Expressions of Islam in Buildings: 
The Indonesian Experience

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Introduction

Every society has its own interpretation of a universal religion, such as Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, or Buddhism, and the members of that society behave according to the interpreted "rules of conduct" that derive from the respective scriptures. Every religion marks out the landscape of a society with distinct features, such as houses of worship, shrines, and pilgrimage places. These religious buildings express the society's religious images which are formulated through a frame of reference dominated by a cultural core of world-views, ethics, and beliefs. As these images change, new expressions may take place in accordance with the availability of materials, methods, technology, managerial skills, and labour. Also, the choice of a particular shape is sanctioned by the value system of the decision-makers and of the builders in a given society.

However, religious conduct, especially that of a newly adopted religion, seldom transforms the existing settlement patterns. Social conduct often adjusts to, and fits into, the established pattern. On the other hand history shows us that political decisions, economic policies, and technological innovations play significant roles in changing settlement patterns. As such, Islam as the religion of the Indonesian majority appears to present no exception.

This paper will focus primarily on specific cases in Central Java, and touch briefly on a few cases elsewhere. It will disclose the decision-making process behind some important elements of a mosque, and illustrate the way the building is used to accommodate Islamic conduct. Although the examples selected cannot be used for a generalized formula, as they represent a partial view of Indonesian culture, the writers believe the process underlying those cases may have resonance in other parts of Indonesia as well.

The first part provides a brief account of the issues of continuity and change. These issues are not conceived as contradictory, but rather as complementary aspects in a continuum of activities. The second part concerns itself with some cases in Central Java where the evolution of Javanese landscape during the spread of Islam is examined to illustrate the framework discussed. The final part raises key issues and presents the point of view of the writers on contemporary expressions of Islam in buildings.
elements that change very fast. In order for cultural syncretism to occur, supportive environments should be provided, usually of a socio-cultural and physical nature.

The core culture of the relevant group will be discussed, originating from the definition of culture itself. On the one end, world-view is considered as an abstract definition of culture and, on the other end, activity system is the operational definition of it. Usually lifestyles and activity systems constitute the core culture of a group, with activity systems directly related to the physical environments: natural or built. In other words, activity systems relate to the system of settings. These two systems correspond to each other showing the specific characteristics of the group.

Within this perspective, the changes of environments will be discussed by using some examples from different locations and periods. These examples include environments with different types and scales, from settlements with different scopes to components of building. It is hoped that this attempt will show the continuity and change in the environments of the Muslim community in Indonesia.

The Notion of Cultural Syncretism

There are different phenomena of change. Many factors characterize change, one being the rate of change. Some are evolutionary while others are rapid. A rapid cultural change often results in the negative, e.g., stressful experiences for many people. One reason is that there is no modulation of the rate of change. In this situation people are not able to adapt to the changing environments smoothly.

Unlike rapid changes, gradual changes allow people to adapt. Here the pace of change enables the process of syncretism to occur, resulting in a creative synthesis between the old and the new. The combination of elements makes for a gradual process that helps people experience a smooth change, and increases their ability to overcome environmental pressures.

The syncretic process includes changes in two types of environments: physical and nonphysical. Socio-cultural environments are examples of nonphysical entities that change continuously. Then there are the changes of physical environments or settings that correspond to them. The task is to identify which elements of the old are still retained and which are abandoned.

Methodologically, tracing these changes includes both longitudinal and cross-sectional approaches. One could look at changes in the same environment from time to time. On the other hand, one also could look at different environments of a similar nature which were built at different times but that still exist and then trace the changes. The first approach would be very time consuming if observation for the future were included. Although there are some limitations, the second approach could solve this problem.
The Need for Supportive Environments for Cultural Change

It is important to modulate the rate of change to provide time for the syncretic process to occur, and, consequently, avoid abrupt changes that could result in negative consequences for the people. Modulating the rate of change can be enhanced by the availability of environments that support the change. Examples can be drawn from the physical as well as nonphysical elements of environments, such as social networks, traditional institutions, ritual activities and their corresponding settings or physical environments.

However, we should be aware that these environments are not only supportive but sometimes also inhibiting. Thus, there should be some way to enhance their supportiveness while at the same time reducing their inhibiting characteristics. In this case, one should be very careful in identifying what relevant group is being supported, especially its cultural core. Secondly, one should also identify the specific characteristics of the supportive environments, whether social or physical, or both. Lastly, consideration should be given to the mechanisms that enable the process to occur.

To conclude, sets of aspects should be considered for any group being studied. The first concerns itself with the cultural core of the group, e.g., lifestyles, behaviour, activities, language, food habits. Members of this group interact with each other or members of other groups, requiring units of social interaction for them. These interactions and activities are in accordance with the institutions of the group with their highly specific cultural activities (e.g., rituals). This leads to the specific building and its components and the systems of settings of the group.

Observation Notes

The Mosque

Early Javanese mosques have a square plan with the building standing on a raised massive floor covered by a multilevel roof that ends in a point. There are four main posts supporting the upper roof. The mosque proper is either surrounded or extended in the front by a roofed veranda called serambi. A mosque and its serambi are encircled respectively by water, open space, and an enclosing wall.3

In some cases, such as those of the mosque complex of a Wali (Saint) or of a state founder, this wall extends to cover a cemetery complex which is often located right behind the mosque.4 The tomb of the most significant figure is often on the axis of the mosque, but usually faces south. In this way the ancestor, who was traditionally respected, would be indirectly venerated during the prayer.5 And the cemetery often becomes a pilgrimage centre.

In addition, the door of an early Javanese mosque faces east and the direction of prayer is oriented towards the west. Although this east-west axis can rarely be found in recently built mosques, it is interesting to observe that such an idea continues in a small mosque
The Indonesian Experience

Gate (top) and interior (above) of the One-Post Mosque. The single post with its four branches and four corners, represents a structural abstraction of the nine walis who helped spread Islam in Java. Exterior view of the One-Post Mosque (below).

The Indonesian Experience

built in the 1970s in the Taman Sari Royal Garden complex. Designed by the renowned Javanese architect Mintobudoyo, this mosque is covered by an upper roof supported by one post at the mosque geometrical centre, instead of by the traditional four main posts. The architect intended to express the religious realm through oneness. This single post has four branches to support the four corner beams of the upper roof. In this way the images of the nine Walis (Saints), who are significant to the spread of Islam in Java, were abstracted into the main structural elements: one major post, four branches, and four corners. The architect told one of the writers that the orientation of the mosque was intentional. To him a Javanese mosque should face east, and any deviation would violate the Javanese rule. He would rather resign than be forced to follow the direction of Mecca in designing his mosque. His request was accepted and the mosque was built according to his original plan. This instance shows that a master builder is respected, for he controls the knowledge of the traditional values of the society.

Of those aforementioned features, the square plan, raised floor, and walled enclosure can be found in the structure of remaining Hindu-Javanese temples. The one-point multilevel roof is a common element of the Balinese Meru, which existed in Java prior to the domination of Islamic culture. The encircling water is an adaptation of a moat, which recalls the Javanese cosmology in which the central continent Javadvipa was enclosed by a ring of ocean. The application of this image can be found in Javanese palaces.

Serambi, which serves social activities such as wedding ceremonies, can be seen as an effort to separate secular activities from spiritual practices that take place in the mosque proper. The tradition of having a serambi in front of the mosque proper continues in many recently completed mosques which are initiated and sponsored by the community, such as those at Bantul and Kota Gede. This practice suggests that some Javanese still consider that prayer is a sacred activity and that a place for prayer deserves special attention.
Some of the mosques in densely populated kampungs of the inner city of Yogyakarta have none of the above-mentioned features. These mosques appear similar to simple huts. They have a unique function, however, as a setting for the extension of the daily activities of the surrounding residents. Because their houses are crowded, people use the open space outside their homes. This indirectly incorporates all the public activities of the kampungs including religious events. Examples would include guard posts, open spaces, overhangs of neighbouring houses, paths, warungs, and the mosques. In the case of the mosque in Kampung Ratmakan, the yard is not only at times used as a badminton court, but also as a place for hanging clothes, cooking, and raising chickens.

An additional element, a miniaturized dome, appears in some new mosques in Kota Gede and its surroundings. The dome has been associated with the mosque in many parts of the world including Indonesia. However, a dome has seldom been used in the interior of the main body of a roof in many recently built Javanese mosques. A miniaturized dome is employed as a crown the use of which should be celebrated. Adopting a strong new element that can enrich the image while maintaining the existing referential framework would seem to be a wise Javanese resolution. The dome as a new sign is not part of interior design in South-Central Java.

In the Javanese context, heaven and wholeness have been represented by the one-point pyramidal roof, which suggests a strong central power commanding its four quarters. Both pyramid and four quarters with a centre are related to spatial archetypes, the archaic image in the human unconscious. These images will reappear in the conscious mind and take an ordered shape at a certain moment. “Archetype”, a term used in Jungian psychology, has been elaborated on by Mimi Lobell. It is interesting to note that any new mosque whose construction is funded by the foundation of Amal Bakti Islam Pancasila, a government-sponsored organization, is based on a model...
derived from the traditional Javanese mosque with a three-level roof. A dome-like structure would appear to be discouraged by this official foundation. Perhaps this is a way to resist change and to retain cultural identity amidst the challenge of other images for a mosque such as that of a dome or a flat roof.

Examples of flat-roofed mosques without domes are relatively rare. This phenomenon began in big cities such as Jakarta (Arief Rachman Hakim, 1968-1970; Sunda Kelapa, 1970-72) and Bandung (Salman, 1974). These mosques were designed by architects who were educated under the modern Western architectural training system at the time the flat roof was associated with function. Flat-roof mosques in Indonesia were less popular than dome-topped mosques. Domes and multilevel pyramidal roofs are associated with mosques in the minds of the common people.

However, this flat-roof type appears to be also accepted in certain parts of Kota Gede. The community in the Jagalan district of Kota Gede has just completed a flat-roofed mosque in order to become "modern". This phenomenon is worth studying. Is it a new, partially accepted image of modernity conceived by some members of Muslim society in Kota Gede or is it a temporary phenomenon?

Houses and Housing

The spatial arrangements of a mosque and a serambi can be related to a typical ideal Javanese house, which consists of an initial house, omah, and an open-roofed hall, pendapa. Omah was a sacred domain for it contained the abode of the rice goddess Sri, called senthong tengah, which was located at the back of the house centre. This sacred spot could be seen by the public only during certain events such as a wedding ceremony. Many houses in Kota Gede today use senthong tengahs for prayer, which indicates that the archaic concept of the sacred domain remains important to some Javanese. They retain its original function but also use it for other purposes.

Pendapa, on the other hand, is used for public activities such as ritual performances and social gatherings. It is open to the public most of the times. Religious feasts often take place in this area. In such religious events, various parts of the house, except senthong tengah, are used. In the backyard a cow and goats are slain. Their carcasses are brought to the pendapa to be processed and distributed to the poor by male volunteers. Female volunteers cook in the backyard for all the participants. Meal preparation seldom occurs in the central zone defined by the four main posts. In this functionally inefficient way, religious conduct is fitted into the existing building.

It is interesting to compare the spatial quality of the mosque proper to that of an omah, as both are governed by darkness, opaqueness, and mystery. On the other hand, the spatial quality of the serambi and the pendapa are dominated by brightness, openness, and transparency. Thus, mosque and house share similar concepts in spatial arrangements and visual expressions, which suggests that a similar image framework was employed in the Javanese building code.
A high wall characterizes the street scene of inner Kota Gede. The physical appearance of a house is blocked out by the wall. The wall unifies the street scene and creates an image of social equity and a sense of safety. At the time when a girl was confined to the pingit (isolated) norm, the wall effectively protected the girl from being seen by strangers.

Most houses in Kota Gede face south, the direction of the South Sea Goddess. Cardinal directions are assigned certain meanings which prescribe correct behaviour. The Javanese world-view emphasizes that a person behave according to his relative position within the surrounding environment. A person should understand his position whenever he goes to a strange place. In so doing he needs to acquire a profound knowledge of directions. This knowledge seems to be a natural outcome of an instructive environment in which everybody knows that south is the direction he faces right at the moment he leaves the house. West is the direction towards which he prays, and north is the direction of his first encounter during a prayer.

One distinct feature of the housing pattern in Kota Gede is the shared gate at the walled boundary between neighbours. Through this gate one can easily enter the yard of one’s neighbour without going to the street. These gates intensify interaction, promote tolerance, suggest cooperation and harmony, and facilitate emergency exit in a critical situation such as fire and war. Tolerance and harmonious interaction are aspects of Islamic brotherhood. Shared gates also reduce the privacy of a house.

Discussion

The writers would like to discuss some key issues, which are considered to be most pertinent and basic in terms of their contribution to the transformation of architectural expressions. They are not exhaustive accounts, as each has its own limitations and validity, and are therefore open to discussion.

- It has been shown that members of a community arrange their built environment to accommodate their daily activities in full accordance with social and spiritual requirements. Traditionally, since “pre-Islamic” times, people included the built environment as part of the enculturation (institutionalization) process, i.e., the process of introducing the living culture to the younger generation. Architecturally speaking, the most pertinent is the notion or awareness of orientation both spatially and socially, the notion of a sacred-profane continuum, pure and impure, of hierarchical order in space, of good and bad direction, etc. As far as the architectural transformation is concerned, the spread of Islam proceeded without disturbing the existing built environment. In the first phase of the Islamicization process, however, the Muslims made new interpretations by designating new functions and meanings to old structures or buildings. Thus, the West was then named qibla (direction to Kaaba), and had to be respected as it was the direction for the head and not for the feet (re: the symbolic meaning of caste).
The Indonesian Experience

The preservation of the cardinal directions for a mosque is an example of how, during the early stage of Islamicization, a compromise by the new religion was made. This may signify the role of the dominant political power in enforcing the placing of a mosque in front of an alun-alun (public square).

- In the later phase of Islamicization, however, the qibla prevailed. It may characterize the building among other masses which usually follow the east-west direction to minimize exposure to the sun. Now, the politico-economic factor shows its dominating power: the birth of the official style represented by the standardized design of mosques subsidized by the Amal Bakti Islam Pancasila Foundation. This reminds one of the Great Mosque of Demak which was inspired by wantilan structures, i.e., a religious building erected originally to accommodate a Hindu ritual, generally believed to be its source. The spread of the standardized design to all parts of Indonesia, for better or for worse, may have its own impact on the people at large. It may form a common cognition of how a mosque should look, namely, in terms of communally shared symbols.

- On the other hand, the thrust to formulate a certain style, an image, better known (but not necessarily a clearer concept) as identity, as part of the idea of regional diversity is getting stronger and stronger. It is a kind of new social consciousness brought up amidst the move towards globalization. This is where an independent designer may have his “piece of cake”. The fundamental problem here is of course that of “social acceptance”. The most characteristic mosque symbols seem to be the minaret or the dome or both. Now, it is truly a challenge for architects to decide how the minaret and the dome should be reinterpreted, if a traditional vocabulary is accepted by the architect. Should the architects prefer to further develop the regional characteristics, he may end up with an esoteric design or else traditional one, or, again, something in between.

The dispute would then be between the all-encompassing style of mosque or, following the regional diversity, a multi-image, a plurality of style. The point is that this argument applies also to any buildings which are meant to have an Islamic expression.

- Lastly, the architects’ education and training should also be held responsible for the creation and thus transformation of the expressions of the Muslim community. The issue of historical awareness will immediately come to mind. A case in point is the fact that modern interpretations of mosque expressions tend to ignore the historical references of Indonesia. Mostly, the bedrock of their concept lies somewhere in the universality of logic (structurally right, honest, respect of materials, economy, efficiency, etc.), and not within the immediate context of the environment (e.g., the use of flat roofs without domes). Conversely, the venture into the creation of new architectural idioms should also be hailed as the enrichment of architectural
expressions, assuming, of course, that sooner or later they may be accepted by the community at large.

But the controversy remains. It may well be aggravated by the absence of Indonesian traditional architectural historiography. Educational institutions may have an instrumental role in resolving the problem, albeit it may take a long time.

Notes

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2. By Javanese we mean those whose mother tongues are Javanese and reside in the South-Central part of Java.


4. Both de Graaf and Pijper missed this point in their description of the Javanese mosque.


7. Field experience.