

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS OF MASJID AL QADIM, SIBU

\*Salfarina Abdul Gapor<sup>1</sup>, Haris Fadzilah Abdul Rahman<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Built Environment, University College of Technology Sarawak (UCTS), Sibul, Sarawak*

*\*Correspondence Author: salfarina@ucts.edu.my*

### ABSTRACT

There has not been many documentation and architectural analyses of historical building in Sarawak, particularly in Sibul. Masjid Al Qadim is one of the oldest mosques in Sarawak and the only one gazetted as Historical Buildings under the Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance 1993. Lack of interest in historical building results in little effort, if not, none, to document and conserve historical building, which is a great loss to a society with the implication of socio-cultural lost, lack of identity and sense of belongingness and social solidarity of a local community, especially among the new generation. Hence, the objectives of this paper are to highlight the socio-cultural significances of Masjid Al Qadim during early Muslim settlement in Sibul and; identify the architectural elements of Masjid Al Qadim. The research approach is through qualitative in-depth interviews, content analyses of historical archives and building survey to identify prominent architectural elements of the mosque. Findings show that the mosque played a significant role in the early settlement of Malay-Melanau Muslim community in Sibul. Masjid Al Qadim was situated in the centre of the villages and the centre for socio-religious activities. No definite dates could be established as to when the mosque was built but historical evidences suggested that the mosque was built between 1830s to 1860s. Changes in urban planning and the expansion of Sibul has influenced the importance of the building. In terms of architectural style, it is a vernacular mosque with main structures consisting of the four pillars of the “Saka Guru” methods, which is typical of Javanese architecture. The roofs are of three-tier pyramidal style, like Masjid Agung Demak’s design, reflecting Mount Meru which indicates a phasing out of Hinduism towards Islamisation among the Malay-Melanau in Sibul, reflecting the trend experienced in the Nusantara region during that period. The original mosque was expanded to meet the demand of the increasing Qariah. Earlier building materials of the mosque include hard timber, locally known as belian (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*) and nipah (*Nypa fruitican*) roof. The building material changed throughout time, and the mosque experienced three major renovations, in 1935, 1950 and 1968. In 1935, the work on the Moghul style mihrab and Neo-classical eclectic main entrance started and completed in 1936.

**Keywords:** Masjid Al Qadim, Sibul, Sarawak, Vernacular Architecture.

### INTRODUCTION

There are 268 mosques in Sarawak and most of them are built after 1950s (Majlis Islam Sarawak, 2009). Only two mosques were built between 1800 to 1850. These are Masjid Bahagian Kuching and Masjid Al Qadim in Sibul. Masjid Bahagian Kuching had gone through many phases of renovation that it had lost its original vernacular architectural features. In 1968, it was totally replaced by a new Moorish Mughal style mosque. Masjid Al Qadim still retain its original features and the only mosque gazetted as Historical Buildings under the Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance 1993. Being the only mosque with many original features, it is important that the historical accounts and original architectural elements are documented. Therefore, it is the objectives of this paper to highlight Masjid Al Qadim’s historical significance and architectural elements.

### METHODOLOGY

For this study both secondary and primary data were used. The research approach was done through a qualitative approach and a building survey. The qualitative approach include in-depth interviews and content analyses of historical archives of the mosque. In-depth interviews were conducted with the villagers who were previously directly involved in the management and

operation of Al Qadim, such as the Al Qadim Committee Members and those living nearby the mosque. A total number of 7 Committee Members and 6 villagers who lived nearby the mosque were also interviewed. In addition, a building survey was conducted to identify the original and prominent architectural elements of the mosque, the changes that has occurred in the mosque and the condition of the mosque.

## FINDINGS

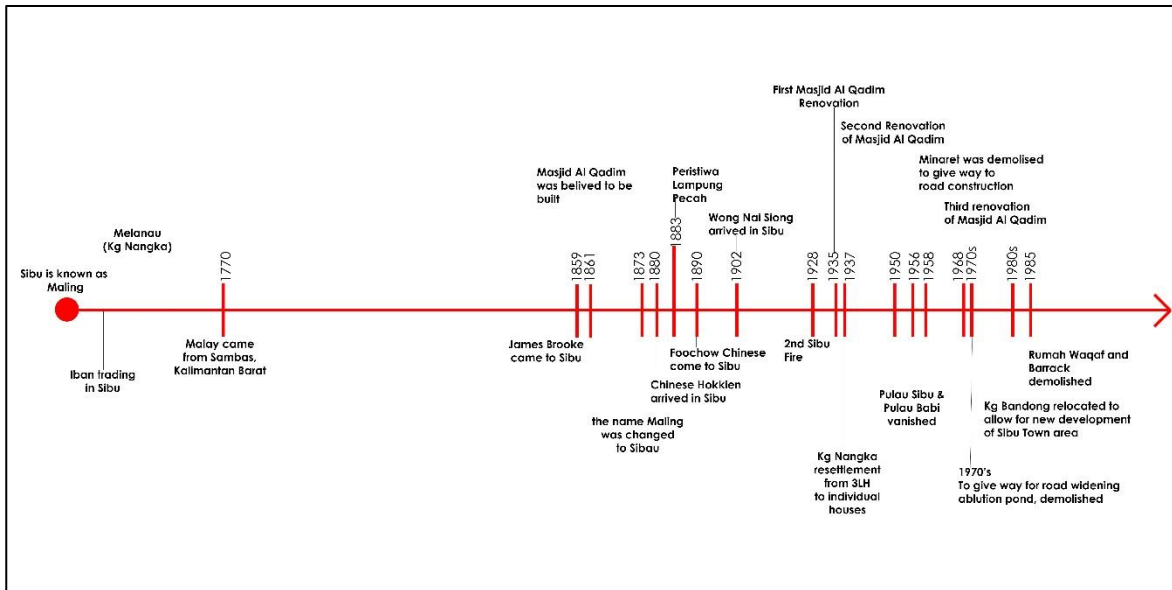
Sibu is located in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia (Refer to Diagram 1). Historically, Sibu was originally known as Maling and later change to “Sibau” by James Brooke in 1873. Sibau in Iban language (the largest and main ethnic group in Sarawak) mean the rambutan fruit, which is found abundantly in Sibu.



**Fig. 1:** Map of Sibu in relation to Sarawak

Source: <http://www.weather-forecast.com/locations/Sibu>

The Malays and the Melanau were believed to be the first residence of Sibu. The Ibans were also recorded to be the earliest inhabitants of Sibu but they do not settled permanently and were there mainly for trading. The Melanau in Sibu are residing at Kampung Nangka, who were initially made up of three main Melanau longhouses of 10 to 11 rooms (Berita Harian, 2012).

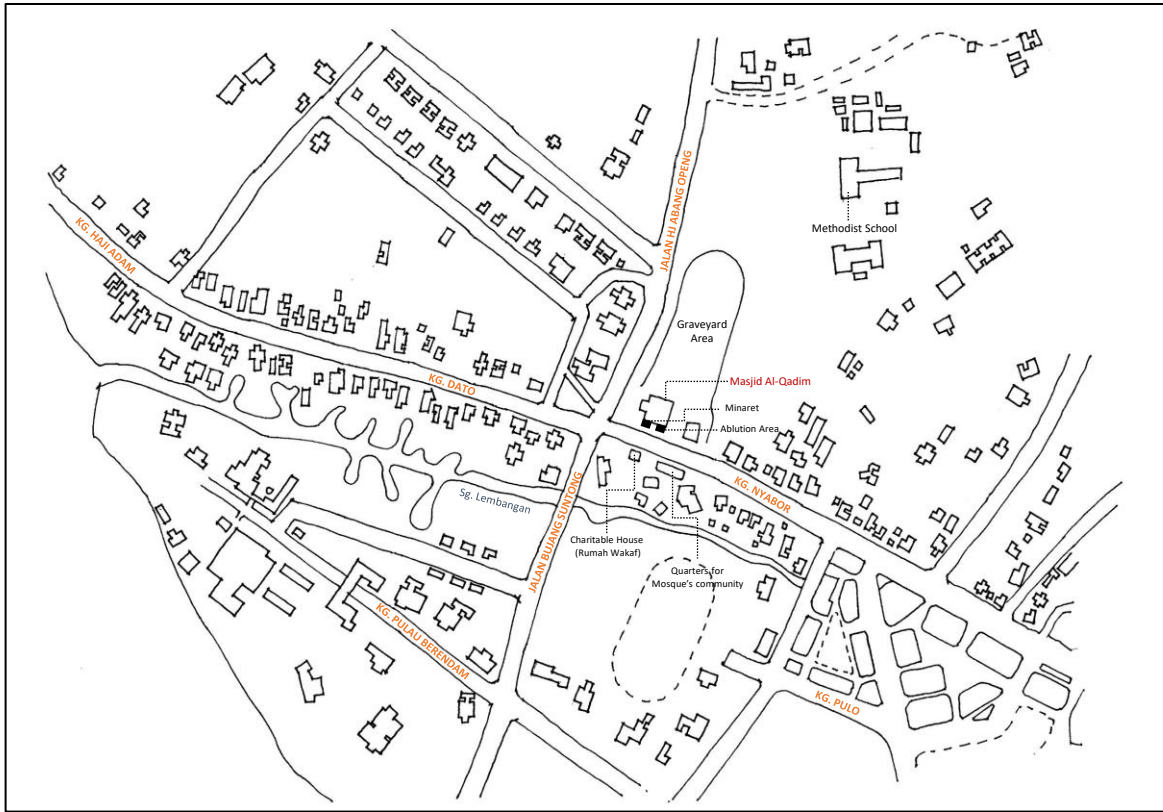


**Fig. 2:** Sibul Timeline in relation to Masjid Al Qadim

Source: Consolidation from various sources (Fong Phang Kuan and Zainal Ariffin, 2003; Fong Phang Kuan and Zainal Ariffin, 2003 and in-depth interviews)

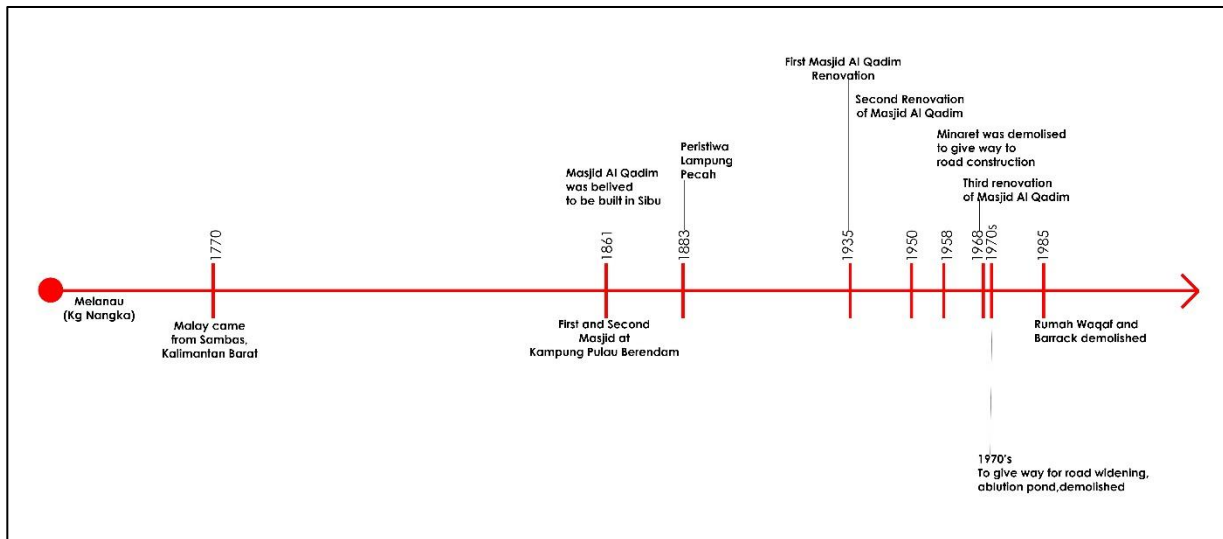
The Malays in Sibul were believed to exist since 1770 due to the discovery of 500 graveyards located near Lau King Howe hospital, where the residences of Kampung Pulo and Kampung Pulau Berendam are buried (Utusan Sarawak, 2002). There were 9 Malay villages located in Sibul at that time - Kampung Pulo, Kampung Masjid, Kampung Datu, Kampung Haji Adam (Kampung Hilir), Kampung Pulau Berendam (at the old hospital), Kampung Haji Sahak (near Masjid An Nur), Kampung Tanjung at Ulu Lanang and Kampung Banyok at Kerto and Kampung Seduan at Sungai Merah (Utusan Sarawak, 2005) (Refer to Fig. 2 and 3).

The Malays of Sibul were mainly originated from Sambas, Kalimantan Barat. Although Sibul was originally under the Brunei Sultanate, the Malays in Sibul were not from Brunei due to the language, which has affinity to the Malays from Kuching. The Brunei Malays were mainly sent to the Melanau coastal areas of Sarawak and soon assimilated with the Melanau culture through marriage. Apart from the Malays of Sambas, those who migrated to Sibul include descendants of family lineage from Arabs, such as those with surname, Syed or Wan who were known as Muslim missionaries and merchants, who migrated to Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia and subsequently to Sibul. At least, two of the Imams of Masjid Al Qadim were from this family – Syed Junaidi Syed Othman and Syed Madhi Syed Othman.



**Fig. 3:** Location of Masjid Al Qadim in relation to the early Malay settlement in Sibul

Masjid Al Qadim is believed to be the third mosque in Sibul. The first and second mosques were built at Kampung Pulau Berendam area (Lau King Howe original site) but they were demolished to give way to the development of Fort Brooke and his administrative office.



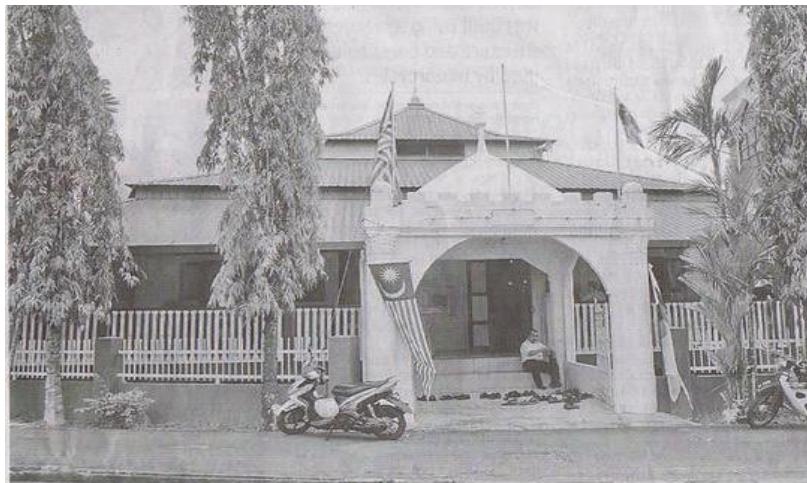
**Fig. 4:** Timeline of Masjid Al Qadim

There is no precise date to when Masjid Al Qadim was built. According to Majlis Agama Islam Sarawak, in their documentation of mosques in Sarawak, it was built around 1830 but there was also believed that the mosque was built around 1861 (from in-depth interview), while other documentation believed that the mosque was built two years before the volcanic eruption of Krakatoa in Lampung, also known as “*Peristiwa Lampung Pecah*”. The mosque was built by the Muslim community of Sibul through social reciprocal activities, whereby villagers donated building materials and their manpower to earn blessings for the Hereafter and also as an act of salvation. It was believed that craftsman from as far as Sumatera, Haji Abdul Salam Minangkabau was also involved in building the mosque.

Masjid Al Qadim have gone through several renovations (Refer to Fig. 4) as a result of pressure from urbanization at Kampung Pulo and eventually Kampung Nyabor. The Malay neighborhood started to disappear within the realms of Masjid Al Qadim, when villagers of Kampung Nyabor moved to Kampung Bandung to allow for rapid urbanization and commercialisation in Sibul. Soon, Masjid Al Qadim no longer can cope with the increase number of Muslim population in Sibul, as a result a new mosque, Masjid Annur was built in 1981 and completed in 1983, to meet the increasing needs for space.

### **Historical importance of Masjid Al Qadim**

Masjid Al Qadim is significant not only for its historical values but also serves as the centre for socio-religious development for the Muslims in Sibul since 1860s (refer to Fig. 3 and Plate 1). The present mosque is located at the junction of Jalan Kampung Nyabor and Jalan Tun Abang Haji Openg, Sibul. Lembaga Amanah Kebajikan Islam Sibul (LAKIS) has been given the responsibility to manage and maintain the building. Findings show that the mosque plays a significance contributions to the early settlement of Malay-Melanau Muslim community in Sibul. Masjid Al Qadim was situated in the centre of the villages and the centre for socio-religious activities, such as prayers, Quran classes and recitation, “*berzanzi*” (panegyrics of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W), lectures on Islamic issues and the celebration of important dates in the Islamic calendar, such as *Eid*, *Awal Muharram* and the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Villagers in Sibul will congregate in the mosques and its compound for the celebration and prayers. The mosque marked an important avenue for socio-religious activities, promoting and developing a sense of identity and belongingness amongst the Muslims in Sibul during its heyday time.



**Plate 1: Masjid Al Qadim**

Source: Borneo Post, 2016

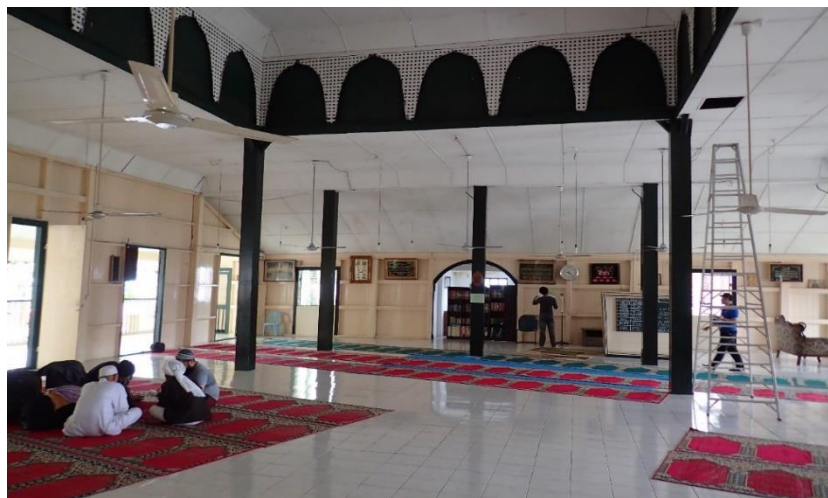


**Plate 2:** Old Picture of Masjid Al Qadim  
Source: Borneo Post, 2016

### **Architectural Elements of Masjid Al Qadim**

Masjid Al Qadim is characterised mainly of vernacular architecture despite the Moghul elements in the *mihrab* and main entrance. It symbolizes the tolerance of Islam in spreading its teaching by adapting to the local context, instead of imposing architectural foreign styles. In the Nusantara region, the Seventeenth century marked a transition between Hinduism and Islam, which are reflected by the main feature of the mosque, the roof resembling mount Meru, a holy symbol of Hinduism.

The masjid is constructed using *belian* (*Lauraceae eusideroxylon zwageri*) timber on masonry stumps. The roof is tiered and supported by four *saka guru belian* pillars (Refer to Plate 3). The construction of the *mihrab* (Refer to Plate 4) and the main entrance (Refer to Plate 5), which have the influence of Moghul architecture, were added later in 1936.



**Plate 3:** Saka Guru Belian



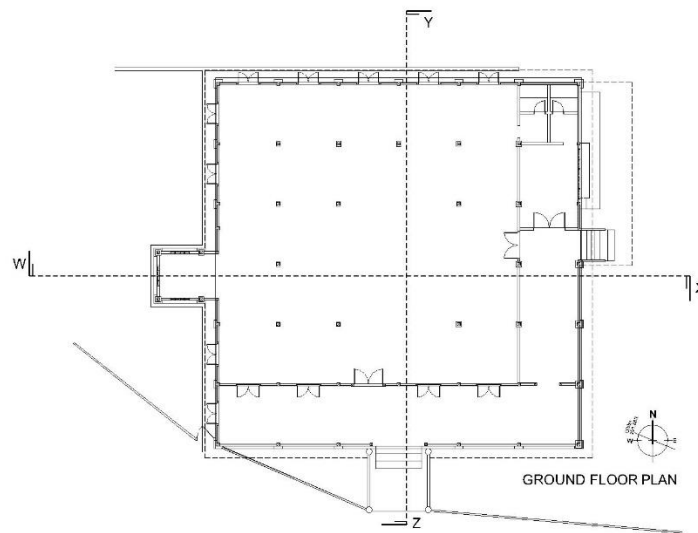
**Plate 4:** Mihrab



**Plate 5:** Main Entrance

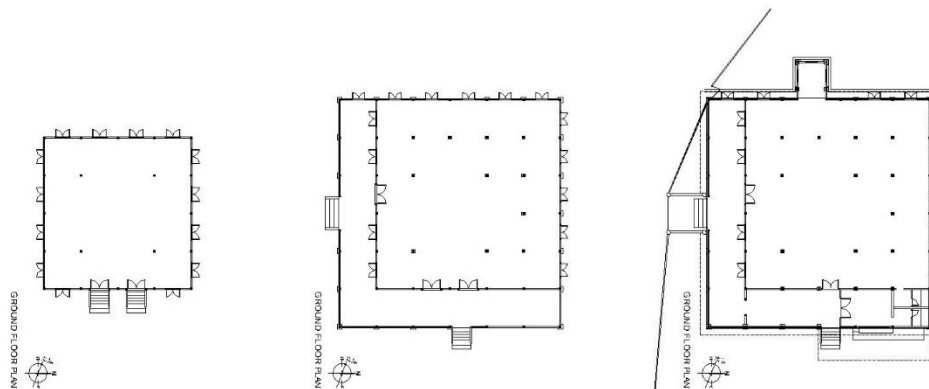
The main structure of the mosque was built based from the four pillars of the “*Saka Guru*” methods, which is typical of Javanese vernacular architecture, such as represented in the *Rumah Joglo*. The original mosque started with the four-*Saka Guru* pillars and later extended to meet the demand of the increasing *Qariah*. Earlier building materials of the mosque include hard timber (*belian*) and *nipah* (*Nypa fruitican*) roof. The building material changed throughout time, and the mosque actually experienced three major renovations, in 1935, 1950 and 1968. In 1935, the work on the Moghul style *mihrab* and Neo-classical eclectic main entrance started and completed in 1936. Cement to build the *mihrab* and main entrance were imported from Singapore. By then, the roofs were replaced with hard wood shingles (*belian*). Information from in-depth interview shows

that later the wooden shingles were replaced by zinc and eventually by the existing metal deck roofing.



**Fig. 5:** Existing Floor Plan of Masjid Al Qadim

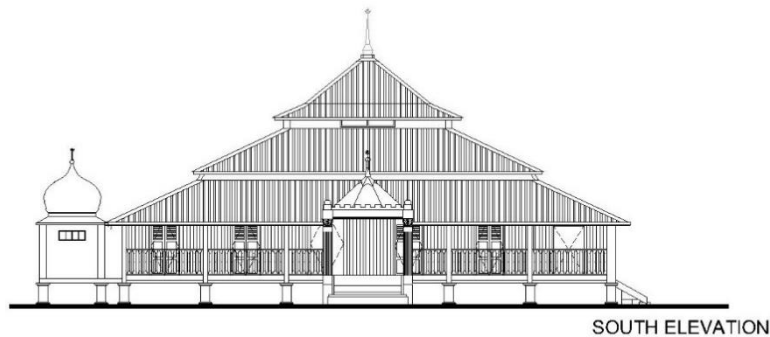
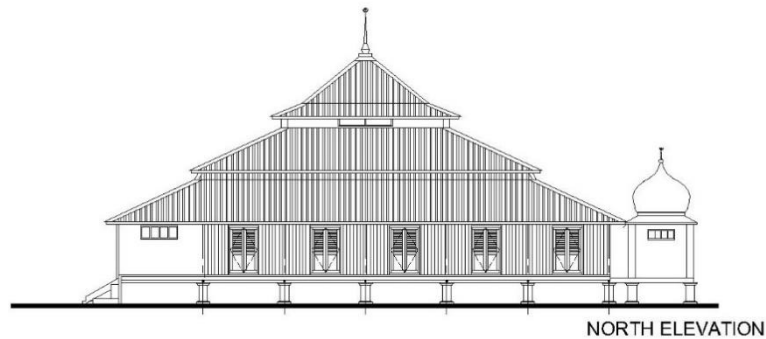
Fig. 6 shows the various versions of the floor plan, indicating the extension of the mosque. The mosque started with the main Saka Guru structure with the main entrance from the East. The centrality of building is very eminent then, with the building is almost perfectly symmetrical. Natural ventilation are provided by the huge windows which are positioned symmetrical around the building's envelope. Later the mosque was renovated by adding around the original floor area. The western and northern part are utilised as praying areas, while the extension towards the eastern and southern part are long portico enclosing the building from the two entrances. The third floor shows the additional mihrab on the Western wall and the new entrance with the Mughal onion dome. In addition to that, later on, towards the northern part, the portico was renovated into female toilet and ablution areas, and followed by a store next to it.

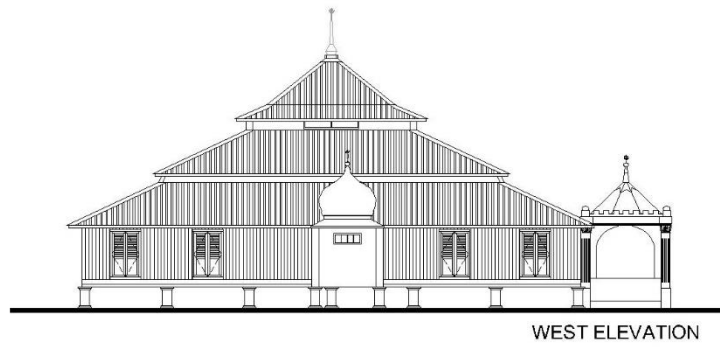
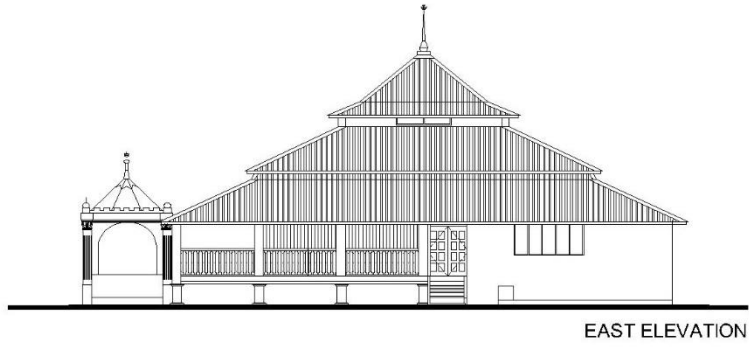


**Fig. 6:** Changes in Floor Plan due to Extension of the Mosque

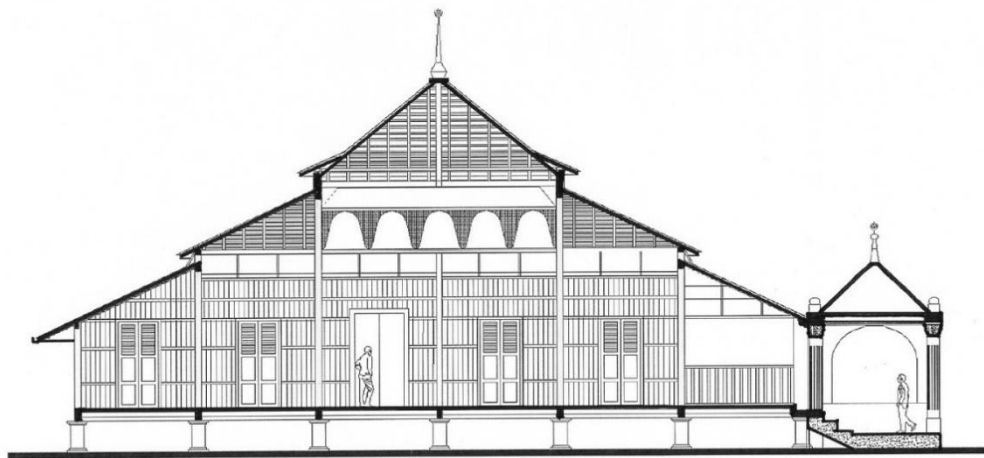


Original colour of the mosque was natural timber; later it was painted white to complement with the addition of *mihrab* and main entrance. There were other structures in its compound – the *rumah waqaf* (funeral home and a toilet) located opposite the mosque; barrack quarters for the mosque committee, next to *rumah waqaf*; ablution pond to the right of the main entrance and a minaret to the left (Refer to Fig. 3). The Minaret is of three levels, the second level was the place where the drum (*beduk*) was placed and the third level was the area for the *muazzin* to call for prayer. The minaret was demolished in 1958. The ablution pond was demolished in the 1970s to give way for road widening. By 1980s, both the *rumah waqaf* and barrack were also demolished to give way to the commercialisation of Kampung Nyabor.





**Fig. 7:** Elevations of the Mosque



**Fig. 8:** North South Section (YZ Section) of the Mosque

The North South section shows the newly added main entrance on the South side of the mosque. The section also shows the internal volume created by the Saka Guru Structures and hierarchy of the three tiers roof. This also shows that the building is elevated from the ground about 4 feet, indicating the integration of passive design by allowing natural ventilation to the other sides of the building and protecting the mosque from potential flooding. The roof tiers are also used for ventilation and natural lighting.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the years, there have been several renovations and addition to the original mosque. However, the timber mosque is now in serious dilapidation state due to years of inappropriate renovation and addition, lack of maintenance, aging, weathering, and unnecessary loads added to the original building. Masjid Al Qadim is in need of restoration and repair work, structural repair and improvement to the building perimeter. Masjid Al Qadim will be restored to its original design and continues to play significant role as centre of socio religious development for the Muslims in Sibü.

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