

STUDY ON THE FUNCTIONS OF MIHRAB IN THE SELECTED MALAYSIAN MOSQUES

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ABSTRACT

Mihrab and Qibla wall are two significant elements exist in any mosques. All aspects in designing the form of Mihrab on the Qibla wall should be taken into study so that the functions will not be misapprehended. Muslim world seizes Mihrab on the Qibla Wall of mosques as a space for Imam (the congregational leader). Archeological evidence confirmed on the existence of earliest Mihrab in the form of semi circular concaved niche used during the Umayyad Dynasty and then shape and form of Mihrab evolves throughout the centuries and across cultures. If the Mihrab is actually used for the *Imam* to lead the congregation, Mihrab should always remain within the same dimension according to normal human anthropometry in comfort and should fit a single prayer rug in the niche, regardless the size of mosque. The objective of the paper is mainly to observe the functions and usages of selected Malaysian Mosques Mihrabs. Typological analysis done reveals that the Mihrabs under study are sized and shaped differently. This concluded that the function of Mihrab in Malaysian mosques is not restricted to be an area for *Imam* leading the congregational prayers but it is more as an indicator of Qibla direction.

Keywords: Mihrab, Mosque, Typology, Qibla wall, Proportion

INTRODUCTION

Mosque, with all its components externally and internally must be studied and comprehended in great details as most of the information on culture, religious and needs of Muslim contained in its compound. Mosque is where the prostrations of Muslim take place either in congregation or alone. Qibla wall guides the believers to the line of Ka'aba direction, where they should face when performing solat (prayer). Qibla wall contains Mihrab which is an indication of Ka'aba direction and a place for Imam, the prayer leader. Agreeable with the significance of Mihrab existence on Qibla wall, Ardalan (1980) conducted a research on 130 major mosques across the Muslim world and Mihrab appeared to exist in all the 130 studied mosques. The finding

shows that Mihrab is one of the main physical components of mosque architecture (Ardalan, 1980).

The different sizes and shapes of Mihrab raised the question on the true function of Mihrab. This paper will give the answer in regards to the true usage of Mihrab as one of mosque components. Mihrab differs in design and construction through the time and across regions, fulfilling the needs of varies cultural background users.

According to Rafique (1982), changes are made in order to face modernization and adapt new elements, where the adaptation will then alter the traditional shape and give a new look to the overall design.

Mihrab on the Qibla Wall

In Medieval mosques, Mihrab is considered to be the focal point or the visual peak of the interior mosque space. Just as the prophet Muhammad s.a.w. stationed himself by the planted ‘harba’(short spear), indicating the qibla direction and lead the congregational prayer.

As stated by Frishman (1994):

“In mosque interiors, the direction of Mecca is indicated by the qiblah wall in which the mihrab niche is incorporated. As the focal point of the building, the mihrab is often its most elaborately decorated feature.”

Mihrab Mudjawwaf (semi circle concave) was the first three dimensional Mihrab built in order to commemorate the point where the Prophet Muhammad faced when leading the congregation. Even though there is no evidence on Mihrab best sized and shaped, it is important to know that Mihrab Mudjawwaf was first built by the humble and pious Umar Abdul Aziz (Whelan, 1986). Mihrab also acts as a commemorative and historical value. Nuha (1998) explained that contemporary Mihrab is conventionally defined as a space with function: orientation device and as a reminder on the Prophet’s customary space.

According to Utami (2005; 22), the area covered by a single man performing prayer is 800mm by 1200mm. Taking this dimension as the yard stick, size of Mihrabs for the chosen mosques are measured and analysed. (figure 4)

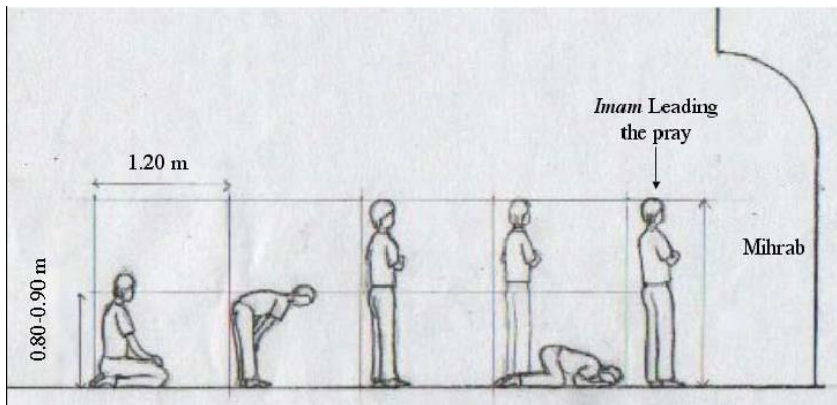


Figure 4: After Utami (2005; 22)

Research Methodology

Typology is the most suitable method for finding the evolution in size and proportion of the selected Mihrabs. It gives the idea of providing orders and certainly to generate forms from the origin given by the earliest mihrab of Qibla wall. The result will provide the opportunity in assisting the authority to classify the tangible heritage in conservation works.

Nine (9) mosques were selected:

- Three (3) mosques from traditional/vernacular mosques
- Three (3) mosques from colonial era
- Three (3) mosques from after independence/contemporary

Table One: List of mosques

No	Mosque	Built year	Era	Mihrab size			Qibla Wall span (mm)
				Height (mm)	width (mm)	Depth (mm)	
1	Tengkerah, Melaka	1728	Traditional/ Vernacular	1950	1200	1580	10700
2	Batu Uban, Penang	1734		2940	1070	1400	7310
3	Kampung Keling, Melaka	1748		2200	1100	1520	9050
4	S.Alaeddin, Selangor	1898	Colonial	3000	2000	1600	12700
5	Muhammadiyah, Kelantan	1867		6400	5000	5000	20500
6	S.Abu Bakar, Johor	1892		7900	4700	2900	17300
7	National Mosque, KL	1965	After Independence	4064	1700	900	34100
8	Putra Jamalullail, Perlis	1994		6500	5900	3890	16420
9	Pahang State Mosque	2005		8000	4750	3450	23750

The Selected Mosques

Traditional/Vernacular Mosques

Traditional mosques are normally built using local materials. They are modestly small as they portray the vernacular Malay house image. Vernacular mosques are built with influences from *Nusantara* vernacular architecture. Their significant feature is the employment of layered pyramidal roof.



Masjid Tengkerah, 1728

Masjid Kampung Keling, 1748

Masjid Batu Uban, 1734

Figure 1

Colonial Mosques

British Colonial era marks the existence of significant British influence on the political, economical and social status of Malaysia. Colonization effects can be seen on mosque design especially in the design and ornamentation of Mihrab and Qibla wall.



Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar,
1892

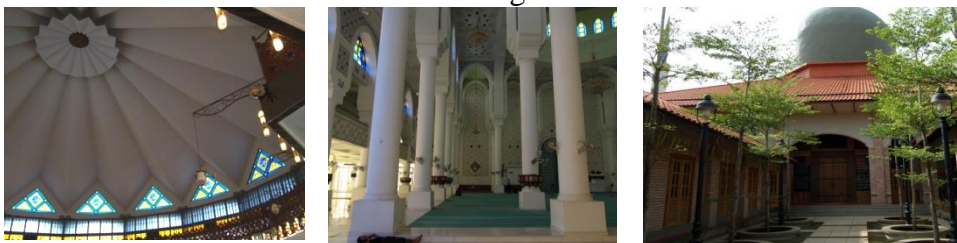
Masjid Sultan Alaeddin,
1898

Masjid Muhammadiyah,
1867

Figure 2

Post Independence Mosques

Post Independence Mosques in the study are the ones built between 1957 and 2005. These mosques are mostly designed by local architects without direct foreign influences.



Masjid Negara
1965

Masjid Negeri Pahang
1994

Masjid Putra Jamalullail
2005

Figure 3

Visits were made to the nine mosques and the data gathered from the visits were then used to see the evolution of Mihrab size and design of the mosques. The Mihrab are arranged to be analysed as typological research and using typological study, the classification of Mihrab formations throughout the years can be seen clearly. Report made by Gulgonen (1982) states that “typology” is termed as the classification of objects; therefore “type” is an *abstract that* could only be identified by the person carrying the classifying activity, which is mostly determined by material and cultural production of the designers, builders, users and societies.

CONCLUSION

The study on Mihrabs size and proportion, gives the answer to the question about Mihrab functions of Mihrab. In Malaysia, Mihrab is not restricted for *Imam* in leading congregational prayers. Mihrab acts as the indication of Qibla direction and in some, emphasized with decorative elements. All the selected Mihrabs are in proportion to the size of Qibla wall which means the bigger the Qibla walls (which represent the mosques' size), the more emphasized given to the Mihrabs; in term of size, height and decoration. The reason could be; for a gigantic mosque, a large Mihrab is employed so it can be easily seen from any points of the huge prayer hall.

Mihrabs of the three traditional/vernacular mosques are measured according to single human occupancy. The span of Qibla wall in the traditional/vernacular mosques is at the average of 9020mm with 2363mm x 1123mm x 1500mm mihrab. The mosques in the Colonial era have a longer span of Qibla wall which is 16833mm and bigger mihrab size that is 5767mm x 3900mm x 3167mm. In comparison, the mosques in the Post Independence era have the longest Qibla wall span of average 24756mm and mihrab size of 6188mm x 4117mm x 2747mm. These findings showed that mihrab design in the mosques of traditional/ vernacular era has able to meet the need of single human occupancy while at the same time serves as the indication of Qibla direction. It can be concluded that mihrabs in mosques of colonial and post independence era were designed not only to house the congregational leader but also as indicator of Qibla direction and mosques ornamentation.

If the Mihrab is actually used for the *Imam* to lead the congregation, size of the Mihrab need not be too wide or too huge for a single occupant. The Mihrab should more or less be sized sufficiently to fit a single prayer rug in the niche. Regardless to the size of mosque, the size of Mihrab should always remain the same size.

Figure 6(six), shows the proportion of all the Mihrabs with respect to their Qibla walls and arranged in line for comparison purpose.

Instead of having a large Mihrab, the big mosques can recognize the function of multiple Mihrabs with a main Mihrab positioned in the middle, Pahang State Mosque is an example on the existence of multiple Mihrabs in Malaysian mosques (Figure 8.11).

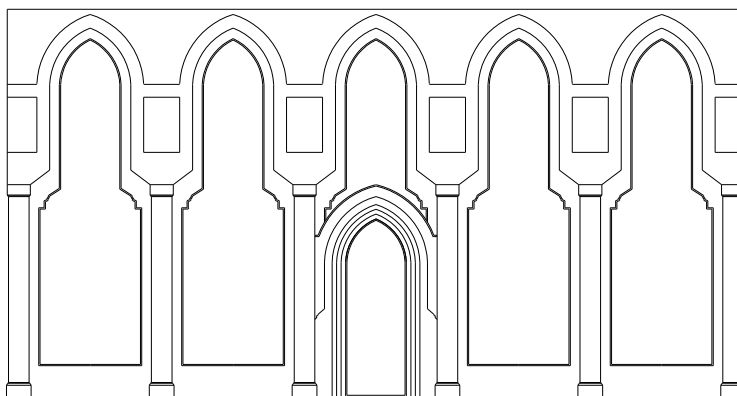


Figure 5: Pahang State Mosque's Main and Multiple Mihrabs

Mihrab is known not only as a functional space for *imam* and as an orientation device for prayer, now it also function as focal point of the mosque compound. Today, as proven by the research, Mihrab also meant to be the most decorative element of the mosque. In a big and gigantic mosque, the Mihrab is constructed and designed tall and huge in proportion to the Qibla wall span. This will make the Mihrabs easier to be noticed from the other end of the mosques. Mihrab with variety of sizes, shapes and designs has a role of carrying the glory and uniqueness of Islamic art and architecture.

AFTER INDEPENDENCE MOSQUES

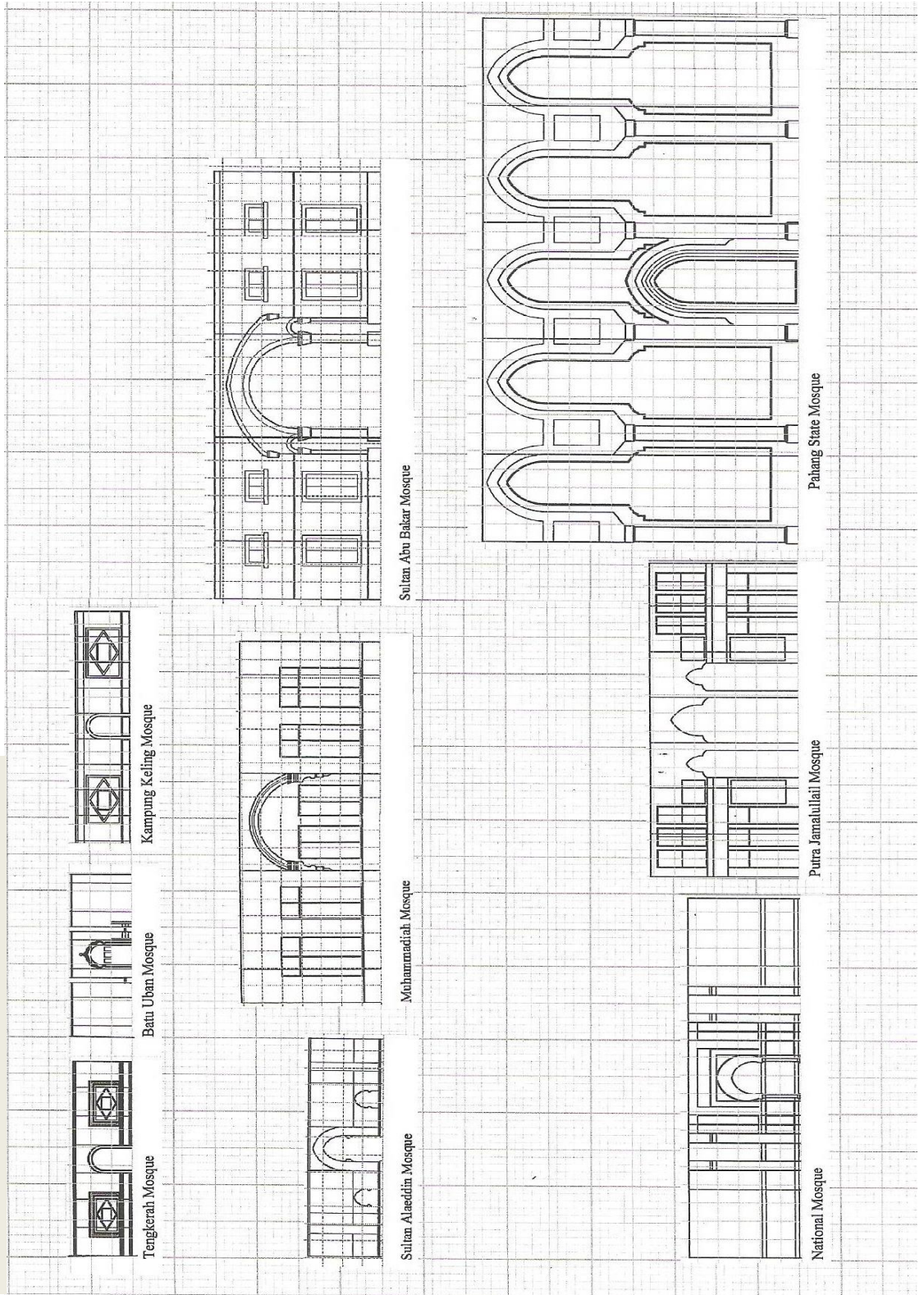


Figure 6: Size and Proportion of Analysed Mihrabs

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