

**THE UNTOLD STORIES OF WAU BULAN: PRESERVING LOCAL CULTURE AND TRADITION****\*<sup>1</sup>SUZULAIKHA MOHAMED**

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**Abstract**

Wau Bulan, also known as a Malaysian kite, was once remarkable and had been a symbol of Malay people. Throughout the years, Wau Bulan is gradually forgotten especially among children as regular kites have been widely used for many years. Although the local government has been hosting the Kite Festival annually; unfortunately, the event taps only a few communities, especially the adults. Besides, the Kite Festival has only been viewed as a seasonal event rather than a tradition. Most studies on Wau Bulan have focused on the history and process of making Wau Bulan. Only a handful of studies focused on storytelling of the history of Wau Bulan. We employed comparative analysis through the library research to provide arguments on the importance of cultivating the love for a fading cultural heritage. This paper highlights the way stories and folklore promote the history and uniqueness of Wau Bulan. It is also expected that this paper can bring the Wau Bulan into new heights at an international level. It is hoped that the strings that keep the beauty of our proud culture will rise into the sky for many years to come for the awareness of the future generation.

**Keywords:** *Wau Bulan; Malaysian Moon Kite; Traditional Games; Folklores***INTRODUCTION**

Kites, locally known as *Wau*, represent one of the unique traditional recreational cultures of the Malay community. In the past, kite flying was a common and enjoyable pastime among village children. However, rapid globalisation and technological advancement have gradually diminished this traditional practice, particularly among urban youths who are increasingly engaged with electronic games and digital devices (Naofusa, 1983; Salma, 2013). Previous studies have largely focused on the historical development and craftsmanship of Wau, with limited attention given to folklore narratives and community-based cultural transmission. Consequently, the cultural meanings and storytelling traditions associated with Wau Bulan remain under-documented. As one of Malaysia's valuable cultural heritages, Wau Bulan warrants continued preservation and promotion at both national and international levels.

This review examines (1) the historical origins and folklore narratives of Wau Bulan, (2) its symbolic meanings and craftsmanship traditions, and (3) contemporary community initiatives aimed at preserving this cultural heritage.

## **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KITES AND WAU**

Kite flying is one of the oldest recreational and cultural practices in human history, with evidence suggesting that it has existed for more than 3,000 years. Ribke (2018) reported that kites were first developed in China over two thousand years ago. Early accounts associate the invention of kites with a legend of a Chinese farmer who tied a string to his hat to prevent it from being blown away by strong winds. Over time, kites evolved beyond simple recreation and were employed for various practical purposes, including distance measurement and military communication (Ribke, 2018).

From China, kite flying spread to neighbouring regions such as India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Japan. In India, kite flying developed into a competitive sport known as kite fighting (Ribke, 2018). In Afghanistan, kite flying became a popular recreational activity among boys and men, although it was later prohibited during the Taliban regime (Semple, 2007). Nafousa (1983) noted that kites were introduced to Japan in the seventh century by Buddhist monks and were associated with spiritual practices aimed at warding off evil spirits and ensuring abundant harvests. Historical narratives also describe daring exploits involving kites, including an attempted theft at Nagoya Castle, after which kite flying gained popularity during the Edo period.

In Europe, kites were introduced in the sixteenth century and became popular children's toys before being adopted for scientific experimentation, such as studies of wind pressure at varying altitudes (Ribke, 2018). In Greece, kite flying was practised as a leisure activity for stress relief, while the Wright brothers reportedly used kites in early aeronautical research (Fieda, 2003; Salina Abdul Manan, Zuliskandar Ramli, & Azni Hanin Hamzah, 2015).

In the Malay Peninsula, kites were introduced during the reign of Sultan Mahmud, the last Sultan of Malacca, approximately five centuries ago (Wan Musa Jusoh, 1957; Salina et al., 2015). During this period, kite flying emerged as a popular traditional pastime among farmers alongside other traditional games such as *Sepak Raga*. Today, kites continue to be flown worldwide in various shapes, colours, and designs.

According to Malaysia National Library (2012), Wau is also known as kite in the southern parts of Malaysia namely in Selangor, Malacca and Johor. Kite flying is believed to originate from Pattani Kingdom, hence the word Wau is said to derive from Thailand. In many eastern and northern parts of Malaysia, the word Wau is widely used among the people in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis. Mohammad Razy (2000) also added that the word Wau may originate from Hokkien dialect which is 'ao'.

In most regions of Malaysia, kites and Wau have distinct meanings which differentiate each other in a few aspects. Wau holds a wide range of history and symbolism of Malay culture in the past as it carries elements of Malay native culture. It can be seen in the form and design of the pattern on the Wau itself. Wau comes in many shapes, designs, and forms. Each of its designs has its own uniqueness and meaning.

Several types of Wau are recognised in Malaysia, with Wau Kucing, Wau Jala Budi, and Wau Bulan officially gazetted by the Malaysian Kites Council (Muhammad Reduan, Raja Nafida, & Fadhlina, 2019). These traditional Wau are recognised based on their popularity, widespread cultural use, and the powerful folklore associated with Malay community life in the past (Ali Mahat, 2016). The three gazetted types of Malaysian traditional Wau are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Three types of Malaysian Traditional Kites which were gazetted by Malaysian Kites Council (Muhammad Reduan et.al, 2019)

Wau Jala Budi, also known as the Woman Kite, has been played for generations in Malaysia, particularly in Kedah. Its name is derived from the curved shape of its tail, which resembles a woman's hips (Muhammad Reduan et al., 2019). The name is also believed to originate from the *budi* leaf found in Kedah, whose shape is reflected in the tail design of the kite, while the term *jala* refers to the structural form of its tail (Wau Malaysia, 2016).

In contrast, the design of Wau Kucing, or the Cat Kite, resembles the form of a cat, particularly when viewed from the back. This kite produces a high-pitched humming sound when flown, which is traditionally believed to ward off evil spirits and serve as a weather indicator (Wau Malaysia, 2016).

Wau Bulan is an intricately designed Malaysian moon kite that is particularly popular in Kelantan and is widely regarded as a symbol of Malay cultural heritage. Its cultural significance is reflected in its decorative patterns and traditional motifs (Muhammad Reduan et al., 2019). Wau Bulan is classified as a two-dimensional flat kite based on Friedman's (1992) classification of kites, which includes flat, three-dimensional, sled, rotor, and parafoil types. Flat kites are characterised by a bamboo, fibre rod, or wooden support structure and a single façade (Friedman, 1992).

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach. Secondary sources, including published journal articles, books, archival records, folklore compilations, museum documents, government heritage publications, and online cultural repositories related to Wau Bulan and Malaysian traditional kites, were systematically reviewed. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the history, symbolism, folklore narratives, and cultural preservation initiatives

associated with Wau Bulan. The reviewed materials were analysed thematically to identify recurring narratives, historical interpretations, and preservation strategies.

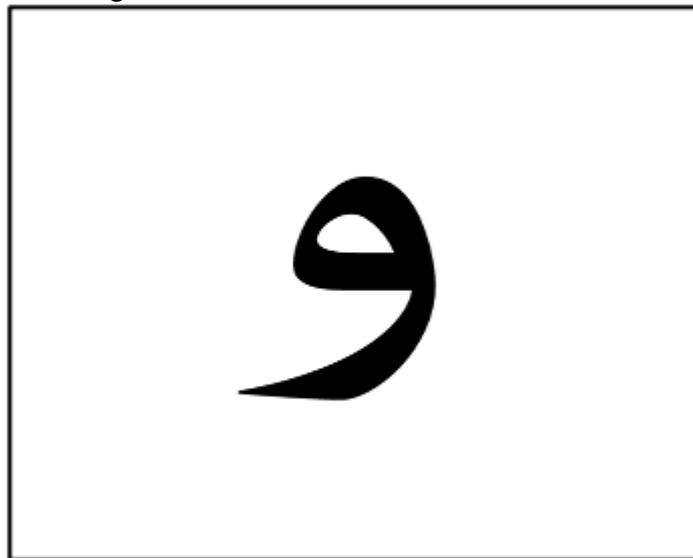
## DISCUSSION

### FOLKLORE NARRATIVES AND SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF WAU BULAN

Numerous folklore narratives and oral traditions describe the origins and symbolic meanings associated with Wau and Wau Bulan. These narratives vary across Malaysian regions and reflect diverse cultural interpretations of the kite's origins, functions, and symbolic values. In northern and eastern states such as Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, the term Wau is commonly used, while in western and southern regions the term kite is more frequently employed (Wau Malaysia, 2016).

One narrative suggests that the term Wau originated from a nameless traditional game played by children using leaves and plant fibres. According to this account, a child's cry of "wa... waaa..." following the breaking of a kite string became associated with the game, leading to the adoption of the term Wau (Shafie Jusoh, 2015). Another narrative traces the origin of the term to the sound produced by the bow attached to the kite, which emitted rhythmic humming sounds during flight, as documented in historical records involving Raja Ahmad and other royal relatives (Ahmad Safar, 2021).

Other interpretations propose that the term *Wau* may have originated from the Dutch word *Wouw*, referring to a bird species found in Southeast Asia (Muhammad Redzuan et al., 2019), or from the Arabic letter *Wau*, based on the resemblance of the kite's wing shape to the letter's form (ExpatriateGo, 2014). These interpretations illustrate the multifaceted linguistic and cultural influences shaping the terminology associated with *Wau*. The Arabic letter associated with the term *Wau* is illustrated in Figure 2:



**Figure 2:** The Arabic letter of 'Wau'  
Source: Wikimedia Creative Commons

Beyond linguistic origins, *Wau* also holds functional and symbolic significance in traditional Malay society. Folklore narratives suggest that *Wau* was historically used by farmers as a flying scarecrow to ward off birds from paddy fields and as a lullaby mechanism, with its humming

sounds believed to soothe children while farmers attended to agricultural duties (Jasmeen Tek, 2015; ExpatGo, 2014).

Mythological narratives further associate *Wau Bulan* with spiritual authority and territorial identity. One prominent legend recounts the story of Dewa Muda, a prince of the Srivijaya Empire, who allegedly used *Wau Bulan* to symbolise and map conquered territories. The floral and leaf motifs on his kite were believed to represent territorial expansion and imperial strength (Wan Basiron, 2002).

Wan Basiron (2002) further noted that, before going to war, Dewa Muda would meditate in a cave to gain spiritual intuition. Upon leaving the cave, he frequently appeared with a wire frame believed to be that of a *Wau Bulan*. *Wau* or *Wau Bulan* is believed to embody the spirit of the sky and wind when flown, and is linked to beliefs that Dewa Muda obtained spiritual guidance by flying his *Wau Bulan* to the heavens, thereby establishing a spiritual connection with another realm (Muhammad Redzuan et al., 2019).

The floral and leaf motifs on his *Wau* were said to represent the districts he had conquered. Thus, whenever he returned from battle, the continuous “growth” of these motifs symbolised the expanding strength of his empire (Wan Basiron, 2002). This symbolic representation is illustrated in Figure 3:



**Figure 3:** The image of *Wau Bulan* symbolising Dewa Muda’s conquered empires (Muhammad Reduan et.al, 2019)

## HOW WAU BULAN ACQUIRED ITS NAME AND DESIGN IDENTITY

In Malaysia, the most popular Wau is “Wau Bulan”. It got its name for the shape of the moon because the tail of this Wau resembles that of the crescent moon like shape of its lower section. It is certain that the name fits one of the three country’s official kites, where the name takes after the shape of the moon as the tail of the Wau itself looks like the crescent. With the right colour, Wau Bulan may resemble a rising crescent moon when it is flown. Moon, on the other hand, means *Bulan* in Bahasa Malaysia. Hence, this type of Wau is called Wau Bulan or also known as Moon Kite.

There are certain main aspects needed to follow in making and designing Wau Bulan. These distinguished aspects are important to maintain the original identity of the Wau itself. These aspects are also pivotal which portray the uniqueness of Wau Bulan from the other types of Wau in Malaysia. Among the main aspects highlighted are the main structure, the size ratio, the decoration and Wau making materials. This only covers the basic shape design of wau and does not include *sobek* (motifs) on it (Muhammad Reduan et.al, 2019).

According to Kasmin Mirun (2006), the appearance of a Wau is based on a complete description of human beings, from head to toe which gives the perfect balance when it is flown in the air. The main structure of Wau Bulan consists of the head, body or wing, waist and tail itself. Each section needs to be connected by the backbone or ‘*tulang tengah*’ so that each section is finely connected when the flight is made.

In the process of making Wau Bulan, the main material should be natural ingredients. Therefore, bamboo is used for the frame or the main structure of Wau because the bamboo has a high bending resistance and is easy to control (Muhammad Reduan et.al, 2019).

The bamboo is then split and soaked in mud for two weeks. This is to prevent the bamboo from being attacked by weevils as well as making it more flexible. The bamboo splits are made into a complex but lightweight frame, tested with one layer of paper. Alterations are then made accordingly to make sure the kite is structurally sound. Next, the patterns are meticulously cut from rice paper and glued on piece by piece to form intricate motifs or known as ‘*sobek*’ (ExpatGo, 2014).

In addition to the aesthetical aspect, additional decoration on the Wau structure is also important as to balance the weight on each side of Wau Bulan. *Rambu* or *Jambul* which is made from small pieces of combined papers are used and tied to the head, left and right of the tail. The main function of these papers is to maintain or balance the weight when equilibrium is needed without damaging the original appearance of the Wau (Muhammad Reduan et.al, 2019).

Apart from the performance and appearance of the Malay moon kite, the sound produced by Wau Bulan is as important as its designs and appearance. Thus, *Busur* is also tied to the Wau head which its function is to produce sounds as well as balancing the weight in the head. The sound created, or ‘*dengung*’, depends on the force of the wind. The higher the Wau flies and the faster the wind, the higher the pitch can be produced (ExpatGo, 2014).

## COMMUNITY INITIATIVES TRANSMIT THE HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM OF WAU BULAN

Wau Bulan carries a unique cultural heritage since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and in the efforts of honouring and preserving this precious heritage, a number of events, programs and recognitions have been made.

The Kite Festival event is one of the efforts in preserving this traditional Malaysian Moon Kite. Numbers of Kite Festival events have been organised and this has become one of the events in promoting the local cultures and traditions. Kelantan International Kite Festival has been organised since 1982 and has been one of the tourist attractions in Kelantan every year. In addition, Pasir Gudang World Kite Festival is also held on an annual basis since its first event organised in 1995. This festival has attracted the interest of many kite players to come and has recorded a total of 100 thousand visitors and received participation from various corners of the world. In 2013, a total of 180 kite players from 25 countries came to Pasir Gudang to participate in this festival (Salina et.al, 2015).



**Figure 6:** Pasir Gudang World Kite Festival  
Source: johorfoodie.com (2020)



**Figure 7:** Kelantan International Kite Festival  
 Source: <https://www.nst.com.my/>

Malaysia has also acknowledged Wau Bulan as one of the national and iconic symbols along with keris and hibiscus flowers (Malaysian Kites Council, 2016). Wau is also used as the Malaysia Airlines System (MAS) official logo since 1<sup>st</sup> October 1972 and is also proudly displayed at the end of all MAS aircraft tails. This indirectly shows that Malay culture is one of the symbols of Malaysian national culture (Zabri Zakaria, 2005 ; Salina et.al, 2015).



**Figure 8:** Wau is used as the official logo of Malaysia Airlines  
 Source: <https://www.malaysiaairlines.com/us/en.html>

The Wau Bulan is also featured on the reversed side of RM1.00 currency and the old 50 cent coin as well as on the commemorative coins in conjunction with the Ninth Sea Games in 1977 as shown in Figure 8. This is one of the efforts to protect the uniqueness of Malay culture which has been made a symbol of Malaysian society.



**Figure 9:** The reversed side of RM1.00 currency, the old 50 cent coin, and commemorative coins in conjunction with the Ninth Sea Games  
Source: Salina et.al (2015)

There are also a few documentary films produced which depict a captivating study in the art of traditional Wau-making and its rich history. ‘High In the Sky’ directed by Keshvan Sugumaran from Tririse Films is the first documentary on the study of the Moon Kites highlighting on the making of Wau Bulan featured by Muhd Azmie Mohd Noor or Mie Sering, the traditional kite craftsman. ‘Wau Bulan: Malaysian Traditional Arts and Crafts Preservation’ another short documentary by Syafie Hilmi and a Merdeka 2016 film ‘The Last Kite Maker’ by Maxis 4G Films are also among the well-known documentaries which aim to preserve and promote to the world on the uniqueness of Malay cultural heritage.

Apart from that, Seman bin Mamat, a prominent cultural figure from Kelantan had composed a Dikir Barat song which was dedicated to Wau Bulan. This song was always performed by him towards the end of his performance (Addy Saufi, 2010).

*Ewa ewa e wau bule  
E wau bule teraju tigo  
Ewa ewa e wau bule  
E wau bule teraju tigo*

## CONCLUSION

Wau Bulan has long been recognised as a traditional game that was widely practised in earlier periods; however, it has gradually become less familiar among contemporary children and adolescents. This review synthesises historical narratives, folklore interpretations, and contemporary cultural initiatives associated with Wau Bulan. The findings highlight Wau Bulan as a culturally significant artefact that embodies Malay heritage, spiritual symbolism, and community identity. Despite a decline in its practice among younger generations, various institutional, cultural, and community-based initiatives continue to support its preservation. Strengthening educational integration, cultural programming, and digital documentation may further enhance youth engagement and ensure the continuity of Wau Bulan as a living cultural tradition.

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