Introduction to Southeast Asian Forms of Mosque Architecture

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Contrary to the narrative in most regional surveys,¹ the Southeast Asian mosque form was not confined to a single type featuring a multi-tiered pyramidal hip roof only. Several other types were also to be found, though existing survey texts have only partly addressed this typological diversity.² The great diversity in mosque building types in Southeast Asia both before and after the introduction of the dome form since the late 19th century bears witness to translocal circulations and recombination. These may be observed more deeply in studies of historical examples and their former contexts. Besides a number of examples on Java,³ historic mosques from other regions of Southeast Asia have not been well studied.⁴ Many have also been demolished and replaced by new buildings featuring the dome.

This article reviews three main issues: first, historiographical categories; second, the cultural and geographical contexts in which mosque forms were created; and third, the question of reinterpretation and revivals, localised Muslim cosmopolitanism, and the limits of translation.

Southeast Asian mosques in ‘Islamic architecture’, and art and archaeology surveys

The built heritage of mosques developed in maritime Southeast Asia is invariably excluded from surveys of Islamic art and architecture, a fate that is shared with Southern Arabia, Southern India, and Southern China. This exclusion needs to be understood in relation to the historiographical and geographical contexts of the study of mosques and Islamic art and architecture, which focused on the archaeological and art historical study of brick and masonry structures left behind by a number of inter-related dynasties and polities. For instance, attention to the 12th to 18th centuries is typically given to Sufi syncretism inscription texts.⁵

The mosques discussed here deal with the material, typological, and architectural aspects of Southeast Asian mosques. The varieties of forms are seen alongside other structural features such as columns and beams. Minangkabau variants found in common throughout the region is the use of a finial (mustaka) on the upper level of the massive five-tiered roofs are found in Kalantan, Telok Manok, Kota Bahru [Fig. 2], and also in Champa. It is also present in 9th-century temple tombs found in India. Conversely, indigenous names and the forms of small Muslim prayer halls, today adapting the Arabic term musalla but originally called surau and langgar, point to origins in indigenous cult buildings and men’s houses.

A key illustration of translation and reworking is seen in Java, where the Trawa tambonanes bearing Arabic Muslim inscriptions used the Saka calendar rather than the Arabic-Islamic one, and the Trengganu Stone, which proclaims Muslim local laws inscribed in the Jawi script (Arabic modified for Malay), but using the term Dewata Mulia Raya as would be expected.⁶ These examples defy the idea of a simple rejection of pre-Islamic cultures or of an unconscious ‘influence’ of pre-Islamic cultures. Instead, we observe the conscious and literate translation and accommodation of culture across conversion. The transculturation process from pre-Islamic Malay and Java- nese literate cultures can thus be seen on these and other gravestones. They serve as indicators of parallel processes of adapting older building forms – some of which had previously served as cult buildings for indigenous, Hindu, and Buddhist creeds – for new religious uses.

Notes


