



International Virtual Colloquium on Multi-disciplinary Research Impact (2nd Series)

Organised by Research Nexus UiTM (ReNeU)
Office of Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation)
Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia, 15 June 2022



The First Series of Malaysian Banknotes as a Symbol of a Nation's Independence

Mohamed Razeef Abdul Razak ¹, Azahar Harun ², Siti Noorashah Hussin ³, Rusmadiyah Anwar ⁴

¹ Islamic Research in Art, Design & Humanities Research Group, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, 40450, Shah Alam Selangor, Malaysia, ² College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Alor Gajah, Melaka, Malaysia, ³ Faculty of Pharmacy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Puncak Alam, 42300, Selangor, Malaysia, ⁴ National Design Centre, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Selangor, Malaysia

razeef080@uitm.edu.my, azahar581@uitm.edu.my, noorashah0352@uitm.edu.my, rusma935@uitm.edu.my
Tel: 016-614 0965

Abstract

Since 1963, numerous national symbols have undergone a significant design modification, including Malaysian banknotes. As a symbol of an independent nation, the banknote presents an acceptance of its value but alternately plays as a propaganda tool. This paper aims to examine the illustrations depicted on the first series of Malaysian banknote designs through the semiotic analysis approach. The study has revealed that the portrait, logo, roman Malay script, building, the ringgit currency against the dollar, and the Malay governor's signature are legitimate evidence to appoint the first series of the Malaysian banknotes as one of the national symbols.

Keywords: Banknote Design; National Symbol; Semiotic.

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2022. The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioural Researchers on Asians) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7i5I7.3797>

1.0 Introduction

Every nation has its unique way of glorifying its independence and sovereignty. For example, some would proudly wave their flag or sing the national anthem, especially during special occasions such as the independence day celebrations.

Towards achieving independence on August 31st 1957, Malaysia (which was then Malaya) already had its flag, national anthem, and a coat of arms used as a symbol of the unification of the country's independence from British colonial rule. However, the country was still using banknotes decorated with the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II managed by the Board of Commissioners of Currency Malaya and British Borneo (1952-1962). Only in 1959 the government issued the one ringgit banknotes that no longer portrayed Queen Elizabeth II (see Figure 1). Instead, it was decorated with an illustration of the a fishing boat on the beach and five coats of arms of countries that were using the same currency, namely the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Brunei, Sabah (North Borneo), and Sarawak on the back of the banknote (see Figure 2). Whereas in 1961, the ten ringgit banknotes were distributed to the public in red and decorated with images of farmers ploughing rice fields with water buffalo on the right, while the back contained geometric patterns (Guilloche) and five coats of arms similar to the one ringgit banknotes (see Figure 2).

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2022. The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioural Researchers on Asians) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7i5I7%20\(Special%20Issue\).3797](https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7i5I7%20(Special%20Issue).3797)



Fig. 1: One ringgit banknotes that were used in Malaya and British Borneo before 1959.



Fig. 2: One ringgit banknote (1959) and ten ringgit banknote (1951) that were used in Malaya and British Borneo after independence

However, the government at the time did not change the 5, 50, 100, 1000, and 10,000 ringgit banknotes since the Bank Negara Malaysia was just established in 1959. It is likely at this point, that the newly independent country wanted to focus on issues more important such as the nation's unity, economy, security (threat of communism), Indonesian confrontation, and also the formation of Malaysia.

2.0 Currency for National Symbol

Money does not only serve as a means of exchanging goods. As a matter of fact, it is also used to disseminate information by the government to the people. According to Katsari (2006), in previous times, a government would use its currency as a propaganda tool to show signs of supremacy and power. For example, when a government extends its influence and empire, the whole colony will use its administration's currency. Usually, a portrait of the ruler or national leader is incorporated in the banknote design.

In times of the growing Islamic empire under the Umayyad dynasty, the Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn. Marwan (685-705 M) took the initiative to issue Islamic government money to unify all Muslims using the Byzantine Empire's currency. Thus, Islamic currency was forged with the Islamic identity by removing the symbols that were not Islamic and were replaced by ornaments (in the form of calligraphy) and expressions of Islam.

According to the Governor of Bank Negara Malaysia, Dr. Zeti Akhtar Aziz, visual designs on the money not only symbolizes the aspirations of the manufacturer but also highlight the characteristics of social heritage, cultural, economic, and religious beliefs, as well as the history of a community, nation, and country (quoted in heritage Numismatic Malaysia, 2013). This shows that in the design of a currency, the symbol of the country is a crucial aspect as it plays a role as an ambassador to the country and its people

3.0 The First Series of Malaysian Banknotes

When the British's administration introduced its banknote, the portrait of the King or Queen of reign in Britain became the official currency of Malaya. Then after the country achieved independence in 1957, the Bank Negara Malaya was formed, which eventually led to the ambition and intention to issue a new currency design without the image of colonialism.

However, this was a lengthy undertaking due to the negotiation that was held with the governments of Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah, and Brunei. Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed the Federation of Malaysia combining the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak. This establishment will not only strengthen cooperation from a political, economic, and social standpoint but will also accelerate the independence of Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak from the British. After all, these countries use the same currency under the Board of Commissioners of Currency Malaya and British Borneo.

Unfortunately, only Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak remained to form Malaysia, with the exception of Singapore, which later gained its independence and established a republic in 1965. Nevertheless, negotiations to use the same currency continued to run but ended unsuccessfully, and eventually, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei issued their own currencies in 1967. According to the Minister of Finance at the time, Tan Siew Sin (quoted in *Sejarah Mata Wang*, 1967).

"It is not practical for two free and independent countries to be using the same currency. A currency can only be used for 2 regions that have a political union. The situation is even more complicated since Singapore and Malaysia have different economic policies."

On June 12, 1967, four years after Malaysia was formed, the Bank Negara Malaysia distributed the first series of the Malaysian banknotes (see Figure 3) that was decorated with a portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tunku Abdul Rahman ibni Almarhum Tuanku Muhammad on the front right section of the banknote. The banknote also used the Malay language in roman script and was signed by the Governor of Bank Negara Malaysia, Tun Ismail Ali. Meanwhile, the back of the banknotes was embellished with repetitive geometric patterns and different patterns were used for each denomination. The Bank Negara Malaysia's logo was also included at the back of the banknote. Only the \$1000 note was printed with the Malaysian Parliament building. Table 1 provides a summary of the first series of banknotes:

Table 1. A summary of the Malaysian first series of banknotes.

Denominations	Size (mm)	Colour	Printer
\$1	121 x 63	Blue	Bradbury Wilkinson
\$5	127 x 71	Green	Bradbury Wilkinson
\$10	134 x 80	Red	Thomas De La Rue
\$50	145 x 88	Blue	Thomas De La Rue
\$100	158 x 95	Purple	Thomas De La Rue
\$1000	172 x 101	Bluish Purple	Bradbury Wilkinson

The first series of banknotes undergo three major changes with some modifications from the original design. The first change was in 1972 where there was the change in the Malay language spelling system. The banknotes that initially used the old Malay spelling were changed to the new spelling. The spellings of the words that changed were the words "Gabenor" to "Gabenur", "Sa-Puloh" to "Sepuluh", "Sa-ratus" to "Seratus" and "Sa-ribu" to "Seribu". In addition, the background colour on the notes was a little softer than the background colour of the original note.

The second change was in 1976, which involved the pattern at the bottom left corner of the symbol \$1 and \$5 (for example) being moved to the upper left corner of the banknote. For the other banknotes, there were only changes to the geometric patterns that vary according to the denominations. These changes occurred probably due to the banknotes printing plant (denominations of \$10, \$50 and \$100), from Thomas De La Rue to Bradbury Wilkinson. There is also a possibility that the changes occurred due to the improvement of the security features on the banknotes.

The third change was in 1981, which involved the signature of the new Governor, Tan Sri Dato' Abd Aziz bin Haji Taha. The first series of banknotes were used from 1967 until the second series of banknotes with the introduction of the new denominations of \$20 and \$500 in 1982 to mark the anniversary of Malaysia's 25th independence.



Fig. 3: The Malaysian first series banknotes issued in 1967.

3.0 Methodology

In this study, the researchers used a visual analysis method called semiotics. According to Arthur Asa Berger (2005, p.5) methods of semiotics analysis is the interpretation of signs and hidden meanings. Because the sign is a visual element that contains a hidden meaning (Anwar et. al, 2015a), semiotic analysis applies to various matters, especially communication and information transfer. To understand more on semiotics analysis, Berger referred to two pioneers of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the philosopher from the United States, Charles Sander Pierce (1839-1914). Generally, Saussure and Pierce stated that semiotics is highly relevant in terms of visual communication and human relations. Semiotics helps people to understand issues in a more holistic manner and gain more insight. For example, the symbol of the crescent moon and stars give the relevance of Islam. This symbol portrays the identity and religious beliefs professed by the Islamic community. Thus it is not surprising to see this symbol on the flag of Islamic countries such as Pakistan and Turkey.

Although there are similarities between Saussure and Pierce's views, both differ in terms of technique. According to Daniel Chandler (2002) semiotic analysis techniques introduced by Saussure emphasise two elements of the sign, which are the Signifier and the Signified. In this context, the signifier refers to the elements of sound while the Signified refers to the concept or idea. Saussure argued that these two elements cannot be separated but instead coexist together. In this case, the signifier is regarded as the primary purpose while the signified is a secondary purpose.

In comparison to the analysis technique by Pierce, there are 3 elements classified as the Representamen, Interpretant and Object. According to Chandler (2002), Representamen refers to a process of analysis to identify the visual elements of the existing (primary). This level is based on the words and expressions based on the individual's experience against the visual. This includes elements such as lines, space, texture, colours and shapes. Object refers to the process of analysis to identify the relationship between the visual with its secondary meaning (secondary). Interpretant is the process of assessing something visual to understand the implied meaning in the existing context (intrinsic).

To understand how Pierce's analysis technique functions, Chandler (2002, p.31) gave an analogy on the process of reading a label on a box containing objects. The first thing seen by the audience is a box and label. This process can be classified as Representamen. Next the audience will guess the contents of the box. This process is known as Object. Lastly, the audience will make an assessment of the visual information (box and label). The tendency of the audience to perceive the data and guess the object is classified as the Interpretant process. The sign is no longer functioning if the object is not hidden and visible. In this analogy, Chandler concluded that the elements of the sign (label and box) help form a mind map (image map) which then gives understanding to the people (Anwar, 2016).

4.0 Analysis and Finding

To carry out this semiotic analysis, the researchers first had to apply the method known as Deconstruction and Reconstruction (Anwar et al., 2015b). According to O'Leary (2009), Deconstruction and Reconstruction help researchers extract visual data from a sample survey and find answers about the relevance of visual data with context. The early stages involve the separation process visuals contained in the sample and then categorized in the table as shown below. By carrying out this process, the analysis could be carried out in a more systematic and organized manner.

Table 2. Semiotics analysis on the front side of the first series of the Malaysian banknotes

Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Portrait of a man	The first Yang di-Pertuan Agong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coat of arms • The symbol of the sovereignty, governance and the united people of Malaysia • Patron of the Malays and indigenous (including the people of Sabah and Sarawak)
Repetitive pattern design and abstract	Guilloche pattern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilloche is a decorative or ornamental pattern formed from two or more lines of curvature interspersed in a row in a rotating design. It is formed using geometric lathe machine • It is also a security feature that is difficult to duplicate
Roman script	Bank Negara Malaysia Wang kertas ini sah dipelakukan dengan nilai **Satu Ringgit, Lima Ringgit etc. Gabenor/Gabenur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The national bank is responsible for controlling, managing and distributing Malaysian currency A statement on banknotes with a value certified by the government • Ringgit Malaysia is a currency unit • The value of banknote denominations • The chairman of the Bank Negara Malaysia • Tun Ismail Ali was the first governor of BNM and is a Malay Malaysian • The use of roman script taken from the English writing system shows the effects of colonialism • However, the language used is the Bahasa Melayu (Malay), representing the national language and symbolizing the nation's unity. • The use of the roman script also represents modernization and globalization as many countries in the world use the roman script.
Roman script \$ symbol	**\$1, \$ 5, \$10, \$50, \$100 and \$1000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The value of banknote denominations

Roman numerals	Serial number	• Security features on the banknotes where each note contains a different number
Signature	Governor signature	• Government's approval stamp on the banknotes

Table 3. Semiotics analysis on the reverse side of the first series of the Malaysian banknotes

Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Drawings of animals, crescent and the form of a circle within a circle	Logo of Bank Negara Malaysia	• Taken from the old Kelantan Government money, which was a gold coin known as the Kijang Mas.
Repetitive pattern design and abstract	Guilloche pattern	• Guilloche is a decorative or ornamental pattern formed from two or more lines of curvature being interspersed in a row in a rotating design. It is formed using geometric lathe machine • It is also a security feature that is difficult to duplicate
Roman script	Bank Negara Malaysia Bradbury, Wilkinson & Co LP New Malden Surrey, London Thomas De La Rue & Company. Limited.	The national bank is responsible for controlling, managing and distributing Malaysian currency The printing plant responsible for designing and printing the Malaysian banknotes The printing plant responsible for designing and printing the Malaysian banknotes • The use of roman script taken from the English writing system shows the effects of colonialism • However, the language used is the Bahasa Melayu (Malay), representing the national language and symbolizing the nation's unity. • The use of the roman script also represents modernization and globalization as many countries in the world use the roman script.
Roman script \$ symbol	**\$1, \$ 5, \$10, \$50, \$100 and \$1000	• The value of banknote denominations
Scenic landscape of buildings and bridges	National Parliament Building	• A symbol of Malaysia as a democratic country • It is also a symbol of unity in the Malaysian federal government • The bridge and the Parliament Building showing a form of relationship and bond between the people and the government

5.0 Results

As shown in Table 2, it is learned that the portrait of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong is a symbol of sovereignty and unity among Malaysians became the key elements of design on the Malaysian banknotes. The use of the portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong of Malaysia represents the monarchy and sovereignty. The portrait of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong portrays that he is a king of Malay descent with his appearance and the royal Malay customs attire especially the royal headdress embellished with a crescent and the 11-pointed star (formerly the Federation of Malaya consists of 11 states). The crescent moon and star symbol can also be found on the coat of arms and the country's flag. However, the use of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong portrait is not the same as other countries that place the ruling government on the banknotes. As all know, the position of the di-Pertuan Agong is appointed in rotation among the Malay Rulers. A Malay Ruler will be selected and appointed as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong for 5 years and then will be discharged of his duties and replaced by another Malay Ruler. As such, the portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong is seen as a symbol of the country's constitutional monarchy and the face of the Malaysian banknotes.

The use of Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) in roman script was seen for the first time on the Malaysian banknotes. The Bahasa Melayu was appointed as the official national language and as a newly independent country at the time, the national language is considered as a symbol of unity among Malaysians of all races. The use of the Bahasa Melayu in roman script replaces the use of the English inscription on the banknotes. In addition, the use of the Jawi script has also been removed from the first series of the Malaysian banknotes. Yet, the sacrifice of the Jawi inscription had to be done to place the Bahasa Melayu in roman script as the main literary language, which aligns with the National Language Policy and the National Education Policy. The use of Bahasa Melayu on the banknotes also indirectly replaced the word dollar with the ringgit term. Today, the ringgit was appointed as the national currency even when translated into English.

The repetitive geometric pattern design, also known as Guilloche, is included as ornaments and decorations and has a main function as a security feature. Banknotes have several security features, yet, the Guilloche pattern is a feature that can be seen with the naked eye and is designed with an attractive geometric pattern. Therefore, it makes the banknotes even more difficult to be duplicated and counterfeited.

The governor's signature is a representation of the government guarantee towards the value of the banknote in legal tenders that take place in the daily affairs in our country particularly. The governor is the chairman at the Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), which is the Central Bank of the country. The bank holds the monetary authority to regulate the financial system and economy of the country. BNM is a legitimate body in managing and issuing currency. The late governor Tun Ismail Ali who was the first Malay to hold that position owns the signature. This proves the Malays' power in managing the national economy.

The logo of Bank Negara Malaysia uses the Kijang (a species of a deer) taken from the gold coins from the old Kelantan State Government, which were the earliest gold coins issued by the Government of the Malay States Sultanate. Most of the old coins were decorated with Islamic motifs and had Jawi or Arabic inscriptions, but this gold coin was engraved with a deer motif on the front side and

Arabic inscriptions on the back. The Kijang motif on the logo of Bank Negara Malaysia proves that Malaysia has a history of great civilization and sovereignty. Apart from the deer motif, there is also a circular symbol and a crescent as part of the logo. According to the book *The Legendary Kijang* (1992), the circular symbol is the sun, which depicts strength and the crescent represents Islam as the country's official religion. Therefore, the logo can be said that BNM is to sustain the country's economy day and night (as long as there is the moon and the sun).

The image of the Parliament Building that appears on the back of the \$1000 banknote which is the highest denomination of the first series, illustrates the Parliament as the highest legislative institution in the country to enact laws in Malaysia. The Parliament adopts a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy under the administration of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as the Head of State. The Parliament is also represented by MPs chosen by the people through elections held every five years. The MPs act as a representative of the public. This can be seen clearly with the bridge and Parliament Building visual that shows a relationship and bond between the people and the government.

6.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study show that despite the fact that images of agriculture and fishing activities of the local communities in economic activities were not yet incorporated, the first series Malaysian banknote has already become a benchmark for the Malaysian banknotes till today. In this case, the depiction of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong became an iconic identity of the Malaysian banknotes. Indirectly, these images successfully replaced the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II to reflect the end of the British rule in Malaysia.

This can also be said similarly to the use of the Bahasa Melayu in roman script appointed as the national language, which was also incorporated in the first series as a replacement of the English inscription. However, the Malay Jawi script had to be sacrificed in the name of national unity.

The decision of the government and Bank Negara Malaysia to issue the first series of the Malaysian banknotes at the moment was timely because every independent nation should have a currency with their state symbols and identity. These visuals are strong enough evidence to show that the first series of the Malaysian banknotes can be appointed as one of the national symbols and identity.

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the help of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in providing the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (Project Number: FRGS/1/2018/SSI07/UiTM/02/5). The authors would also like to acknowledge the Bank Negara Malaysia and Faculty of Art & Design for providing means and support in making this study possible.

References

- Ahmad Sarji bin Abdul Hamid, Volume Editor (2007). *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia (Vol.16): The Rulers of Malaysia*. Singapore: Archipelago Press.
- Anwar, R. (2016). PhD Thesis. *Characterizing a syntactic pattern of formgiving in design thinking process*. Universiti Teknologi MARA.
- Anwar R., Abidin S.Z., Hassan O.H. (2015a). A Pattern in Formgiving Design: Giving Priority to a Principle Solution in Industrial Design Situation. In: Gen M., Kim K., Huang X., Hiroshi Y. (eds) *Industrial Engineering, Management Science and Applications 2015. Lecture Notes in Electrical Engineering*, vol 349. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-47200-2_35
- Anwar R., Abidin S.Z., Hassan O.H. (2015b). *Function Means Analysis For Ablution Concept Solution*. *The Online Journal Educational Technology. Special Issue for INTE 2015*.
- Baharudin Yatim (1996). *Dasar Pelajaran Kebangsaan dan Dasar Bahasa Malaysia dalam Konsep Pembangunan dan Kenegaraan Malaysia*. Malaysia: Pusat Pengajian Umum, Universiti Kebangsaan.
- Bank Negara Malaysia (1983). *Pameran Matawang Sedunia: Matawang Sepanjang Zaman (1983)*. Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Negara dan Public Bank Berhad.
- Bank Negara Malaysia (1989). *The Currency Legacy: A Guide to Bank Negara Malaysia's Collection*. Kuala Lumpur: Bank Negara Malaysia.
- Bank Negara Malaysia (1992). *The Legendary Kijang*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Bank Negara Malaysia.
- Bank Negara Malaysia (2003). *Warisan Numismatik Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Bank Negara Malaysia.
- Bank of Canada (2018). *Principles for Banknote Design*. Retrieved online from <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/banknotes/principles-bank-note-design/>
- Bank of England (2018). *Banknote Character Advisory Committee*. Retrieved online from <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/about/people/banknote-character-advisory-committee>
- Berger, A.A. (2005). *Media Analysis and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: The Basics*. New York: Routledge.

European Central Bank (2018). Design Elements. Retrived online from <http://www.ecb.europa.eu/euro/banknotes/design/html/index.en.html>

Katsari, C. (2006). Money And Proto-National Identities in The Greco-Roman Cities of The First and Second Centuries AD. *National Identities*, Vol.8, 1-20, Taylor & Francis.

O'Leary, Z. (2009). *The Essential Guide To Doing Your Research Project*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication

Salmy Edawati binti Yaacob (2009). Sejarah Dinar Emas dan Kronologi Pertukaran Mata Wang Dunia. *Jurnal Al-Tamadun*, Bil 4 (ms. 107-127). umrefjournal.um.edu.my

William Shaw and Mohd. Kassim Haji Ali (1971). *Paper Currency of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei (1849-1970)*. Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Negara.

Yaakob Mat Noor (1996). *Perlembagaan Persekutuan Tanah Melayu 1957 dalam Konsep Pembangunan dan Kenegaraan Malaysia*. Pusat Pengajian Umum, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.