

MANAGING OLDEST MOSQUES IN MALACCA: EMBEDDING MODERN FEATURES TO THE TRADITIONAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT: Chinese architectural influence on mosque architecture in Malacca began when Chinese craftsmen first came for building constructions. The early mosques in Malacca were shaped like a tiered pyramid and pagoda-like towers, suggesting Chinese influence. The objective of the present paper is to present the physical components of these mosques. Observation on four of the oldest mosques in Malacca revealed that these mosques displayed internal and external elements. These elements clearly point towards the harmonious combination of Chinese and Islamic culture. In addition, the paper proposes the blending of modern elements to enrich the role and function of these mosques physically.

Keywords: Oldest mosque in Malacca, Relationship with China, Components of mosque

1. INTRODUCTION

Apart from the local and Islamic influences, Chinese elements on mosque architecture are obvious from oldest mosques built during the time Malacca was colonized. The shape of the towers and roofs of these mosques were decorated with wavy ridges, similar to the pagoda or Chinese places of worship, although the basis for these old mosques were still based on an architectural style that had long existed in the Malay Archipelago, which was the *tajuk* shape or *meru* roof with *atap tumpang*. The mosque architecture in Southeast Asia is similarly related to the mosques in China. The objective of the present paper is to present the traditional components and design of a mosque in Malacca, known for its historical heritages. Blending of modern features to the traditional component is proposed to suit the present need of the Muslim society.

2. TRADITIONAL COMPONENTS OF MOSQUES

a. External Component

The oldest mosques in Malacca have a roof component with a triangle base, and arranged by level. The shape of this layered pyramid roof is also known as the mosque with *meru* roof. *Meru* roof is also known as pyramid roof. The name came from the shape of the roof having the largest base at the bottom, followed by smaller layers to the centre of the peak. There are two main theories discussing the influence of the *meru* roof. [1] and [8] concurs by elaborating that the early architecture in Malay Archipelago as having its own influence prior to the advent of Islam and similar to the mountains or *Meru*, which were considered as the dwellings of deities by the Hindus, while for the Malays, the *meru* roof is the descending place for Malay royal ancestors.

The second element is the decoration at the top of the mosque's roof is better known as the crown or dome and usually, it is made of ceramic. It has also been called *mustoka* and *puncak* (peak). This adornment can only be seen in mosques of China and Malay Archipelago only, and most widespread among mosques in Malacca. The origin of this craft is said to be from Canton and Fukien in China. When the Chinese migrated to Malacca, they introduced the crown roof as a construction component, which was integrated into mosque architecture. This component eventually became one of its most prevalent features and considered as a symbol and identity of Malaccan mosques. The crown roof was usually

made of ceramic. At the time, ceramic was considered a luxurious material since it was valuable and has its own allure. The use of crown roof on the building of a mosque manifested a certain air of stateliness due to the value placed on it. Ceramic-made roof was also highly resistant towards heat and rain due to the high firing process. Ceramic also lasts a long time, which can be attested by how the material can still be found atop of these mosques' roof. As such, the use of Chinese ceramic on the crown roof of mosques contributed towards the image and attraction of these mosques.

On the roof of *meru* design, it can be seen that the corners of the roof are decorated with *sulur buyur*. [2] believes that a majority of mosques in Malacca display designs with apparent Chinese carvings and decorations, found at the ends of roofs and peaks of these mosques.

Towers are an important element of mosques in Malacca. Their design is highly dependent on the local tradition and would differ with the ones from other areas. A district or country may produce their towers based on their creativity and combination of Islamic designs and local culture. These differences can be attributed to their respective situations, climate and the contour of the land. In general, the towers in Malacca were built slightly later after the mosque themselves. In the beginning, traditional mosques in Malacca used *beduk* and *ketuk-ketuk* to inform that it was time for prayer. Aside from functioning as an indicator for prayer times, *beduk* and *ketuk-ketuk* were also used to gather villagers in order to convey information to them. In the beginning of 19th century, towers were introduced and built for the traditional mosques, compared to the modern mosques that had their towers built with them from the beginning.

The mosques in Malacca with pyramid roof were usually combined with the pagoda-shaped tower. According to [6], the pagoda towers were built by the Chinese who were specifically brought from China to build mosques in Malacca. Many believed that Chinese pagoda was an inspiration for mosque tower in the Malay Archipelago including Malacca. Additionally, the influence of pagoda form for towers came from the time of Tang Dynasty and was brought by Chinese who lived in the Southern part of China. Among the best examples is the Tengkeri Mosque with its six layers pagoda tower. The topmost level has an open space or a balcony covered by a Chinese designed roof. The whole of the tower

is hexagon-shaped, with six corners. Every level has designs on its walls such as arches and small sill-less windows, with exception of the highest level. Similarly, the tower at the Kampung Hulu Mosque also has a roofed balcony at the top of the tower. He believes that the craftsmen involved in the construction of the tower were supervised by a Chinese master craftsman. This proves that Chinese architecture had been present in mosques of Malacca since the 18th century when it was still under the Dutch rule.

Finally, gate or archway which was introduced during the time of the Dutch (1641-1824). Its use was the result of implementation by crafts from China. The archways of the mosque from the central districts of Malacca (e.g. Kampung Keling Mosques, Tengkeria Mosques and Kampung Hulu Mosques) supported Chinese-influenced archways. The basis for this claim came from the fact that the designs and adornments on the archways which share apparent similarities with Chinese temples. Apart from that, the adornments were made from materials that were brought from China, such as Chinese pottery. These archways were attractively sculpted with various designs such as such floral motifs and each of the archways was carved with the date of the respective construction of the mosque. Among the main reasons that gates were installed around the mosques was to protect the tranquillity of a mosque's environment, and the stone was selected for the purpose. Archways were also beautifully decorated with copious artistic and religious elements. One common characteristic of mosque architecture is the gated area that protects its surrounding from intrusion. As such, high fences can be found around mosques. The archway can be said to act as a separating border between the hustle and bustle outside and the tranquillity of the mosque in order to enable its visitors to worship peacefully and quietly. An archway is an important component in protecting the well-being of a mosque. This is because it provides privacy to the congregation when performing their worship and other religious obligations. This component is significant in regard to people and activities outside of the mosque immediate vicinity, as an area that is marked and sheltered will indicate to a person outside of the space that it is to be respected, especially when it comes to religious matters.

b. The Internal Components of Mosques

At the beginning of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mosques in Malacca began to show their own unique identity and characteristics. These include the prayer hall with its four pillars, two main windows at the front of the hall and one window on each side, and the doors leading into the hall may vary from four to nine, depending on the size of the hall. Outside of the hall, at the main door and on both sides there are areas for verandah and steps leading into the hall. The mosque is the main focus in Islamic architecture and it is one of the best symbols of the beautiful Islamic arts. The internal elements of a mosque consist of the prayer hall, mihrab (niche) and ablution pool. These components often went through changes based on the current architecture, while maintaining their roles as significant symbols in Islam.

The prayer hall is an area with a roof and open space; the size of the roof depends on the expanse of the open area. Every space in the mosque has adequate lighting and provides comfort for the individual Muslims while praying in the hall.

Based on observations during the field study, the researchers of the present study note that the prayer halls of mosques in Malacca are rectangular-shaped. There are four main pillars that function as the main support for the three layers pyramid roof. The positions of these pillars are spread out and form a square shape. In each corner of the roof, the eaves guide the shape of the basis of the roof that would be supported by the four main pillars. Usually, the space in the mosque is beautifully designed, with the use of calligraphy, *khat* and other adornments that display the uniqueness of Islamic arts, while providing the sense of harmony and humility once entering the hall.

Next is the Mihrab is the wall of the qibla that faces Mecca and functions as the marker for the direction. Mihrab played a significant role, as when an imam was leading a prayer, his voice would be reflected since he is facing the mihrab. The congregation was able to clearly hear the imam's voice and follow his movement. However, this function of the mihrab is no longer significant due to the use of the loudspeaker, and it more like a decoration inside of the mosque. Most of the mihrabs are semi-circle and built curved into the wall of the mosque. It is observed that most of mihrabs in Malacca are six square feet in height and three square feet in width. Imam does not actually lead the prayer while standing inside the mihrab, but rather faces it. The mihrab in Malacca is more like a porch-shape niche that extended a little from the wall that faces the qibla. As mentioned above, this shape was able to magnify the voice of the imam when loudspeakers were not yet in use. The passing of time brought with it changes in mosque architecture and design, and mihrabs in modern mosques of Malaysia are now larger and able to accommodate the imam inside.

Mimbar is an ascending place for an imam to deliver his khutbah or sermon during Friday prayers. It is called 'mimbar' since the height of this component requires stairs to reach it. Mimbar is always placed on the right side of the mihrab and has a series of steps to its small platform, sheltered by an ornamented roof. Philosophically, mimbar is said to be a symbol of communication of the heaven. Mimbar in Malaccan mosques has unique patterns and designs. The decorations found on these mimbars are said to be different from the ones commonly seen.

The unique carvings and adornments found on the mimbars of mosques in Malacca cannot be found elsewhere in Malaysia, most of which can be attributed to the wealth of Chinese designs. The Muslim Chinese contributors who built these members did so in order to preserve their Chinese culture in the mosque space. Both images above share certain similarities such as the crown roof, sulur bayur and decorated with attractive and almost similar designs. The mimbars observed at the three selected mosques in this study use various Chinese elements including colours that are considered attractive and meaningful to the Chinese such as red, red, brown and green. Chinese temples are often painted with eye-catching colours, since the meaning attributed to them are often related to the Chinese identity. Most of the mimbars in this study are more than a decade old.

The verandah can be seen on both sides of the mosque. Traditionally the verandah on a mosque is not placed on the outer wall. There had been instances where the verandah

actually surrounds the prayer hall of a mosque. During the time of Malacca Sultanate, the verandah was used to carry out religious learning activities. The verandah also supported the higher number of the congregation during the Eid prayers, functioned as the place to pay the zakat *fitriah* (alms) and the space for *nikah* (marriage contract ceremony). It can be observed currently that the verandah area of mosques in Malacca is used as female prayer area since the main prayer area may only be adequate for male worshippers. During Ramadan, the *tarawikh* (night voluntary prayer) would also include the verandah. Additionally, the breaking of fast during Ramadan would also be held here. The congregation members also use the verandah for other activities such as discussing, resting, eating (when there is a feast) and also for other worship activities when there are more congregation members than usual.

Finally, ablution pool is placed outside of the prayer hall near the verandah. It is usually connected to the hall through a special route. Some ablution pools may have cement stairs around them and decorated with ceramic tiles. Congregation members who come to the mosque use the pool to make their ablution before prayer. Most of the pools are rectangular-shaped. Before pools were used, Muslims would use wells as the water source for ablution. However, the ablution pools found at the mosques in this study are much more interesting with its decoration and carvings, compared to other mosques that the researchers have visited.

In brief, the mosques understudy exemplified obvious Chinese elements suited to the history of colonization of Malacca. Thus, these mosques displayed heavy traditional design and elements suited to the environment of the past as elaborated above.

3. A PROPOSAL: BLENDING TRADITIONAL COMPONENTS WITH MODERN ELEMENTS

The previous section highlighted the internal and external elements of mosques from a traditional perspective which can be found in Malacca. Preserving these elements is essential as to safeguard the traditions inherited for hundreds of years. However, blending modern elements in the future is also vital to enriching the roles of mosque both from religious and also economic perspective. The mosque has always been referred to as a uniting factor and is of great importance to Muslims and their environments. In many parts of the world, the mosque plays an informal role in economic, political, social, cultural and religious development, but mostly, dwells in religious issues. In Muslim majority countries like Malaysia, many mosques do exist but their roles are no longer so influential to the communities anymore. In the past, mosques played a nucleus role for all community activities as mentioned by [3] & [4] who are of the view that a mosque serves as a vehicle for transforming governmental policies within the society. In Malaysia for example, programs and activities with an Islamic input are carried out in mosques to instil and strengthen Islamic values among community members. Additionally, [5] emphasized that the role of the mosque is three-fold. The first and primary one relates to worship, secondly a social activity and thirdly a political role. According to [7] mosques in Muslim majority countries are under-utilized whereas in some Muslim minority countries like the United States and China for example, the role of the

mosque involves social activities which benefit the society. To suit this role, mosques in Malacca should blend the traditional components mentioned in the previous section with modern elements to enrich the whole concept of the mosque to exemplify the role of a developed and advanced state. The role of the mosque should be suited to the teachings of Islam as well as to adhere to needs of the present time. For instance, special rooms such as meeting rooms or seminar rooms equipped with the latest advancement of audiovisuals are essential for briefing sessions to fulfil the role mosque as a source of information dissemination of Islam. In addition, Ablution pools may be modified with modern styles as to suit the needs of visitors. This could be achieved by fulfilling certain needs such modern equipment's, rooms for information communication technology advancements as could be seen in mosques in Mekkah and Madinah. The mosque administrators should look how ways to advancements are embedded in the traditional settings of mosques. Specifically, it is recommended that these mosques play important role in disseminating information on Islam to visitors especially tourism from all over the world by embedding modern features to the existing traditional components.

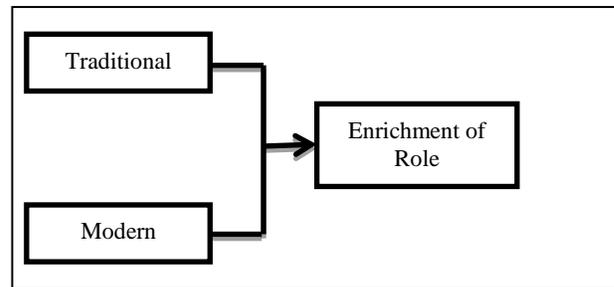


Figure 1: Embedding Modern and Traditional Features of Historical Mosques in Malacca

4. CONCLUSION

In Malacca, the form of the mosques and Musolla is unique due to the layered pyramid roof. When one looks closely at the edges of the roof, one can see carving and decorations from Chinese culture. This traditional setting should be embedded with modern elements just like traditional mosques in other parts of the world as to mainly to exemplify the role of mosques in disseminating information and knowledge in an efficient way.

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