

Theories of the Architectural Symbolism of the Traditional Mosque: A Preliminary Classification

(Teori-Teori Simbolisme Seni Bina Darihal Masjid Tradisional: Satu Pengelasan Awal)

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ABSTRACT

The productive scholarship on the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque expounded by the Traditionalist School at the end of the second millennium, which continued well into the third millennium by scholars exhibiting a strong Traditionalist influence or otherwise, is a testament to the subject's importance to the development of Islāmic architecture. Despite its prolificity and agency, most studies on the subject remain theoretically arbitrary, if not deficient, rudimentary at best, and disjointed. To fill this theoretical gap, this article, for the first time, identifies, outlines, and synthesises the many disparate theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque to establish a preliminary classification. It employs a hermeneutic reading of 32 significant theoretical and empirical studies on the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque sourced from books, journals, conference proceedings, and periodicals available to the authors. By capitalising on the textual and comparative analyses, it is found that as many as 28 distinct theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque with their attendant symbolic dimensions and parameters were posited in all 32 studies, all of which can be consolidated into three broad theoretical frameworks. These findings present an original systematisation of theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque, which is instrumental in two ways: it encourages scholars to develop existing theories or establish new ones, and it assists Muslims in recognising and acknowledging the spiritual agency of their built forms while offering foreign readers another expansive and inspiring lens to view them.

Keywords: Architectural theory; architectural symbolism; mosque architecture

ABSTRAK

Kesarjanaan berdaya keluaran mengenai simbolisme seni bina darihal masjid tradisional yang dihuraikan oleh Sekolah Tradisionalis pada penghujung alaf kedua, dan diteruskan oleh para sarjana yang memperlihatkan kecenderungan yang kuat kepada Tradisionalisme atau sebaliknya pada alaf ketiga, merupakan bukti kepentingan subjek tersebut dalam perkembangan seni bina Islām. Meskipun bersifat prolifik dan agentif, rata-rata kajian mengenai subjek tersebut masih bersifat semberono, cetek, dan tidak sistematik dari segi teori. Bagi mengisi lompaangan teori ini, makalah ini, buat pertama kalinya, mengenal pasti, merangka, dan mensintesis teori-teori simbolisme seni bina darihal masjid tradisional yang berbeza bertujuan membangunkan satu pengelasan awal. Makalah ini mengguna pakai pembacaan hermeneutik terhadap 32 kajian teori dan empirik yang penting mengenai simbolisme seni bina darihal masjid tradisional bersumberkan pelbagai buku, makalah, laporan persidangan, dan terbitan berkala yang tersedia kepada para pengarang. Dengan mengguna pakai gabungan analisis teks dan perbandingan, makalah ini menemui sebanyak 28 teori simbolisme seni bina darihal masjid tradisional yang berbeza berserta dimensi dan parameter simbolik masing-masing yang terdapat dalam kesemua 32 kajian dan mendapati bahawa

kesemua dapatan ini boleh digabungkan ke dalam tiga kerangka teori yang umum. Hasil penemuan-penemuan ini memperlihatkan satu pensisteman teori-teori simbolisme seni bina darihal masjid tradisional yang asli, yang berperanan penting dari dua segi: pengelasan ini mendorong para sarjana untuk mengembangkan teori-teori sedia ada atau membangunkan teori-teori baru, dan membantu para Muslimin mengenal dan mengiktiraf upaya rohani dalam bangunan-bangunan mereka di samping menyediakan satu lagi kanta yang luas dan mengilhamkan kepada para peneliti luar untuk melihat bangunan-bangunan yang berkenaan.

Kata kunci: Teori seni bina; simbolisme seni bina; seni bina masjid

INTRODUCTION

The traditional mosque is a symbolic receptacle for the communal remembrance of God. It is a centerpiece of Islāmic architecture (Aziz 2004) serviced by other artistic pursuits (Burckhardt 1976) such as Arabic calligraphy, the arabesque, and carvings. Given its primary position, it is not difficult to surmise why the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque, more than any other building typologies, has been persistently studied by the Traditionalist School at the end of the second millennium. The mosque continues to be investigated by the School's succeeding scholars and others who are influenced by its philosophy well into the third millennium. Even more admirable is that the subject has been explored theoretically and empirically by non-Traditionalist researchers of the Malay world as early as the 1970s when mosques in this region were predominantly denigrated or dismissed from the international architectural surveys.

While due recognition should be given to these scholars whose works have become a stepping stone for succeeding researchers to examine the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque, we should not turn a blind eye to the prevailing deficiencies in their research outputs. In their theoretical works, the dearth of descriptions detailing how concepts or theories were understood and practised by the Muslim community sticks out like a sore thumb. When they do exist, these were typically oriented to ideas and expressions that abound in the Islāmic world's centres and were generalised to embody the universal worldview of the Islāmic civilisation. In their empirical works, the conceptual and methodological frameworks used for interpretation were either seldom made explicit or mentioned in passing without conviction, hence hampering the readers' confidence in the subject being treated. For better or worse, both types of work have, to a certain extent, made the subject appear opaque and fragmented.

Restricting its scope to studies that necessarily satisfy the meaning of "symbolism" as understood by the Traditionalist School, the sole purpose of this article is to fill the theoretical gap by identifying, outlining, and synthesising the many disparate theories

of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque to establish a preliminary classification. The authors begin by describing three conceptual frameworks pertinent to this article—the perpetuity of architectural symbolism, the dynamicity of the traditional mosque, and the necessity of a preliminary classification. We then move on to the methodology for the study of theoretical and empirical works before finally ending with the identification of theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque, the outlining of dimensions and parameters of symbolism, and the systematisation of theories into three broad theoretical frameworks.

THE PERPETUITY OF ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLISM

Before dwelling on the meaning of "symbolism," we wish, at the outset, to introduce the pioneers, proponents, and adherents of the Traditionalist School. The School was established by René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, whose progressive works paved the way for instructive studies on symbolism, generally, and on architectural symbolism, particularly, by productive advocates, namely Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr together with followers including, but not limited to, Nader Ardalan, Laleh Bakhtiar, Adrian Snodgrass, and Khursheed Kamal Aziz. As a collective, the Traditionalists understood "symbols" as static and vertical contrary to modern art historians whose understanding of the term denotes dynamic and horizontal "signs" (Akkach 2005; Burckhardt 1987). The foundation of the Traditionalists' philosophy can be found in verse (*āyah*) no. 21 in the chapter (*sūrah*) of al-Hijr from the Qur'ān: "Naught is there, but that its *treasuries* [emphasis added] lie with Us, and We do not *send it down*, save in a *known measure*." This verse alludes to the archetypes (God's "treasuries") that is always the heir who inherits back the symbol (God's "treasuries sent down in a known measure") in which It manifested Itself. Architectural symbolism, thus, "expresses the manner in which the phenomenal world relates to the Real and how the One 'fragments' into multiplicity" (Snodgrass 1985). It operates as an intellectual

bridge between the concrete and the abstract, the tangible and the intelligible, the known and the unknown.

Seeing conformity to spiritual principles such as symbolism is essential to all traditional art (Ardalan & Bakhtiar 1975), traditional architecture must, *ipso facto*, be symbolic, and such quality forms the basis of originality—the quality or state of being rooted in the Origin—in traditional architecture. Originality in traditional architecture has aspects of both permanence and change: “Permanence is achieved by a link with the primary cause through the world of Archetypes, following rules of traditional art forms; change comes from the ability of the creative imagination to produce a new synthesis of materials, techniques, and functions.” (Ardalan & Bakhtiar 1975). So long as the Origin or “primary cause” survives the vicissitudes of time, traditional architecture and its symbolism will prevail.

The traditional mosque is the sacred architecture of Islām *par excellence*. It integrates its space into that sacred space of primordial creation (Nasr 1997) linking man to his Origin or “primary cause.” It is thus not unreasonable to find Traditionalists and non-Traditionalists alike labouring on the architectural symbolism of the building typology in various theoretical and empirical studies. In the context of the Malay world, local scholars contend that the traditional mosque offers unending insights into the Malay-Islāmic tradition (Ahmad Zakaria et al. 2021; Dahlan & Abd Manan 2021; Harun et al. 2022; Ismail et al. 2022; Md Sharif 2019), by means of, among others, its architectural symbolism. While the perpetuity of the traditional mosque’s symbolism and the wisdom it poses are assured, we must now turn to the dynamicity of the traditional mosque and its symbolic expressions.

THE DYNAMICITY OF THE TRADITIONAL MOSQUE

Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan proposed five primary categories of traditional mosque design occurring in seven distinctive regional styles: (1) the hypostyle hall and open courtyard type; (2) the massive central dome or central pyramidal roof construction type; (3) the bi-axial four-vaulted entrance (*ḥwān*) type; (4) the triple domes and an extensive courtyard type; and (5) the detached pavilions within a walled garden enclosure type (Frishman & Khan 2007). Such plasticity of mosque architecture also mirrors the dynamicity of its architectural symbolism, this being a fine example of the phenomenon of diversity in unity or unity in diversity. Consequently, one would presuppose the scholarship of the architectural symbolism of the

traditional mosque to be as dynamic as the building typology itself.

While research spanning from Burckhardt’s 27-page chapter in his profound book *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods* (1967) to Aziz’s comprehensive two-volume book *The Meaning of Islamic Art: Explorations in Religious Symbolism and Social Relevance* (2004), among others, may indicate a dynamic corpus on the subject, a closer inspection of their works reveals predominant Arabo-, Perso-, Euro-, Afro-, and Indo-centric geographical, epistemological, and philosophical orientations in their observations and interpretations. The generalisability and transferability of the symbolism in the mosques which dominated these works to other mosques situated outside the predominant discourse of traditional Islāmic art and architecture were not deliberated. Without taking the latter into account, we run the risk of ontologically denying the Islāmicity of mosques in the periphery and spatially exiling them from the Islāmic tradition and their building typology. This article addresses this issue, albeit limitedly, by entailing considerable theoretical and empirical studies on mosques in the Malay world.

Substantial surveys such as the ones cited above heavily alluded, explicitly or implicitly, to various theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque. However, these allusions lack descriptions of what the theories were and how they were understood and interpreted by Muslims architecturally. As duly noted by Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, the deficit of a comprehensive understanding of the Islāmic faith, and the authors must add, exposition of its esoteric rites and philosophies, have hampered scholarly efforts to bracket traditional Malay mosque architecture, and we can also generalise such labours to the traditional mosque here, with Islāmic spirituality (Mohamad Rasdi 2000). A succinct commentary on all the theories of architectural symbolism would demand multiple volumes and is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, this article addresses this issue by identifying the theories and outlining their attendant dimensions and parameters of symbolism. Furthermore, it takes a step further by synthesising these theories into a preliminary classification.

THE NECESSITY OF A PRELIMINARY CLASSIFICATION

While identifying and outlining each theory of architectural symbolism is a fundamental undertaking in itself, we consider the systematisation of the theories to be equally, if not more, critical to the architectural historian. This

endeavour is demanding on two grounds: (1) each symbol has a plurality of meanings on the horizontal level (Eliade 1959). This varies according to, among others, religious, cultural, and geographical specificities; and (2) each symbol partly forms “a *pattern* [emphasis in original] of concordant interrelationships” which is not singular in nature but correlates with other symbols, all of which fit together to construct “a mutually reinforcing web of meaning” (Snodgrass 1985). Both scholarly labours, we argue, are prerequisites to penetrating the meaning of the traditional mosque. Without understanding the multivalent meanings of symbols and how they harmonise into a coherent whole, we risk essentialising the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque by maximising or minimising the merit of one symbol against the others.

Snodgrass’s metaphor of the Buddhist Net of Indra is beneficial in clarifying the interrelationship between each symbol: “The Net, which hangs in Indra’s Palace, has a jewel at each of the crossings of its threads. Each of these jewels reflects each and every other jewel and is in turn reflected in each of them. In the same way that the many jewels of the Net are reflected or ‘focused’ within a single jewel, so all symbolic constructs can be found within the single symbol studied and can be unified within it” (Snodgrass 1985).

Thinking about architectural symbolism in this way enables us to regard the architectural historian’s operational task of locating and coalescing the symbols as unitive rather than reductive. Moreover, such a systematisation of symbols or theories offers scholars a panoptic view on how each symbol or theory’s dimensions and parameters interrelated and materialised architecturally. The reflective qualities of each symbol or theory as disseminated in existing studies on architectural symbolism could stimulate scholars to successively unveil both its latent reflectivity and the reflections in it.

Accommodating Snodgrass’s metaphor of the Buddhist Net of Indra to this article’s research subject and object, the theories of architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque resemble the Islāmic arabesque. Although each motif of the stylised plant forms and strictly geometrical interlacing work, both of which were occasionally combined with Arabic calligraphy to construct the arabesque (Burckhardt 1976), can stand alone, the latter only becomes intelligible for interpretation when our eyes follow the flow of the interconnecting network binding elements of the former. Similarly, while each symbol or theory can be studied independently, an integrated “reading” of the theories deepens our understanding and appreciation of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque. It must be stressed, however, that the emerging pattern of meaning does not deplete the import of the symbol; rather, it rightly reinforces the phenomenon of diversity

in unity or unity in diversity described in the discussion on the dynamicity of the traditional mosque. Being analogous, the theories of architectural symbolism would essentially share mutual qualities, and it is precisely this classification of theories into broad fields or frameworks that this article systematises.

METHODOLOGY

The authors employed a hermeneutic reading of theoretical and empirical studies as it provides the means for us to arrive at the texts’ intentions and meanings in greater depth. Theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque cited explicitly or implied implicitly in the studies were examined, together with symbolic dimensions and parameters comprising each theory. 32 studies were selected for several reasons: (1) they were published during the most productive period in the history of ideas on symbolism generally and on architectural symbolism specifically; (2) their studies on architectural symbolism satisfy the meaning of “symbolism” as understood by the Traditionalist School; and (3) their objects of study represent traditional mosque architecture which exemplifies distinctive regions.

The theoretical studies sampled consist of 13 studies which defined or advanced a theoretical position with or without furnishing an analysis of and links between empirical studies. In addition to this, the empirical studies sampled consist of 19 studies based on evidence drawn from observation and experience and were usually devoid of a theoretical position. Findings from the texts were organised and analysed using textual analysis according to distinct theories and their attendant dimensions and parameters of symbolism. Analysis of the texts furnishes the specifics and subtleties of each theory, which would remain dormant and obscure if a cursory examination was done. Subsequently, these findings were further organised and analysed using textual and comparative analyses according to their theoretical contents. Analysis of and comparison between the theories enable the authors to determine similarities and differences between aspects of each theory, develop explanations for their possible affinities, and subsequently classify them into broad theoretical frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As many as 28 distinct theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque with their attendant symbolic dimensions and parameters were posited in all 32 studies, as identified and outlined in Table 1. The designations of these theories were

generated directly from the studies themselves or, when not stated, from prevalent concepts or ideas in the religious tradition of Islām. Only three theories of architectural symbolism have yet to be studied empirically: (1) The Curtain (*Hijāb*); (2) The Primordial Covenant; and (3) The Prostration (*Sujūd*). Notably, these theories were put forth by non-Traditionalists at the dawn of the 21st century and have not enjoyed the recognition and acknowledgement by contemporary scholars contrary to their Traditionalist counterpart. 15 theories of architectural symbolism were indicated either explicitly or implicitly in empirical studies but were never substantiated conceptually: (1) The Body of Divine Revelation; (2) The Corners of the World; (3) The Cosmic Tree; (4) The Divine Attributes of God; (5) The Earth; (6) The Greeting (*Tahiyyah*); (7) The Journey to God; (8) The Levels of Faith; (9) The Majesty of Faith; (10) The

Monarchy; (11) The Mountain; (12) The Natural Environment; (13) The Pillars of Faith; (14) The Remembrance of God (*Dhikr*); and (15) The Supplication (*Du‘ā’*). While this phenomenon may imply a theoretical deficiency in the empirical works, we argue here that most, if not all, of the relevant theories have already been explored in voluminous works beyond the discipline of architecture. It is these works which the architectural historian must consult to formulate or develop the theories of symbolism within the architectural canon. The traditional mosque’s most symbolic architectural principles were verticality, hierarchy, ascension, expansion, union, and number. At the same time, multitiered roofs, spire or pinnacle, four-cornered prayer hall, dome, pillars, and minaret were found to be some of its most symbolic architectural elements.

TABLE 1. Matrix of theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque in theoretical and empirical studies with their attendant dimensions and parameters of symbolism

No.	Theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque	Studies		Dimensions of symbolism	Parameters of symbolism
		Theoretical	Empirical		
1	Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension (<i>Mi‘rāj</i>)	Burckhardt (1967) Burckhardt (1976) Prijotomo (1992) Aziz (2004) Humphrey & Vitebsky (2005)	El-Muhammady (2016)	Ascension Centripetality Corporeality Directionality Enclosure Hierarchy Invisibility Limitlessness Union Verticality	Base Building height Dome Foundation rock Four-cornered prayer hall Minaret Mosque building Multitiered roofs Octagonal drum Prayer niche (<i>mīhrāb</i>) Pulpit (<i>minbar</i>) Spire or pinnacle Staircase Tomb tower Calligraphy
2	The Body of Divine Revelation	–	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Balance Harmony Horizontal Rhythm Unity Verticality	
3	The Corners of the World	–	Persatuan Ulama Negeri Melaka (1979) Othman (2006) Shafie (2010)	Number	Four-cornered prayer hall
4	The Cosmic Motion	Burckhardt (1976) Aziz (2004)	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Composition Infinity Light and shade Mobility Rhythm Stasis Synthesis	Arabesque Screen Vault (<i>muqarnaṣ</i>)

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5	The Cosmic Tree	–	Yaapar (2010)	Expansion Stylisation	Hip ridge Spire or pinnacle
6	The Curtain (<i>Hijāb</i>)	Burckhardt (1967)	–	Veiling	Arabesque
7	The Divine Attributes of God	–	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975) Abdul Malek (2001)	Colour Form Geometry Harmony Matter Numbers Order	Courtyard Garden Hip ridge
8	The Divine Presence	Burckhardt (1967) Burckhardt (1976)	Yaapar (2010)	Appearance Expansion Function Harmony Openness Refuge Reverberation Spaciousness	Four-cornered prayer hall Prayer niche (<i>mihrāb</i>)
9	The Divine Unity (<i>Tawhīd</i>)	Burckhardt (1976) Aziz (2004)	Mohd Yatim (1995) O’Neill (2007) Idris et al. (2019)	Abstraction Ascension Axiality Centrality Convergence Denaturalisation Height Imitation Light Number Plenitude Rhythm Stylisation Union Verticality Weightlessness	Arch Dome Door Minaret Multitiered roofs Pillars Pulpit (<i>minbar</i>) Spire or pinnacle Vault (<i>muqarnaş</i>) Wall Window
10	The Earth	–	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Essentiality Horizontalty	Floor
11	The Greeting (<i>Taḥiyyah</i>)	–	Shafie (2010) Harun & Othman (2011)	Form	Hip ridge
12	The Heavens	Burckhardt (1967) Aziz (2004)	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Centrality Contraction Enclosure Expansion Immersion Infinity Interiority Motion Time	Blue-coloured tiles Court with fountain(s) Dome Gateway

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13	The Journey to God	–	Mohamed (1978) Persatuan Ulama Negeri Melaka (1979) Mohd. Noor et al. (1983) Halim (1993) Mohd Yatim (1995) Kamsari (1998) Abdul Malek (2001) Othman (2006) Shafe (2010) Yaapar (2010)	Ascension Function Hierarchy Number	Four-cornered prayer hall Multitiered roofs Pillars Spire or pinnacle
14	The Ka'bah	Nasr (1975) Burckhardt (1976) Snodgrass (1990) Akkach (2005)	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Axiality Centrality Completion Concentricity Convergence Hierarchy Light Privacy Spatiality Stability Union Ventilation View	Cubic form Four-cornered prayer hall Room
15	The Levels of Faith	–	Mohd Nawawi & Abdul Majid (2016) Yusof & Tun Othman (2018)	Hierarchy	Multitiered roofs
16	The Majesty of Faith	–	Halim (1993)	Form	Spire or pinnacle
17	The Monarchy	–	Mursib (2016)	Hierarchy	Multitiered roofs Spire or pinnacle
18	The Mountain	–	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975) Yaapar (2010)	Height Proximity Union	Multitiered roofs Socle
19	The Natural Environment	–	Harun & Othman (2011)	Hierarchy	Multitiered roofs
20	The Pillars of Faith	–	Halim (1993) Mohd Nawawi & Abdul Majid (2016)	Number	Multitiered roofs Pillars
21	The Primordial Covenant	Chebel (2003)	–	Tactility	The Black Stone
22	The Prostration (<i>Sujūd</i>)	Aziz (2004)	–	Horizontality	Courtyard Vaulted entrance (<i>īwān</i>)

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23	The Remembrance of God (<i>Dhikr</i>)	–	Zainal Abidin & Hitam (2013)	Function	Arabesque Pulpit (<i>minbar</i>) Verandah Window
24	The Seven Degrees of Being (<i>Martabat Tujuh</i>)	Mohamed (1978)	Moersid et al. (2008)	Ascension Contraction Descension Expansion Hierarchy Horizontal Verticality	Courtyard Four-cornered prayer hall Hip ridge Multitiered roofs Pillars Spire or pinnacle Verandah
25	The Standing (<i>Qiyām</i>)	Bakhtiar (1997) Aziz (2004)	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Axiality Height Isolation Verticality	Minaret Tomb tower
26	The Stations of Wisdom	Burckhardt (1987) Lings (1997)	Abdul Malek (2001)	Ascension Attraction Beauty Centrality Dynamicity Expansion Height Mediation Multiplicity Objectivity Oneness Openness Orientation Passivity Plenitude Protection Refuge Spatiality Stasis Totality Verticality	Courtyard Dome Door Minaret Multitiered roofs Pillars Prayer hall Prayer niche (<i>mīhrāb</i>) Pulpit (<i>minbar</i>) Roof Worshipper
27	The Supplication (<i>Du‘ā‘</i>)	–	Persatuan Ulama Negeri Melaka (1979) Othman (2006) Shafie (2010) Harun & Othman (2011)	Form	Spire or pinnacle
28	The Union	Burckhardt (1967) Chebel (2003) Aziz (2004)	Ardalan & Bakhtiar (1975)	Mediation Motion Transition Union Verticality	Concentric plan Dome Four-cornered prayer hall Minaret Porch

All 28 theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque were systematised and classified into three general theoretical frameworks, or “spheres,” as we would prefer them to be known, in decreasing scholarly prominence, as shown in Table 2. Analogous to the metaphor of the Islāmic arabesque established earlier, the intricate pattern of this integrated system of theories was also constructed from three symbolic spheres derived from

the religious tradition of Islām: (1) the sphere of myth which particularised symbols conveyed verbally or in the form of narratives; (2) the sphere of doctrine which particularised symbols conveyed conceptually; and (3) the sphere of ritual which particularised symbols conveyed through speech and gestures. The authors wish to re-emphasise that while these theories were systematically classified into individual spheres, they were by no means

confined within their boundaries. The purpose of such classification is to investigate common affinities between the theories within a sphere, which we postulate as being evident and typical of each sphere, to enrich and integrate the theories. At this juncture, we wish to briefly examine the characteristic features of each sphere and how the theories of architectural symbolism of the traditional

mosque were positioned within them. It is important to note that whereas as many as 18 theories across all three spheres were affiliated with the traditional Malay mosque, essential interpretations of only the most significant theories from each sphere related to the Malay mosque archetype are presented in this article due to space constraints and peripheral exposure.

TABLE 2. Preliminary classification of theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque

Theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque		
The sphere of myth	The sphere of doctrine	The sphere of ritual
The Journey to God	The Divine Unity (<i>Tawhīd</i>)	The Supplication (<i>Du‘ā‘</i>)
Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension (<i>Mi‘rāj</i>)	The Ka‘bah	The Standing (<i>Qiyām</i>)
The Union	The Cosmic Motion	The Greeting (<i>Taḥiyyah</i>)
The Corners of the World	The Heavens	The Prostration (<i>Sujūd</i>)
The Divine Presence	The Divine Attributes of God	
The Stations of Wisdom	The Levels of Faith	
The Mountain	The Pillars of Faith	
The Seven Degrees of Being (<i>Martabat Tujuh</i>)	The Earth	
The Body of Divine Revelation	The Majesty of Faith	
The Cosmic Tree	The Natural Environment	
The Curtain (<i>Hijāb</i>)	The Remembrance of God (<i>Dhikr</i>)	
The Monarchy		
The Primordial Covenant		

The sphere of myth constituted theories of symbolism which accentuate the oral narratives of the religious tradition of Islām. While all myths are stories, not all stories are myths (Smart 1996). Etymologically derived from the Greek *muthos*, initially from *mu*, meaning “to speak with the lips closed” (Snodgrass 1985), myths should not be understood as unfounded stories according to their dictionary meaning but as ineffable ones which unveil the mystical aspects of religion. Such myths like The Journey to God, Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension (*Mi‘rāj*), and The Seven Degrees of Being (*Martabat Tujuh*), for instance, were sourced from esoteric interpretations of the mythical life (*sīrah*) and prophetic miracles (*mu‘jizah*) of Prophet Muḥammad. As Muslims are intrinsically drawn to such stories as attested in the handsome production of prose narratives (*hikāyāt*) and treatises on Islāmic mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) abound in the Islāmic world, it is not unusual that 13 theories of the architectural symbolism of the

traditional mosque were posited within the sphere of myth, the least explored theory being The Primordial Covenant while The Journey to God was the most prominent one.

In the sphere of myth, The Journey to God remained one of the earliest and most conspicuous theories applied to the study of the architectural symbolism of the traditional Malay mosque. Dimensions of hierarchy and ascension were symbolised in the multitiered roofs of the mosques, with the prayer hall representing the level of *sharī‘āh*, the first roof tier representing the level of *ṭarīqah*, the second roof tier representing the level of *ḥaqīqah*, and the top-most roof tier representing the level of *ma‘rifah* (Abdul Malek 2001; Halim 1993; Othman 2006; Persatuan Ulama Negeri Melaka 1979; Shafie 2010). Other researchers reached a similar conclusion, albeit with a different organisation of meanings in the successive roof tiers: *sharī‘āh*, *ḥaqīqah*, and *ma‘rifah* (Mohd. Noor et al. 1983) and alternatively *ṭarīqah*, *ma‘rifah*, and *mu‘jizah* (Kamsari 1998). Without

detailing the architectural symbolism of the multitiered roofs, Othman Mohd Yatim clarified that these different levels represented the sequential stages that the Muslim mystic (*Sūfi*) has to undergo in his journey to God (Mohd Yatim 1995). While these studies portrayed some sense of coherence in their readings, the constant deficit of methodological rigour and empirical evidence in their assumptive analyses evidenced by the absence of an in-depth explanation of what the journey to God entails and how different stages of the journey identified in these studies relate to the symbolic dimensions strikingly leaves a great deal to be desired. Without a detailed understanding of the theory, interpretations of its symbolic correspondence in the traditional mosque would render such readings, consistent at best and contradictory at worst, futile.

The sphere of doctrine constituted theories of symbolism which accentuate the teachings of the religious tradition of Islām. Ninian Smart listed six functions of doctrines in religions: (1) the attitudinal; (2) the descriptive; (3) the reconciliatory; (4) the definitional; (5) the responsive; and (6) the scientific (Smart 1996). In the religious tradition of Islām, doctrines are sourced from the canonical texts of the Qurʾān and Prophetic traditions (*Aḥādīth*), together with their respective traditional esoteric commentaries, all of which are also primary sources for the various Islāmic myths and rituals. Such theories like The Levels of Faith and The Pillars of Faith, for instance, although not articulated directly in the Qurʾān, were defined and detailed in the *Aḥādīth*, both of which were uncompromising to every Muslim notwithstanding one's religious sect. As religious doctrines are foundational to the lives of the Muslim individual and community and whose sources are regarded as the twin legacy of Prophet Muḥammad, it is not unusual that 11 theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque were posited within the sphere of doctrine, the least explored theory being The Remembrance of God (*Dhikr*) while The Divine Unity (*Tawḥīd*) was the most prominent one.

In the sphere of doctrine, The Divine Unity (*Tawḥīd*) was one of the earliest and most conspicuous theories applied to the study of the architectural symbolism of the traditional Malay mosque, whose spire or pinnacle symbolised the figure 'One' alluding to God (Mohd Yatim 1995). Besides the numerical symbolism of the spire, it was also discovered that other symbolic dimensions such as verticality, axiality, centrality, union, height, ascension, and light were expressed in the form of multitiered roofs and pillars to embody the concept of *Tawḥīd* in the traditional Malay mosque (O'Neill 2007). According to Hugh O'Neill, the multitiered roofs particularly epitomised the replacement of the identity of the self and the universal principle in Hindu belief with the doctrine of *Tawḥīd* between God and the Malay-Muslim believer. Researchers also found that motifs on the doors, windows, walls, and pulpit (*minbar*) of the

traditional Malay mosque symbolised the same through imitation, stylisation, denaturalisation, and abstraction (Idris et al. 2019). Although the doctrine of *Tawḥīd* was indicated in the above studies, neither profited from theoretical explorations posited at length by Burckhardt (1976) or Aziz (2004) nor contextualised the doctrine by explaining how it was understood and practised by the Malay-Muslim community. Without a proper comprehension of the concept, it would almost be impossible to offer a productive and nuanced interpretation of a traditional society's heterogeneous cultural production such as the mosque, which considers that particular society's dynamic religious and spiritual understanding and practice of the doctrine.

The sphere of ritual constituted theories of symbolism which accentuate the repetitious sacred actions of the religious tradition of Islām. The bodily and auditory actions performed in rituals are symbols "put into action," every ritual gesture being a symbol "acted" (Snodgrass 1985). Rituals are practices of religion which entail worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites and healing activities (Smart 1996). In the religious tradition of Islām, the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) is enjoined upon all Muslims as one of the Pillars of Faith, whose command by God can be found in the Qurʾān and detailed instructions of its performance in the *Aḥādīth*. All four theories of The Supplication (*Duʿāʾ*), The Standing (*Qiyām*), The Greeting (*Taḥiyyah*), and The Prostration (*Sujūd*) were derived from a series of postures or movements which make up the *ṣalāt*, whose essence is fixed in the religious doctrines but whose forms are fluid in the school of Islāmic jurisprudence (*madhhab*). Despite the esteemed position of the *ṣalāt* as the primary rite performed by Muslims and of the mosque which houses such a symbolic rite, only four theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque were posited within the sphere of ritual, the least explored theory being The Prostration (*Sujūd*) while The Supplication (*Duʿāʾ*) was the most prominent one.

In the sphere of ritual, it can be observed that while the positions of *qiyām* and *sujūd* were theorised to understand the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque in the Islāmic world's centres, other theories were applied in the study of the architectural symbolism of the traditional Malay mosque. The gesture of *duʿāʾ* was significant, symbolised in the spire or pinnacle to represent man's paramount hope and prayer to God (Harun & Othman 2011; Othman 2006; Persatuan Ulama Negeri Melaka 1979; Shafie 2010). Another symbolic position of the *ṣalāt* is the *taḥiyyah* position, which is embodied in the finger-like form of the *sulur bayung* decorating the hip ridges of the mosque (Harun & Othman 2011; Shafie 2010). What is striking in these studies is that none of them attempted to make explicit their conceptual and

methodological framework employed in decoding the symbolism of the ritual positions and their expressions in the traditional Malay mosque. Even though it may be evident that the *Ahādīth* generally, in addition to the advisory opinions (*fatāwā*) issued by the predominant *madhhab* in the Malay world particularly, ought to become the foundation of the researchers' frameworks, the absence of a single passage quoted from either of these sources of the Islāmic tradition in their studies only render the reliability and validity of such studies questionable.

CONCLUSION

This article attests to its preamble that the traditional mosque is a symbolic receptacle for the remembrance of God. Theoretical frameworks posited on the perpetuity of architectural symbolism, the dynamicity of the traditional mosque, and the necessity of a preliminary classification positions the traditional mosque generally, and its Malay variant particularly, within the scholarship of architectural symbolism established by the Traditionalist School, whose corpus on the research subject and object is still desperately inadequate. By systematically identifying the theories of architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque and outlining their attendant symbolic dimensions and parameters, this article highlights the significance of the architectural principles and elements unique to the building typology, which should not only be preserved and conserved for posterity but also contemporised and hybridised by present-day and future architects and artisans. Most importantly, it assists Muslims in recognising and acknowledging the spiritual agency of their built forms and offers foreign readers another expansive and inspiring lens to view them through a provisional classification of theories of the architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque into the spheres of myth, doctrine, and ritual, all of which were derived from the religious tradition of Islām.

To develop existing theories or establish new ones, the authors recommend further examination of the research subject and object by means of a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical contents and dimensions and parameters of symbolism within and beyond the theoretical and empirical studies examined in this article. Such an analysis should not only take into account mosques and theories of architectural symbolism that are not dealt with here, but most importantly, it should derive its conceptual and methodological framework from the extra-architectural sources of the religious tradition of Islām already outlined. To illustrate the last point, our recent demonstration of how the symbolism of Prophet Muḥammad's Ascension (*Mi'rāj*) in the traditional Malay

mosque can be examined through the traditional Malay *hikāyāt* might be of interest (Hakimi et al. 2022). Nevertheless, the authors recognise the process of systematising the theories of architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque into a *preliminary* classification as a perpetually Herculean task. We italicise "preliminary" here as the symbolic spheres into which the theories were positioned should be considered not as final drawings but as early sketches in the design and making of the Islāmic arabesque metaphorising the system of theories. Although its lines and curves have only just begun to appear, the full beauty of the arabesque can only be enjoyed and admired when it is finally made. Therefore, we urge the architectural historian to sharpen his chisel and start carving.

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