

Book Review

Mosque architecture. A review of *Mosque architecture in the Malay World* by Abdul Halim Nasir. Bangi, Malaysia, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2004, 188 pp.

Raha binti Jaafar*

To cite this book review: Raha binti Jaafar (2020). Mosque architecture [Review of the book *Mosque architecture in the Malay World* by Abdul Halim Nasir]. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 9(1): 53–56. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202011_9\(1\).0005](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202011_9(1).0005)

To link to this book review: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202011_9\(1\).0005](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202011_9(1).0005)

Abdul Halim Nasir is one of the most active writers of Malay literary history primarily involving research on Malay architecture, traditional Malay houses, mosques, and matters associating with Malay cosmology. A native from Lenggong, Perak, he started working as a painter and then as a researcher at the National Museum. He was appointed as a Guest Writer at the Institute of Malay World and Civilization of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia from 1989 to 1995. He has travelled far and wide to study mosque designs within the Malay Archipelago and *Mosque Architecture in the Malay World* is the fruit of his labour of love.

The Malays who form the largest community in Malaysia are followers of Islam which was introduced into the Malaya Peninsula by Arab and India traders. Following the spread of Islam, mosques were built as places of worship throughout the land. The mosque is more than a place of worship but serves many other functions to meet the needs of the Muslim community.

Despite the long history of Islam and the large number of mosques in the Malay World, there have been few studies on mosque architecture and designs. This study by Abdul Halim was preceded by his own *Mosques of Peninsular Malaya* in 1984 and *Motif Hiasan Tiga Buah Masjid Abad ke-18 (Decorative Motifs of Three Mosques of the Eighteenth Century)* by Ros Mahwati and Ahmad Zakaria in 2009, and another a year later on *History of Mosques and Kramats in Penang 1730s-2012* by Mahani Musa.

Mosque Architecture is concerned with the architectural features of mosques before and after the arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia, but with a special focus on the Nusantara Malay Design that represents the uniqueness of the earliest mosques in the region. Its four chapters are devoted to the study of early mosques, the emergence of mosques in the Malay World, their architectural features, and mosque surroundings and fittings, richly illustrated with more than a hundred photos of mosques, dozens of diagrams on the plans and elevated views of selected samples, and two maps as well as a glossary of relevant terms.

The book begins with the introduction to the brief history of Islam and the mosques in the Middle East. The architecture style of the earliest mosques was defined as Syro-Egyptian style that adhered strongly to the architecture style of the earliest mosques in the Islamic world, namely, the Quba Mosque (622 AD), the Nabawi Mosque (622 AD), the Al Haram Mosque (684 AD) and the al-Aqsa Mosque (705 AD). The spread of Islam beyond the Arab world led to the introduction of different designs that reflect the influence of local cultures. In China, for example, most of the earliest mosques exhibit a striking resemblance to a pagoda or temple. The history of the earliest mosques in the Malay World is rather obscure as most of these mosques had suffered from the ravages of time. It was only in the nineteenth century during the colonial period that concrete materials were used instead of timber in mosque construction. Changes in design appeared when the traditional style featuring the multiple-tiered roof design was replaced by the onion-shaped dome of the colonial era and the umbrella-shaped roof of the post-independence years.

The earliest mosques in the Islamic world have a special significance to Muslims throughout the world and inspire them to strengthen their faith and belief in Islam. Since the time of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the mosque has been the most important and influential institution in Islam. The mosque in its many forms is the quintessential Islamic building, as a place for congregational prayers as well as a centre for Muslim community activities.

The design style of a mosque can generally give us an idea of the period and region in which it is found. The designs of mosques are clearly different from one period to another. The Middle East design might not have a direct influence on the design of the earliest mosques in the Malay World except for the minaret, the *mihrab* (niche), and the *mimbar* (pulpit) which are the general characteristics of all mosques. In fact, the direct influence of Middle East design on the mosques in the Malay world came later during the colonial era.

The history of the earliest mosques in the Malay World is inseparable from that of Islam itself. When and how Islam first arrived in Southeast Asia have remained as a topic of discussion up to this day. The author accepts the consensus based on Muslim gravestones found in several areas such as in Pahang dating back to 928 AD and the inscription stone or “Batu Bersurat” in Terengganu that was dated to between 1326 and 1386 AD. The author asserts that the design of the earliest mosques was not inspired by foreign influences as the mosques then were not built for glorifying Islam but rather to provide a place for worship and hence bore the resemblance of ordinary houses. Such mosques are generally identified as vernacular mosques whose designs were adapted to the local climate, materials and craftsmanship, and the subcultural background of the followers. Among the early mosques in Southeast Asia that featured in this book are the Demak Mosque, the Banten Mosque and Aceh’s Grand Mosque in Indonesia and Kampung Laut Mosque, Kampung Hulu Mosque and Tengkeru Mosque in Melaka.

The earliest mosques in Southeast Asia often display the Javanese style architecture which differs from those in the Middle East. These early mosques bear a striking resemblance to the multiple-tiered pyramidal roof also known as Meru roof, Rabung Pecah Empat, and Bumbung

Bertingkat that the author attributed to the influence of ancient buildings with bell-shaped roofs and adapted from Hindu cultures that were prevalent between the seventh and fourteenth centuries.

The main architectural features of the earliest and later mosques in Southeast Asia may be classified according to the styles of the traditional mosques, the colonial era mosques, and the post-independence mosques. The traditional mosques feature the classical multiple-tiered roof, the colonial era mosques are distinguished by the onion-shaped dome, while the post-independence mosques show the umbrella-shaped roof.

The multiple-tiered roof of the earliest mosques, according to G.H. Pijper, a Dutch archaeologist, is a reflection of the pre-Islamic period when this roof architecture was found in buildings unrelated to Islam such as the Hindu temple in Bali. Most were constructed with timber and have been extensively renovated and modified over time. A few still survive the original form and structure including Kampung Laut Mosque in Kelantan, the oldest mosque in Malaysia and built in the early eighteenth century. The mosques constructed during the colonial era that are discussed in the book follow a distinctively different design. The characteristic feature is the onion-shaped dome, also known as Kubah Potong Bawang. Well-known examples include many historical mosques in the world such as the Blue Mosque (Turkey), Badshahi Mosque (Pakistan), and Sheikh Zayed Mosque (Abu Dhabi), and the Ubudiah Mosque in Perak and the famous mosque in Putrajaya in Malaysia. The post-independence period saw the introduction of the unique semi-open umbrella-shaped roof that signifies that Islam is well protected against negative influences. The National Mosque of Malaysia belongs to this category.

The influence of local custom and culture is given due attention in the design and construction of mosques, including the design of internal and external surroundings. Other features of the mosques highlighted are the ablution area, the minaret, and the mimbar. Mosque architecture changes with time according to social habits and ideas in design. The literature indicates that new designs introduced during the renovation process have given rise to the Nusantara-Malay style, Sino-Eclectic style, European Classical style, and Post-Modern Revivalism. The mosque is generally erected in the vicinity of Malay settlements to fulfil its religious and social roles. Among the early mosques, the cemetery is often sited close by to satisfy the tradition of providing burial sites for departed members of the congregation. But this practice is no longer possible in new residential, commercial, and administrative areas in the larger urban centres.

Few realise that the architecture of some old mosques displays features that reflect Chinese influence in their external design and interior décor. In Melaka, the mosques at Kampung Hulu, Kampung Keling and Lama Machap are unique in their design style in the fusion of Islamic and Chinese design that is attributed to the close relationships between the local Malay and Chinese communities in the past. Many theories have been put forward and debates carried out concerning the factors that have contributed to the design style of these mosques.

Studying the architecture and design of mosques in the Malay World is a challenging task that requires commitment, effort and co-operation. The book is a pioneer study on the subject and an excellent product of the author's keen observations and extensive research that has yielded valuable insights into the history and the rationale in mosque construction. The collection of pictures, sketches, and diagrams adds to the visual impact of the styles and colourful décor of the mosque.

This publication provides a good understanding and guide to this subject of mosque architecture and design and a useful source of reference for research on the traditional mosques in the Malay World. It would have been more comprehensive if greater attention is given to the ornamentation of mosques which may reveal possible sources of non-Islamic influence on the design of mosques. The sources of foreign influence mentioned are attributed to the Middle East, the Chinese and Hindus but the author made no attempt to pursue this further. This aspect was given cursory attention in the book and one feels that there are still various questions unanswered regarding the actual nature of the origins of mosque design styles.

* Raha binti Jaafar is a Senior Lecturer in New Era University College, Malaysia. Email: raha.j@newera.edu.my