

INTEGRATION OF LOCAL AND ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN TRADITIONAL MINANGKABAU MOSQUES

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ABSTRACT

Mosque architecture is an important part in the process of Islamizing societies whose civilizations have had influences from another system of belief prior to the conversion into Islam. The mosque provides a new substitute for a place of ritual and signifies a change in the *welsthanchauung* where the alien concept of mosque is integrated in the new Muslim community through the incorporation and reinterpretation of local traditional symbols and architectural designs. A fieldtrip, accompanied by a local guide, to ancient Minangkabau mosques, on the Sumatera Island, Indonesia sought to examine examples of Islamicization in mosque architecture. Interview with locals were conducted, photographs were captured and observations made were cross-referenced with available literature to validate interpretation. In these mosques, old designs, thought to be of Hindu-Buddhist origin, such as the *stupa* (mound-like structure), *gunungan* (mountain-like feature) and *makara* (mythical sea-creature) have been retained and incorporated in mosque designs and given new Islamic interpretation. Non-religious designs with strong local affinity such as floral and vegetal motifs using local flower and plant as inspiration are utilized to increase the aesthetic value of mosque. Other examples, like the radiant sun motifs that is peculiar only to Malay mosque, is thought to carry symbolic Islamic meaning whereas *gonjong* roof (buffalo horn-shaped roof), is incorporated for both cultural identity and functional purposes. In addition, new components, symbols and designs were introduced from other Islamic civilization; examples include features such as crescent and *na'al* (sandal) motifs.

Keywords: Islamic architecture, local architecture, Minangkabau mosque.

INTRODUCTION

Many parts of today's Islamic worlds were under the influence of other religious system before Islam was finally introduced to them. The prevailing religious system in the pre-Islamic period pervaded many parts of local's life – rituals, hierarchical system, dressings, as well as architectural design of both secular and

religious buildings. The introduction of Islam in many of these regions, such the Malay Archipelago, through trade and da'wah strategies, employed ingenious methods of Islamicization that allows a slow but firm and sure integration of Islamic practices and *weltanschauung* (worldview). One of these methods is seen in the Islamization of designs of traditional mosques, seeking not only to reform local religious architecture but also to reinterpret spiritual symbologies in a wholly Islamic perspective. This paper takes Minangkabau mosques on the island of Sumatera as case examples of the process of Islamization and integration of local and Islamic architecture.

THE COMING OF ISLAM TO THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

1303, the date inscribed on the Trengganu Inscription Stone, is regarded a watershed in the history of conversion of the Malay Archipelago to Islam, a time that forever changed the social and religious attitude of the prevailing cultures in the region. The Trengganu Inscription Stone provides a concrete evident of what is already known – that Islam had arrived hundreds of years before 1303, and Muslim sultanates were already established from as far as Ternate to the coast of Sumatra and Peninsula Malaysia. Islam by 1303 was consolidating itself culturally and politically in the region.

The conversion process even in the initial stages in the Malay Archipelago is not restricted to the ruling strata or the merchant class as argued by several Western scholars, Krom (1950) and Vlekke (1959) for instance, nor was it done by force. Through the introduction of the concept of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God), Islam engineered an intellectual revolution from which the Malays of all walks of life were made to appreciate the functions of intellect. The new religion thus liberated them from irrational dogma and inspired them with the ethos of taqwa (God-consciousness), in which emphasized is on the origin and equality of existence of mankind, differing only in the level of taqwa in the eyes of God. These resulted in the breakdown and disposal of the Hindu-Buddhist caste system, the concept of human king as deities, and the veneration of stone idols. Also affected by the

coming of Islam monotheism are indigenous cosmologies which had given rise to local cosmogony (origin of the world), teogony (origin of deities), anthropogony (origin of mankind) and others (Middleton, 1967; Subagya, 1981; Mohamad Ibrahim et al, 1990). Simply put, the coming of Islam initiated the process of 'revolutionising the Malay-Indonesian world-view, turning it away from a crumbling world of mythology ... to the world of intelligence, reason and order' (al-Attas, 1969, 29-30).

Hindu-Buddhist and local indigenous beliefs during the pre-Islamic Malay societies were expressed not only in the form of philosophical ideas and rituals. They also found expression as cultural and art forms. Even if the philosophical teaching of these non-Islamic doctrines were not well understood or embraced fully by the locals, their gripping influence in shaping the locals' worldview was effected through the cultural and art forms (al-Attas, 1969). Henceforth, the revolution carried about by Islam also encompasses architectural transition from Hindu-Buddha architecture to Islamic architecture in the region, which must have firstly emerge in a mature form during the Second of Phase of the Islamisation of the Archipelago, the consolidation phase, put to between the 14th to 18th centuries (al-Attas, 1969) and which continues on until after the 18th century.

THE MINANGKABAU

Minangkabau tribe, which converted to Islam as early as the 15th century, is known as one of the staunchest and devout followers of Islam from among the Malay tribes. Their motherland spans between the western and eastern coasts of central Sumatera bothering neighbours like the Rawa, the Batak and the Mandailings. These latter tribes only started to convert to Islam in the late 19th century (Lubis, 2005). The culture of the Minangkabau was considered instrumental in bringing these neighbours into the fold of Islam, by the presentation of wise and creative Islamic enterprise through their dressings, foods, manners, cultural fests, and also secular and religious buildings of the Minangkabau. As Islamization is never meant Arabization, Islamized nations like the Minangkabau are able to retain many parts of their cultures which do not contradict the principles of

Islam. The philosophical interpretation of their world underwent great changes, though, with many concepts regarding God, revelation, life, and the Hereafter substituted pre-Islamic definitions. New spiritual and ritual space was also introduced in the form of the mosque as a replacement to temple. At the mosques, *ulama'* (clergymen) taught the precepts of the religion while local craftsmen translate these in the stunningly beautiful construction of the building. The Minangkabau landscape is dotted with many such mosques, some dated from several hundred years ago, which are built in stunningly beautiful and pronounced Minangkabau architecture, completely unique and distinct from other regional Malay mosques. A cluster of these traditional Minangkabau mosques, represented by the Limo Kaum Mosque, Rao-rao Mosque, and Surau Nagari Lubuk Bauk (at Batu Sangkar) Mosque, could be found around the Pagar Ruyung area, not far from the touristy town of Bukit Tinggi. Many of these buildings, including mosques, are not only telling buildings to look at, richly endowed with cultural and religious values, but also pivotal points in the everyday life and grand narrative of the Minangkabau people. (Mohd Shafri, 2008)

The Limo Kaum and Rao-rao mosques have both been listed (Peraturan Menteri Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, 2010) as *cagar budaya* (protected cultural sites). The Limo Kaum mosque in particular was important because it has origins as the earliest mosques built in the Tanah Datar district of the Minangkabau heartland. The original Limo Kaum mosque had no walls or roof (Almaizon, 2004) and was built by a religious missionary by the name of Burhanuddin in 1690. The current building was built in 1710 on the site of a disused pagoda-like temple, which were abandoned after the conversion of locals into Islam (Almaizon, 2004). The current Rao-rao Mosque is much more recent than the Limo Kaum mosque. It was built in previous century (Kementerian Agama Indonesia, no date) to replace the original Rao-rao ijuk-roofed (ijuk: a type of palm tree whose leaves are used as roof) mosque. It has historical values as centre of local resistance against the Dutch (Akbar, 2012). The Surau Nagari Lubuk Bauk, built in 1896, (Kementerian Agama Indonesia, no date) is a smaller community mosque. In contrast to the Limo Kaum and Rao-rao mosques, this building was never used for

Friday prayer, and only functions to perform the five daily prayers. Although it has not received similar national status as the other two mosques, Surau Nagari Lubuk Bauk is looked after by the local authority who values its elaborate decorations and distinctively local architecture.

ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES OF ARCHITECTURE

It is first important to discuss what denotes a mosque design Islamic. It has been argued that the Prophet's mosque was a simple building with little decoration. This, however, is a simplistic conclusion on the Prophet's mosque and overlook the absent of clear prohibition of and lack of clear proof of the Prophet's disinterest in architecture. A mosque is understood in its traditional function not only as a ritual space, but one that represents the higher virtue of Islam i.e. a *deen* or a way of life. Thus, it could have many functions that may be regarded as secular too such as a learning place. In fact, at least six different mosque typologies have been identified: Arabian, Turkish, Iranian, Indian, Chinese and the Southeast Asian. Their presence indicates that traditionally, the physical aspects of the historic mosque of the Prophet have not been used to restrict the vocabulary nor the expression of Islamic architecture. On the other hand, the Prophet's mosque could serve as standard to determine the principles, qualities or spirits of an Islamic building.

Principles that have been proposed to characterise an Islamic building includes the principles of *tawhid* (unity), *ihitiram* (respect), *ikhlas* (sincerity), *iqtisad* (moderation/humility), *haya'* (modesty), *'ilm* (pursuit of knowledge), and *dhikr* (remembrance) (Moustafa, 2008). In the tawhidic principle, elements that do not convey the message of Oneness of God, such as idols, are taken out. It also leads to the development of a communal centre with unifying command. Respect or *ihitiram* involves deference to individual's space and rights, partitioning between genders, local materials and designs as well as in the relation to environment. An Islamic building must also be built with sincerity and purity of intention hence the emphasis on designs that promotes contemplation of God (*dhikr*) takes priority over one that

promotes contemplation of human power. The attempt at producing a contemplative mood through designs is matched by the drive for moderation and humility so that the balance between extravagance and prudence is achieved. The principle of ‘ilm or knowledge is expressed by a careful planning that shows care has been given to its functionality, appropriate aesthetic values and application of precise geometry, to name a few examples. Others, such as Mohamad Rasdi MT (2010), have also added other characteristics such as the idea of eternal, integration versus wastefulness and the concept of a democratic building. Each of these principles was derived from the Prophet mosque and his s.a.w. Canonical saying as well as the verses of the Qur’an. For instance, to explain the idea of the ‘Eternal’ in Islamic architecture, the author based his idea on the following verse:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the day and night. They are indeed signs for men to understand. Men who celebrate the praises of God standing, sitting and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the wonders of creation. [al-Quran 3:190]

Thus, in the understanding of a Muslim, God is to be contemplated through His creations in nature. This lead to appreciation and gratitude for the universe, expressed in many ways through assimilation to the design, choice of materials, colour and consideration to the local surrounding in architecture. The Islamisation process of built environment of a newly-converted community therefore revolves around how these principles could be integrated into local building tradition

MINANGKABAU MOSQUES AS EXAMPLES OF ISLAMISED LOCAL BUILDINGS

Specific literature on traditional mosques of the Minangkabau area was limited, but old pictures of Minangkabau mosques that were on permanent exhibit at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur lead to a visit in May the same year. This was an independent research trip which aims to identify old mosques with local and organic architecture which may give clue to the process of Islamization in the Malay Archipelago. A local guide

was identified through local guesthouse whose local knowledge of the area was instrumental in finding the way to the mosques.

The first thing that strikes visitors of the mosques were the roofs which were built in the *gonjong* style, resembling a buffalo horn, a tradition that refers back to the folkloric, pre-Islamic origin of the tribe and the famous buffalo fight against the invading Javanese. Its inclusion in the Minangkabau mosque architecture is interesting to note as it represents the inclusive nature of the local Islamic tradition, one that does not attempt to do away with local traditions that do not contradict the edifices of the faith, but rather embraces, preserves and support the ancient tradition. The unique roofs are topped by another feature uniquely found in Minangkabau mosques - the boxed-balcony, rich in and lovingly decorated with a lot of Minangkabau styles.

Overall, the general design of the roofs of the mosques at Rao-rao, Limo Kaum and Lubuk Bauk still follows the multi-tiered *meru* (of pyramidal shape) roof which is almost universally used in traditional mosque architecture throughout the Malay Archipelago, in contrast to the modern-day onion-shaped dome. This type of roof is often attributed to Hindu temple design (Mabbett, 1983) which is retained after the coming of Islam by changing its meaning and significance to conform to the Islamic perspective. The multi-tiered mosques of the Malays are usually of three or four tiers and this is interpreted as representing the three components of Islam – tawhid, fiqh and tasawwuf – in the former, and as representing the four stages towards the gnosis of God – Syari’at, Tariqat, Hakikat and Ma’rifat – in the latter (al-Ahmadi, 1985). The five-tiered roof of Limo Kaum is not unique to this mosque as there are other five-tiered mosques in the Malay Archipelago (Budi, 2004; Wiryomartono, 2009; Hartono, 2007). Five layers of roofs is interpreted as representing the five pillars of Islam – Syahadah, Zakah, Solah, Fasting, and Hajj. However, local sources also mention that the number of tiers of the roof is related to the number of clans (or villages) involved in the making of the mosque.

The Minangkabau people is traditionally and essentially a farming community who lives close to nature. They therefore

have special regards to it, looking at nature with the philosophy of 'alam takambang jadi guru' (the vast Nature as Teacher) (Navis, 1984). Nature is thus looked upon not only as a source of living, but also a source of guidance and a source of inspiration. Floral, vegetal and animal-inspired motifs are used extensively in their architecture sometimes as pure decoration to enhance aesthetic values and sometimes modified to enhance functionality. Among popular Minangkabau motifs in used are *pucuak rebung* (young bamboo shoots), and *keluak paku* (curls of ferns). The use of floral and vegetal motifs is preferred in accordance to Islamic teaching that forbids the use of animal figurative designs (Burckhart, 1970). However, wherever animal motifs are to be used, these are further modified so that they take the form of an abstract form. An example includes the *itik pulang petang* pattern (the form of ducks waddling home at dusk) which could be found as a decoration of *kayu pemanis* (a decorated element below the eaves) of Malay-Minangkabau buildings. The *pucuak rebung*, and *keluak paku* styles can be seen as wood carving in all three traditional mosques being mentioned. Various other patterns are also seen, often carved in highly complex and abstract patterns, adorning and enhancing the functions of features such as ventilation panels, wall panels, railings and partitions. The wholly wooden Lubuk Bauk Mosque, in comparison to others, is more richly endowed with these decorations. At Limo Kaum Mosque, on the other hand, blooming flowers and plant tendrils are hand-painted as additional features to the external walls.

Other than floral and vegetal patterns, suitably Islamic geometric patterns are also being used, carved in successive patterns or connected with the floral and vegetal motifs. Geometrical designs are thought to be a predominant feature of prehistoric architecture, but is replaced by object figure designs during the Hindu-Buddhist period, (Abdullah, 1981) and then given a new lease of life when Islam, which forbids representation of animals and mankind in statues and carvings, was introduced. Rectangles, squares, circles, and triangles feature prominently, especially at the intricately carved Lubuk Bauk Mosque.

In other parts of the Malay Archipelago, such as the Malay Peninsula, cosmic motifs are also a common feature at mosques. A very peculiar motifs, almost exclusively used for mosques, is

the radiant sun motif (*matahari terkembang*), often found above doors and windows (Mohamed, 1985). Stars and crescent shapes are also carved into walls to add to the Islamic ambience as well as to aid ventilation. Interestingly however, carved cosmic patterns are not present at the Minangkabau mosques. Instead, stars and crescents are painted onto walls, or added to the kingpost of roofs and gables and the newel of mosque gates.

Some other features that are thought to have been inherited from Hindu tradition are what are considered four cardinal features of Malay woodcarvings – the *stupa* (mound-like feature), the *gunungan* (mountain-like feature), the *makara* (mythical sea creature feature) and the lotus (Said, 2002). The *stupa* and lotus are normally what forms the *buah buton* (buton stone) which is used as newel to stairs, gate and the kingpost of the roof structure of a Malay building. The *gunungan*, literally mountains, is normally incorporated as a status symbol (Said, 2002) in the building of royals and the affluent. These features are also incorporated into the building of mosques due to their aesthetic and symbolic functions to sanctify the building. The *stupa* and lotus are found in all three Minangkabau mosques adorning gables and kingpost of the roofs, but the *gunungan* is only found as part of the Rao-rao Mosque.

The *stupa*, the *gunungan* and the *meru* roof are thought to be names or representation of the same Hindu-Buddhist cosmic mountains, Mahameru, (Yaapar, 2010) where the greatest God, Indra, resides (Poopongpan, 2007). Although the usage of these features is preserved in Malay Muslims architecture, the old pre-Islamic reference and meaning of the terms are not retained and instead they are redefined and associated with the Mountain Qaf, which is related to the end of the world of creation in Sufi cosmology or representation of mosques as locus of interaction between man and the Divine Presence (Yaapar, 2010).

A very unique feature found at the Limo Kaum Mosque is the use of Sufi motif of the *na'al* (sandal) of the Prophet s.a.w. Its use as part of a building in a Malay mosque has not been mentioned before. The *na'al* is a talismanic devotional image in Sufi tradition and it is used as a medium for getting blessings as well as aiding in gaining a closer relationship with the Prophet

s.a.w. At the Limo Kaum Mosque, the shape of *na'al* frames windows as well as appear as painted decoration at the top-most part of the *meru* roof. The association of Sufi followers with mosque building traditions in the Malay-Archipelago and especially in the Minangkabau country, however, is well-understood such as the case of the multi-tiered *meru* roof which provides practical use to Malay Sufis, (Yaapar, 2010) who benefit from the seclusion (*khalwah*) and other *tariqah* practices (*riyadah*) done on the higher tiers of the mosque under the supervision of Spiritual Masters. The Limo Kaum Mosque is strategically located at the centre of a rice fields, and the five-tiered *meru* roof soars high above the coconut and fruits trees, visible to everyone from every direction. Hence, the *na'al* drawings and *na'al* frames of windows is both thoughtful and intentional, aiding the mosque in its role in directing all hearts to the simultaneous remembrance of God and His most beloved Prophet, Muhammad s.a.w.

CONCLUSION

The mosques mentions here could represent the early and later period of Islam in the area. It is striking to see that the two older mosques of Limo Kaum and Lubuk Bauk present a totally local design with little outside influence in their physical appearance. The more recent Rao-rao mosque, while remain predominantly Minangkabau, has incorporated outside elements with Indo-Persian arches made in stones and ceramic from China. This provides a historical framework for mosque-building tradition in the area; local features were of primary consideration at the infantile stage of Islam and foreign influence are only considered once Islam had spread firmly locally and when contact with outside culture took place more intensely.

Architecturally, principles of Islamic architecture are finely intertwined in the construction of these mosques. Non-Islamic place of ritual was replaced with an Islamic space where idols and representation of non-Islamic philosophy were discarded, replaced or being given a new meaning. Some of these recasts of symbols and philosophies into the new monotheism mould found matching concept with the local needs and

functions. An example is the construction of the multi-tiered roof, an excellent choice in a rainy tropical climate, which is used to represent the basics of religion as well as to remind the community of the spirit of togetherness that binds the clans. Other principles are also expressed in oneway or another, but the ultimate aim remains: placing man in front of God, physically and spiritually, by the well-arranged thoughtful use of space (Nasr, 1987). Through the historical narratives of the local people, it is known that the first generations of Muslim in the area were highly knowledgeable and sensitive people. They did not seek to abandon local norms, make abrupt and puritan reform or aim at making their thought and cultures dominant over the local masses. They identified with and valued locally grown culture and represented a dynamic and pragmatic force that had enabled Islam to be welcomed and embraced fully by the societies. Islam, in a nutshell, was seen as neither a destructive form nor a hindrance to a flowering of a totally new, vibrant architectural tradition. In modern context, many things could be learnt from these mosques. The concept of *jatidiri* (strong sense of identity), communality and togetherness, local attitude towards climate and materials, and the highest purpose of a building (i.e. the orientation of mad towards God and the centrality of religious precepts in a Muslim's life) are among the salient features that must be considered when building mosque and other building. Islamization (which is defined, includes and respects all of these concepts) in planning and constructing buildings is both a process and a destination.

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