

## “Not Just a House to Honour God”: Mosques in the Malay World as Cosmopolitan Spaces

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### Abstract

This article argues that mosques are not just devotional places but also projections of the cosmopolitan temperaments of Muslims in the Malay world. This is evidenced, first, in the aesthetics and architecture of the mosques that draw upon so many religious and cultural traditions. I then show how the close proximity between mosques and other places of worship and the sharing of sacred spaces have ensured the continued vitality of cosmopolitanism among Muslims and non-Muslims in the Malay World. For many generations, mosques have functioned as sites that sustain the spirit of mutual tolerance and cooperation between Muslims and adherents of other faiths to ensure the safety and welfare of their communities.

In his study of mosques in Europe, Roemer van Toorn noted that a mosque ‘is not *just* a house to honour God, but a place to come together, a collective space for the community. In short, a mosque as a space can provide a counterweight to the “public” space of the individualized and consuming human being (2009, p.112). I would extend this illuminating reflection further to argue that mosques in the Malay World are also places that enable different faiths, persuasions, ideologies and temperaments to interact, collaborate, amalgamate and appreciate the beauty of the Muslim belief, giving rise to a dynamic and peaceful environment. To demonstrate this point, I will first dissect the aesthetics of the mosque. This is followed by an examination of the tolerance and cooperation between the worshippers at these mosques and devotees of other faiths at nearby religious sites. I delve into the inclusive nature of mosques, allowing non-Muslims to utilise the space for

their own purposes. Before making the case for us to begin to view mosques as cosmopolitan spaces, I recount, in very broad strokes, the evolution of mosque building in the Malay World. The wide scope of the topic would not allow me (or anyone) to discuss in vivid detail the history of *all* mosques in the Malay World. What I hope to provide here is a sketch for reflection, a macroscopic view that would encourage us to see the forest apart from the trees, so to speak, in the path to cement the point that mosques are indeed reflections, expressions, manifestations, representations and symbols of cosmopolitanism.

### The Evolution of Mosques in the Malay World

The successful diffusion and continuous vitality of Islam in the Malay World is partly attributed to the rapid expansion of mosques in all corners of the region. The region’s oldest surviving mosque, Masjid Agung Demak, was built in the thirteenth century in Central Java, Indonesia. The structure and functions of this mosque became a sort of model that was emulated by other mosque founders and builders in later years. It ‘was made up, reproduced, and rearticulated, along with other practices, products, and discourses demarcated over time in Javanese society (Abidin Kusno, 2010, p. 216).

The colonial period saw a sustained expansion of mosque-building throughout The Malay World. The Dutch and the British, in particular, sponsored the founding of many mosques as part of their strategy to gain the support of local rulers and Muslim elites. However, they maintained a close surveillance of all mosque

activities, committee members and publications to keep track of anti colonial movements that all too often emerged from these religious sites (Djohan Hanafiah, 1988). Together with local Muslim leaders and elites, European architects experimented with new designs, incorporating Turkish, Indian, Persian, Chinese and even European architectural styles to create mosques that soon become national monuments in the postcolonial period.

The British, for example, drew upon the various forms of Hindu, Western and Indian-Islamic architecture that they had experimented with in India and transplanted these styles to the building of new mosques in their Southeast Asian colonies (Metcalf, 1989). Onion-shaped domes were introduced and these domes later became an indispensable feature of mosques in the Malay World. Abdul Halim Nasir, a historian of mosques in the Malay World, has highlighted the extent to which domes have become essential to mosques in the region:

Many people feel that a mosque is not really complete without the onion-shaped dome. This feeling has created restlessness and as a result mosques built during the pre-colonial and colonial period without the onion-shaped domes have had the roofs radically modified so that an onion-shaped dome can be built (Abdul Halim Nasir, 2004, p.99).

Examples of mosques in Singapore with domes introduced by colonial architects include Abdul Ghafoor Mosque, Alkaff Mosque, Haji Yusoff Mosque, the above-mentioned Jamae Mosque, and the ornamental Hajjah Fatimah Mosque in Beach Road in Singapore that incorporates the architectural forms of diverse religious buildings.

There is a dearth of information about the total number of mosques that currently exist in the Malay World. In the small island-state of Singapore, official records state that there are currently more than sixty mosques, with two more under construction. (Majlis Ugama Islam

Singapura, n.d.) The number of mosques found in Malaysia and Indonesia would probably be a few hundred times the number in Singapore, given the size of these countries and the number of Muslims populating them. Undoubtedly, mosques in the Malay World have become the most visible and the most emblematic of all Muslim religious sites due to state sponsorship of mega-mosque projects.

Under the Sukarno and Suharto regimes from 1949 to the end of the 1990s, there were programmed attempts on the part of the Indonesian presidents to build dozens of grand mosques as a means of bolstering their political legitimacy. Similarly, in Malaysia during the same period, mosques were built at a rate of almost one a year, with each mosque surpassing the one that came before it in terms of its aesthetic beauty as well as its sheer size (King, 2008). Conversely, in Singapore, the number of mosques actually saw a marked decline after independence. Small mosques were demolished to make way for new generation mosques that could accommodate larger numbers of worshippers and to ensure the state supervision of all mosques in Singapore through the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS, the 'Islamic Religious Council') (Rodolphe de Koninck, Drolet, & Girard, 2008). As in the case of mosque-building in the Arab world (countries of the modern-day Middle East and North Africa that utilise the Arabic language as a lingua franca), Iran and Turkey during this era, the majority of these mosques were 'state mosques as well as ambassadorial gifts, monumentalizing the political ambitions of their patrons. Their audience is the local user as well as the international community, for whom they represent a particular vision of global Islam' (Kishwar Rizri, 2015, p.5).

Architectural historians have divided the development of mosques in the Malay World into three overlapping phases:

**Phase 1:** the building of vernacular mosques with styles that display strong local Malay and Indic influences (thirteenth century to the present);

**Phase 2:** the introduction of colonial-sponsored mosques that blend classical and Moorish styles (early nineteenth century to the 1950s);

**Phase 3:** A. Ghafar Ahmad states that the establishment of modern mosques which encompass the styles drawn from the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran (1950s to the present) (as cited in Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Salih et al, 1999, pp. 147-63).

The mosques that are currently standing in different parts of the Malay World comprise community-funded mosques, mosques supported by generous endowments as well as state-sponsored mosques. While Singaporean and Malaysian mosques are highly regulated by state and federal governments, Indonesian mosques have a higher degree of autonomy in the management of their activities and in the upkeep of the buildings and other facilities. Nevertheless, a close and objective scrutiny of mosques in the Malay World would enable us to uncover the strong sense of cosmopolitanism inherent within them.

### **Mosques and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism**

Mosques across the Malay World display the cosmopolitan character of the Muslim communities that worship in them through their hybrid architectural forms. That mosques in the region are architecturally cosmopolitan should not come as a surprise, given that there is no clearly defined template or doctrine in Islam regarding mosque-building. Since the era of the Prophet Muhammad in the sixth century, Muslims have enjoyed the freedom of building mosques in a manner that blended the attraction of the natural surroundings with the imagination of the architects and builders. (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 2003). Mosques in Muslim the Malay Muslim World have lived up to this tradition for many centuries. In point of fact, the majority of mosques in the region exhibit the multicultural

make-up and interreligious landscapes that surround them. Put differently, the aesthetics of the mosques bear evidence of a synthesis of forms, motifs and sensory effects. The ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanism’, as Nikos Papastergiadis rightly stressed, ‘does not simply refer to the aesthetic representations of cosmopolitanism, but to a cosmopolitan worldview that is produced through aesthetics’. (2012, p.90).

Aesthetic cosmopolitanism in mosques can be discerned from their architectural complexion. Many mosques in the region amalgamate the traditions of different religions while integrating a variety of styles and forms that are seemingly foreign to the Malay world. Certainly, it has long been common for ‘non-Malay’ and even outwardly ‘non-Muslim’ elements to be incorporated into the making of mosques. These elements have remained untouched to the present day. What is the explanation for this? Roger Joseph argues convincingly that the space, both inside and outside the mosque, communicates a system of relationships of individuals to society, to each other, and to themselves. If, however, the structure of mosque space is a social code embedded in the cultural experience of various ethnic and historical communities, we should not expect any absolute homogeneity of cognitive or aesthetic expression’ (Joseph, 1981).

Mosques in the Malay World, from such a perspective, display a high degree of heterogeneity, as opposed to homogeneity, of aesthetic expression because they have been built in ways that are sensitive to the multicultural spirit of the local Muslim societies that have unremittingly celebrated syncretism and diversity in their expressions of Islam (Snellgrove, 1991).

The best illustration of this is Beijing Mosque (Masjid Beijing, also known as the ‘Sultan Ismail Petra Silver Jubilee Mosque’) at Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Inaugurated in 2010, the mosque was envisioned as a ‘multicultural mosque that would reflect the diverse cultural influences in the Malay world – ranging from

Chinese, Indian, Siamese, Malay and other sources' (Farish A. Noor, 2000). The mosque frontage delivers even more than its creators had promised. At first glance, Beijing Mosque looks like any ordinary Chinese temple, featuring sloping roofs with upturned corners, a symmetrical floor plan and ornamental designs, and a big courtyard in the centre of the mosque compound. Overall, Beijing Mosque is almost a replica of many mosques in China today. What is most striking about the mosque is that it is constructed in a Malay state purportedly known for its Malay-Islamic conservatism. The construction of Beijing Mosque shows that Muslim cosmopolitanism, in both architectural form and daily life, has a secure place in Kelantan.

Another, more intriguing, example of aesthetic cosmopolitanism is Hajjah Fatimah Mosque in Singapore. Built in 1846 by (and named after) a successful Bugis businesswoman, the mosque combines Eastern and Western designs as well as Islamic and Christian architectural forms. The mosque's minaret is a duplicate of the church spire of the century-old St Andrew's Cathedral located some kilometres from it. Slightly slanted, the minaret has been dubbed the Singaporean version of Italy's Leaning Tower of Pisa. Chinese-style windows and grilles are also part of the mosque's external design, along with Malay traditional woodcarvings and the huge dome that is commonly found in many mosques in the region. Even after several major renovation works, the mosque still maintains its hybrid appearance. Hajjah Fatimah Mosque has been designated as a national monument (Lily Kong & Brenda S.A. Yeoh, 2003).

Chinese influence on mosque architecture in the Malay world deserves further elaboration here. Certainly, Chinese motifs have had an imprint on the aesthetics of mosques for many centuries. Mohamad Tajuddin's study of the architectural heritage of the Malay world cements this enduring legacy. He describes Kampung Hulu Mosque in Malacca City 'as one of the best examples of a well to do

hybrid traditional Malay-Chinese architectural influence' (Mohamad Tajudin Mohamad Rasdi, 2000, p.68). In recent years, Al-Azim Mosque, built in Malacca in 1991, 'combines Chinese culture with vernacular architecture' (Wael A. Yousef Mousa, 2014. P.142).

This easy acceptance of the architectural forms of other traditions was born of the Sufistic and inclusive nature of Islam in the Malay World, where mosque designers and builders have embraced forms seen as congruent with the Islamic spirit since the coming of Islam through to the early modern period. Mosques in the Malay World have also integrated Hindu elements, which reflects continuity with the region's pre-Islamic past. A great number of mosques on the island of Java maintained the meru (the Hindu sacred mountain) structure and many Hindu motifs until the eighteenth century. Most prominent among these syncretic mosques is Menara Kudus Mosque (Masjid Menara Kudus, also known as 'Al-Aqsha Mosque'). (H.J. de Graaf, 1963, pp.1-5; Bagoes Wiryomartono. 2009. Pp. 33-45).

Another layer of cosmopolitanism lies in the fusion of modern and pre-modern, of vernacular as well as imported architectural traditions, projecting an image of both adaptation and synthesis. This fusion of forms and styles shows not only progress, but also the ability to preserve aspects of the Malay past that remain relevant in the reconstruction of Islam in a postcolonial and multicultural world. To quote Kishwar Rizvi: 'Architecture serves as the physical embodiment of this mobility of meaning; the mosque is thus simultaneously a memorial to the past and an aspiration toward what is to come'. (Kishwar Rizvi, 2015). This is illustrated by the aesthetics of the National Mosque (Masjid Negara) in Kuala Lumpur. Built in 1965 as part of the ambition of Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to forge a national identity via architectural splendour, the National Mosque is a mixture of the old and the new. Its main prayer hall mirrors that of a traditional Malay house through the use of an



umbrella-shaped roof and concrete stilts. This facade of traditionalism is counterbalanced by a 73-metre tall minaret, which looks like an antenna rather than a typical minaret found in the Middle East.

The mosque, as one scholar notes, represents the ‘spirit of the times’ and ‘true Malaysian identity’ (Mohamad Tajudin Mohamad Rasdi, 2005, p.27). It appeals to contemporary tastes just as its design harks back to the remote history of the Malay world. The National Mosque was the first mosque in Malaysia – and probably the first mosque in the Malay World as well – to synthesise vernacular and modernist architecture (Hassan-Uddin Khan, 1997). Other mosques in Malaysia followed suit, such as Negeri Sembilan State Mosque that blends Minangkabau and modernist architectural designs.

It took the Indonesians a few more decades before they were able to make visible the mingling of modernist and traditionalist architectural forms in their mosques. From the 1950s until the 1970s, mosques in Indonesia largely gravitated towards the Middle Eastern forms. Istiqlal Mosque (Masjid Istiqlal) in Jakarta is an exemplar of this trend that was born of the Indonesian leaders’ desire to win over Islamic groups in the country that were influenced by developments in the Middle East. Mosque design, therefore, served as a symbol of the government’s commitment to ‘Islam as the basis of the Indonesian identity and Islam as an important constituent of Indonesian unity’ (Gerard M. Macdonald, 1995, pp. 270-93).

By the early 1980s, the Indonesia Institute of Architects called for a rethinking of Indonesian religious architecture in order to imbue it with vernacular elements. From then on, Indonesian mosques featured both modern and traditional architectural influences. A local Indonesian historian described this transformation as a movement from ‘architectural homogeneity’ to ‘architectural hybridity’ (Bagoes Wiryomartono, 2009, p.43). The University of Gadjah Mada Campus Mosque makes this apparent with its

arabesque and modernist patterns interlaced with a roof and other structures that are similar to the historical Agung Demak Mosque (Pudji Pratitis Wismantara, 2012). Another example is the Grand Mosque of Central Java (Masjid Agung Jawa Tengah) that embodies a bricolage of local Javanese and modernist Middle Eastern forms. Such architectural hybridity can also be seen in the case of mosques in Singapore such as the Darul Aman in Changi Road, which was designed and built by the government’s Housing and Development Board (HDB) with an elaborately Malay architectural character. From the outside, the mosque looks like a traditional palace, flanked by the most contemporary and state-of-the-art facilities. The mosque represents the Singapore state’s creative experimentation of merging regional and international architectural flavour as the country intensifies its movement towards high-technological modernity (Tay Kheng Soon, 1989).

### **Sacred Tolerance**

If we train our eyes to observe places where mosques are located near temples, churches, synagogues or other sacred sites, we realise that the Malay World is replete with examples of where amity and harmony between worshippers of different religious sites are actually lived and upheld. This assertion is not made to downplay instances when zealots from different religious groups have obstructed access to religious places, picked fights with worshippers of other faiths or even gone to the extent of destroying religious sites. Rather, it is to say that, as tragic as such incidents are, they do not constitute the predominant conduct of either Muslims or non-Muslims in the Malay World, who generally value peaceful coexistence.

I term this peaceful coexistence between mosques and other religious sites, and between Muslims and non-Muslims, ‘sacred tolerance’. It is a condition where devotees of religious sites maintain the uniqueness and sacredness of their places of worship without infringing upon the rights of others who do not subscribe to their

beliefs. Sacred tolerance is evinced through the sharing of spaces within and outside specific religious sites. Adherents of different religions draw upon each other's spaces to ensure that their rites and rituals can be practised easily and openly without inhibition. Furthermore, what makes sacred tolerance possible is the process of adaptation undertaken by Muslims and non-Muslims towards ensuring amity. Through the vehicle of mosques, Muslim cosmopolitans assist and support other communities of believers during festive occasions and, if necessary, during moments of crisis.

Sacred tolerance has been a feature in the history of Islam since mosques were instituted. The mosque began as an inclusive space where Muslims and even non-Muslims of all ages, sexes and backgrounds could come together for purposes of devotion, for social gatherings and for planning sessions for all sorts of activities including war and reconciliation. During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, there was a famous incident when a non-Muslim Bedouin came into the mosque and urinated within the compound. The Muslims were upset and ready to teach the man a lesson in basic manners, but the Prophet stopped them. Rather than approve his companions' plans to drive the man away for this unrefined behaviour, the Prophet said, 'do not interrupt his urination'. The Prophet then poured water over the spot where the Bedouin had urinated. The Bedouin watched and was impressed with the message that the Prophet had preached; a message of forbearance and wisdom is reflected most vividly by this famous incident that occurred in a mosque (Muhammad bin Ismail al-Bukhari, 1997). The Prophet's actions set the example for Muslims in the generations to come regarding the inclusive nature of mosques. A mosque should be not only a domain where believers bring themselves closer to God and to their community, but a site where piety can be shared and appreciated by those who have yet to enter the fold of Islam.

Mosques in the Malay world are inheritors of this spirit of openness and tolerance. The

acceptance of non-Muslims into mosque compounds is becoming increasingly common, to the extent that, in recent years, it has become a source of concern among some congregants. Religious scholars and teachers have been asked whether non-Muslims should be allowed to enter mosques. The standard answers given by the Muslim learned class is that not only is it permissible, but in fact it should be encouraged so as to inform non-Muslims about the role of mosques and the vision of Islam. Dr Mohd Asri Zainal Abidin ('Maza') writes about this at some length:

*Our mosques ought to function like the mosques during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Non-Muslims were permitted to listen to lectures or religious talks, or to seek financial assistance for those among them who were in need. Mosques should be opened to non-Muslims to know Islam, to be present to witness Muslim devotions and to obtain reliable information about Islam. This was the case during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Muslim and non-Muslim delegates from various places met the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the mosque or they sat to observe Islamic rites in the mosque, the closed-minded will eventually become active and participative. (Mohd Asri Zainal Abidin, 2008, p.82).*

Dr Maza's explanations were prompted by some Muslims being troubled by the presence of non-Muslims in the mosques. This is to be expected, given that there are legal opinions that bar non-Muslims from mosques because of their perceived impurity (najis), but (Ahmed El Shamsy, 2013).

But only a minority of Muslim jurists actually hold this opinion. In reality, there is a widespread tolerance and acceptance of the 'other' in many mosque activities, displayed in the Malay World in various ways. One way this is shown is through the annual religious functions and festivals and a good example of this is during the breaking of the fast during Ramadan. In July 2014, some seventy non-Muslim tourists

joined Muslims in a breaking of the fast event at Putra Mosque in Kuala Lumpur. Co-organised by the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia and the Islamic Tourism Centre, the session included talks about Islam and the significance of fasting. The non-Muslims also joined in the congregational prayers to have a first-hand experience of Muslim devotions (Zainarida Emilia Zaidi, 2014). The breaking of the fast with non-Muslims has now become a yearly ritual in mosques across the region. Ministers and other prominent non-Muslim community leaders are often present during these events as part of their efforts to gain the support of the Muslim community (Lim Yang Liang, 2015).

Another way in which mosques are open to non-Muslims is through impromptu visits. These are basically walk-ins by non-Muslims who are in search of some form of assistance or those who wish to know more about the mosque and its functions. Many mosques in the Malay world accommodate such impromptu visits. Raya Baiturrahman Mosque in Banda Aceh is one such mosque that allows non-Muslims to drop by at any moment they wish, provided the mosque is not closed for the night or for renovation works. Certainly, the mosque is one of Aceh's major post-tsunami tourist destinations (Kenny, Clarke, Fanany, & Kingsbury, 2010). Long dresses and pants are also prepared for non-Muslims to wear when they enter the mosque.

In the Malay world, non-Muslims can also enter mosques through institutionalised arrangements. These are structures that are established by mosques to attract non-Muslims to visit regularly and may come in two forms: outreach programmes and visual displays. Outreach programmes include dialogues, discussions and the sharing of perspectives on issues affecting Muslims and non-Muslims in general.

In Singapore, outreach programmes have been one of the core activities of mosques since the September 11 attacks. At An-Nahdah Mosque in Singapore, for example, the Harmony Centre

was established in October 2006. It is basically a space within the mosque where visitors can learn about Islam and Muslim civilisations. Interfaith dialogues are also organised between the major religious groups in the country, which include Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Baha'ism. The implicit aim of this centre, as Eugene Tan observes, is to encourage Muslim youths to steer away from radical ideologies (Eugene K.B. Tan, 2007). More than that, underlying many of the Harmony Centre's activities is the will on the part of the Muslim community to combat Islamophobia and misconceptions about the religion and its adherents.

In Indonesia, institutionalised structures come in the form of converting parts of the mosque compound into business and educational hubs. Mosques in Semarang and Bandung are equipped with exhibition halls, meeting and conference rooms, libraries and cafeterias for anyone to lease and utilise. To attract non-Muslims into the mosques, the architecture of the mosques has been designed to mirror the modern buildings that surround them. The Grand Mosque of Central Java in Semarang is one such mosque. As a mammoth complex that can accommodate about 10,000 people, it is 'also an urban oasis for sociocultural, business and leisure activities. It comprises a 400-seat convention centre, meeting rooms, rental offices, a food court, a 23-suite hotel, shops and a sightseeing tower' (Bagoes Wiryomartono, 2009, pp. 43 – 4).

While the outreach programmes in Singaporean and Malaysian mosques are usually initiated and undoubtedly monitored by the state, in Indonesia, after the fall of Suharto in 1998, mosque committees demonstrated much freedom and agency on the part of the masses in bridging the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims. Cheng Ho Mosque, built by the minority Chinese Muslim community of Java in 2002, provides a revealing model. The architecture of the mosque exhibits the aesthetic cosmopolitanism that we have discussed earlier, in that it is an amalgamation of traditional

Chinese and modern styles. In fact, the mosque looks exactly like a Buddhist temple. Managed by the Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia (PITI, 'Organisation of Indonesian Chinese Muslims'), the mosque committee sees the non-Muslim Chinese as its primary group of potential converts. Islam classes are organised for Chinese converts and non-Muslims as well.

The mosque also provides financial and social assistance for needy Chinese. It arranges events with non-Muslim organisations for purposes of education, interfaith understanding, economic ventures and minority affairs. Owing to its proactive and cosmopolitan outreach programmes, the mosque receives financial support from the non-Muslim Chinese. The deputy governor of East Java referred to the mosque as 'a unison of two cultures, between Chinese and Islam ... This is a place of worship that symbolizes harmony, love and togetherness despite race or language' (Indra Harsaoutra, 2013). The mosque is an avenue through which a localised understanding of 'Chineseness' is constructed in a way that makes it different from the rest of the ethnic Chinese in the Malay World. (Chiou Syuan-yuan as cited in Chan Kwok Bun, Jan W. Walls, & David Hayward, 2007, p. 276).

Other mosques in Indonesia, such as those in Surabaya, Jember, Pandaan Pasuruan, Malang, Purbalingga, Kalimantan, Jakarta and Palembang Jakabaring have replicated the activities of Cheng Ho Mosque (Choirul Mahfud, 2014). These mosques have become instruments by which anti-Chinese sentiments among the native Indonesians can be assuaged. Such a project is especially pertinent following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 and the anti-Chinese riots which resulted in close to a thousand deaths and the raping of Chinese women in various parts of Indonesia. The riots were a consequence of many decades of resentment against Chinese dominance of the economy; it was essentially a class war more than a war between ethnic and religious communities. In this context, by building these

mosques and serving the locals through its many programmes, what the Chinese Muslim community has done is project its own unique identity while showing that religious sites are also cosmopolitan spaces (Hen Wai Weng, as cited in Chiara Formichi, 2013).

Memorials and displays constitute another medium that Muslims in the Malay World use to attract non-Muslims to the mosques. In so doing, mosques fulfil a dual function, serving as places of worship and as repositories of historical information. Mosques perform the role of protectors and communicators of the living memories of the people who built these mosques and the communities that grew around these sites (Hodge & D'Souza, 1999). Ba'alawi Mosque at Lewis Road in Singapore is known for its utilisation of memorials and displays. Erected by Arab philanthropists in 1952, the mosque's regular congregants are Muslims from all walks of life in Singapore. The imam (leader) of the mosque, Habib Hassan, has been active in organising interfaith discussions with other religious leaders in the country, aside from welcoming international guests (Mona Abaza, 1993). The mosque uses the spaces within it to promote Islamic heritage by displaying, for example, different versions of the Qur'an through the ages or the types of headgear worn by Muslims in different countries. Non-Muslim visitors are given insights into a slice of local and global Islamic histories through such displays.

Similarly, the visual displays at Sultan Mosque at Kampung Glam in Singapore have generated a lot of interest among non-Muslims. Rebuilt in the late 1920s in the Indo-Saracenic style on a site where a mosque had once stood since 1824, the Sultan Mosque is an illustrative sample of Western neoclassical styles fused with Persian, Turkish and Moorish architecture (Ten Leu-Jiun, 2013). The mosque is a must-go place for non-Muslim tourists, who can view displays about Islam as a global faith. The displays provide detailed explanations about sacred scriptures in Islam, the value of prayer and spirituality, family life and the important position of women



in Islam. To explain the main thrusts of these displays, staff members of the mosque have also learnt Japanese and Chinese in order to interact with the overwhelming numbers of visitors from Japan and China. The impression given by these displays is that Sultan Mosque serves as a religious site and also as a space that reflects the cosmopolitan nature of Singapore. The mosque thus expresses the universalist nature of Islam to non-Muslims (Ismail, 2006).

The sacred tolerance of mosques is also made visible through the sharing of common spaces with other religious institutions. Such is the case with An-Naim Mosque in Sarawak, which was built less than a hundred metres from Good Shepherd Church. The mosque and the church share their car parks on specific days. The church allows Muslim congregants to use its car park every Friday for their weekly prayers. The mosque, in turn, opens its car park for churchgoers on Sunday. Both mosque and church worshippers have been breaking fasts together annually during the month of Ramadan for the past fifty years. The church reciprocates in kind by inviting Muslims to the church for dinner during Christmas. Commenting on such mutual reciprocity, the imam of An-Naim Mosque, Imam Mohd Zulkifli, said, 'It has become a way of life for us to share car parks and meet for gatherings. To us, Muslims and Christians are one big family' (Foreign Desk, 2015).

The same spirit of tolerance is experienced daily at the famous UNESCO Heritage Site, Malacca City. Along Jalan Tukang Besi (famously known as 'Harmony Street') are three places of worship sharing a common space: the Muslim Kampung Kling Mosque, the Hindu Sri Poyyatha Vinagar Moorthi Temple and the Buddhist Cheng Hoon Teng Temple. That there have been no tensions at all between these three religious institutions is telling of how tolerant and respectful they have been towards one another. A well-known travel blogger captures the ambience well:

In the afternoon, the Muezzin's call of Adhan

is blaring from the Kampung Kling Mosque reminding the Muslims to do their Zuhur midday prayer. Hearing the Adhan sound, a Makcik selling key chains and souvenirs at a nearby shop turns off her radio from playing Malay pop music until the Adhan calling is over. None of the people around the mosque seem to be bothered by the Adhan even though the mosque is surrounded by many tiny Chinese art shops and food stalls. Just the way the hostel occupants and I remain undisturbed by the Hindus' Morning Prayer chant. Here, the religions and cultures have been co-existed side by side for centuries. This is what makes Malacca [the English rendering of Melaka] so unique in many visitors' eyes as well as mine. A pair of doves hovers over my head then both perch on the edge of the pond looking for fresh water to quench their thirst. Peaceful positive vibes are oozing in the air as I leave the idyllic Harmony Street down to the Dutch Square. Recalling what an Encik (old Chinese woman) said to me, 'we don't ask each other about one's race and religion. But what we do always ask each other is "have you eaten?"' Not only preserving their historical sites, multi cultures and religions, Malacca most vitally also preserves its people to keep their lives eternally beating in harmony alongside The Malacca River (Novani Nugrahani, 2013).

Nowhere is such cosmopolitan temperance more visible than at Jalan Gatot Subroto, Surakarta, in Indonesia. Al-Hikmah Mosque shares not only the same space as Joyodiningratan Church, but also the same mailing address. When asked how the church and the mosque could coexist in such a manner, a local pastor remarked, 'we [the church and the mosque] have to live together or learn to live together as we are born to be together ... we are only two meters apart ... we have made every effort to establish a mutually beneficial partnership' (as cited in Myengkyo Seo, 2013). He admitted that there have been episodes of tension, but, by and large, both religious groups get along well together. Their main instrument for sustaining a close relationship is through acts of reciprocity and

tolerance. The mosque turns off the speakers used for the call to prayer (adzan) when the church organises events that would be disturbed by amplified prayers. The church, in return, cancels its morning service should it coincide with Muslim festive holidays (such as Eidul Fitri and Eidul Adha) to avoid congestion and also to respect Muslim sensibilities in regard to dress codes on religious days (as cited in Myengkyo Seo, 2013).

Elsewhere in Indonesia, Bakti Mosque in Medan stands right next to the Protestant Church of Indonesia at Simpang. The two religious institutions have been getting along so well that youths of both religions frequent each other's social events. On Fridays, the church organises events to coincide with the Muslim prayers, and vice versa on Sundays. Correspondingly, at Jalan Enggano, No. 52 Tanjung Priok, Jakarta, Al-Muqarrabin Mosque shares the same wall as the Protestant Church of Mahanaim. But, that is not all. Both mosque and church volunteers assist each other at their religious events. This shared cooperation – or perhaps it is best described as 'sacred tolerance' – has endured through more than half a century of social change and modernisation in Indonesia (UCAN Indonesia, 2013; Editorial, 2015).

## Conclusion

Mosques in the Malay World have long functioned as cosmopolitan spaces where Muslims can connect with the divine and intermingle with their co-religionists, and where non-Muslims can equally benefit from the amenities and services offered by the mosques to the community at large. However, the mosques' reputation as cosmopolitan spaces goes further than that. Cosmopolitanism can also be found in the mosques' outward manifestations, in that they are built and designed in styles and forms that make them appealing to the eyes of believers and non-believers alike. These designs have drawn upon the traditions of East and West, as well as a combination of modern, local and global ideas about the creation of

iconic buildings.

It is astonishing, therefore, that, even after more than seven centuries of instrumental existence, mosques in Muslim the Malay Muslim World have escaped the attention of researchers in their analyses of cosmopolitan sites. A plausible reason for this has to do with the perception that mosques are generally exclusive to Muslims and that conservatives and fundamentalists have jealously guarded this exclusivity (Raillon, 2011). While this perception of mosques may be true in exceptional cases, it does not reflect the general texture of social relations within the mosques, or even the external appearances of these places of worship. Mosques are cosmopolitan spaces and scrutinising them in this manner enables us to reconsider these and other sacred places in Islam as sites where both Muslims and non-Muslims can derive much personal and spiritual inspiration.

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