

## Unveiling the Legacy of the Hayat Ağacı from the Seljuks and Ottomans to Southeast Asia

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the identity characteristics of the Hayat Ağacı (Tree of Life) motif in the decorative arts of the Seljuks, Ottomans, and Southeast Asia. Through field-based research and observational methods, it examines the consistent presence of this motif in minbar carvings across various cultural and historical contexts. The findings reveal a shared conceptual approach among minbar carvers despite differences in cultural and temporal contexts. Furthermore, the study documents the distinctive stylized variations of the Hayat Ağacı, emphasizing its role as a unifying symbol within Islamic heritage art across the Islamic world.*

**Keywords:** *Hayat Ağacı, Tree of Life, minbar carvings, Islamic heritage, stylized motifs.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Ornamentation in Islamic art is more than a visual embellishment. It serves as a medium through which metaphysical principles, spiritual symbolism, and cultural identity are expressed. Among the many motifs employed in the decorative arts of the Islamic world, the *Hayat Ağacı* or Tree of Life, holds a remarkably enduring and cross-cultural significance.

The *Hayat Ağacı* or Tree of Life motif, traditionally symbolizing life, divine wisdom, and the connection between the earthly and the heavenly, is deeply embedded in both pre-Islamic and Islamic iconographic traditions. Its presence in religious architecture, particularly in the minbar (pulpit) of mosques, provides insight into the spiritual and cultural ideals of the societies that produced them.

The concept of the Tree of Life does not appear in the Koran. Still, it is a very ancient and widespread cosmogonic symbol that may be regarded as symbolising eternal life or the afterlife. The symbolism of the tree points to light and the word (i.e., The Koran). Light is God Himself (Doğan Kuban, 2010) [1]. The image of the great tree of life that is seen in carving, shadow puppets, weaving and the like all indicate the extent to which the cult of trees had become deep-rooted in the Malay World (Farish A. Noor & Eddin Khoo, 2003) [2].

The minbar, as a central liturgical object in the mosque, not only serves a functional purpose during sermons but also embodies profound symbolic meanings. Its design, including the use of intricate wood carvings, often incorporates a range of ornamental motifs reflecting the theological and aesthetic values of its context.

In Islamic architecture, *Hayat Ağacı* is typically abstracted and depicted in an Islamic style. It is prominently used as part of minbar ornamentation all over the Islamic world. The Anatolian Seljuk and Ottoman architects often use this element in their designs, which show both great skill and meaning at the same time.

Alternatively, the use of the Tree of Life motif in Southeast Asia, notably on the Malay Peninsula, Java as well as islands in Indonesia, merges the local culture's style with Islamic art patterns. Most Southeast Asian minbars are made from tropical hardwoods, showing intricate carvings and an original interpretation of Islamic styles incorporated with indigenous mythologies, motifs, designs as well as

craftsmanship. In some places, the Tree of Life shows local ideas, for example, related to fertility, living as a community and connectedness to ancestors, but it still embodies universal Islamic themes of spiritual development and divine unity.

Even though the *Hayat Ağacı* motif is well-known and used in the three regions of Anatolia (Seljuk, Ottoman as well as Asia, very little research has looked at how the motif developed in each one. Current academic scholarships generally study these regions by themselves and do not examine the kinds of motifs, styles and symbols used in connection to others. Even though Islamic geometric and vegetal ornamentation has received a lot of attention, few studies have actually looked directly at how the motif appears in the Tree of Life on minbars.

The main goal of this study is to understand the differences and similarities in the *Hayat Ağacı* motif's identity, shapes and meanings in minbar design between the Seljuk, Ottoman and Southeast Asian Islamic cultures. The study examines the motif's role in minbar design using both exploring the site and visual analysis despite changes in materials, techniques and styles used in different cultures.

By focusing on the Tree of Life as a case study, particularly in the underrepresented context of Southeast Asian minbar decoration, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Islamic art serves as both a unifying cultural force and a reflection of regional diversity. It emphasizes the importance of ornamental motifs not only as decorative elements but also as carriers of meaning, identity, and continuity within the broader narrative of Islamic civilization. This study is guided by the main research objectives and research questions, which have been formulated to explore the central themes and scope of the research.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the presence and application of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif in minbar ornamentation within the artistic traditions of the Seljuks, Ottomans, and Southeast Asia.
2. To identify the formal visual characteristics of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif in the minbar ornamentation of the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Southeast Asia contexts.
3. To analyze the underlying philosophy and symbolic meanings embedded in the visual forms of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif in the minbar ornamentation of the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Southeast Asia.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is the *Hayat Ağacı* motif manifested and utilized in the minbar ornamentation of the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Southeast Asian Islamic artistic traditions?
2. What are the defining visual features and stylistic elements of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif as represented in minbar ornamentation across the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Southeast Asian contexts?
3. What philosophical and symbolic meanings are conveyed through the visual representation of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif in minbar ornamentation across different Islamic regions and historical periods?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies related to mosque pulpits (mimbar) during the Seljuk and Ottoman periods have been conducted by Yüksel, Kasal, Erdil, and Acar (2014) [3], as discussed in their conference paper entitled *A Review of Basic Interior Design Elements in Mosques from Seljuk and Ottoman Periods*. Further scholarly exploration was also presented by the same group of authors in an earlier study, Yüksel, Kasal, Erdil, and Acar (2013) [4], which focused on a traditional wood decoration and construction technique known as *Real Kundekari*, documented in the paper *An Old Wood Decoration/Construction Technique in Seljuk: Real Kundekari*.

Based on previous studies, the development of wood carving art in the Malay Peninsula has been discussed. The book entitled *Ukiran Kayu Warisan Melayu* (Malay Woodcarving Heritage) compiles several subtopics based on research conducted by prominent figures, particularly among skilled traditional Malay woodcarvers. This book examines the historical development of wood carving in

Malaysia and provides an introduction to the traditional art of woodcarving. It also presents the decorative motifs found on carved panels and explores the underlying philosophy behind their artistic beauty (Baba, Z., 2010) [5].

The book *Spirit of Wood* (2003) by Farish A. Noor and Eddin Khoo shows illustrations for over 40 traditional minbar designs. The publication contains pictures showing the whole minbar from Surau Langgar in Kelantan (date: 1874) and an image of the “*gunungan*” section taken at the Masjid Losong Haji Mohd 44 in Terengganu, which is assumed to have been built in the late 1800s. I have included the *gunungan* design of the minbar from Masjid Losong Haji Mohd as one of the main subjects of my research.

The way people from different ethnic backgrounds express themselves with art is often guided by their customs, beliefs and traditions, resulting in many different methods and styles. Traditional woodcarving in the Malay Archipelago usually highlights scenes of plants rather than animals as a sign of conscious alignment with Islamic beliefs. The way these carvings are formed and designed shows the important values of Malay culture, which are categorized by the values of neatness, compliance and a strong sense of balance in life (Baba, Z., 2010) [6].

Norhaiza Noordin, a master in Malay woodcarving, shows an advanced skill in carving. He is also known as an Adiguru (Master of Craftsman) and is engaged with the beauty of how things are made and the situation of design. His emphasis on design, as evident in his sketching and illustrating of the surrounding area, is very noticeable in Kuala Besut Sketches. The illustrations show that the author has a keen sense of responsibility in keeping the tradition of Malay woodcarving alive. This display of culture helps people reflect on themselves, which contributes to the growth of a cultural identity supported by traditional roots and common references (Hasan et al., 2018) [7].

Many researchers and experts have discussed about the field that this research belongs to. The article entitled *The Form and Symbolism of Minbar Architecture in The Malay World* (Rashid, S., 2015) [8], outlines how the designs of minbars changed in the Malay world, highlighting how Islamic and local designs combined, as well as the meaning behind each element in those minbar designs.

In the article titled *Study of Decorative Art in the Muslim Religious Monuments with Religious Significance* by Khan, S. 2015 [9], the author explores the religious meaning of plant motifs in Islamic art. It was developed from prevailing Sasanian and Greco-Roman artistic forms and were later included in Muslim religious structures. Meanwhile, Ismail, H., Haron, H., Yusof, N. A., Jaafar, R. and Othman, A. (2024) [10] conducted a study focusing on the minbar’s wood carving motifs found at the Ulul Albab Mosque, how their culture is important to those themes and the features they contribute to the minbar’s design in the article *Exploring Wood Carving Motifs: The Minbar of Ulul Albab Mosque*.

Previous research on ornamental patterns in Malay woodcarving has been explored by various cultural scholars. For instance, Mohamed Yusof, Y., Abd Arif, H., & Abdullah, N. (2020) [11] examined contemporary expressions in carving art, while Ahmad Asri and Mohd Yusoff (2022) [12] focused on natural and plant-based motifs found in Terengganu carvings and Abd. Arif, H., Mohd Noor, A. I., Abdullah, N., & Hamzah, M. J. (2019) [13] further contributed by highlighting herbaceous plants as a source of inspiration for Malay carvers.

### III. METHODOLOGY

In this case, the *Hayat Ağacı* motif acts as a sample and is the main focus of analysis at the chosen field locations. This way of working is in line with qualitative research, which stresses that research should be carried out in real and genuine settings. According to Othman Lebar (2006) [14], one objective for researchers is to observe, describe and interpret situations as they naturally occur. They do not try to change the situation in any way. Thus, the study will take a qualitative approach by applying the case study method. Provided that this study aims to examine how the *Hayat Ağacı* motif was used differently in Seljuk, Ottoman and Malay cultures, a careful investigation is required. It means watching natural

processes in their native surroundings and recording detailed data about them. Gathering information in a scheduled and formal way allows for a balanced understanding of the main points.

#### IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

After the Seljuk conquest, mosques became some of the first significant buildings found in urban parts of Anatolia. Religious architecture from the medieval age shares certain well-defined features that show both its function and meaning. Besides their external features, the existing minbars show what the Seljuk era was like in terms of religion and art. Well-preserved liturgical equipment can be seen in the Alaaddin Mosque (Alaaddin Camii) in Konya and the Karamanoglu Mosque (Karamanoglu Camii) in Aksaray.

Notably, both of these historically significant minbars were constructed concurrently in the year 1155 CE, underscoring a period of active architectural patronage and religious expression (Sahin, S. 2019) [15]. Here are two examples of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif as seen on the minbars of historical mosques, including Karamanoglu Camii and Aslanhane Camii, from the Anatolian Seljuk period, as shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

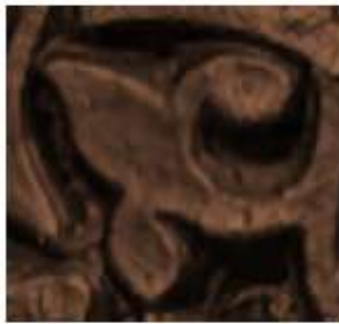


Fig. 1 *Hayat Ağacı* Motif on the Minbar of Karamanoglu Camii, Aksaray, Turkey [1155]



Fig. 2 *Hayat Ağacı* Motif on the Minbar of Divrigi Camii, Sivas, Turkey [1288]

Here are two more examples of the *Hayat Ağacı* motif as seen on the minbars of historical mosques of Aslanhane Camii and Bursa Ulu Camii from the Turkish Ottoman period, as shown in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4:



Fig. 3 *Hayat Ağacı* Motif on the Minbar of Aslanhane Camii, Ankara, Turkey [1289/1290]



**Fig. 4** *Hayat Ağacı* Motif on the Minbar of Bursa Ulu Camii, Bursa, Turkey [1399]

In the Malay World, floral and foliate motifs are often rendered in naturalistic forms, yet at times stylized into abstract geometric configurations to evoke a sense of balance, unity, and aesthetic perfection within the composition. These botanical elements, deeply rooted in the artistic tradition, are inspired by Islamic philosophical thought, symbolizing the divine presence and the intricate beauty of the natural world as a manifestation of God's creation (Bakar, O., & Omar Basaree, R., 1995) [16].

Field-based investigations into minbar ornamentation over the past century have identified notable visual parallels in the *Hayat Ağacı* (Tree of Life) motif between examples found in this transcontinental region and those observed in Southeast Asian minbars, as shown in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6:



**Fig. 5** *Hayat Ağacı* Motif on the Minbar of Tgk. Di Pucok Mosque, Pidie, Aceh [1620]



**Fig. 6** *Hayat Ağacı* Motif on the Minbar of Losong Haji Mohd Mosque, Terengganu, Malaysia [1810]

## V. CONCLUSIONS

*Hayat Ağacı* (Tree of Life) is a distinctive motif characterized by a dome-shaped form commonly found in the decorative art of Nusantara wooden carvings, particularly on mosque pulpit (minbar). This motif, observed in the ornamentation of Nusantara minbars, shares similar identity traits with the *Hayat Ağacı* designs from the Ottoman Turkish period, as well as with those from the earlier Anatolian Seljuk era.

The variations of this motif in architectural elements and art objects from the Seljuk and Ottoman periods, as well as in the minbars ornamentation of the Southeast Asia region, reflect the intellectual ingenuity of local artisans, including carvers and sculptors. *Hayat Ağacı*, as manifested in the decorative traditions of Southeast Asia minbars, represents a distinctive marker of Anatolian Seljuk and Ottoman Turkish influence, highlighting the concept of unity in diversity through cultural assimilation that has been adapted to local traditions.

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