

**INTERIOR MOTIFS AND DESIGNS OF THE  
MALACCA MOSQUE: A Discussion of the *Kampung  
Kling* Mosque**

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**Abstract :** Arriving in Malacca in 15th century, the Chinese and Indian traders carried their culture and custom with them. It has brought profound implications on aspects of the architecture and motif decoration of mosques in Malacca, which belongs to the Sino-eclectic style. This writing focuses on Sino-eclectic mosque like a Kampung Keling mosque which has three roofs and is located in Malacca town. Because of its strategic location and closeness to other worship places, most of the muslim traders who came to Malacca stop by to pray at the mosque. The remains of their activities at this mosque can be recognized through the motifs and visual designs decorating the mosque which show the immense influence of Chinese and Indian, and therefore, the author of this paper decided to study the magnificent heritage. There are plenty of visual symbols and motifs found in the mosque. They comprise elements of flora, fauna, geometry, cosmos and calligraphy, and are highlighted to increase the aesthetic value and uniqueness of the old mosque. This study yielded fact that the use of the motifs and drawings in the mosque is permitted as it does not violate the boundaries of syariah, which makes Islam easily accepted in Malay.

**Keywords :** architecture, motifs, mosque, interior design, visual signs

## Introduction

During the golden age of Malacca in the 15th century, there were many beautiful mosques built by community; however, most of the precious buildings were destroyed when Portuguese landed and took control of the island. The mosques were finally rebuilt when the Dutch invaded Malaka years later and responded more flexible to religion by giving their consent to the Muslim community to build mosques. This could be the reason behind the facts that most oldest mosques in Malacca are influenced by outside elements particularly in terms of architecture and design. The influences can also be noticed primarily in the mosques' architecture and interior design, which have their own mark and places in the art and culture of the existing Islamic society. Impressed by its aesthetic value, the author of this paper decided to take *Kampung Keling* mosque as the main focus of study.

## Motifs and Decoration of the Mosque' Architecture

Beginning her discussion about mosque's decorations, author describes briefly the meaning of the decoration in general. According to the Dictionary of the Board, decoration is ornament or images<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Encyclopedia of Knowledge, decorative art design refers to the specific objects that have originality and quality which display beauty<sup>2</sup>, while Alistair in his Art Deco, describes term "decoration" as

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<sup>1</sup> *Kamus Dewan*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2007, hlm. 324.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia of Knowledge*, Grolier Incorporated United States of America, US, 1993, hlm. 53.

the art of decoration crafted or drawn on furniture, textiles, ceramics, etc. and made of modern and traditional shaped materials <sup>3</sup>

The internal motifs of the mosques belong to decoration for they are the results of inspiration formed by philosophy, legend, and history. Motifs are embodied in the forms of visual and non-visual symbols and typically presented in the forms of ornaments and colors relevant to them.

Architectural decoration in China is categorized into five: animals, plants, a phenomenon, legends and geometry. The Chinese motifs and symbols are different from the other cultures because they carry their own meaning, for example; carved dragon motif, which symbolizes the natural forces to the nature or the balance of all things in the universe. From the diameter of its body to scales, eyes and fangs, dragon has its uniqueness. Generally, dragon is described as a large and scary animal, with sharp claws and breathes fire out of its mouth.

Similarly, the floral design like peonies, lilies, bamboo, *banyan* trees and cypresses, including painting of plants seen in the architecture and design of the Malacca mosques, embodies its own meaning and purpose for the Chinese community as well. As an example, peony flower, which is often considered as the queen of all kinds of flowers, symbolizes courage, while lotus represents purity. Chrysanthemum, on the other hand, means peace in life

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<sup>3</sup>Alistair Duncan, *Art Deco*, Thames and Hudson Ltd London, London, 1995, hlm. 175.

because it has high durability even in winter, and finally, a vase is symbol of the importance of knowledge and achievement. Carrying the special meaning, flower pot made of porcelain is decorated by flowers only, such as peonies and orchid <sup>4</sup>

Like floral and dragon motifs, the geometry is not just a form, but it carries a symbol that represents a certain set of negative and positive elements which are the basics of *Feng Shui*. It is believed that this geometry motif works to repel evil influences and bring prosperity and safety to the building or things where it is crafted. Likewise, the *swastika*, also known as "Gammadion cross" or "Hakenkreuz", is considered to be representation of fortune or good luck for anyone who uses it and becomes popular in any culture and society throughout the world. This symbol, which is also considered as the representation of sun, is often used by Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism to worship Aryan, the sun God. The geometric decoration crafted on the Malacca mosque consists of flat patterns formed by the geometric patterns with square motifs.<sup>5</sup>

For Malay community, as in Chinese and Indian, the interior motif is also as important as architecture and it carries certain meanings, for example; flower in blossom symbolizes happiness and fitness, whereas the bud of the flower represents sadness, grief and death. The round-shaped flowers embody the

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<sup>4</sup> Lou Qingxi, *The Architecture Art of Ancient, China* Intercontinental Press, 2002, hlm. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China*, Muzium Kesenian Islam Kuala Lumpur, 2001, hlm. 71.

universe, while top petals symbolize the real nature and bottom petals mean the supernatural. Similarly, *awan larat* also called "spread out clouds" motif, which displays complex carvings; a coiling and spreading effect embracing big and rare flowers with lots of leaf branches<sup>6</sup>, also represents important message, particularly when the motif includes flowers, leaves, and twigs. Javanese *Awan larat* motif can be easily recognized from its massive use of flowers, twigs, and leaves, and its small fruits. In fact, the fruits crafted in *awan larat* motif are smaller than those in the other motifs and bounded each other.

In addition to the influences of Malay people, the Malacca mosques' motif and interior decorations have also received significant 'signature' from Indian community which was recognized from the use of lotus motif—it is well-known symbol of sanctity by Hindu society—to decorate interior of the mosques. This is because the actual influence of Hinduism has been in the Malay since the 8th century.

### **Historical Background of *kampung Keling* Mosque in Melaka.**

*Kampung Keling* mosque is the oldest mosque in Malacca, which was built in 1748 during the Dutch occupation. The mosque is also known as Kampung Pali or Balik Bukit Kapur mosque. Construction process of this mosque took about four

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<sup>6</sup> Che Husna Azhari, Reka Melayui: Satu tafsiran dalam Prosiding Persidangan Antarabangsa Sains dan teknologi di Alam Melayu, 15-17 Disember 2010, ATMA, UKM, hlm. 20 dan 21.

to five years and spend around one thousand ringgit. The mosque was restored in 1872 AD by using stone and then, in 1908 AD, then its roof was lifted up as high as the roof of the *Kampung Hulu* mosque.

Some historical tales said that, in early settlement, said *Kampung Keling* was inhabited by descendants of origin Arsaily<sup>7</sup>. Coming to the *Kampung Keling*, traders of Gujarati married to local residents living in the area, and assimilated to the area and its community and culture since then. Because the majority of people living in the village were descendants of Keling, the village was eventually named "Keling".<sup>8</sup> However, a study conducted by the authors reveals no exact date of the opening of *Kampung Keling* and how it happened. None of people there, either by locals or outsiders, have reliable information about when *Kampung Keling* began to develop. Moreover, there are not any cuments or facts found to prove the story about the relation between Gujarat traders and local people of *Kampung Keling*.

The other history said that the mosque is the actual site of the Indian Muslim traders to recharge if they were on the way to Malacca to trade in the 14th century BC and 15 AD, and to pray upon their arrival in Malacca.

During the colonialism of Portuguese<sup>9</sup> and the Netherlands, the traders still ran commercial activities and

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<sup>7</sup> This descendents come from Kalingga island, Partanam which is located in Koromandel shores. Melalui temu bual yang telah dibuat, kebanyakan masyarakat Chetti tidak mempunyai hubungan lagi dengan Negara asal mereka.

<sup>8</sup> Ada yang berpendapat Munsyi Abdullah merupakan keturunan India Muslim dan pernah mendiami kampung ini.

<sup>9</sup> In Portugis colonialism, there were a church built by Portugis in the area of *Kampung Keling*. It was called Gereja St Thomas. View Yeang, *The Architecture of Malaysia*, The Pipin Press, Selangor, 1992, hlm. 28.

became the wealthiest. Indeed, some of them also bought land in the Malacca area, and dwelt there permanently. Unfortunately, the economy in Malacca began to decline when the Dutch invaded the area, and this immediately affected the Keling community. Struggling to survive during the weak economy, most of them found a new way to save their trade: they began to settle in villages because land prices and house rents were too high. This situation, however, continued to get worse and forced them to sell their house and land to the Chinese, who were richer that time and moved to Kampung Keling and built mosque to pray.<sup>10</sup> The historical village, unfortunately, will soon disappear once the process of urbanization occurs in Malacca.

*Kampung Keling* mosque, established by Che Mat Hj. Vinegar, Kecut,<sup>11</sup> is claimed to be a gift from Dutch colony for *Datuk Aroom*, who passed it on *Datuk Samsuddin bin Datuk Aroom*, the 2nd governor of Melayu, before he handed over his power to him. In 1782 AD, the wooden building was replaced brick and renovated again in 1808 AD. However, there is a rumour saying that the current condition is not a result of the renovation in 1808 AD, but a product of massive restoration occurred between 1938 AD-1940 AD.

The *Kampung Keling* mosque was constructed to replace the Kampung Hulu mosque, which was sent to an auction by Hajjah

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<sup>10</sup> Salim Dolah, *Temu bual*, Sejarah Masjid Kampung Keling, 2010, 10 Mei.

<sup>11</sup> Che Mat Kecut is wealthy landlord at that time. Helped by his son-in-law, Yahya Samad collected taxes and rent of land in Kampung Hulu. He bought several mosques around Malacca, including Kampung Keling mosque, by using the taxes. *Ibid*.

Datuk Aminah bte Samsuddin, who was the heir to Datuk Samsuddin bin Aroom and the owner of the land that time. The property landed into the hand of Che Mat Hj. Vinegar, a rich tycoon of the era, who immediately purchased the property as soon as it was in auction.

As people notice today, the *Kampung Keling* mosque has a unique architecture for it has multi-cultural influences brought by traders from several different countries. Parts of the tower and podium or "minbar" was affected by Hinduism, while its lamp stand and *wudhu* room (a space inside mosque which provides some tap water for Muslims to clean up themselves before doing pray) were influenced by Arabic architecture. Its tiles are made in Portuguese and English, but pillars and architectural elements prayers are Corinthian style,<sup>12</sup> which abounds in Sumatera island.<sup>13</sup> Considering the value of *Kampung Keling* mosque, the Department of Museums and Antiques has been conducting intensive conservation in order to make the mosque remain existed and functioned as a place of worship. If this effort continues, the *Kampung Keling* mosque will last as a testament to the historical development of Islam in the country few centuries ahead.





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<sup>12</sup> It comes from Greek architecture which shows a concept of Acaethus leaves dan flower on pillars. This style is widely used in Roma, particularly in big buildings, statu etc.

<sup>13</sup> Zarinah Sarifan, *Masjid Kampung Keling*, Berita Jabatan Muzium dan Antikuiti 2 (3), 2000, hlm. 7.



## Interior Motifs and Decorations in the *Kampung Keling* Mosque, Malacca.

MOTIF	TYPE	LOCATION
	Geometry	Geometry motif is found in the window in front of the mosque
	Fern	Fern motif is found on the rostrum of the mosque
	Swastika	Swastika is found on the mosque's wall
	Dragon head motif	Dragon head motif is crafted on the rostrum's roof



Dragon  
scale motif

This motif  
is on the  
rostrum's  
head



Nymphaea

This motif is  
found on the  
mosque's gate



Peony

This motif is  
found on the  
mosque's roof



Swastika

Swastika is found  
on the mosque's  
wall

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*Kekwa*  
flower

*Kekwa* flower is  
crafted on the  
Mosque's  
Podium



Nymphaea

Nymphaea is  
found on the  
mosque's ceiling



Javanese  
Awan larat

Javanese Awan  
larat is found on  
the mosque's  
pillars



Sun Flower

Sun Flower  
motif is found  
on the wall

## Conclusion

*Kampung Keling* mosque, the oldest mosque in the Islamic society and the center of worship in Malacca, has cultivated its own art and aesthetic value in addition to the motifs and ornaments brought by people of China, India and Indonesia. The mixed motifs and ornaments added to mosques building has made it more even unique and outstanding. Not only do they brighten up the mosque's rooms, the multi-cultural carvings also highlight the creativity of the carpentry working at the mosque' interior design project at that time because they have successfully combined local elements with the foreign ones in good harmony. They have produced a mosque with characteristics of purity and high aesthetic values, which are relevant to the principle of Islam and consequently, they are accepted by Malay community in Keling.

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