

## **Mosques in Malaysia: British colonial architectural influence and forming a new national identity**

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### **Abstract**

Mosques represent a significant aspect of Muslim life; showcasing the religion's rich history as well as its ability to thrive over time. Yet, the built design of these mosques often demonstrate a colonial style, which looks to the Middle East for inspiration. The focus of this paper is to explore to what extent British colonial powers have influenced the mosque and its design in Malaysia today. Such a study is necessary in order to highlight that Malaysian Mosques should reflect the diverse population of Malaysia. Throughout the paper, specific examples of mosques (vernacular, colonial and neo-Islamic styles) will be utilised to gain a better understanding of contrasting images of mosques throughout the country. The paper concludes by contending that Malaysia should seek to fuse its own identity into its architectural designs and re-discover what it means to be Malaysian by focusing on building a national identity through its built environment.

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout the Muslim world, the mosque symbolises the fundamental aspects of Islamic thought. Whilst practices within the mosque have remained unchanged since the religion began, the architecture of the mosque has evolved significantly. As a postcolonial country, Malaysia's mosques have adopted various styles and are symbolic of the country's multicultural population. This paper focuses on the mosque during the British colonial period (1795-1957) and argues that a new identity is needed for the design of mosques today following its independence in 1957. Research was achieved by conducting an analysis of literature and this paper contributes to the discourses surrounding how identity and mosque architecture are inherently connected. Whilst much of the literature focuses on a comparison of different mosques over time, this paper firstly conducts an analysis of a vernacular mosque, colonial mosque and a modern mosque; subsequently concluding that Malaysia should seek its own architectural identity for its mosques and use its colonial past as a way to move forward.

The mosque remains a fundamental part of Malaysia and is 'the centre of the Muslim life' (Tajuddin & Rasdi, 2007, p. 7), as 61.3% of Malaysia's population are of Muslim religion (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2015). Malaysia seeks to build its own national identity in its nation-building which can be succeeded through its mosques; they play a significant role in everyday life of the population, regardless of whether they indulge in Muslim practice. More recently, Malaysia developed the 'One Malaysia' slogan which has been adopted to foster solidarity amongst its everyday people, in an attempt to initiate an overall national identity, one that merges religion, culture and heritage together (Saad, 2012). The mosque, therefore, is at the centre of the discussion on identity within the built environment in contemporary Malaysia.

## 2. Background to Islamic architecture

Islamic architecture incorporates styles that fit in with both the economic and climatic conditions of the city it is in, hence mosques are typically located amongst city centres, with minarets built to a large and high scale, making them visible to city areas (Itewi, 2007; Mahmoud & Elbelkasy, 2016). Government systems utilise mosques to showcase a country's power through using the extravagant spaces and architectural styles which further suggest immense wealth (Arkoun, 2008). The architecture that Islam has aided in creating makes for a design that is still lawful today and helps Muslims to understand the multiple expressions of Islam (Rabbat, 2012). Thus, it has overcome different tastes of representation as well as other religions and contrasting thoughts and beliefs (Tajuddin & Rasdi, 2014). Despite this, this paper disputes both Rabbat (2012) and Tajuddin and Rasdi (2014) in that the mosque designs have not overcome different tastes of representation, but have followed designs that are now seen to be out of date and not in keeping with Malaysia's multicultural population and aspirations to have one overall national identity.

### 2.1 Vernacular/traditional Malaysian mosques

Muslims conquered the Byzantine, Sassanid and Persian civilizations, which became crucial aspects within the Islamic culture, organised to create one Islamic view (Itewi, 2007). Whilst some claim that Islam 'borrows' other cultures, 'Islamic religion, culture and literature was neither derived from a Bedouin past nor directly borrowed from other religions but developed in parallel with the other as part of a shared Middle Eastern heritage.' (Lapidus, 2014, p. 170). As a result, Muslim life was centred around the mosque to accommodate religious practice, however this 'Middle Eastern heritage' changed as the religion spread into parts of South-East Asia. Wherever Muslims have chosen to live, a mosque will have been built as a space for their worship (Esposito, 2002). The first mosque to be built was the Quba Mosque in Saudi Arabia, which was laid by The Prophet Muhammed and still exists today (Macca & Aryanti, 2017). Islam came to South-East Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but it was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> century that it became more prominent and mosques became pivotal for the dissemination of Islam (Ahmad, 1999). Malaysia became a centre of trade for those from India, the Middle East and Indonesia which aided in the spread of the religion (Moser, 2012). Traditional vernacular Malaysian mosques were constructed of wood, with pagoda type roofs, similar to those of the Malay houses, which were built on stilts (Moser, 2012; Ahmad, 1999).



Figure 1. The Kampung Laut Mosque, Khota Baru (Photo derived from Hassan & Nawawi (2014))

The Kampung Laut Mosque in the figure above (see Figure 1) is agreed to be the oldest mosque in Malaysia, built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Hassan & Nawawi, 2014; Bruce, 1996; Petersen, 1996). The architecture resembles that of traditional Malaysian buildings which incorporated local components with a sustainable design (Hassan & Nawawi, 2014). The timber structure was a common mosque type before the colonisation of the country (Bruce, 1996) and it further demonstrates traditional Malay identity which has since been replaced by other designs.

## 2.2. British Colonial Mosques

There is no doubt that colonialism had a profound effect on Islam, which would include changes in both economic and social ways (Peters, 1979), however, it was not until around the 19<sup>th</sup> century that colonialism became more prominent (Mutalib, 1993). Before British occupation, the country was first colonised by the Portuguese (1511-1641) and the Dutch (1641-1795), which in turn made for hybrid mosques which combined several Islamic images (Ahmad, 1999). Initially, mosques were constructed and designed by locals, but during the colonial era they were built by foreigners who had little understanding of the symbolic meaning of the places they were constructing (Farrag, 2017). However, Choueir (2002) contends that the colonisers remained mindful of Islamic life and ways in the places they dominated. Bayoumi (2000) posits that the colonial era formed the creation of forced

cultural meanings through architecture, known as symbolic capital which would cause a change in who facilitated the administration of public buildings. Nearly all mosques that were constructed during colonial times were not only visually different from the vernacular mosques of Malaysia, but there was a change in their scale in addition to the building materials used (Ahmad, 1999). British colonisers sought to bring classic architecture which presented a more Middle Eastern, Islamic style to the mosques, seen in the domes, arches and columns (Ahmad, 1999). The first dome ever constructed was in Damascus in 706 AD and minarets were a similar construct to these, which highlighted the historical and spatial relevance of the mosque that they were placed on (Itewi, 2007).



Figure 2. Ubudiah Royal Mosque, Kuala Kangsar (Photo derived from Sanusi, et al. (2019))

Built in 1912, the Ubudiah Royal Mosque (see Figure 2) is Islamic in image and designed with classical architecture in mind. Different from the previous vernacular styles of Malaysia (see Figure 1), the colonial mosque was built by British architects implementing domes, columns and arches, created to showcase Britain's power and sovereignty (Sanusi, et al., 2019), despite it being built in Malaysia. The civic religious building contains geometrical patterns which underlines the Islamic ideals brought from the Middle East which many colonial planners and designers brought to South-East Asia (Ismail, et al., 2020).

### 2.3. Modern vernacular and neo-Islamic style mosques

Lapidus (2014) notes that although the British colonisers stripped the Malay sultans of most aspects of their roles, they did not dominate their religion and customs. This is not to say that they were not at fault for changing the Muslim architecture that already existed. Khazae, et al. (2015, p. 641) demonstrate their awareness of colonial buildings created

with a Middle Eastern form in mind; wanting to highlight a 'more Islamic outlook' to moderate the local people into the new colonial way of the religion of Islam. Wung (2014) says that today, whole cities have been made using Middle Eastern styles to further 'Islamicise' Malaysia and Kota Bahru's municipal government has made it mandatory that buildings should implement Islamic architecture. Despite this new way of Islamic living, Wung (2014) says, this may end up dividing Muslims, as they want diverse architecture.

It is evident that there are mixed views surrounding colonialism and its impact on Islamic and Muslim architecture. European architects changed the design of the mosque during the colonial period by using motifs from Middle Eastern cities and applying them with western modes of ideas, which created neo-Islamic and other neo styles (Rabbat, 2014). Whilst the term 'neo-Islamic' seeks to lessen the gap between the varied historical periods of Islamic revival, they would not become widespread styles in the modern day (Rabbat, 2012). On the other hand, Elaraby (1996) says that the built environment can have an Islamic design as modernism where cultural identities are able to coincide. Moser (2012) highlights that there has been an alteration in urban design, which draws upon the Middle East as an influence because mosques originally were vernacular in style which now consist of domes and arches. Tajuddin and Rasdi (2014) describe this as a crisis for the mosque, as Western powers have tried to dominate the Muslim world.



Figure 3. Putra Mosque, Putrajaya (Photo derived from Hussein (2019))

The Putra Mosque (see Figure 3) was completed in 1999 as a significant landmark that would symbolise Islam in Malaysia, often thought of as a political act showcasing the 'romanticization' of the history of Islam, whilst simultaneously glorifying it (Ismail & Rasdi, 2010). Geometrical patterns are evident, along with domes, demonstrating the presence of a colonial style (Utaberta, et al., 2015). The double layered dome is decorated in geometrical

patterns within its interior, reinforcing the notion of Muslim's place within what God has created mentioned previously above (Ismail & Rasdi, 2010). The mosque was completed to implement Islam into an important landmark in Putrajaya as part of a bigger master plan for the new city (Utamberta, et al., 2015). The built environment has the ability to express power and the mosque capitalises from this, which the Malaysian governments uses as a way of social control (Ismail & Rasdi, 2010).

Tajuddin and Rasdi (2005) claim that modern mosques in Malaysia, 'show a serious case of Middle Eastern inferiority complex.' They believe that many contemporary architects think that the traditionally styled mosques do not conform to the standards of what mosques should be, despite no indication within the Quran that Middle Eastern style mosques must be used in every Islamic country. Despite other scholars (Moser, 2012; Tajuddin & Rasdi, 2005; Wung, 2014) determining that Malaysia seemingly borrows Middle Eastern designs, Petersen (1996) argues that since its independence, architects have attempted the move back towards the more vernacular and less colonial or Middle Eastern styles. However, Yeoh (2002) contends that the mosque design is constantly evolving and the country should use its past as an agent for positive change.

### 3. Conclusions

Constructing a national identity and the architecture of the Malaysian mosque are two entities that are inherently connected in Malaysia and the country has sought to achieve national unity since its independence. Through observing the vernacular, colonial and modern vernacular styles of mosque, it is possible to conclude that Malaysia should seek a way forward to reflect a vision of architectural inclusivity, and use British colonial planning as a vehicle to move forward, rather than try to emanate the built environment of what was before. The examples used are only a small sample of mosque styles that exist in Malaysia, and there are an array of styles that exist, so it is important to be mindful that not all mosques that exist in Malaysia today are built in a colonial style. It is recommended that a more in-depth analysis of the mosques that are in Malaysia should be conducted in order to build on this paper's argument. The challenge, nevertheless, is to put Malay designs that reflect the national identity of independent Malaysia as it is evident that the mosques built by the Malaysian government as a form of state building have become inherently unstable due to its colonial and middle eastern influences. If mosque designs adapt to be inclusive of the current cultural and political climate of Malaysia, they have the potential to create a new vision for Malaysia; one that is inclusive of both a local and national identity.

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