

# A Thematic Analysis of Halaman Sidr's Wooden Sculpture

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.807199>

Received: 17 July 2024; Revised: 24 July 2024; Accepted: 27 July 2024; Published: 17 August 2024

## ABSTRACT

In the Islamic spiritual tradition, Ulu al-Absar refers to an individual who has deep inner vision and spiritual wisdom. His observations are sourced from all the creations of Allah SWT in heaven and earth, to improve the intellectual, spiritual and physical competence of a human being. Thus, this study aims to analyze the implementation of the concept of Ulu al-Absar in the artwork of Halaman Sidr wooden sculpture. Through a qualitative approach that involves text analysis and the study of wooden sculpture, this study seeks to highlight the integration of the concept of Ulu al-Absar in the interpretation of the sculpture's architecture. Halaman Sidr's wooden sculpture was chosen as the subject of the study because it reflects a combination of modern aesthetics with deep spiritual symbolism and its connection with Sufism values. Analysis was done on the composition of the sculpture, the use of space, as well as the symbols applied in this work. The results of the study concluded that Halaman Sidr's wooden sculpture art offers a new perspective related to the application of Islamic spiritual concepts in visual art. In addition, it is also able to promote a deeper appreciation of the art of sculpture in the spiritual and cultural context of Islam. This study also adds to the knowledge in the field of Islamic art and provides inspiration to artists to incorporate spiritual elements in their work.

**Keywords:** Ulu al-Absar, Wood Sculpture, Halaman Sidr, Tasawuf, Islam

## INTRODUCTION

Sculpture art is a branch of modern visual arts discipline that is growing nowadays. Nevertheless, the field of visual arts is a challenging field in terms of knowledge and skills in the era of globalization without borders. Therefore, high knowledge and skills need to be possessed by artists in producing creative works and innovations. According to al-Attas (1978), knowledge is the arrival of the meaning of something to oneself, as well as the success of oneself absorbing it. This statement clearly shows that knowledge is true information and brings meaning to the life of every human being so that they can transform themselves into knowledgeable human beings (Sabri, 2017). The ambiguity of the concept of knowledge led by the secular Western view has led to tyranny in human life and nature. Humans today know a lot of information. However, most of the known information does not include important facts in life such as the existence of God, the day of retribution, the human spirit and others that can only be known through the source of revelation (Hisham, 2011).

Generally, Islamic scholars agree that all sources of knowledge come from one source (Sabri, 2017). Islam requires its people to master knowledge and skills because Allah SWT has provided the potential ability to receive knowledge in humans. Accordingly, the Qur'an has debated three main concepts namely *Ulu al-Albab*, *Ulu al-Absar* and *Ulu al-Nuha* in guiding the ability of the mind and human potential. In the context of this study, the subject of the study that is used as a reference axis is the artwork of Halaman Sidr. This work was

chosen as the subject of study because it reflects the combination of modern aesthetics with deep spiritual symbolism and its connection with Sufism values. Analysis was done on the composition of the sculpture, the use of space, as well as the symbols applied in this work. Therefore, this article formulates the concept of *Ulu al-Absar* to display the beauty and subtlety of meaning and aesthetic values through the sculpture of Halaman Sidr.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research approach through narrative design to collect information, data and reference materials from the right sources. Narrative studies emphasize understanding and generating meaning based on stories, experiences and observations (Potteiger & Purinton, 1998). In this study, this approach is implemented through two forms of analysis, namely content analysis and visual semiotic analysis. Content analysis focuses on the process of analyzing the content of previous studies to formulate the meaning of Ulu al-Absar theory according to Islam. Next, a visual semiotic analysis method was performed on the Halaman Sidr sculpture to connect the interpretation of this work with the concept of *Ulu al-Absar*. According to Chandler (2007), visual semiotic analysis is a study related to signs that exist visually, the procedure of interpreting the meaning of those signs. A design and painting have an intrinsic meaning that can be formulated into loose principles to help the researcher's evaluation in understanding the meaning of the image or sculpture produced (Soikun & Ibrahim, 2018). Thus, both analytical approaches can summarize the implementation of the concept of Ulu al-Absar in the Halaman Sidr wooden sculpture as determined in the study.

### *Ulu Al-Absar* Concept in Al-Quran

The term *Ulu al-Absar* is expressed in the Qur'an through surah Ali Imran, al-Nur, al-Sad and al-Hashr to describe the group that takes reminders from natural events and occurrences (Nazneen & Syaidatun, 2019). However, the concept of *Ulu al-Absar* or 'those who know the heart' are not explained in detail in the Quran. Accordingly, the word *basirah* is seen to be closely related to the principles contained in the concept of Ulu al-Absar. Etymologically, *basirah* means heart conscience or insight. The word *basirah* comes from the word *basara* or *absara* which means eyes of the heart (Azyumardi, 2008). According to Farid (1971), *basirah* also means intellect, intelligence, lesson and testimony, while Ibrahim (2004), in Mu'jam al-Wasit explains *basirah* refers to the power of vision accompanied by inner intelligence or intuition that contains the truth. Although the word *basar* means to see, it is very rare that the word *basar* only explains vision without being accompanied by the sight of the heart.

In the context of Sufism, the term *basirah* refers to deep spiritual vision or intuition based on the ability to see the essence of something with the eyes of the heart and go beyond the outward view that is limited to the physical senses. In fact, *basirah* is also closely related to the wisdom and spiritual acuity bestowed by Allah SWT to those who have faith and piety. Ibn Ajibah (2005) argues that *basirah* refers to the eyes of the heart by seeing deep meaning, while the gross eyes can only see things that are felt by the senses. When the eyes of the heart have been opened and the light comes out to dominate the gross eyes, the gross eyes will see what the eyes of the heart see through *musyahadah*. In addition, Sufis explain that *basirah* refers to those who have a keen eye, intelligence, stability and faith in religion (Azyumardi, 2008). Furthermore, people who have wisdom can understand the true reality when carrying out God's commands and abandoning His prohibitions because the eyes of his heart are able to see something secret behind the promises and threats from God SWT. Evidence related to *basirah* which refers to the conscience is revealed in the Qur'an ie:

Translation: But lo, man is well aware of himself, even though he might make up excuses.

(Surah al-Qiyamah 75:14-15)

If examined, *basirah* is divided into three levels, namely *syu'a al-basirah* (light of *basirah*), *ayn al-basirah* (testimony of *basirah*), and *haqq al-basirah* (reality of *basirah*). *Syu'a al-basirah* refers to the initial rays or rays of spiritual vision. The first stage the individual begins to feel the light of truth and gains some spiritual enlightenment. Individuals at this level begin to understand and feel the signs of God's greatness through reflection and meditation. Indirectly, individuals begin to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and bad

(Azyumardi, 2008).

The second stage, *ayn al-basirah*, refers to a deeper and sharper spiritual vision. At this level, a person not only receives the rays of the light of truth but is also able to clearly see the truth behind all events. Individuals at this level could see the truth clearly and understand the deeper meaning behind the events in life. Indirectly, individuals can see the signs of God in all aspects of life and have a deep understanding of God's laws and wisdom (Azyumardi, 2008). The third level, *Haqq al-basirah* is the highest level where a person achieves the essence of spiritual vision. At this level, this individual sees the truth clearly, is confident without any doubt until reaching the level of *ma'rifah* which is deep knowledge about Allah SWT and has a very close relationship with Allah. In addition, individuals at this level not only understand but appreciate and practice Divine truth in every aspect of life. Indirectly, at this level the individual will have peace and deep inner satisfaction, understand the purpose of life and always be in a state of *zikrullah* (remembering Allah), be a source of inspiration and role model for others, radiate wisdom and wisdom in every action and speech (Azyumardi, 2008).

Therefore, these three levels describe *Ulu al-Absar's* progressive spiritual journey from the early stages of enlightenment until he has a deep understanding and finally reaches the essence of truth. Al-Maraghi (1946) explains that *Ulu al-Absar* has a keen eye that always reflects and improves himself. They realize that nothing is hidden from God. Therefore, they strive to do good and sincere deeds. This realization led to a deep realization, where *Ulu al-Absar* always reflected and tried to improve their weaknesses. This is proven through surah al-Nur which explains about the *Ulu al-Absar* group ie:

Translation: Allah alternates the night and the day. Indeed, in that is a lesson for those who have vision.

(Surah al-Nur 24:44)

Based on the verse above, *Ulu al-Absar* refers to people who have sharp vision, not only physically but also spiritually. *Ulu al-Absar* is an individual who can see and understand the wisdom behind natural events and events in life (al-Maraghi, 1946). This term is often associated with people who have wisdom and a deep understanding of religious teachings and God's creation. Through these two proofs prove that *Ulu al-Absar* takes lessons from every fact that happens and tries to always improve himself, act honestly and sincerely in every aspect of life. In fact, *Ulu al-Absar* has reached such a high spiritual maturity that he inspires others.

### ***Ulu Al-Absar* and Malays Local Wisdom**

The concept of *Ulu al-Absar* is based on research and in-depth observation of something to create benefits in life. Allah SWT has blessed human beings with intelligence and clarity of conscience as a source of generating *Ulu al-Absar* values in oneself. For the Malay community, the concept of *Ulu al-Absar* can be seen through elements of local wisdom. Local wisdom is defined as all local wisdom that is full of the values of goodness, decency and intelligence, and is practiced as a community culture and practice (Giska, 2013). According to Suhartini (2009), local wisdom is closely related to the environmental wisdom that exists in every community based on the values and behavior of the community, not only in living daily life, but in interacting with humans and the environment. For Aslan (2017) on the other hand, local wisdom also involves culture and traditions that are inherited, held and practiced by the community, both in the form of religion, customs, ethics and daily practices.

Nunung & Muslim (2016) see local wisdom as a procedural manual produced by a society, based on their research on the environment to offer a solution to problems resulting from the interaction of humans and nature. This manual is then handed down from one generation to another as a guide and legacy of life. This unique knowledge is further cultured in the community and used as a guide in making various decisions and considerations, both involving aspects of agriculture, animal husbandry, traditional customs, health, and the management of natural resources (Flavier, 2003) This element of local wisdom is also found in knowledge traditional, handicrafts, sculpture art, polite manners and the pure values of society (Miranita, 2017). Local wisdom is also linked to local wisdom, which refers to the skills and abilities of a community based on life experience and cultural characters practiced in the environment. It is built through the critical and creative thinking of the first generation, which is then passed on to the next generation according to the suitability of their

environment (Warren, 1996). Therefore, Sillitoe (1998) has divided local wisdom into two forms, namely something that can be touched and seen (tangible) such as monuments, manuscripts, traditional houses and cultural symbols; as well as something abstract (intangible) such as tips, advice and taboos.

Thus, this element of local wisdom not only reflects the superiority of a society's culture and tradition, even according to Islam, it is closely related to the concept of Ulu al-Absar itself, which is the main basis for the appointment of humans as caliphs in the world. In fact, the concept of Ulu al-Absar is also a guide in straightening the elements of local wisdom based on Islamic principles, without neglecting the traditional values of the community. According to Rahimin et.al (2013), Islam has strengthened the elements of local wisdom in the Malay world through six approaches. The main approach is through the application of the Islamic world-view in Malay society, with an emphasis on the meaning of life, the purpose of life and the end of life. Therefore, it provides a new paradigm in facing the two dimensions of life, namely fellow creatures (horizontal) and with the Creator (vertical). This view of life results when humans understand the reality of their own existence (the microcosm) as well as the environment and the supernatural (the macrocosm) (Uthman, 2001). Therefore, humans need to know the reality of the existence of these two worlds through authentic and authentic sources, that is, the reality of the world through the source of reason (*al-'aql*), while the reality of the unseen world is through the source of revelation (*al-naql*).

In addition, Islam also plays a role as a formula for the development of human capital, which is the axis of the element of local wisdom in the Malay community. Islam has explained the fact of the creation of every human being from three main elements, namely spirit, body and mind. These three elements need to be developed in an integrated manner to create a civilized society that has a strong sense of identity and tradition (Rahimin, 2005). Therefore, the application of the concept of Ulu al-Absar is not only focused on the element of reason but is also influenced by the element of spirit and body. Thus, to ensure that the Malay community is balanced in physical and spiritual development, the community education process based on family institutions has played an important role. The term *budiman*, which highlights the balance, and the best human character (*qudwah hasanah*) is based on the traditional values and courtesy of the Malay community. It is translated through the appreciation of the values of character, courtesy, discretion, common sense and high and noble manners (Hashim, 2001). The instillation of these values makes the element of local wisdom that exists in the Malay community not merely external in nature but has an internal strength in giving meaning to life in this world and the afterlife. In fact, it is also not limited to relationships between people and the environment, even more importantly it is able to strengthen the value of servitude to Allah SWT through the axis of faith and piety.

### **Implementation of *Ulu Al-Absar* in Halaman Sidr's Wooden Sculpture**

The production of a work of art is a perspective from the artist himself regarding evaluation and consideration of a meaning and truth (Anwar, 2007). Humans usually tend to give impressions and perceptions related to something without researching the truth. This perception is built only depending on the perception of the senses, without the logic of the mind. Thus, when this notion begins to spread, various confusions and misunderstandings can potentially arise in society. So, based on the attitude and behaviour of the community in the face of rumours and fabricated information, there is an awareness to take advantage of the advantages of human creation through the combination of senses, mind and heart. The combination of these three elements not only optimizes the function of human creation but is even able to form a healthy and harmonious relationship with their environment.

The human mind needs the guidance of Islamic Shari'a to judge the truth. It becomes the basis for determining and evaluating a matter whether it meets or contradicts Islamic law. The human heart is the axis of the basic belief in the principles of faith. It requires people to align their beliefs (*Aqidah*) with Islamic law (*Sharia*), further ensuring that their actions reflect good ethics (*Akhlak*) (Muhammad, 1993). These meanings have been applied through the production of Halaman Sidr's sculptural artworks for this to benefit the physical appearance and spiritual meaning to the observer and art appreciator. This wooden sculptural is designed so that it can be perceived as part of a book page, an information board, an inscribed stone character that can be read visually and has a meaning and order that are interrelated in function between the image of each surface and its manufacture.



Figure 1: Front View

Figure 2: Inside View

(Source: Hisammudin Ahmad, 2023)

(Source: Hisammudin Ahmad, 2023)

The word 'Halaman' in the title of the work can refer to the book's function as an intermediary for conveying and storing knowledge. The yard can also be seen as part of the external and internal physical space of the house. Window objects, interior and exterior spaces as an object of thought focus in producing works because they think windows have a mechanism that has the potential to create a space and boundary barrier between two spaces, namely outside and inside (Faizah et.al, 2008). The wood is perforated to create a space that can be stalked, seen, perceived, cursed, exposed, looked at. What is being watched is two chairs that cross each other (ambiguous) creating a two-dimensional space that refers to a view as if it were a discussion, with a reminder of words of wisdom. In this sculpture, traditional Malay houses reflect local wisdom in the use of natural wood materials. Windows are the most important part of the Malay house structure showing a deep understanding of the surrounding atmosphere, with good ventilation to ensure effective air flow. Stairs as a symbol of the connection between the outside world and the inner world (personal space). This is a general concept of the relationship between humans, the environment and the creator (Faizah, et.al, 2008).

Picking up the bidara tree (Sidr) as the main study reference in producing new motifs for traditional carvings. Traditional carving motifs often depict nature, flora, fauna, and aspects of daily life. This tree is taken because of the unique nature of the thorny tree and the Muslim community believes in its physical and spiritual function in treating and protecting humans with the permission of Allah SWT. The function of healing, treating and preventing is confirmed by reference to hadith and the history of companions. This motif is not only beautifying, but also often has a symbolic meaning. This motif means trust and protection from the creator of nature (Yusri et.al, 2017). The nature and character of the bidara tree (Sidr) is processed into a pattern (embossed carving) and placed on the window leaf as a suggestion of its function as a source of protection from Allah SWT. The bidara tree is a symbol of the fortress between the physical world and the supernatural world. Placing a pattern between the outside and the inside of the house is like a guardian of the boundaries of the nature created by Allah SWT.

Painting the base colour with gold and covering it with a construction colour commonly used in carpentry gives the meaning of something that we may not know the value of because it is covered by something else.

In the context of the implementation of the *Ulu al-Absar* concept, this Halaman Sidr's sculptural artwork also emphasizes the appreciation and meaning of human nature, as well as its interaction with the environment. The summary of the implementation of this concept is as follows:

NO.	ARTWORK ELEMENT	APPEARANCE, MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES	MEANING
1.	Bidara Tree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This tree becomes a reference that is transformed into a pattern to be implemented on wood as an embossed wood carving.</li> <li>Flowers, thorny branches and leaves of the bidara tree are arranged and carved vertically with a gold color finish.</li> <li>There is a section of the work that depicts the bidara tree as part of the traditional Malay house landscape.</li> </ul>	The Bidara tree is a tree that is encouraged to be planted in the yard as a physical protection requirement because of its thorny physical and spiritual nature based on the reference of religious scholars.
2.	Door	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The door in this work is found in the landscape part of the house with a modern paint colour approach and wood carving as a support to emphasize the image of trees and traditional houses.</li> <li>Vertical composition depicts the shallow space of the overlay of the front and back images.</li> <li>Inspired by Catan Persian Miniatures whose function is like a storybook.</li> <li>Presenting that there is a part of the work that works like a book, in accordance with the title of the page that can refer to the physical landscape and the pages of the book.</li> </ul>	The door in this work is an object referred to from a house that functions as a passageway that connects between the outside and the inside.
3.	Window	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The window in this work encompasses the entire structure of the work.</li> <li>Penetration and relief wood carving techniques are applied to depict the nature of the reference object.</li> <li>Inspiration from the window of a traditional house is treated as if it is slightly open, creating a deep and shallow space in the work.</li> <li>The window is packed with wooden shell color as the nature of traditional reference material to illustrate the reference state.</li> </ul>	The window in this work is one of the features that must be present in the design of a house that functions as an eye path breaking the boundary of the wall with the outside space. It has a limit that cannot be stepped on and passed compared to the door of the house.
4.	Roof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a portion of the page of the work that is cut out of the square format. This is to further</li> </ul>	The image of the roof in the work is as a protective function for people in the house and the corner

		<p>emphasize the reference of the roof image that is trying to be visualized.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The reference to limas roofs and in general is a roof that is protective and coloured like a reference to Persian paint.</li> </ul>	<p>pointing sharply upwards shows the one God.</p>
5.	Lamp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is the use of old lamp images processed with wood carving techniques. The light composition is placed at the top with light that illuminates certain parts of the page of this work.</li> <li>Ciarascurro technique.</li> </ul>	<p>Lamps as one of the features that depict hope and breathing space. The light focus technique tries to create a mood of secrecy, secrecy and hiding.</p>
6.	Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are two chairs arranged facing each other in a narrow space. Chairs are processed by overlapping lines between 2 chair images to create a shallow (ambiguous) space.</li> <li>Chairs are close together as if there is a conversation and need a close distance to deliver it like a whisper.</li> <li>This work uses the image of a chair to describe human behaviour whose visual experience is recorded in society.</li> <li>This visual page is also related to the part of the window that is processed through perforation. Its function is to spy on conversations from outside the space.</li> </ul>	<p>This visual symbolizes the position of human status and relationships in society. It also reflects behaviour in society that likes to give feedback to society before investigating first (slander)</p>

Table 1: The Meaning of Ulu al-Absar in Halaman Sidr’s Sculpture Artwork

(Sources: Hisammudin Ahmad, 2023)

Table 1 has summarized the three main aspects in this Halaman Sidr sculpture artwork, namely elements in the work, visual processing, materials and techniques and implied meaning. This work has given a new perspective in highlighting manners and ethics, as well as a subtle warning against the collision of those ethics. However, this perspective requires an appreciation of the concept of *Ulu al-Absar*, which is an in-depth observation and knowledge related to local wisdom to ensure that the desired message can be properly understood. Thus, Halaman Sidr's sculptural artworks also provide added value to existing sculptural artworks, further making their own contribution in applying the values of morals and decency in oneself, as the axis of the identity of the Malay community.

## CONCLUSION

Ulu al-Absar is a concept conceived by Islam, through the sources of al-Quran and al-Hadith to create a holistic human being, with a blend of senses, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. This concept is translated in the Malay community through elements of local wisdom that have become the traditional identity and heritage of treasures in the Malay World for ages. Therefore, the production of Halaman Sidr's sculpture artwork, which combines elements of the local wisdom of the Malay community to convey the message of morals and character of every human being, provides benefits for artists and the public. However, this message can only be perceived based on the value of Ulu al-Absar, which is the generation of an intellectual mind and a clear conscience to ensure

that it can be put into practice in everyday life. Emphasis on the element of maintaining confidentiality, as well as ensuring the truth of any information is the main basis for the existence of a harmonious and prosperous society.

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