpieces, with symmetry and balanced compositions playing an important role. The variations found in Aceh, Terengganu, Patani, Penang and other Nusantara contexts demonstrate the influence of local culture and artistic traditions in Quran manuscript illumination. Overall, the findings show that Nusantara Quran manuscript illumination combines Islamic visual principles with local artistic identity through diverse motifs and structured decorative compositions.

Keywords — **illumination, Quran manuscripts, Nusantara, formalistic analysis**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Illuminated manuscripts represent an important form of artistic expression in Malay and Nusantara cultural heritage. In Quran manuscripts, illumination is used to decorate and embellish selected pages and textual sections through the arrangement of colour, motifs, frames and other visual elements. Gallop (2004) defines illumination as decoration used to illustrate or embellish texts, often involving gold or silver, while other colours such as black and red inks may also be used. The formal arrangement of Quran manuscript illumination may include colours, formatting, frames, ornate layouts and decorative motifs (Zain, 2007).

This study focuses on the variations and structural organisation of decorative motifs found in the illumination of Quran manuscripts in the Nusantara. A formalistic approach is used because it concentrates on the visual form and structure of an artwork, including elements such as line, shape, space, colour and value, as well as principles such as balance, harmony, repetition, unity and variety (Omar et al., 2023; Abd Rahman, 2022). Within the context of manuscript illumination, this approach enables the visual characteristics and organisation of decorative motifs to be examined systematically.

Previous studies show that Nusantara Quran manuscripts display considerable diversity in decorative motifs and illumination structures. These variations are associated with local styles and cultural influences, particularly in regions such as Aceh, Terengganu, Patani and Penang (Gallop, 2004, 2005). Therefore, this study synthesises findings from selected previous research to identify the main types of decorative motifs and the structural characteristics of Quran manuscript illumination in the Nusantara.

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II. OBJECTIVES

This study aims to examine the variations of decorative motif designs in the illumination of Quran manuscripts in the Nusantara. Specifically, the study seeks:

1. To identify the types and variations of decorative motifs found in the illumination of Nusantara Quran manuscripts.
2. To analyse the structural organisation of decorative motifs based on a formalistic approach.
3. To identify the visual characteristics and local influences reflected in the decorative motifs of Nusantara Quran manuscript illumination.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative literature-based approach. Data were collected from eight selected previous studies discussing decorative motifs and illumination in Quran manuscripts and related illuminated manuscripts in the Nusantara. The studies were examined through visual observation and table analysis based on a formalistic approach. The analysis focused on identifying similarities and differences in motif designs and decorative structures.

The selected studies included research on Aceh Quran manuscripts (Andeska et al., 2019), the Terengganu Mushaf (Azmi & Abdullah, 2017), the design of Dala'il al-Khayrat (Abdullah & Silah, 2016), vegetal elements in Nusantara Mushaf art (Din et al., 2016), old Mushaf collections in Jakarta (Saefullah, 2007), illuminated manuscripts from the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula (Gallop, 2005), Acehnese manuscript illumination (Gallop, 2004) and illuminated Islamic manuscripts from Penang (Gallop, n.d.). The findings were then synthesised to identify recurring motif types and the structural organisation of decorative illumination.

IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. Types of Decorative Motifs

The analysis identified 26 examples of decorative motif designs. The motifs demonstrate strong variation according to local style and cultural influence. Many of the motifs are derived from natural resources, particularly flowers, leaves, shoots and tendrils. Examples include bungong sagoe, bungong pucuk rebung, bungong seuleupo, kuncup bunga, bungong kundo, bungong ayu-ayu, bungong awan-awan, vegetal motifs, tendril motifs, simple leaves and flowers, and floral motifs (Andeska et al., 2019; Din et al., 2016).

Other motifs include forms resembling the letters 'M' or 'W', wavy patterns, chilli motifs, woven or twisted rope motifs, coiled vine motifs, pear-shaped trefoil motifs, eight-petal flower motifs, repetitive geometric motifs and shoot or bud motifs (Gallop, 2004, 2005, n.d.). The diversity of these motifs demonstrates that Nusantara Quran manuscript illumination is characterised not only by Islamic decorative conventions but also by distinctive local artistic forms (Akbar, 2014; Gallop, 2004).

TABLE I

Main motif grouping	Examples identified from the analysed studies
1. Floral and vegetal motifs	Bungong sagoe, bungong pucuk rebung, kuncup bunga, bungong kundo, bungong ayu-ayu, simple leaves and flowers, floral and vegetal motifs (Andeska et al., 2019; Din et al., 2016)
2. Tendril and organic motifs	Tendril motifs, coiled vines, shoots or buds, awan and related organic forms (Gallop, 2004, 2005; Din et al., 2016)
3. Geometric and structured motifs	Repetitive geometric motifs and eight-petal flower forms (Abdullah & Silah, 2016; Gallop, n.d.)
4. Distinctive local motifs	M/W-shaped patterns, wavy motifs, chilli motifs, woven or twisted rope motifs and pear-shaped trefoil motifs (Gallop, 2004, 2005)

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Overall, the findings indicate that floral and vegetal elements are dominant in the decorative traditions represented in the analysed studies. The synthesis of the previous research also emphasises the formalistic characteristics of the motifs, including their visual forms, repetition, arrangement and relationship with local artistic traditions (Andeska et al., 2019; Din et al., 2016; Gallop, 2004).

B. Structural Organisation of Illumination

The analysis identified four main components in the structure of decorative illumination: text, colour, basic markings and format. These components work together to organise the visual appearance of the illuminated manuscript.

Textual elements include fine calligraphic panels, readable coloured text and text positioned within framed or rectangular structures. Colour is represented through the use of basic colours, gold gilt and combinations of red, yellow, green, orange, black and white. Gold is particularly associated with the luxurious visual character of illuminated manuscripts (Azmi & Abdullah, 2017; Gallop, n.d.).

Basic markings include juz marks, the beginning of surah, nisf marks, ayatul sajadah marks, sentence markings, surah titles and the beginning of each juz. These markings are frequently incorporated into decorative structures, including rectangular frames and repetitive geometric arrangements (Azmi & Abdullah, 2017; Gallop, n.d.).

The format of illumination shows considerable diversity. Identified structures include rectangular geometric arrangements, boxy frames with floral decorations, domes surrounding text frames, curved outer frames, sharp projecting forms, half-domes, small domes, three-dome arrangements, wavy patterns, tendrils, teardrop-like forms, double frames, headpieces and tailpieces (Gallop, 2004, 2005; Saefullah, 2007).

C. Local Styles and Visual Characteristics

The analysed studies demonstrate clear regional variations in decorative style. Aceh manuscript illumination is characterised by double frames, headpieces and tailpieces, together with distinctive woven or twisted rope motifs, coiled vines and pear-shaped trefoil motifs (Gallop, 2004). Terengganu-style illumination is associated with luxurious decoration, the use of gold, dome forms, curved frames, repetitive floral and leaf motifs, and patterns resembling the letters 'M' or 'W' (Azmi & Abdullah, 2017; Gallop, 2005).

Patani-style manuscripts show a comparatively different structural arrangement, including three decorated domes, rectangular text panels, tendrils, chilli motifs and teardrop-like forms. The decorative design also distinguishes between major and secondary vegetal elements (Gallop, 2005). Penang manuscript illumination includes sentence markings, surah titles, juz divisions and repetitive geometric motifs, including eight-petal flower forms (Gallop, n.d.).

These variations demonstrate that the structure of illumination strongly influences the arrangement of decorative motifs. Across the analysed examples, symmetry and balance are important visual characteristics, particularly in facing pages and framed compositions. At the same time, local culture influences the selection, naming and transformation of motifs, producing distinctive regional identities within the wider Nusantara tradition (Gallop, 2004, 2005; Din et al., 2016).

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined decorative motifs in Nusantara Quran manuscript illumination through a qualitative, literature-based formalistic analysis. The findings identified 26 examples of motif designs and four main structural components: text, colour, basic markings and format. Floral, vegetal and tendril forms are prominent, while geometric, wavy, woven and other distinctive motifs demonstrate the diversity of Nusantara decorative traditions.

The structural analysis shows that illumination is organised through combinations of frames, domes, rectangular panels, headpieces, tailpieces, colours and textual markings. The examples from Aceh, Terengganu, Patani and Penang demonstrate that local artistic identity plays an important role in shaping the visual characteristics

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of Quran manuscript illumination (Gallop, 2004, 2005, n.d.; Azmi & Abdullah, 2017).

Overall, the study shows that Nusantara Quran manuscript illumination represents a rich combination of Islamic decorative principles and local artistic traditions. The findings provide a concise reference for further studies on manuscript illumination, decorative motifs and the visual heritage of the Nusantara.

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