

**Postcolonial Semiotics and Visual Representation
in Islamic Malay Architecture:
Interpreting Cultural Identity and Symbolic Continuity
in the Jami Mosque of Mentok**

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Abstract

The Jami Mosque of Mentok is a dynamic semiotic space expressing Islamic–Malay identity within a postcolonial and Global South frame. Located in a nineteenth-century multiethnic port town, it reflects Arab, Chinese, Javanese, and European colonial influences in its spatial and aesthetic form. Using a qualitative interpretive method that combines

ethnohistorical inquiry and visual analysis, this study draws on cultural semiotics (Lotman), Islamic aesthetics (Nasr, Burckhardt), and postcolonial visual theory (Mitchell, Bhabha). Architectural elements—the *bumbung tumpang* (tiered roof), fauna-inspired *simbar*, and floral ornamentation—are read as symbolic expressions of relational *tawhīd*, localized cosmology, and Muslim Malay ethics. Findings show these forms act as a non-verbal cultural archive, tracing transformations from colonial to contemporary times. The mosque’s eclectic, dialogic aesthetic sustains local traditions while reframing Western semiotic models through Global South epistemologies in Southeast Asian heritage discourse.

Keywords: cultural semiotics, Islamic–Malay aesthetics, Jami Mosque of Mentok, postcolonial architectural discourse.

Introduction

In the discourse of Islamic architecture, the mosque is not merely a space for ritual worship, but also an articulation of ideology, cosmology, and complex social constructions within Muslim societies (Fārūqī, 1992; Grabar, 1992; Nasr, 1987). As a living architectural form, the mosque mediates the relationship between space, symbol, and identity through historically and aesthetically situated processes. Across the Indonesian archipelago, historical mosques have long served as witnesses to the dynamics of locality, intercultural encounters, and the transformation of Islamic values within local cultural frames.

The Jami Mosque of Mentok, established in 1881 in the colonial port town of Mentok, Bangka Belitung Islands Province, stands as a significant architectural artifact within the Islamic-Malay tradition. Situated within a multiethnic urban milieu comprising Malay, Chinese, and Arab communities under Dutch colonial hegemony, the mosque functioned not only as a center of religious practice but also as a site of social representation and a symbol of local cultural resilience. Its architectural design presents an eclectic configuration that harmonizes local, Arab, Chinese, and colonial influences into a coherent formal system. Visual elements such as *bumbung tumpang* (tiered roofs), *simbar* (local ridge ornament), and flora-fauna motifs operate as symbolic codes of relational *tawhīd*, social harmony, and *tasāmuh* (cultural tolerance) embedded in the worldview of the Mentok Malay community. While previous studies on mosque architecture in the Indonesian context have largely focused on typological or

historical-descriptive aspects (Arif & Panakkal, 2024; Budi & Wibowo, 2018; Mirzani et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2016; Wirakusumah et al., 2021; Wiryomartono, 2023), few have approached the mosque as a living semiotic space mediating dynamic cultural meanings across time. Likewise, postcolonial perspectives that interpret the mosque as a contested space of identity negotiation remain critically underarticulated, particularly beyond Java-centric frameworks.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the Jami Mosque of Mentok through the lens of cultural semiotics and postcolonial interpretive analysis. It examines how the mosque's visual symbols and spatial configurations reflect historical transformations, cultural negotiations (Santosa & Noorwatha, 2025), and the articulation of spiritual values rooted in relational *tawhīd*. By reading the mosque as an "unwritten archive" (Foster, 1996; Hall, 1997) the research explores how the Tanjung Malay community actively produces and recontextualizes the meaning of sacred space in response to colonialism, modernity, and social pluralism. The article's central contribution lies in its conceptual development of Islamic-Malay aesthetics within an eclectic-*tasāmuh* framework, and in reinterpreting the mosque as a dynamic postcolonial cultural space. Through an ethnohistorical approach and field-based aesthetic analysis, the study expands the discourse of Islamic Nusantara architecture by foregrounding the significance of local agency in the production of spatial and visual meaning.

Theoretical Framework

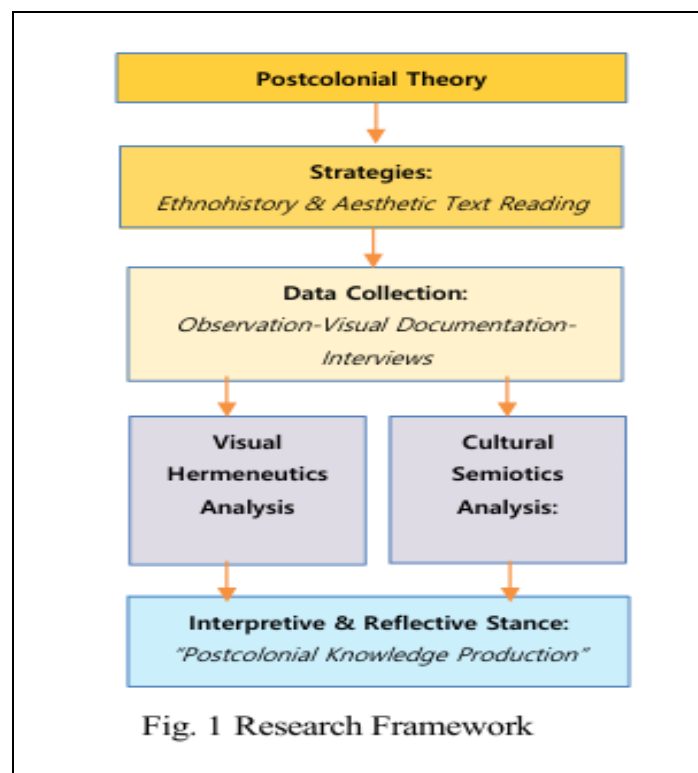
In the discourse of Islamic architecture, the mosque is not merely conceived as a place of worship, but as an ideological and symbolic artefact that embodies the complex configuration of faith, cosmology, and social structure (Fārūqī, 1992; Grabar, 1992; Nasr, 1987). Grabar argues that Islamic architecture is always situated in a dynamic tension between inherited forms and meanings that are continuously negotiated. Nasr (1987), on the other hand, emphasizes that Islamic aesthetics is a manifestation of *tawhīd* (divine unity), which permeates geometric, vegetal, and spatial expressions as representations of cosmic order and spiritual ethics.

The cultural semiotics approach, as developed by Hall (1997) and Eco (1986), enables the interpretation of the mosque as a living semiotic space, a field of articulation in which visual symbols, ritual practices, and spatial structures interact to produce meaning. In the context of the Mentok Malay community, visual elements such as *bumbung tumpang* (tiered roofs), *simbar* (roof finials), and local flora-fauna ornamentation are not merely decorative but function as

cultural codes that articulate values of relational *tawhīd*, *tasāmuh* (cultural tolerance), and social harmony through visual form.

Furthermore, postcolonial approaches in Islamic architecture shift the focus from typological analysis to the dynamics of power, cultural resistance, and identity negotiation within space (Bhabha, 1994; Holod et al., 1997; Said, 1978). Within this framework, the mosque can be understood as a discursive site of contestation, where local Islamic identity interacts with colonial legacies, modernity, and social pluralism to produce architectural expressions that are eclectic yet ideologically charged. Accordingly, the Jami Mosque of Mentok is interpreted as a living spatial archive (Foster, 1996), wherein visibility and spatial configuration function as narrative media that both record and recontextualize the social and spiritual experiences of the Tanjung Malay community in the face of colonialism, social transformation, and contemporary challenges.

Research Methodology



This study employs a qualitative interpretative approach, integrating an ethnohistorical strategy and aesthetic analysis to enable an in-depth exploration of the visual and symbolic transformations of the Jami Mosque of Mentok within its local cultural context. Ethnohistory, as conceptualized by Axtell (1979) and Trigger (1982). It is applied to trace the collective narratives of the Mentok Malay community through both historical documentation and social memory, particularly as they relate to the mosque's function and meaning. Aesthetic analysis is conducted to interpret form, ornamentation, and spatial configuration as expressions of spiritual, social, and cosmological values.

Data collection was carried out through fieldwork, including participatory observation, visual documentation, and in-depth interviews with religious leaders, mosque caretakers, and local community members. This multi-modal approach facilitates the identification of embedded meanings within visual artefacts and the contextual interpretation of space.

The data are analyzed using visual hermeneutics and cultural semiotics, drawing on the frameworks of Hall (1997) and Eco (1976), to unpack the symbolic and ideological layers embedded in the mosque's architectural representations. The analysis is conducted in an interpretative and reflective manner, critically positioning the researcher within the epistemological dynamics of postcolonial knowledge production (Guha & Spivak, 1988).

Results and Discussion

a. Urbanism and Architectural Transformation in Mentok: Expressions of Power, Identity, and Cultural Negotiation

In Islamic architectural discourse, the mosque is not merely a place of worship; rather, it constitutes an ideological and symbolic artefact that embodies the complex configurations of faith, cosmology, and social structure (Fārūqī, 1992; Grabar, 1992; Nasr, 1987). Grabar (1992) argues that Islamic architecture consistently negotiates the tension between inherited forms and evolving meanings. Nasr (1987), on the other hand, posits that Islamic aesthetics arise from the principle of *tawḥīd* (divine unity), which permeates geometric, vegetal, and spatial expressions as manifestations of cosmic order and spiritual ethics.

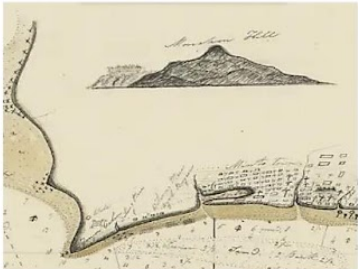
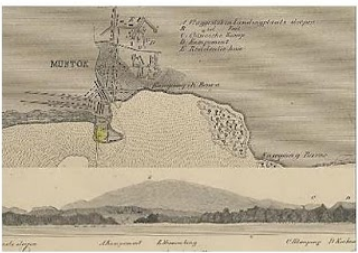
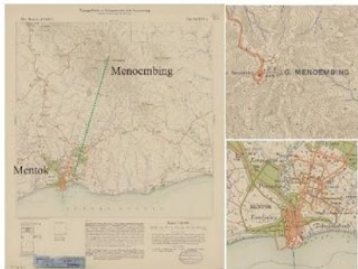
<p>(1) The 1850 city map of Mentok drawn by E.C. Smets, now held in the KITLV collection at Leiden University, serves as a vital visual document.</p> <p>Source: digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl</p>	
	
<p>(2) The depiction of Mount Menumbing (Monopin) across four historical maps attests to its geographical and symbolic prominence</p>	
	<p>Monopin on Bangka Map Ca.1700–1800, Sources: Nationaal Archief</p>
	<p>Monopin Hill on Mentok Map Ca.1817, Source: Nationaal Archief</p>
	<p>(2c) Mentok Map Ca.1859, Source: Kommissie tot Verbetering der Indische Zeekaarten (Batavia)</p>
	<p>(2d) G. Menoembing (Menumbing Mountain) on Mentok Map Ca.1935. Source: Topografische Dienst (Batavia).</p>

Fig. 2 Two major categories of Mentok's historical documentation.

Mentok represents a typology of colonial coastal towns that underwent spatial and architectural transformation through dialectical processes involving colonial power structures, local agency, and the labor contributions of migrants. Since the late 18th century, the city's spatial order was shaped by the racial segregation logic of Dutch colonialism in the Indies, in which ethnic classification and economic function formed the basis of urban planning (Kusno, 2000; Nas, 2002). The European quarter was positioned dominantly on elevated ground, comprising government buildings, official residences, and neoclassical churches. In contrast, Malay communities inhabited coastal settlements structured by communal customs and oriented toward maritime life. Between these zones, Chinese settlements emerged around ports and markets, forming hybrid spaces characterized by dense and dynamic socio-economic activities.

These visual materials fall into two major categories of historical documentation that are central to reconstructing Mentok's spatial and geographic development from the 18th to the early 20th century. First (Figure 2.1), the 1850 map by E.C. Smets provides a primary cartographic record of the town's early colonial layout, reflecting the Dutch effort to establish a new administrative and economic center on the western tip of Bangka Island. It illustrates how spatial organization was informed by racial and functional segregation—common features in colonial urban design in the Dutch East Indies. Features such as the port, European quarters, Malay kampungs, and early mining facilities can be identified, offering insights into spatial-social dynamics. Second (Figure 2.2), the series of maps featuring Mount Menumbing across different periods underscores the mountain's long-standing role as a topographical and cultural reference point in both colonial and local narratives. Its consistent representation across cartographic records from institutions like the Nationaal Archief and Batavia's Topographical Services highlights its ecological and symbolic function in maritime navigation and colonial planning.

The Chinese labor force, primarily from the Hakka group, was imported by the Dutch from the early 19th century as contract workers (coolies) to support the tin mining industry, a cornerstone of Bangka's colonial economy (Lohanda, 1996; Reid, 2009). Beyond their role in extractive industries, Chinese migrants introduced vernacular building techniques, spatial logics, and cultural symbolism that gradually shaped Mentok's architectural landscape. The two-storey shophouse typology, blending Chinese vernacular aesthetics with tropical adaptations, became a dominant form in commercial districts. Architectural features such as thick brick walls, wooden

louvered openings, decorative ventilation holes, and multifunctional front spaces reflect a fusion of economic pragmatism and feng shui principles (Lim, 1993; Tan, 1993).

Moreover, the presence of Chinese communities contributed to the transformation of the city's morphology. Narrow alleyways, introverted courtyard housing clusters, and compact market spaces gave rise to a more organic urban structure distinct from the rigid geometry of colonial town planning. This indicates that everyday spatial practices of work, worship, and commerce—shaped the urban form in ways that eluded colonial control, driven instead by the social and cultural logic of subaltern communities (Chakrabarty, 2000; Scott, 1990).

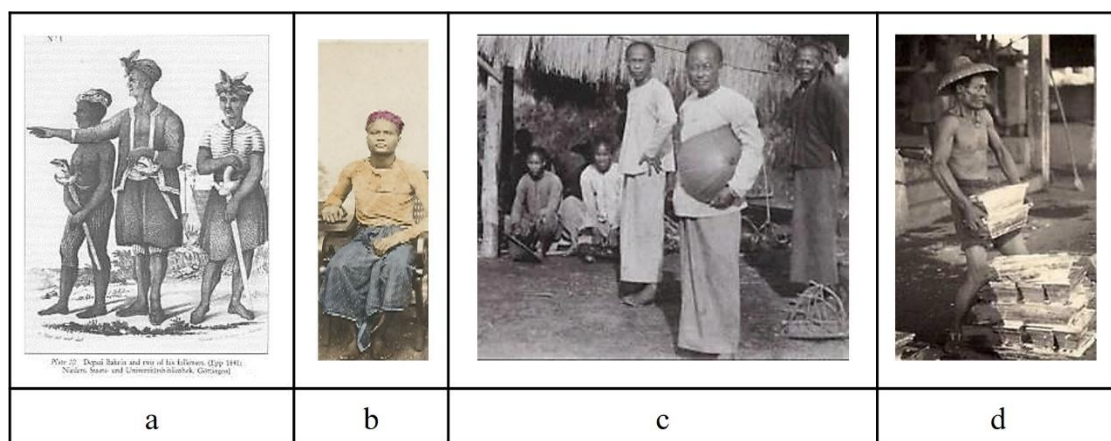


Fig. 3 Archival photographs depicting interactions between Bangka Malays and Chinese communities in 19th-century Mentok are preserved in the: (a). (Epp, 1841), (b). Digital collection at Leiden University, (c). Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, (d). Museum Timah Indonesia.

These visual documents may be analyzed through the lenses of visual culture studies and postcolonial theory, revealing how bodily gestures, clothing, spatial arrangements, and expressions in the photographs reflect the negotiation of identity and colonial social stratification. Such representations also provide alternative readings of Chinese cultural contributions to the architectural, urban, and economic transformation of West Bangka beyond the purview of formal state narratives.

Thus, Mentok's architectural and urban fabric should not be reduced to either a colonial product or a purely indigenous expression. Rather, it embodies a hybrid landscape emerging from power relations, identity negotiations, and cross-cultural encounters. While colonial buildings may represent imperial authority and Western modernity, Malay and Chinese houses

reveal the persistence of tradition, communal agency, and cultural adaptation under colonial conditions (Jenkins & Forsyth, 2009; King, 1995). Within the framework of postcolonial theory and Southeast Asian urban studies, Mentok serves as a concrete case of how colonial coastal towns became arenas of encounter between imperial expansion, labor migration, and alternative modes of spatial production. The resulting architectural transformations are not solely the outcome of colonial policy, but rather the product of multi-actor interactions shaping the form, function, and meaning of urban space (Jung, 2014; Yeoh, 2003).

a. Visual Symbols and Social Structure: A Semiotic Interpretation of Sacred Architecture

In the context of the Jami Mosque of Mentok, architectural elements such as the *bumbung tumpang* (multi-tiered roof), *simbar* (roof finial resembling mythological fauna like dragons or birds), and local flora-fauna ornaments serve not merely as visual embellishments, but as carriers of profound, relational meanings. From a cultural semiotic perspective, these symbols function as iconic and indexical signs that mediate the relationship between cosmos, society, and spirituality.

The *simbar*, for example, is not simply an aesthetic or structural closure; it operates as an ideological and spiritual marker, symbolizing the mosque as an axial point that connects the transcendent (sky), the immanent (earth), and the human (mediator). Within the Mentok Malay community, the *simbar* assumes the role of a metaphysical protector with apotropaic functions and signifies the mosque's status as the highest moral authority. Sociologically, this reflects a flexible hierarchical social structure, where the mosque intersects with religious authority (*ulama*), customary power, and—during the colonial period—colonial governance. The interrelation between visual form and social structure can be interpreted through the semiotics of sacred space, in which architecture functions as a cultural text that constructs and reproduces communal value systems. Drawing on Barthes's semiology and Cassirer's symbolic form theory, these architectural symbols are not mere shapes but living structures of meaning, continuously reinterpreted through social practice and religious ritual.

b.1. Social Spatiality and Cultural Semiotics of the Jami Mosque Site Plan

The spatial configuration of the Jami Mosque reflects the spatial consciousness of the Malay community—one that is not solely functional or religious, but also a form of cultural resistance against colonial domination. Its linear orientation along the main road, open access from the north and south, and strategic placement facing the river and market underscore the mosque's role as a nodal point in the local social, spiritual, and economic networks. Unlike the visual hierarchy imposed by colonial spatial design, the mosque's layout articulates a cosmology of connectedness, flowing from transcendence into everyday praxis.

The proximity of a Chinese temple to the south and the spatial relationship with the market reinforce the interpretation of the site plan as more than an architectural arrangement; it is a spatial embodiment of coexistence. The sacred space is not constructed in monumental isolation but in intercultural and interspatial dialogue. Elements such as the ablution pool, dual gateways, and stone fence form a symbolically charged spatial structure: the pool as existential purification, gateways as transitions between the profane and the sacred, and the fence as a marker of honor rather than exclusion. The mosque performs multidimensional roles, ritual, social, educational, and economic, serving as a cultural fortress created by an oppressed community. In the colonial context, this site plan is a spatial declaration of semantic sovereignty, asserting that spatial control is not solely political but emerges from the cultural agency of a community that dignifies space as a form of resistance.

b.2 The Gateway as a Mediating Structure: Symbolic Boundaries, Sacred Access, and Cultural Sovereignty in Islamic-Malay Sacred Architecture

The gateway of the Jami Mosque is an architectural expression of openness, hospitality, and reverence embedded in Malay cultural values. Beyond its function as a physical entry, the gateway serves as a symbolic mediator between the profane world and sacred space, articulating a social ethic of inclusivity and conscious boundary-making.

Its symmetrical form, modest columns, and vegetal scroll motifs integrate universal Islamic design language with local aesthetic sensibilities. The gateway is not intended to intimidate or dominate visually; rather, it invites and embraces a symbolic form reflecting an egalitarian social structure and communal spirit. It becomes a living threshold, a site of social interaction

intertwined with ritual, where sacredness resonates in daily life rather than isolates. In the postcolonial context, this gateway signifies visual resistance to hegemonic symbols often embedded in monumental power architectures. It is the product of a culturally sovereign community—one that frames boundaries not as domination but as reverent demarcation of the sacred in a humanistic and open narrative.

This figure presents three visual representations that serve as architectural and historical data sources for interpreting the role and meaning of the gateway at Jami Mosque, Mentok. First, the site plan (Figure 4.a) illustrates the strategic spatial placement of the gateway within the mosque complex, functioning as a transitional node between public (outer) and sacred (inner) spaces. This spatial articulation reflects traditional Islamic architectural principles of sacred-profane demarcation, embodying the concepts of *'adl* (equilibrium) and *tanzhīm* (orderliness) within Islamic aesthetics. Second, the architectural façade (Figure 4.b) provides visual evidence of the gateway's formal and material composition. In this context, the gateway operates not merely as a physical threshold, but as a symbolic representation of *miqat*—a liminal boundary that mediates ritual transition and spiritual experience in Islamic spatial practice. Third, the 1949 photograph (Figure 4.c) offers historical and performative insight into the gateway's adaptive function. It reveals that the gateway also accommodated a storm lantern, indicating its responsiveness to local needs concerning lighting, safety, and communal activity. This dual functionality underscores the dynamic and negotiated nature of traditional Islamic-Malay architecture, in which symbolic meanings are continually mediated through practical exigencies and socio-historical contexts.

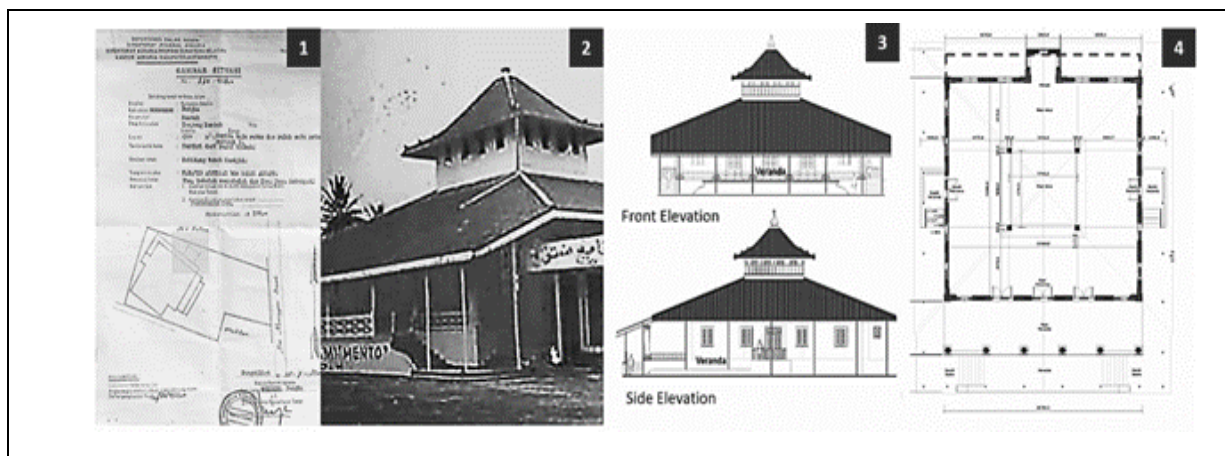


Fig. 5 (1) Waqf land certificate, (2) 1970 photograph of the mosque, (3) Redrawn elevation, (4) Redrawn architectural floor plan. All visuals are based on field-based visual reconstruction and direct observation.

This figure comprises four visual artifacts and documentary evidence that enrich the historical, legal, and architectural understanding of the Jami Mosque of Mentok as a dynamic religious institution and cultural space. (Figure 5.1) The *waqf* land certificate is a formal legal document affirming the mosque's land ownership as an Islamic endowment. Its presence signals a significant historical process of institutionalization, legitimizing the mosque's religious authority within both Islamic jurisprudence and the Indonesian legal framework. In the context of Islamic architectural studies, *waqf* documents form the legal foundation for the mosque's spatial and functional continuity across generations. (Figure 5.2) The 1970 photograph serves as a historical visual archive capturing the mosque's postcolonial architectural condition. Beyond archival value, the image is a primary source for analyzing spatial morphology, material usage, and environmental relationships, and can be situated within studies of collective memory and community heritage. The redrawn elevation represents a visual-conservational effort to reconstruct and reinterpret the mosque's façade (Figure 5.3), allowing for critical readings of architectural elements—such as roof forms, columns, fenestration, and ornamentation that reflect a syncretism between Islamic, local Malay, and colonial architectural vocabularies. Such drawings are essential in typological and visual studies to trace design logic, aesthetic principles, and embedded symbolic meanings. The redrawn floor plan provides a spatial mapping of the mosque's internal configuration, including the porch, prayer hall, *mihrab*, and ablution areas (Figure 5.4). The plan reflects the mosque's hierarchical spatial order based on *taharah* (purity), *qibla* orientation, and socio-communal functions. It also serves as a foundation for spatial analysis within Islamic architectural discourse, where space is both functional and cosmologically symbolic, expressing divine orientation and social harmony. Overall, Figure 5 presents a holistic visual-archival approach to understanding the mosque as a religious, legal, and architectural entity embedded in the evolving cultural landscape of the Islamic-Malay community of Mentok.

a. Architecture as a Field of Meaning: Spatial Symbolism and Cultural Resistance in the Jami Mosque of Mentok

The Jami Mosque of Mentok is not merely a religious artifact but a symbolic field wherein meanings are produced, negotiated, and transformed through structure, materiality, and spatial experience. It may be read as a visual and spatial narrative of how the Malay Muslim community in Mentok articulates its identity within the colonial landscape through architectural practices that are resistant, symbolic, and contextually embedded.

c.1 Elevated Floor and Staircase: Transcendence and Cosmological Acculturation

The elevated floor of the mosque embodies a spatial articulation of transcendence, sanctity, and vertical spiritual orientation. The presence of seven steps not only reflects the stratification of sacred space within Islamic tradition but also suggests the acculturation of pre-Islamic cosmological heritage—particularly Hindu-Buddhist influences in the archipelago, where odd numbers and elevation symbolize the spiritual ascent toward perfection. Postcolonially, this architectural elevation offers a counter-narrative to European colonial monumentalism, which often imposed structures devoid of local spiritual resonance. The staircase thus becomes an affective and performative passage—transitioning from the profane to the sacred, from social reality to spiritual depth.

c.2. The *Serambi* as Liminal Space: Representation of Inclusive Malay Islam

The *serambi*, or veranda, serves as a transitional zone between the mosque's sacred interior and the everyday social environment, functioning as a liminal space that mediates spiritual and communal experiences (Turner, 1985). Incorporating elements of Chinese (fencing), Greek (Doric columns), and European (Carrara marble) architecture, the *serambi* reflects the cultural agency of the Malay community in reinterpreting foreign symbols within an open yet contextual Islamic framework. Rather than submitting to colonial homogenization or normative transnational Islam, it presents an inclusive, selective, and dialogical expression of Malay Islam. It becomes a performative space for *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), without diminishing the sacral intensity of the site.

c.3. Walls and Openings: Austerity and Inherent *Tawhīd*

The plain and solid walls of the mosque represent an aesthetic of simplicity that resists the ornamental excess of colonial architecture. From the perspective of Islamic aesthetics, this reflects the values of *tawadhu* (humility) and *tajrid* (spiritual detachment from materiality). Abundant openings—such as *krepyak* (latticed vents), *loster* (ventilation blocks), and wide doors—not only facilitate tropical airflow but also symbolize the epistemic openness of the Malay worldview. The calligraphy inscribed on the walls is not mere decoration; it acts as a *signifier* in the Islamic semiotic system, transforming architectural structure into a medium of *dhikr* (remembrance) and a vessel for *tawhīd* (divine unity).

c.4. The Terrace: A Space of Social, Cultural, and Spiritual Egalitarianism

The northern and southern terraces are not auxiliary appendages but dynamic social spaces where interaction among classes, generations, and roles occurs within a framework of reciprocity. The terrace functions as a site of social production (Lefebvre, 1991), where Islam is not only performed ritually but also lived socially and culturally. The use of local Malay wooden fences and indigenous ceramics resists colonial material standards while affirming the continuity of local tradition. The symmetrical orientation embodies the value of *mīzān* (balance), rendering the terrace a dialogic arena of human interaction beneath the unifying shadow of *tawhīd*.

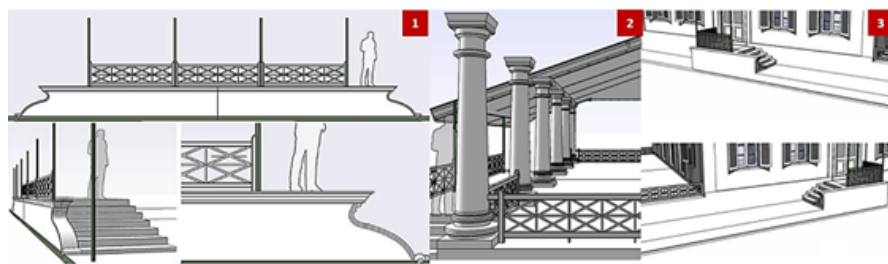


Fig. 6 (1) Elevated floor of the mosque's main prayer hall; (2) Chinese-style wooden railing and six Greek Doric columns; (3) Carved wooden fence with distinctive Palembang-Malay motifs. The entire image is a visual reconstruction based on direct field observations.

This image constitutes a reconstructive visualization of the interior elements of the Jami Mosque of Mentok, reflecting the complex interplay of form, function, and symbolic meaning in localized Islamic architecture. It reveals that the mosque is not merely a physical container for ritual practice, but a cultural construction layered with historical, symbolic, and ideological significance. The first element, the elevated prayer hall floor (Figure 6.1), spatially articulates Islamic concepts of sacredness (*tahārah*) and spatial hierarchy. This elevation creates both visual and ritual distinctions between profane and sacred zones, guiding the psycho-spiritual transition of congregants into the main prayer area. Semiotic interpretation suggests that the elevated floor signifies more than physical separation; it manifests the religious value system that organizes space and behavior. The second element, a Chinese-style wooden fence combined with six Doric columns (Figure 6.2), embodies architectural hybridity emerging from the port-town context of Mentok. The coexistence of Chinese and European classical features within a mosque's interior indicates aesthetic assimilation driven by multicultural interaction among Malay, Chinese, and colonial communities. In a postcolonial reading, this is not merely eclecticism but a cultural negotiation of identity under colonial power structures and tin-mining capitalism. The third element, a fence with Palembang-Malay motifs (Figure 6.3), reflects the continuity of local woodcarving traditions integrated into religious ornamentation. These motifs reinforce regional identity while functioning as a medium for preserving ancestral symbolic values through sacred aesthetics. A fourth element, the partition wall symbolizing *bhurloka*, reveals a syncretic absorption of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology into local spatial traditions later Islamized. *Bhurloka*, traditionally representing the lowest worldly plane, is reinterpreted here as the symbolic boundary between the profane exterior and the sacred interior. This signifies a symbolic transformation rather than erasure—an Islamization that integrates and reconfigures existing cosmological structures. As a whole, Figure 5 functions not merely as visual documentation but as a conceptual map showing how the Muslim Malay community in Mentok constructs its prayer space through the synthesis of religious values, local traditions, and intercultural influences. This approach positions the mosque as a dynamic site of social, spiritual, and cultural articulation.

The *bumbung tumpang* (tiered roof), a prominent architectural feature in Nusantara Islamic architecture, holds deep symbolic meaning. Cosmologically, it represents the axis mundi—a vertical axis connecting the celestial and terrestrial realms—and acts as a spiritual marker orienting human consciousness toward the divine. In the Islamic framework, this verticality

embodies *tawhīd* (Divine Unity), which governs theological relations while shaping spatial arrangements and architectural symbolism.

Morphologically, the pyramidal form of the *bumbung tumpang* encodes multiple layers of meaning: on one hand, it reflects continuity with vernacular architectural forms such as the Malay rumah limas or Palembang's traditional roof structures; on the other hand, it resonates with universal symbols of spirituality found in Egyptian pyramids, Buddhist stupas, and sacred towers across civilizations. This demonstrates that Malay Islamic architecture is not bound to formal purism but engages in dialogical and transcultural symbolic articulations. Moreover, the presence of *simbar* (ornamental finials in the form of local fauna) and natural ventilation systems embedded within the roof structure are not merely decorative; they express ecological values inherent to traditional architecture. The integration of aesthetics, cross-ventilation, and recognition of local biodiversity reflects a holistic environmental approach: the mosque as a living ecological system aligned with Islamic green spirituality, which reveres creation as a manifestation of *āyāt kauniyyah* (divine signs).

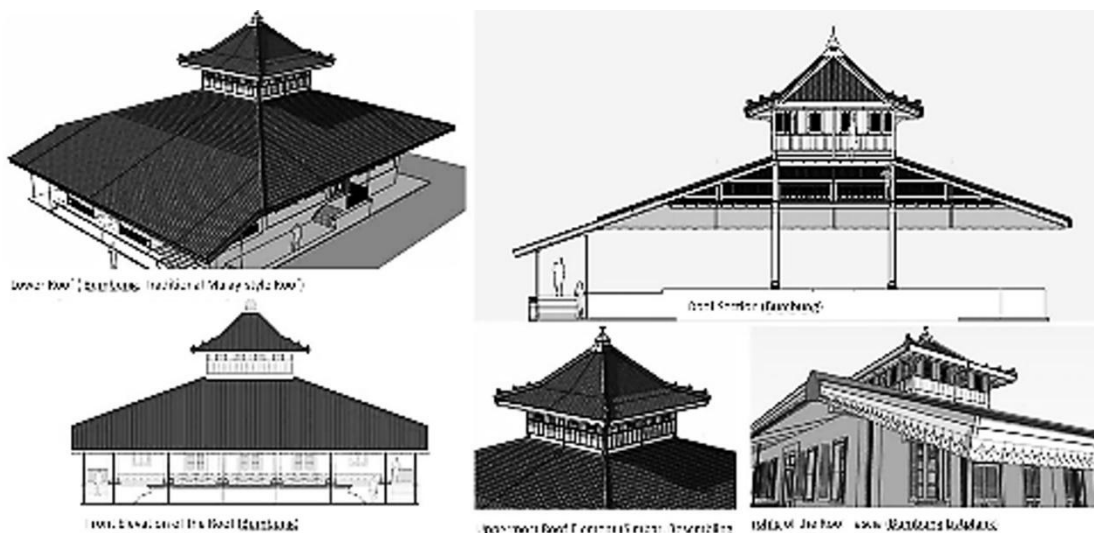


Fig. 7 The *Bumbung Tumpang*, Architectural Roof Form of the Jami Mosque of Mentok.

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From a postcolonial perspective, the *bumbung tumpang* serves as architectural resistance to the dominance of colonial flat-roof systems, which were characterized by rationalism, rigidity, and spatial homogenization. In contrast, the *bumbung tumpang* reinstates the symbolic function of the roof as a marker of transcendence and continuity of tradition. It becomes a symbolic arena through which the Mentok community constructs a *tawhīdic* civilization—an integrated life

order connecting faith, environment, and culture—not through colonial imitation, but through beauty, balance, and the dignification of local heritage. Thus, the *bumbung tumpang* is not merely a technical structure, but a medium of spiritual expression, a symbol of cultural identity, and an aesthetic-political field of postcolonial articulation in Nusantara Islamic architecture.

The illustration represents a visual reconstruction derived from direct field observation, depicting the architectural roof form of the Jami Mosque of Mentok (Figure 7). This form embodies a synthesis of traditional Malay architectural typologies, Islamic symbolic principles, and responses to the historical-colonial dynamics of the Bangka coastal region. The mosque's roof adopts a multi-tiered pyramidal structure (*bumbung tumpang*), a morphology characteristic of ancient mosques across the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. It simultaneously reflects the architectural continuity of vernacular house forms, particularly the *rumah limas* and raised wooden dwellings of the Malay cultural sphere.

From the perspective of Islamic architectural symbolism, the tiered roof articulates the principle of spiritual verticality, a hierarchized relationship between earth and heaven, humanity and the Divine. Each layer of the roof signifies existential and metaphysical levels within the Islamic cosmological framework, progressing from the material realm (*alam al-shahādah*) toward the transcendent dimension (*alam al-ghayb*). As such, the entire roof structure may be interpreted as an axis mundi, a cosmic axis orienting the sacred space of prayer toward a tawhīdic metaphysical order. Technically and ecologically, the steep, multi-tiered roof structure provides an effective system of natural ventilation and climatic adaptability within a humid tropical environment. Cross-ventilation and interstitial air cavities between tiers ensure thermal comfort and efficient air circulation, demonstrating that the architectural form is not only aesthetically meaningful but also functionally sustainable.

Within a postcolonial framework, the roof form of the Jami Mosque emerges as an architectural symbol of resistance against the hegemony of modern colonial typologies, which tend to favor flat or cubic roofs—emblematic of Western rationality, spatial homogenization, and visual control. In contrast, the *bumbung tumpang* manifests as a culturally embedded counter-form that reaffirms local identity, Islamic spirituality, and indigenous architectural knowledge. The roof thus functions not merely as an architectural differentiation, but as a signifier of cultural continuity, born from the dialectic between locality, Islamization, and colonality. Consequently, Figure 6 should not be regarded merely as a visual representation of a

roof form, but rather as an epistemological entry point into understanding how mosque architecture operates as a discursive arena where religious, ecological, and politico-cultural values are co-articulated within the historical context of Islamic-Malay heritage in Mentok.

d. Ornamentation of the Jami Mosque of Mentok

d.1 Malay Calligraphy (Arabic–Jawi Script) and Floral Motifs

The placement of Malay calligraphy in the Jami Mosque of Mentok functions not merely as visual ornamentation but serves as a symbolic, informative, and historical articulation embedded within the architecture itself. A key example is a stone inscription measuring 63 × 63 centimeters, installed above the southeast entrance of the mosque. This inscription employs the Arabic–Jawi script, a distinctive writing system rooted in the Islamic–Malay literary tradition, which records the date of the mosque’s foundation (1 Muharram 1300 AH / 1881 CE) along with the name of its founder, Demang Abang Muhammad Ali (Tumenggung Kertanegara II).

The script style of this inscription demonstrates the aesthetic influence of the Sultanate of Siak, particularly in the symmetrical rendering of the name “Muhammad”—a form locally known as *Muhammad Betangkup*. This typology synthesizes the universal spatial grammar of the mosque as a sacred site of global Islam with the regional order of Malay aesthetics, which emphasizes harmony, symmetry, and collective meaning, especially at the main access point of the building. Its symbolic function reinforces the inscription’s role as both an institutional artifact and a localized identity marker, permanently embedded within the architectural fabric.

Floral motifs in the architecture of the Jami Mosque of Mentok extend beyond mere decorative purposes; they operate as symbolic statements reflecting the harmony between nature, Islamic spirituality, and Malay cultural identity. These motifs are prominently featured in the ornamentation of the *mihrab* and *minbar*, articulating both religious and social meanings within the sacred space. On the *mihrab*, floral elements such as triangular flowers (*datura*) and circular sun-like blossoms are carved into the lower and upper framing structures. Using high-relief and pierced carving techniques, the motifs are rendered in an organic, non-repetitive composition, suggesting a symbolic understanding of spiritual fertility and visual transcendence.

These ornaments are carved from tembesu wood and painted in gold or brown, underscoring the sacredness of the *mihrab* as the focal point of the qibla. On the *minbar*, floral

motifs appear across both the body and the roof, incorporating *datura*, sun motifs, and *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoots) in a complete and harmonious composition. Techniques such as non-perforated high relief and stylized perforated carving are employed to generate intricate visual detail that integrates seamlessly with the minbar's function as a platform for religious discourse (*da'wah*).

The floral ornamentation on these architectural elements not only reflects the universal aesthetic principles of Islamic art but also reveals regional particularities in the visual interpretation of Malay cultural values. These motifs embody the continuity of tradition, the resilience of local knowledge systems, and the transformation of religious values into living artistic expressions within the social space of the Muslim community.



Fig. 8 Inscribed stone relief with Siak-influenced design and symmetrical floral patterns. Source: Field Documentation.

This figure presents two visual artefacts of significant symbolic and historical value within the material Islamic-Malay culture of Mentok: (Figure 8.1) The stone inscription, produced through a casting technique, reflects distinctive visual characteristics typical of Islamic polities in the Malay region, particularly those associated with the Sultanate of Siak. The decorative style exhibits ornamental patterns that indicate the influence of Islamic aesthetics—specifically arabesques, geometric elements, and stylized flora—serving as visual articulations of the principle of *tawhīd* (unity in multiplicity). The symmetrical composition reflects a cosmological sense of order and equilibrium, an aesthetic value traditionally employed to represent divine authority and spiritual legitimacy. In this context, symmetry is not merely a visual device but a

symbolic manifestation of divine order, fundamental to the Islamic conception of sovereignty as *khalīfah fī al-ard*. (Figure 8.2) The floral ornamentation within the architecture and interior of the Jami Mosque of Mentok demonstrates the continuity of Islamic aesthetic values applied in a localized cultural context. These vegetal motifs integrate Islamic decorative principles with Malay artistic expression, functioning not merely as ornamentation, but as part of a symbolic system that mediates the profane and the sacred. Such motifs appear across various interior elements—*mihrab*, *minbar*, columns, and railing structures—and serve to communicate the divine beauty (*jamāl*) and foster a contemplative atmosphere within the prayer space. The use of local flora arranged in symmetrical and repetitive patterns underscores an aesthetic that is simultaneously spiritual and ecological, reinforcing the interconnectedness between worship space, Islamic cosmology, and the surrounding natural environment. Collectively, these artefacts illustrate how Islamic visuality in the Malay-Mentok context transcends formal imitation and actively reinterprets religious and regal symbols within localized narratives. Both the stone inscription and the floral motifs function as media of representation that bind text, space, and authority—affirming that traditional aesthetics are integral to the cultural and spiritual identity of the community.

Based on Yuri Lotman's theory of cultural semiotics (Lotman, 1990), Culture is a semiotic system that constructs the world through signs, wherein visual artefacts such as inscriptions and architectural ornamentation can be read as cultural texts. Within this framework (Figure 8.1), the stone inscription is not merely a legal document or an emblem of authority, but a semiotic unit that conveys historical meaning, political legitimacy, and Islamic spirituality in the Malay context. (Figure 8.2) The floral ornamentation acts as a visual code within a broader system of local Islamic cultural communication, which Lotman refers to as the semiosphere—the symbolic space in which culture produces and regulates meaning. Symmetry and ornamentation are not solely aesthetic forms but semiotic systems that articulate the notion of “divine order,” and within the Islamic-Malay semiosphere, such visual conventions enable communities to negotiate spiritual values and identity in their social spaces.

Drawing from Islamic aesthetics as theorized by Nasr (1987) and Burckhardt (1987), art in Islam is a reflection of the metaphysical principle of *tawhīd* (divine unity), in which visual forms are not mere embellishments but manifestations of a transcendent reality. Floral motifs embody the principle of unity in multiplicity: repetitive and symmetrical patterns that mirror cosmic order

and reflect the divine beauty (*jamāl*) in worldly forms. The stone charter, rich in visual symbolism (both decorative and centralised), can be understood as an architecture of visual *kalām*—a theological articulation of law, order, and sanctity. Islamic aesthetics thus posit that visual forms are not autonomous but constitute an "articulated light" that integrates spiritual values, architectural form, and cosmological vision.

Through the lens of postcolonial visibility theory, particularly as developed by Mitchell (1994) and Bhabha (1994), images and visibility are contested terrains of power and negotiation. Mitchell contends that images are not inert representations but are sites where ideologies are enacted and challenged. Bhabha further argues that in colonial and postcolonial contexts, local visual cultures become ambivalent spaces containing both resistance and hybridity. Applying this to the Jami Mosque of Mentok: (Figure 8.1) The mosque's visual repertoire—including influences from the Sultanate of Siak, Palembang stylistics, and Mentok's local idioms—may be understood as an expression of visual hybridity, in which Islamic imperial and local vernacular styles are reconfigured to assert cultural authority under colonial pressure. (Figure 8.2) The stone inscription operates as a counter-visibility, not merely documenting Islamic local governance, but establishing an alternative cultural space beyond colonial narratives. (Figure 8.3) Thus, the mosque's visibility is not merely an artistic legacy, but a representational strategy that articulates collective Malay-Muslim identity in a complex postcolonial condition.

The analysis positions the Jami Mosque of Mentok within three interrelated conceptual domains (Figure 9). First, as a 'discursive space', it operates through symbols, performativity, and adaptation as key modalities of meaning-making, grounded in a vernacular Islamic–Malay discourse that frames the interpretation of spatial and visual narratives. Second, in the realm of 'Tawhīd and vernacular aesthetics', the mosque's floral motifs and the typology of the Malay stilt house serve as carriers of localized spiritual and cultural values. Third, as a 'Ritual space and site of social transformation', it embodies anti-colonial, national, and digital-era dimensions that mark successive phases of symbolic transformation. The intersections among these domains reveal deeper layers of meaning: between discursive space and vernacular aesthetics lies a shared interpretive ground rooted in Islamic–Malay vernacular discourse; between vernacular aesthetics and ritual transformation emerges a ritual aesthetic embedded within a broader social cosmology; and between discursive space and ritual transformation unfolds a process of symbolic change that links performative meaning with socio-historical shifts. At their convergence, the mosque is

understood as a 'living cultural text'—a postcolonial Islamic–Malay construct that integrates symbolic, aesthetic, and socio-political dimensions into a dynamic and evolving heritage framework.

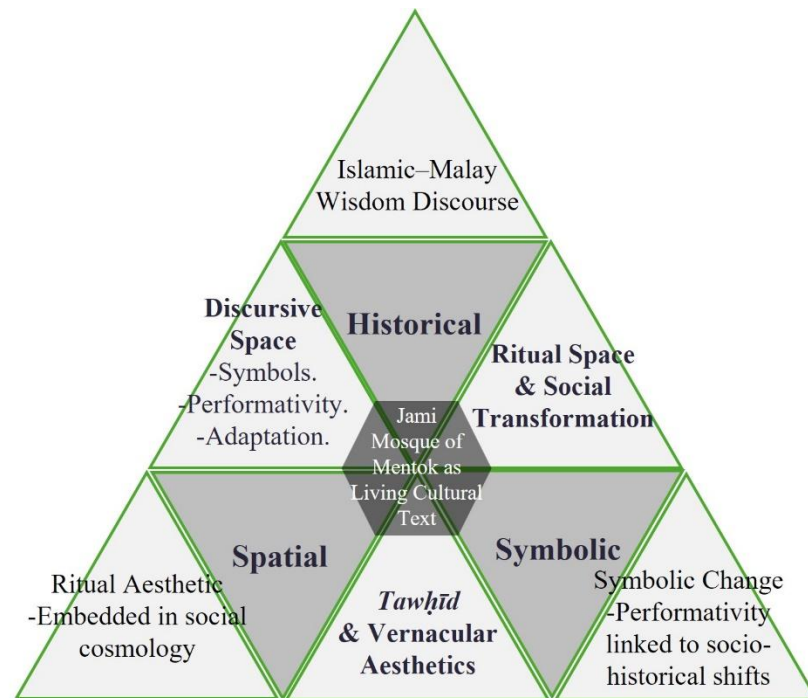


Fig. 9 Aesthetic Synthesis of the Jami Mosque of Mentok in the Postcolonial Context of Semiotics and Visual Representation.

When considered as a whole, these approaches demonstrate that the visibility of the Jami Mosque of Mentok and its artifacts cannot be confined to the categories of aesthetic form or historical record in isolation. Instead, they function as a nexus for the production of meaning, the employment of symbolic strategies, and the mediation of culture. The integration of cultural semiotics, Islamic aesthetics, and postcolonial visual critique enables the interpretation of these artifacts as embedded narratives of identity, spirituality, and cultural resistance within local Islamic worlds, such as Mentok.

d.2 Arabic Calligraphy (Qur'anic Inscriptions)

Arabic calligraphy in the Jami Mosque of Mentok appears prominently on the *loster* (ventilated panels) of the entrances (southeast, south, and north) as well as within the interior of the mihrab. Executed in the *Thuluth-Jali Diwani* style, the calligraphy is crafted from cut metal painted in gold and framed within semi-transparent wooden panels. This configuration not only facilitates air circulation but also enhances the spiritual-visual transition within the mosque space.

Each corner of the calligraphic frame features an emblematic motif, which the mosque caretakers describe as resembling a "crab" or a symmetrical composition of the name Muhammad (locally referred to as *Muhammad Betangkup*). At the bottom of the inscription, the Hijri year 1300 is inscribed, indicating the original date of construction. The present calligraphy is a faithful reproduction of the original, which was destroyed during a Japanese bombing campaign in the wartime occupation period. The reconstruction was undertaken by *Ustadz* A. Dahlan Muhammad, a local religious scholar who played a key role in reestablishing Islamic symbolic forms in the post-occupation era.

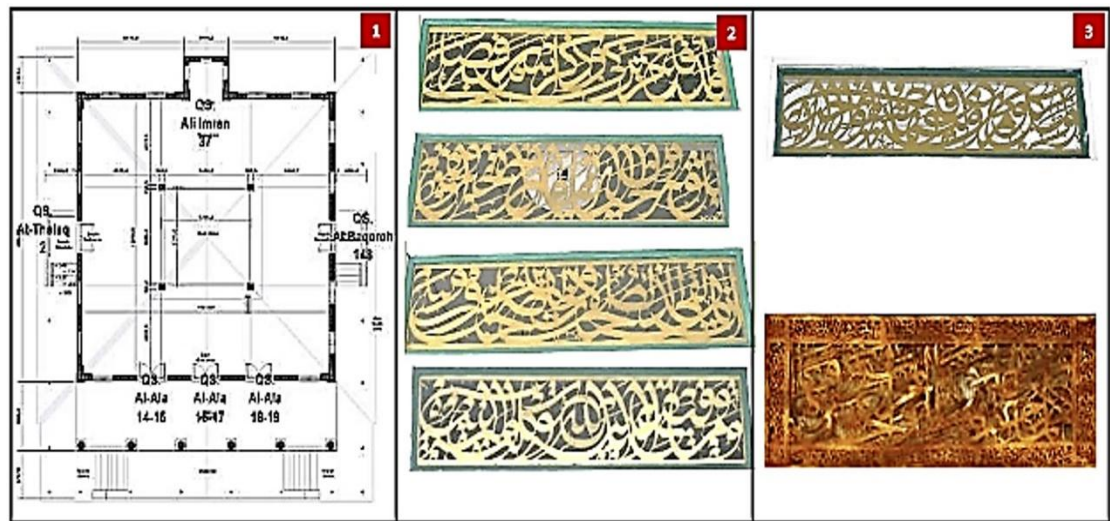


Fig. 10 Calligraphic Plan

Conceptually, the presence of calligraphy within the mosque articulates a universal architectural feature of Islamic sacred spaces—namely, the use of script as a primary element in expressing *tawhīdic* identity. Within the *bine* architectural framework, the

calligraphy strengthens the relationship between spatial function (place of worship) and communal practice (ritual and religious-social life), serving as a visual-symbolic anchor that binds the community through shared spirituality and collective memory.

Interior layout plan showing the spatial arrangement of Qur'anic surahs in calligraphic form (Figure 10.1) The verses employed reflect Islamic moral and spiritual messages (Figure 10.2 & 3). Southeast door (left to right): Surah Al-A'la verses 14–19, addressing self-purification, remembrance of God, eschatological orientation, and the continuity of divine teachings. South door: Surah At-Talaq verse 2, concerning ethical conduct in divorce and the imperative of taqwa (God-consciousness). North door: Surah Al-Baqarah verse 148, emphasizing the diversity of qiblah and the exhortation to compete in doing good. Mihrab: Surah Ali 'Imran verse 37, narrating the story of Maryam, divine grace, and spiritual protection

Conclusion

The Jami Mosque of Mentok is a discursive space—a spatial palimpsest that reconfigures symbols and power relations through the grammar of architecture. It resists being a passive object of colonial imposition and instead acts as an agentic subject in the articulation of local Islam through symbolic negotiation, aesthetic adaptation, and spatial performativity. Thus, the mosque is not merely a site of worship but also a locus of discourse, a repository of collective memory, and a field of cultural resistance where each architectural detail speaks a layered language of spirituality, society, and politics.

The Islamic doctrine of *tawḥīd* extends beyond a theological assertion of divine unity, offering a relational cosmology that binds God, human beings, and nature in an integral configuration. In the context of the Jami Mosque of Mentok, *tawḥīd* is not visually articulated through dominant Arabesque calligraphy or Middle Eastern ornamentation, as commonly found in transregional mosque architecture, but through vernacular aesthetics—such as vegetal scroll motifs and the indigenous stilt-house form of Malay architecture. These symbols function as manifestations of a spiritual ecosystem rooted in locality, wherein faith and aesthetics are rendered communicative rather than elitist. The mosque, therefore, is a semiotic system that

engenders religious experience through dynamic visual representation. Drawing upon the theories of Islamic visuality developed by Nasr and Burckhardt, the visual expressions of the Jami Mosque of Mentok exemplify a transcendent beauty that is localized through cultural idioms. Symbols here do not operate merely as representational signs but serve as participatory communicative tools that transform architecture into a medium of visual da‘wah and a spatial embodiment of *tawhīdic* values. Consequently, the mosque can be understood not only in physical and aesthetic terms but also as a visual epistemology, illuminating how the Mentok Muslim community inscribes Islamic values into the fabric of their sociocultural world. Architecture, in this framework, becomes a declaration of faith that is dialogical, relational, and context-sensitive—demonstrating the continuity of *tawhīd*, symbol, and social structure in the postcolonial Malay-Islamic landscape.

Ritual Space and Social Transformation The spatial configuration of the Jami Mosque of Mentok has undergone significant transformation in response to sociohistorical changes. From a silent symbol of anti-colonial resistance to a post-independence site of national identity consolidation, and more recently, a forum for new interpretations in the digital age, its main hall, porch, and courtyard function not only as liturgical zones but also as social arenas. As such, the mosque operates as a ritualized space (Rapoport, 1982), a spatial entity continually redefined by and for significant social events.

Unwritten Archives and Semiotic Heritage as an unwritten archive, the mosque embodies the socio-political history of the Mentok community through its symbols, spatial layout, and ritual practices. Here, visual patterns are not merely aesthetic remnants but part of a semiotic heritage—symbolic knowledge transmitted and reinterpreted across generations. In the contemporary era, a key challenge lies in preserving the symbolic meaning from being reduced to mere decoration. Architectural conservation must, therefore, be accompanied by the preservation of the symbolic narratives that animate the built form.

Cultural Semiotics and Postcolonialism The cultural semiotic approach, as formulated by Hall (1997) and Eco (1976), enables a reading of the mosque as a living semiotic space—a field of articulation where visual symbols, ritual practices, and spatial structures intersect in the production of meaning. In the context of the Mentok Malay community, visual elements such as *bumbung tumpang* (tiered roofs), *simbar* (roof finials), and local floral-faunal ornamentation are not mere decorative features, but cultural codes articulating values of relational *tawhīd*, *tasāmuh* (cultural tolerance), and social harmony in visual form.

Furthermore, the postcolonial approach to Islamic architecture shifts the focus from typological classification to power dynamics, cultural resistance, and identity negotiation within spatial production (Bhabha, 1994; Holod et al., 1997; Said, 1978). Within this framework, the mosque becomes a site of discursive contestation—where local Islamic identity interacts with colonial legacy, modernity, and social plurality to produce an eclectic yet ideologically charged architectural expression. The Jami Mosque of Mentok thus emerges as a living spatial archive (Foster, 1996), wherein visibility and spatial structure function as narrative media that record and recontextualize the social and spiritual experiences of the Tanjung Malay community in their navigation of colonialism, social change, and contemporary challenges. The case of the Jami Mosque of Mentok demonstrates how visual symbols and spatial structures constitute a dynamic system of spiritual communication. Through the lens of cultural semiotics, this study argues that the mosque should not be perceived solely as a religious edifice but as a living cultural text—wherein *tawhīd*, social ethics, and local cosmology are visually articulated and interwoven. This research suggests that the aesthetics of Islamic Nusantara must be understood not merely through architectural form, but through the social meanings and symbolic systems embedded within it.

Methodological Positioning

This research adopts an interpretative qualitative approach situated at the intersection of cultural semiotics (Lotman, 1990), Islamic aesthetic philosophy (Nasr, 1987; Burckhardt, 1976), and postcolonial visibility theory (Mitchell, 1994; Bhabha, 1994). An ethnohistorical strategy is employed to trace the symbolic genealogy of the Jami Mosque of Mentok, complemented by architectural analysis of spatial forms, ornamental typologies, and construction techniques. The mosque is conceptualized as a living semiotic space, wherein visual elements such as the *bumbung tumpang* (tiered roof), zoomorphic *simbar*, and floral motifs are interpreted not merely as decorative features but as symbolic articulations of *tawhīd*, expressions of cultural resilience, and epistemic resistance to the colonial visual regime. This methodological approach prioritizes depth of interpretation over generalization, aiming to reconceptualize vernacular Islamic architecture as a site of cultural negotiation and symbolic continuity within the postcolonial context of Southeast Asia.

1. Cultural negotiations, as articulated by Santosa and Noorwatha (2025) in their study of the Surakarta Palace during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exemplify a nuanced process of cultural hybridity. Although the Palace incorporated colonial architectural elements in its forms, materials, and spatial configurations, the integrity of its symbolic values and spiritual meanings remained uncompromised. This phenomenon aligns with Santosa and Noorwatha's (2025) definition of cultural hybridity as an active, rather than passive, process of cultural amalgamation—one that strategically appropriates foreign elements to reinforce the narrative of local identity. In this light, the architecture of the Surakarta Palace emerges not merely as the product of acculturation, but as a deliberate medium of symbolic resistance to colonial hegemony. Through an intentional strategy of design adaptation, colonial elements were recontextualized to operate within a Javanese cosmological framework imbued with deep philosophical significance. This synthesis embodies an aesthetic convergence in which the geometric rationality of Western architectural order is harmonized with Javanese principles of cosmic balance, producing a dialogic visual and spatial configuration. Consequently, the presence of colonial elements in the Surakarta Palace does not signify cultural subordination; rather, it represents a strategy of creative appropriation that asserts symbolic sovereignty and sustains the continuity of local traditions within the complex socio-political landscape of the postcolonial era.

2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's (1987) conception of Islamic aesthetics positions the principle of *tawḥīd* the belief in the oneness of God—as the metaphysical foundation that underpins all artistic and architectural expression within the Islamic tradition. From this perspective, *tawḥīd* is not merely a theological doctrine, but serves as an ontological source that informs the formal order and visual structure of Islamic art. According to Nasr, Islamic aesthetics manifests through geometric patterns, vegetal (floral) motifs, and spatial compositions that are not purely decorative, but instead reflect cosmic order and divine harmony. These expressions are embedded with metaphysical meaning, offering a visual articulation of spiritual ethics and the unity of creation.

3. The Mentok Malay community can be understood as a cultural entity shaped by a long historical process within the socio-political and economic dynamics of the western coastal region of Bangka Island. As part of the broader maritime Malay world in Southeast Asia, this community exhibits distinct cultural characteristics formed by the convergence of Islamic tradition, local heritage, and transcultural influences brought about through trade and colonial encounters. Since the Dutch colonial period in the 18th and 19th centuries when Mentok became a strategic port in the tin trade—the community has developed within a multiethnic configuration involving Malay, Arab, Chinese, and European elements. This intercultural interaction has fostered a form of social pluralism that is reflected in an adaptive and dialogical collective identity. Islam plays a central role in shaping the community's worldview, not only as a system of belief but also as a symbolic framework embodied in cultural expressions such as architecture, ornamental art, and ritual practice. A defining feature of the Mentok Malay community is its ability to articulate the values of *tawhīd*, *tasāmuh* (tolerance), and social harmony within a hybrid lifeworld. The resilience of this culture is maintained through the symbolic transmission and continual transformation of meaning across space, language, and material artefacts.

4. The roof of the Jami Mosque of Mentok adopts a multi-tiered pyramidal form (*bumbung tumpang*), a vertically layered and symmetrically rising structure. This roof typology not only represents the morphological hallmark of traditional mosques across the Malay-Indonesian archipelago but also articulates the architectural continuity of local vernacular forms, particularly those found in the *rumah limas* and *rumah panggung* of the Malay architectural tradition. Typologically, the tiered roof embodies a cosmological hierarchy that is central to Islamic–Malay architectural culture, wherein each ascending tier signifies a progressive elevation of spiritual states and proximity to the Divine. The vertical composition reflects a metaphysical order in which architecture mediates the relationship between the earthly and the celestial, the temporal and the eternal. Moreover, the roof structure reflects an ecological adaptation to the tropical climate through the provision of natural ventilation and efficient rainwater drainage. This environmentally responsive design demonstrates the integration of vernacular knowledge systems with the sacral function of religious space. The air cavities and overhanging tiers not only enhance thermal comfort but also express a cultural logic of sustainability embedded in traditional Malay craftsmanship. Thus, the *bumbung tumpang* is not merely an architectural

element, but an integrative symbol of traditional heritage, Islamic spirituality, and time-tested environmental adaptability. It exemplifies how sacred architecture in the Malay world simultaneously sustains cosmological meaning, ecological intelligence, and cultural resilience within a coherent and enduring formal language.

5. The script form inscribed on the plaque represents not merely a calligraphic expression, but a material trace of cultural intertextuality and symbolic authority rooted in the aesthetic tradition of the Sultanate of Siak. The letterforms employed exhibit stylistic tendencies toward Thuluth or Naskh calligraphy, which have undergone localized visual adaptation in accordance with the artistic conventions of Islamic-Malay court culture in the Riau–eastern Sumatra region. This localization signifies a transfer of aesthetic values and political legitimacy through the medium of script, wherein calligraphy functions not only as a mode of communication but also as a visual artifact that consolidates cultural hegemony and dynastic identity. In the context of the Sultanate of Siak, Islamic calligraphy occupies a central role as a manifestation of *tawhīd* (divine unity), the sanctity of knowledge, and a symbol of sovereign power grounded in the authority of the Qur’anic text and the Islamic intellectual tradition. Accordingly, the calligraphic form on this plaque cannot be divorced from the broader symbolic structure that interweaves spiritual authority, courtly artistic expression, and inter-polity diplomatic networks among Malay sultanates during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It operates as both a theological signifier and a political emblem, encoding the convergence of sacred aesthetics, Islamic governance, and regional identity within a single epigraphic form.

6. Mitchell (1994) and Bhabha (1994), although departing from different theoretical premises, both emphasize that visibility in the postcolonial context is not merely a passive mode of representation, but a contested site where power, identity, and resistance are actively negotiated. While Mitchell highlights the semiotic and performative dimensions of the image, Bhabha opens up the reading of visibility as a hybrid and ambivalent practice that challenges colonial dichotomies between center and periphery. Within the study of architecture, visual arts, and material culture in postcolonial regions such as Southeast Asia, this theoretical framework proves highly relevant in unpacking how forms, symbols, and aesthetics function as arenas of contestation between local traditions, spirituality, and colonial legacies.

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