

Southeast Asian Islamic Art and Architecture: Re-Examining The Claim of the Unity and Universality of Islamic Art

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the claim of unity and universality of Islamic art, whose discussion usually disregards Islamic art and architecture in the Southeast Asian context. The question raised is where Islamic art in the Malay world should be put before the claim of the unity and universality of Islamic art and whether this claim is, thus, still valid. To meet this objective, the two heritages of Javanese Islamic art, Demak and Cirebon mosques and wayang, are presented and analyzed before such universal claim and pre-Islamic Javanese art. These Javanese expressions have unique features compared to those from the older Muslim world. The mosques lack geometric ornamentation and Qur'anic calligraphic decoration, and are rich with symbolism. However, both the mosques and wayang also clearly express the figurative designs. Thus, this paper argues that instead of geometric designs as the unified character of Islamic art as some argue, it should be the abstraction of motifs. This way, the universal claim of Islamic art accommodates the artistic expressions from the wider regions, including those from Southeast Asia. Besides the abstraction, these Javanese artistic expressions also shares other universal character of traditional development of Islamic art; its ability to always considering the local tradition while maintaining the basic principle of Islamic art. Javanese Islamic art is both Islamic and uniquely Javanese. In the midst of globalization and the contemporary tendency towards "Islamic authentication" by importing culture and tradition from the Middle East, including the mosque architecture, the latter character is vital. It tells that any direct import and implantation of other or foreign traditions to a certain region without any process of considering the local tradition and context has no basis and legitimation in Islamic artistic tradition.

Keywords: Islamic art and architecture, Southeast Asia, Universality.

A. Introduction

Most scholars claim that, in despite of the diversity, there is a sense of unity and universality in Islamic art. They argue differently about the variables that constitute this universality. Titus Burckhardt argues that it is the architecture and ornamentation that become the prototypes ceaselessly reproduced according to circumstances.¹ Ieoh Ming Pei, discussing the essence or heart of Islamic architecture, describes the variable in the following: “when sun brings to life powerful volumes and geometry plays a central role.”² In other words, Pei considers geometry as the universal variable of Islamic art. In addition, regions usually covered in the discussion of Islamic art are from Spain to South Asia, while Southeast Asia and West Africa are rarely brought into discussion.³ In fact, the two are part of the Muslim world.

This paper is an attempt to visit Islamic art in the Southeast Asian context and view it from the perspective of the above claim. Hence, the question is where Islamic art in the Malay world should be put before the claim of the unity and universality of Islamic art, and whether this claim is still valid. Rather than surveying artistic expressions from different places in the region, it focuses on those in the fifteenth/sixteenth century of Java. Java was the center where Islamization eventually expanded rapidly in the Malay world under

¹ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), p. 125.

² An interview with Ieoh Ming Pei. See Sahiba Al Khemir, *From Cordoba to Samarqand: Masterpieces from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha* (Paris: Musee du Louvre Editions, 2006), p. 34.

³ See Titus Burckhardt's *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*; Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture and the Literary World* (New York: Abrams Perspectives, 1997); Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: Introduction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987). A book dedicated to discuss Islamic Art in Southeast Asian context is James Bennet (ed.), *Crescent Moon: Islamic Art and Civilization in South East Asia* (Canberra: Art Galley of South Australia, 2006).

the legacy of an “organization” or a network of ‘*ulamā*’ called the *Wali Songo* (nine *walis*).⁴ Islamic art and architecture developed during this period marked the shift from pre-Islamic art into Javanese Islamic art, which eventually influenced the development of Islamic art in the Southeast Asian region.

B. Islamic Art and Architecture in The Context of the Islamization of the Malay World

Discussing Islamic art and architecture in the Malay world cannot be separated from the period of its Islamization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Malay world had been introduced to Islam since the earlier period through international trade or sufism.⁵ Scholars however agree that Islam was accepted by the majority of the population not until this period.⁶ Agus Sunyoto states that this success was due to the creative educational, political and cultural approaches of the *walis* to attract people to Islam.⁷ In a cultural sense, through assimilation and synthesis by transforming the existing cultural heritage in accordance with Islam, the *walis* could communicate Islam in a form compatible with the beliefs held by the people.⁸ In short, the early development of Islamic art and architecture in the Malay world was part and parcel of the process of Islamization of the region, which was in a period when Islamic art in the older Muslim world had developed in its sophisticated fashion. Secondly, Javanese beliefs before the coming of Islam were

⁴ Whether *Wali Songo* is historical or merely a legend has been a topic of debate among scholars. Ricklefs states that it is difficult to determine the case because there is no enough documentary evidence. See Ricklefs, p. 5. Others insist they are historical. See Agus Sunyoto, *Atlas Wali Songo: Buku Pertama yang mengungkap Wali Songo sebagai Fakta Sejarah* (Depok: Pustaka Ilman, 2012), p. 123. Lapidus seems take the existence of the *walis* for granted. See Lapidus, p. 392.

⁵ There are different theories explaining the first encounter of Islam in the Malay world. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. For further information, see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 383-384; M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 3-14.

⁶ Ricklefs, p. 6, 12.

⁷ Sunyoto, p. 107-140.

⁸ Lapidus, p. 383.

Hinduism, Buddhism and *Kapitayan*, a local religion. They had been rooted in the cultural tradition of Javanese people. Due to the international trade, other influences also entered the region, such as from China, Champa, India, Persia and Arab.

In the following sections, the two expressions of Islamic art—the early mosques and *wayang* (shadow puppet)—are presented. The two are discussed in the context of Islamization process and the unity and universality of Islamic art.

C. The First Mosques: Localizing the Global Islam

Among the early mosques in Java are Demak and Cirebon mosques, whose founder was attributed to the *Wali Songo*. The Great Mosque of Demak, which was founded in 1479 before the establishment of the first Islamic Kingdom in Java, the Demak Kingdom, is the oldest mosque known in the Malay world. The mosque was renovated and believed to acquire its current form in the early sixteenth century.⁹ Cirebon mosque was constructed in 1500.¹⁰

The general characteristics of these mosques are: square ground-plan, multi-tiered pyramidal roof, four master columns (*soko guru*) to support the upper most part of the roof, the *qibla* wall extending to the outside to form the *mihrab*, an open veranda (*serambi*) and walled courtyard with gate(s). There are different opinions about from where the architects derived their architectural inspiration; either from traditional Javanese house or the one central space concept of Ottoman mosque.¹¹ Either way, when viewed from an Islamic context, the Javanese mosques represent a distinctive genre and a form of their own, which can be justly called the Javanese type.¹² Similarly, despite the fact that they are inspired by the already popular Javanese architectural design, they also exhibit a form that can only be justly regarded as Islamic.

⁹ Ahmed Wahby, "The Architecture of the Early Mosques and Shrines of Java: Influences of the Arab Merchants in the 15th and 16th Century? Volume 1: The Text," *Dissertation* (Bamberg: Otto-Friedrich Universitat Bamberg, 2007), p. 55.

¹⁰ Wahby, p. 58.

¹¹ Wahby, p. 151-152.

¹² Wahby, p. 168-169.

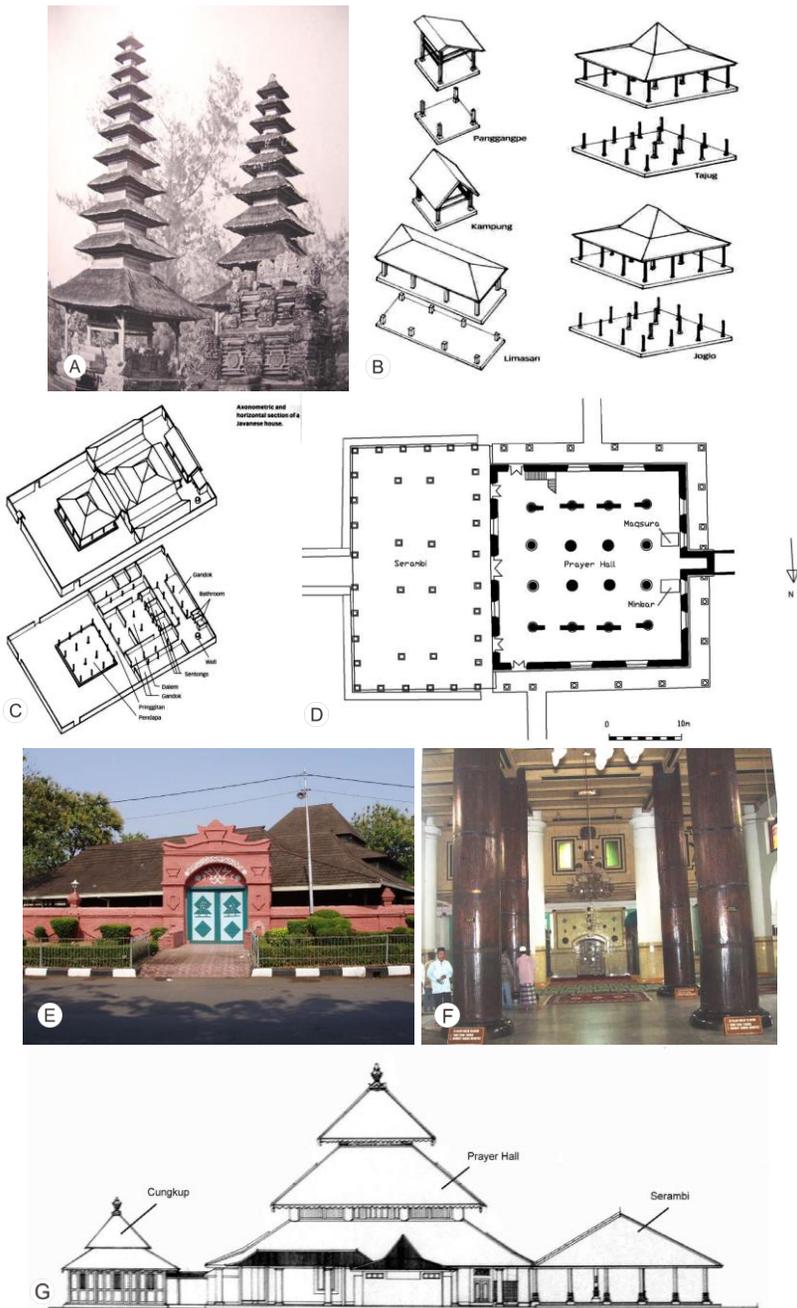


Figure 1. A. Belinese Meru roof; B. Javanese roof-types; C. Ground plan of the Javanese house; D. Ground plan of Demak Mosque; E. Cirebon mosque; F. *Soko guru* in the prayer hall of Demak mosque; G. Demak mosque.

In Demak mosque, the *minbar* is constituted of carved wood in a Javanese fashion. The stylization of *makara* is appeared at the front side. *Makara*-type arch at the top is also found in the Cirebon mosque.¹³ The wooden surfaces are carved in floral and foliage designs, types of decoration also seen in the poles and columns supporting the construction of the mosques. The *miḥrāb* niche of Demak mosque displays the Majapahit¹⁴ sun motif, circular interlaced medallion and the turtle motive carved in the wall of the *miḥrāb*.¹⁵ In Cirebon mosque, an arched niche is guarded by two cylindrical columns with lotus on top. A stone medallion is carved between the two columns depicting geometrical interlaced lines, combining Islamic geometric design with straight lines and sharp angles, and cursive ones.¹⁶ A three dimensional carved lotus hangs down from the ceiling of the niche. In the case of Demak mosque, the doors' wooden leaves depict "makara-like beasts" and the ceramic vase originated from Champa, a region where the older *walis* came from. Another depiction in the other door is golden lotus flowers surrounded by spiraling stems and leaves.¹⁷ Lotus becomes the center of the floral decoration in the main door of Cirebon mosque. The frame of the door, which has a gate shape, and the wall in the right and left side of the door, are decorated with geometric designs.

¹³ Wahby, p. 58.

¹⁴ Majapahit was the last great Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom that fell soon before the rise of Demak Kingdom. It is aimed to get the support of the Majapahit or the people who are still in admiration of the falling Kingdom. Wahby, p. 54.

¹⁵ Wahby, p. 54. The Javanese term or turtle is *bulus*. *Bu* and *lus* would mean "to enter gently," which imply the conversion to Islam.

¹⁶ Wahby, p. 59.

¹⁷ Wahby, p. 54.



Figure 2. A. The *minbar* of Demak mosque; B. The *minbar* of Cirebon mosque; C. The *mihrāb* of Demak mosque (The tiles are later renovation); D. The *mihrāb* of Cirebon mosque; E. F. The door leaves of Demak mosque; G. The door of Cirebon mosque; H. Carved woods in Demak mosque; I. Carved woods in Cirebon mosque.

The early mosques' ornamentation is a combination of several traditions, particularly existing local tradition (Javanese Hinduism-Buddhism) and Islam. The pre-Islamic decoration and symbolism that are still found in these mosques are: *tumpals*, *kala-makaras*, lotus buds, and scrolls, which are changed to conform the Islamic art tradition. In pre-Islamic context, it is believed that "*tumpals* signify the Cosmos Mountain where gods abode; *kala-makaras* protect the temples of the gods; lotus buds denote creation; and scrolls imply the start of life."¹⁸ This continuity shows that early Javanese Muslims still considered Hindu-Buddhist symbolical ornaments as "a mystic way to approach God." However, unlike Hindu-Buddhist temples, in which the decoration should follow the narratives in the sacred text, there is a sense of more freedom in decorating the mosque. The adoption of existing form can also be seen as a strategy to attract new converts or prospective converts to enter the building and receive Islam. In this case, architecture became the mediator for introducing people to Islam.¹⁹ Only later were those architecture and ornaments' meaning transformed into Islamic narrative by the Sufis.²⁰

¹⁸ Wahby, p. 137.

¹⁹ Hee Sook Lee, "Al-Andalus and Java: Still a Sanctuary for Interconnecting Religions and Traditions," *Journal of Religious Science*, 44/2012, p. 91.

²⁰ Wahby, p. 165. For example, a three-tiered roof is believed to symbolizes a link between God and Muslims, representing *iman*, *islam* and *ihsan*, or *tariqa*, *haqiqa* and *ma'rifa*. "A mustaka, a crown of red lotus at its apex, is a container of the essence of divine unity in Hinduism, but in Islam, it embodies the ultimate goal of the mystical path into God. Soko guru, the four master columns, signifies the spiritual context: the verticality and centralisation express an ultimate unity between God and his believers which was continued from the Hindu belief in the identity of self and the universal soul." See Hee Sook Lee, p. 91.

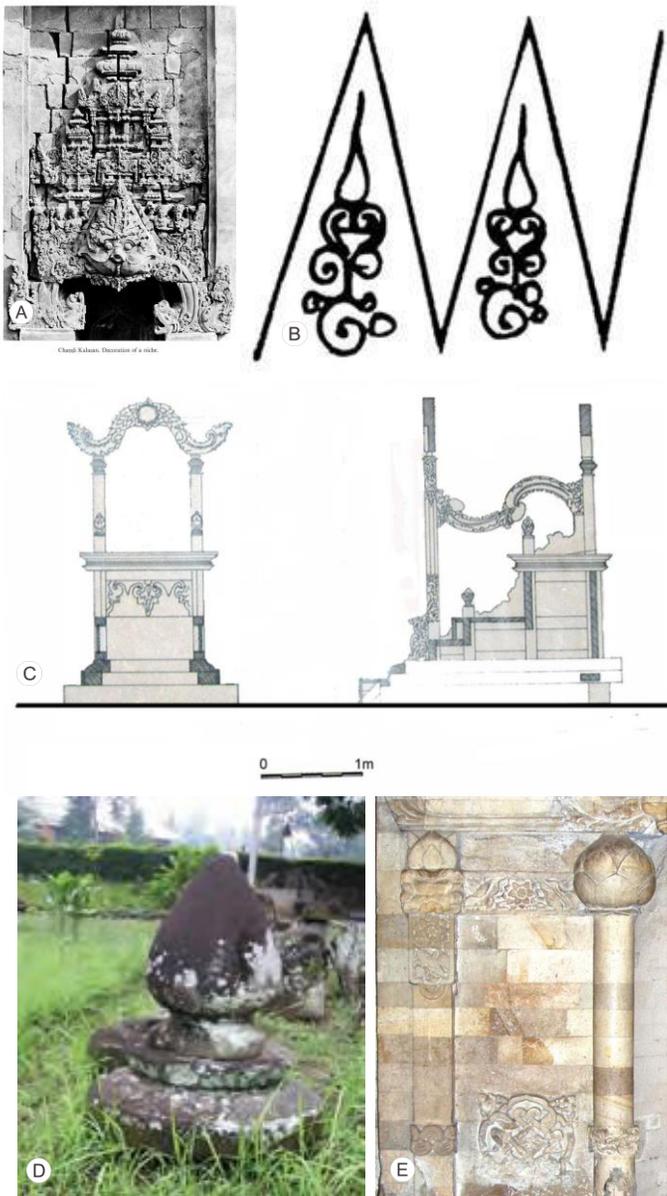


Figure 3. A. *Kala-Makara* in a Hindu temple; B. *Tumpal*; C. *Makara* and *tumpal* in the *minbar* of Demak Mosque; D. Lotus in Kalasan Buddhist temple (dated in the ninth century); E. Lotus on the cylindrical column of the *minbar* of Cirebon mosque.

As the earliest mosque, Demak mosque has been the template for mosques in the Malay world, at least until the nineteenth century. This influence was possible through the relation between Demak Kingdom and other Kingdoms in the region, and the relation between the *walis* and their students and communities in the area. Several mosques following the prototype of Demak mosque, at least in its spatial design, are: Kampung Laut mosque in Malaka,²¹ Sultan Suriansyah mosque in Banjar, Borneo (early sixteenth century), the Great Mosque of Mataram Kingdom (1773), Air Barok Village Mosque in Malaka (1916).²² In much later period, Soeharto, the ex-president of Indonesia, promoted replicas of Demak mosque in a standardized form to be used nationwide.²³



Figure 4. A. Kampung Laut mosque; B. Kauman great mosque; C. Air Barok village mosque; D. Sultan Suriansyah mosque.

²¹ Naimatul Aufa, “Tipologi Ruang dan Wujud Arsitektur Masjid Tradisional Kalimantan Selatan,” *Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 1(2): 2010, p. 54.

²² Roslan B. Thalib and M. Zailan Sulieman, “Mosque Without Dome: Conserving Traditional-Designed Mosque in Melaka, Malaysia,” *Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 1(3): 2011.

²³ Abidin Kusno, “The Reality of One-Which-Is-Two”—Mosques Battles and Other Stories: Notes on Architecture, Religion and Politics in the Javanese World,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 57(1): 2003, p. 62.

D. The *Wayang*: Introducing Islam through the Popular Art

Before the period of *Wali Songo*, Javanese people had their own artistic accomplishments such as the *wayang* and *gamelan* orchestra.²⁴ *Wayang* is the shadow puppet play, which uses leather or wooden puppets, dramatizing the Javanese version of Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, or the history of the kingdoms of Java.²⁵ The *walis* used and popularized this play to spread the message of Islam to the people by transforming the existing stories to be in line with Islamic doctrines and teachings, inserting Islamic doctrines, teachings and stories about the Prophets and adding new characters.²⁶ Some *walis* even created new stories. The success of this method is seen in the rapid growth of the Islamization of Java and the popular belief that it is the *walis* who created *wayang*, while in fact, it was dated before their period.²⁷ In modern times, considering the *dalang* (the puppet master) as the symbol of God is still popular among the Javanese people.²⁸

²⁴ Lapidus, p. 382.

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), p. 261; Sumarsam, p. 50; Ricklefs, p. 53.

²⁶ See Ricklefs, p. 53. One popular insertion of Islamic doctrine is the narration that the elder Pandhawa brother, Yudhistira, has a powerful amulet called *Kalimasada*, which derived from *kalimah sahadat*, the Islamic profession of faith. See Sumarsam, "Past and Present Issues of Islam within the Central Javanese Gamelan and *Wayang Kulit*," in David D. Harnish and Anne K. Rasmussen (eds.), *Divine Inspirations: Music and Islam in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 54.

²⁷ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 53.

²⁸ What is involved in the *wayang* play (puppet master, light, shadow, *gamelan* orchestra) has been interpreted as spiritual and theological symbolization that corresponds to Ash'arism, a theology that corresponds to pre-Islamic belief of Javanese people. This topic is yet out of the scope of this paper. See Sumarsam, p. 59-60.

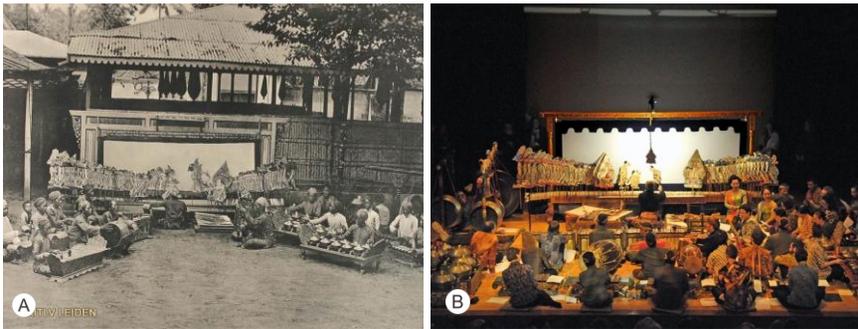


Figure 5. The puppet shadow play.

Another Islamic influence on *wayang* is portrayed in the attempt of the *walis* to create non-realistic puppets to follow religious prescription restricting the portrayal of the living and breathing creatures.²⁹ Stylization of the puppets was similar to the context of Islamic figurative art in Persia.³⁰ There is no report where the *walis* received the idea from. It seems that the idea of denaturalizing the creature popular in that period could easily reach the *walis*.



Figure 6. A. Balinese puppet depicted the figure of Arjuna. This puppet shows an older shape for *wayang* puppet; B. The stylization of Arjuna in Javanese puppet; C. Balinese puppet for Yudhistira; D. Javanese puppet for Yudhistira.

²⁹ James Bennet, p. 252

³⁰ Burckhardt, p. 32.

E. Is Javanese Islamic Art Part of Universal Islamic Art?

Contextualization of the principle of Islamic art in each local context has a set precedent in the history of Islamic art and architecture.³¹ In fact, its uniqueness is that while it remains universal, it always has a local taste. Titus Burckhardt is true when he describes Islamic art as phenomena of “unity in diversity and diversity in unity.”³² In this sense, what is universal in Islamic art lies in the ability of the artists to create an artistic expression that combines and considers both Islam and the local context. In light of this, the case of Javanese Islamic art is not totally unique. What is unique from the Javanese context is that Islamic art and architecture were developed as means for Islamization. To my knowledge, this narrative is not found in other contexts in the Muslim world.

Based on the observation of some mosques and *wayang* in the previous section, Javanese Islamic art is distinct to the common and unified features of Islamic art. In this early period, calligraphy was almost nonexistent in the mosques; while in fact, calligraphy is the central expression of Islamic art in the older Muslim world. Trying to understand this phenomenon, Ahmed Wahby states that Southeast Asia, in general, did not have a sense for written history; and early Islamic period in Java still carried out the practice.³³ Reading from the perspective of the strategy of Islamization, introducing a completely new script in the building might go against the attempt to attract people to Islam. Another issue is with regard to symbolism. Islamic art, different from Medieval Christian art, has much less obsession to religious symbolism. As Robert Hillenbrand says, “[T]here was, it seems, no consistent association between any particular type of plan or elevation and a deeper symbolic meaning.”³⁴ In another place, Burckhardt states that Islamic art

³¹ One example among many, *iwan* so celebrated in Iranian architecture was found from Iraq to Central Asia in the pre-Islamic period. See Hillenbrand, p. 24.

³² Burckhardt, p. 125.

³³ Wahby, 143.

³⁴ Hillenbrand, p. 16-7. Hillenbrand indeed mentions some examples of symbolism in Islamic architecture. Yet, in general, Islamic architecture applies a natural focus of religious symbolism. *Miḥrāb*, for example, technically and theoretically means no more than a space showing the direction to *qibla*. See Hillenbrand, p. 18-19.

reduced the archaic motifs into the most abstracted designs, taking away “every magical quality” and giving in return the “spiritual elegance.”³⁵ Conversely, as Javanese Islamic art was developed in the milieu of architectural symbolism, it was very rich of it—although it is also true that it practiced the stylization of previous symbols, such as *kala makara*. In these cases, it can be said that early Javanese-Islamic art breaks the common features of the established Islamic art and architecture.

Furthermore, there are some Islamic characteristics that inspired Javanese Islamic art and architecture. First, general attitude in Islamic art is the discouragement of depicting human beings or animals. Burckhardt says, “figurative art plays only peripheral role” in Islamic art.³⁶ The impact in Javanese Islamic art is not the total eradication of it, but the abstraction or stylization, as in the case of *wayang* and ornamentation of animals disguised in the foliage and floral patterns. Second, the intensification, rather than the introduction, of floral and foliage designs, since the Malay world itself is rich in flora.³⁷ While Islamic art and architecture represented in the Javanese mosques and *wayang* are uniquely Javanese Islamic expression, they still captured the unified characters of Islamic art. Along this line, I argue that the abstraction of motifs is a more unified character of Islamic art than geometric designs as argued by Pei. The abstraction of motifs includes in it the denaturalization of the creature and geometric designs. This way, the unified character of Islamic art is able to include artistic expression from the wider scope of the Muslim world, including Southeast Asia and West Africa.

There are some answers to the question why Javanese Islamic art minimally shares the unity or universality of Islamic art, or to put it in a more positive statement, why a “characteristic regionalism” is very apparent. First, geographical factor. The geographical distance between the *dār al-Islām* and Southeast Asia can be argued as preventing the massive direct influence from the Islamic center into

³⁵ Burckhardt, p. 66.

³⁶ Burckhardt, p. 32.

³⁷ Wahby, p. 139.

this region.³⁸ Other geographical issue, like climate, might be another significant factor. The building takes account the local profusion of natural resources and climates. Domes, minarets and geometric ornaments do not feature in this tradition. The multi-layered roofs and *soko guru* are suitable for weather with its heavy rain and humidity.³⁹ Second, external factor. The Malay world was never conquered by the Muslim army, but rather an influx of traders, adventures and Sufis. The Islamization of the Malay world was taken in the period after the peak of Islamic civilization and corresponded to the rise of European civilization and colonialism, which marks an interruptive moment for the development of different aspects of life. It also corresponded to the rise of Sufism in the Islamic world, an aspect of Islam known to be more tolerant, allowing assimilation between cultural heritage and Islam. Third, internal factor, which is the open character of Malay people to changes, without necessarily discarding their heritage.⁴⁰ Abidin Kusno interestingly describes the way Java conceives of, or responds to, the external influence. Javanese people view that Islam was a guest in Java. As a guest, it should make itself fit to the context of the householder. From this point of view, mosques, as architectural works, became the site of negotiations between global Islam and Java.⁴¹

F. Conclusion

Presenting the artistic expressions of the Malay world, particularly Java, this paper aims to re-examine the claim of unity and universality of Islamic art, whose discussion usually disregards Islamic art and architecture in the Southeast Asian context. Islamic art and architecture in Java was developed as means for massive Islamization of Java and the Malay world. This narrative, to my knowledge, is uniquely Javanese. Despite the fact that Islam flourished in the Malay world in a much later period after the advent of Islam, Javanese Islamic art still shares unified characteristic of

³⁸ Hee Sook Lee, p. 88.

³⁹ Hee Sook Lee, p. 88.

⁴⁰ Hee Sook Lee, p. 88.

⁴¹ See Abidin Kusno, p. 57.

Islamic art worldwide, namely the abstraction of motifs. Geometrical designs as the other universal character of Islamic art is not developed sophisticatedly in the Malay world due to some factors; geographical, internal and external. Besides the abstraction, the other character of the traditional development of Islamic art is its ability to always considering the local tradition. Again, the assimilation of pre-Islamic Javanese tradition and Islam expressed in the Javanese Islamic art and architecture is a phenomenon shared with other contexts in the Muslim world. It is this principle that should be remembered in the midst of globalization. In the modern Indonesia, for example, for the sake of “Islamic authentication,” the Javanese Islamic art and architecture have been replaced by those from the older Muslim world.⁴² In fact, if Indonesian Muslims want to continue the legacy of Islamic tradition, what should be developed is, instead, creating Islamic artistic works expressing a continuous dialogue between Islamic tradition and local tradition.

⁴² In Indonesia and in the worldwide, in my opinion, colonialism as the interruption of the development of Islamic civilization and the new-colonialism era with its globalization marked the distance of Islamic world with its tradition. In Indonesia, traditional architecture of mosque is replaced by architecture from the older Muslim world. The obvious indicator would be the replacement of traditional roof to the doom. See, Achmad Haldani Destiarmand and Imam Santosa, “Impact of Islamic Authentication towards Traditional Ornaments in Great Mosques in West Java, Indonesia,” *Tawarikh: International Journal for Historical Studies*, 5(1): 2013.

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