

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia

9 Euro / US\$10

Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia focuses on many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin, and provides analyses and discussions on how they could be revitalized.



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Hindu-Buddhist Scrolls: Sacred Architectural Ornamentation Reflects Javanese Muslims' Tolerance and Flexibility

Typical Javanese ornaments were constantly used both in temples and mosques as a result of syncretic Islam in Indonesia. The ornaments are derived from a combination of elements from mystic animism, Hindu-Buddhism, and an Islam that differs from orthodox Islam in the Near East and Arab world. **Hee Sook Lee-Niinioja** writes about her research on the topic.

Introduction

Indonesia, located in Southeast Asia, is the fourth most populous country (c.237 million) in the world. Its main island of Java is blessed with active volcanoes, tropical climate, and fertile soils. Indonesia's ethnic formation falls largely into two groups, Malayan and Papuan, each with sub-groups, resulting from extensive immigration, largely from Asia. Nearly 90% of the population are Muslim, making Indonesia the largest Islamic nation; and 7% are Christian, 2% are Hindu, and 1% is Buddhist.

The influence of Indian civilisation began in the 5th century through trade and Buddhist missionaries. In the eighth century, the Buddhist Sailendra and Hindu Sanjaya kingdoms were founded in Central Java; they constructed Borobodur and Prambanan temples respectively. Around 930 CE, political power shifted to East Java, and the Hindu kingdoms of Singasari and Majapahit arose, covering vast areas of the Malay Peninsula. Under Majapahit in the 14th century, the country went through a golden period of Indonesian history, as demonstrated by the magnificent temple complex of Panataran.

Muslim traders arrived in Indonesia in the 11th Century (1082), starting the gradual penetration of Islam in the country. By the end of the 16th century, Islam replaced Hindu-Buddhism as the main religion. The first Islamic Demak kingdom was established on the coastline (pasisir) of Java, and political power was stabilised during the period of the Mataram kingdom in the 16th century. Mataram was Islamic, but it was patterned after Majapahit, absorbing influences from mystic animism, Hindu-Buddhism, Europe, and Islam.

Wagner (1959) attributed the Javanese's absorption of various religious ideas to their open-minded tolerance, and considered their ability to syncretise them as a characteristic feature of their religious life. European influences arrived with the Portuguese's capture of Malacca in 1511 in pursuit of spice, and the Dutch followed in 1596, colonising Indonesia until independence in 1945.

Temple Ornamentation

A candi (temple) is a place where gods are considered to be actually present, and serves to represent the Cosmos Mountain, Meru, the mythical abode of the gods. The central object of worship in the candi is the image of God. The king is treated as a living god, and when he dies he is united with God. Borobodur (8th Century) in Central Java is a model for the study of the form, function, and meaning of Javanese temple architecture and ornamentation. Believed to be a 'hill monastery', it was built by the Buddhist Sailendra kingdom. Stutterheim (1956) regarded Borobodur as a symbol of the Cosmos Mountain, Meru.



Borobodur (8th Century), Central Java



Panataran temple (1197-1454), East Java

Four holy motifs are regularly found in the ornaments examined: tumpal, kala-makara, the lotus, and the integration of the symbols in the carvings and the Arab aesthetic. They illustrate the harmonization of Islam, the local genius of Indonesian society, and sacredness. The tumpal represents the "cosmic mountain," or place of God; the kala-makara protects sacred monuments; the lotus symbolises life and creativity; and the carvings the birth of life.

As candis represent the universe and the home of the gods, their proportion, number of pillars and corridors, and sculptures should conform to the canon of Hindu religious architecture and sculpture, called silpasastra. The walls, carved with decorative motifs of humans, animals, and mythical characters, as well as floral motifs, have a specific place in the scheme of temple architecture. However, the canon does not deal with temple ornamentation in depth; consequently, Javanese artists elaborated on and appropriated a wide range of decorative motifs from India. A combination of different motifs was usual, varying according to location and group of temples, in order to show the divine nature of structures and ornaments. Many motifs are of things that the Javanese believed are found in heaven.

In fact, the Chinese-influenced Dong Son style of the Bronze and Iron ages had already reached Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, spiral lines and geometrical decorative figures, such as tumpal and swastika, appeared along with ancient symbolic signs; while popular plant motifs were later introduced during its Hinduisation period in the fifth century.

A common motif is tumpal, a decorated triangle carved in different variations on walls and cornices. The tumpal is a common ornament in Java. It first appeared in Neolithic and megalithic times, and its use was continued in Hindu-Buddhist temples. Despite the uncertainty of whether it originally depicted a human figure or a stylised bamboo shoot, the motif was used because of its magical character, or because it symbolized fertility. Probably, its triangular shape represents the worship of the Cosmos Mountain, Meru.

The kala-makara appears as a motif of two animal forms on the lintels of doorways and stairs. In Java, kala (lion) has a human face or demon's head, and a pair of curved makaras is placed at the foot of a gatepost. The makara, a mythical animal with the body of a fish and the trunk of an elephant, was introduced at the same time as the kala during the period of Hinduisation. In Indian mythology, kala-makara represents the holy Cosmos Mountain, and protects temples from demons. Kala, sometimes interpreted as 'time', is a symbol of the celestial element, and makara is the water element in creation – the primal source of life. Combined, they form duality and totality.



a: *Tumpal*: prehistoric (drawing taken from Pepin Press 1998, *Indonesian Ornamental Design*, Amsterdam), b: *Panataran* (1147-1454); c: *Kala-makara*: Borobudur (8th Century); d: *Lotus bud*: Prambanan (8th-9th Century), e: *Kalasan* (9th Century)

The sacredness of a temple is mostly expressed by the lotus (*padma*), which signifies the seat of the highest divinity, the birth of the Universe, the birth of the Buddha, and the ultimate truth. Indian mythology says that gods were born from lotus flowers on which they were seated. It is, thus, not surprising that the lotus has the most significant role in Hindu-Buddhist art. In Mahayanist Buddhism, the abstract notions of the Dharma (truth in Buddhist understanding) were patterned after the lotus, as creator and supporter of the cosmic tree. The bud of the lotus flower, which undergoes a series of natural changes, provides the basic symbol.

Other temple ornamentation includes *kalpataru* (the wishing tree), which represents heaven, found on relief panels and niches of temples; and *puṇnaghata* (a pot of plenty), which appears with flowering plants or scrolls growing from ewers of holy water, symbolising the elixir of immortality. To this, the *kinnara* (heavenly musician), usually female, half-human, half-bird, is added.

Hindu-Buddhist Scrolls

The significance of scrolls lies in its function as a symbol. It was not until the Hindu period in Java that vegetal ornaments came into vogue; from then on, they became principal elements of Indonesian ornamentation (van der Hoop 1949).

A variety of Hindu-Buddhist ornament, the scroll motif often appears in the shape of a recalcitrant spiral. It is the rootstock of undulating lotus which produces nodes (Sanskrit, *parvan*) at regular intervals; from each node emerges a leaf-stalk in the shape of a spiral. These spirals undulate alternately to the right and to the left. At the end of each leaf-stalk is a leaf which bends in the opposite direction to the stalk. Where the stalk curls clockwise, the leaf undulates the other way. For this reason, Brandes named it 'the recalcitrant spiral'. Different adaptations were introduced to lotus scrolls in temple ornamentation. Somewhat stylised, the submerged, horizontally growing part of the plant was made perceptible to the observer, and transformed into a decorative motif. It represents 'the origin of life', called *Hiranyagarbha* ('the Golden Germ').



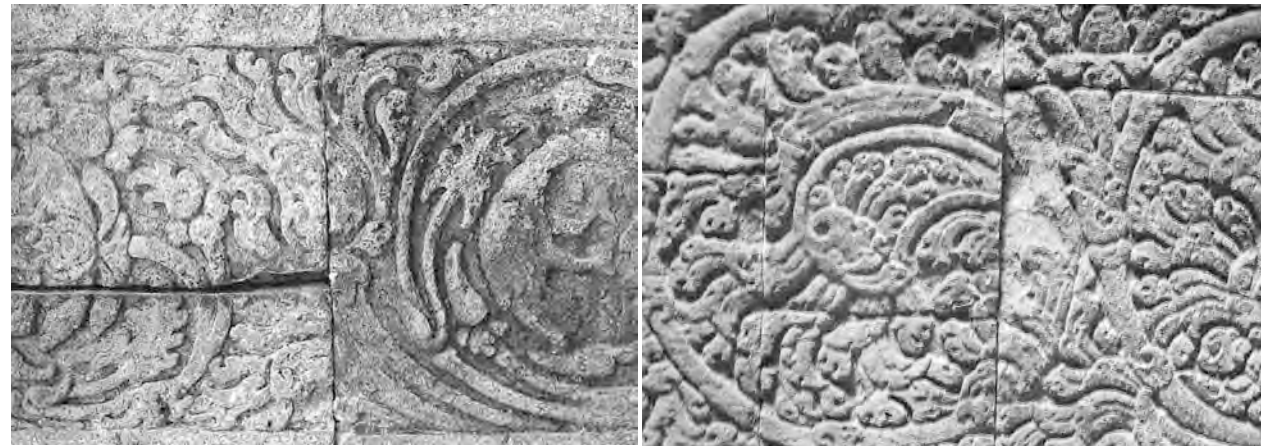
Various types of undulating scrolls (Bosch 1960)

According to Bosch (1960), the Indian concept of the origin of life has been dominated by the belief in dual forces in nature: (i) the male element is creative and omnipresent, and (ii) the female element is chaos, an inert mass of primeval waters. When the breath of creation enters the waters, 'the Golden Germ', the beginning and origin of all creation, is born. A close look at Borobudur exposes an interesting variant of the lotus rootstock. An animal or a human or other emblem in a circular form replaces the lotus root, and rises upwards, introducing nodes, indicating 'the Golden Germ'.

It must be emphasised that 'the Golden Germ' is the most crucial concept in using scrolls on Hindu-Buddhist temple ornamentation. It is also a vital clue for identifying the origin of scrolls in Javanese monuments, whether Hindu-Buddhist, or Islamic, or both.

Moreover, compared to Indian scrolls, the sculptural ornaments in Borobudur are influenced by the Greco-Buddhist style. They also reflect the lotus scrolls of Bharhut in India in the 2nd Century BC, although the reliefs in Bharhut are smaller, while at Borobudur, panels separated by vertical recalcitrant spirals are larger.

A profusion of flowers and curly leaves are also found in Yogyakarta's Kalasan, a 9th Century Buddhist temple with blends of Hindu and Javanese artistry. Vine scroll, a variant of lotus scroll, emerges from a tuber and spreads sideways. As tuber is a symbol of plenty, scrolls are supposed to sprout from the tuber. The beauty of the temple was described thus: This temple is overcrowded with ornament ... but when seeing the good taste with which it has been applied; when realizing that all these decorations are not contrived, being merely enlargements of what the dogma prescribes, when observing how perfectly they harmonize with the whole, then we must admit that this temple had to be built that way and no other in order to be perfect (Bruyn cited by Bosch 1961).



Central Java: Borobodur (8th Century)

Prambanan (8th-9th Century)



Kalasan (9th Century)

Mendut (9th Century)



Top to bottom:
East Java: Panataran (1197-1454), Djago (1268),
Jawi (13th Century),
Simping (13rd-14th Century)

Nevertheless, Mendut (9th Century) has the most beautiful pattern with 30 panels of scrolls. It is another Buddhist temple, located in the village of Mendut, Central Java. The panels illustrate sprouts from a round tuber, fishes, vases, or tortoises. These decorative panels are often purely ornamental, and sometimes filled with depictions of semi-divine beings.

On the contrary, East Javanese scrolls are more stylised and indigenous than Central Javanese ones. On the posts and lintels at the Djago temple (1268) in East Java, scrolls show a variant of the spiral ornament. The vertical movement of the shortened scrolls has lost much of its smoothness. On the flight of steps, a complicated arrangement of curls and scrolls with a height of 1.8 metres springs from the back of a lion. In Panataran temple (1197-1454), a compound of ancient monuments, scrolls are mostly expressed in the form of medallions whose diametres are ca. 35 cm. All kinds of animals within a circular shape are used as decoration. Their tails continue into a scroll, reflecting the styles of Central Java, but are reduced to a single curl which fills the entire medallion. Scrolls seem to evoke both the connotations and beauty of the sacred life.

Trilling's theory raises an enquiry. Zimmer (1960) claims that the sculpture of Borobodur was of Indian origin, probably from Gupta, while Stutterheim (1956) associates Borobodur with the Greco-Buddhist school of Gandhara, and this was accepted by Kempers (1959). There are still debates on whether the original Greek vine scrolls in Borobodur came to Indonesia through India, or whether it also travelled to the Middle East and was transformed into Islamic arabesque in mosque ornamentation. This supposition can suggest an example of syncretic ornaments beyond time and space. Ornament can be a mediator between different cultures.

Pre-Islamic Ornaments in Javanese Mosques

Krom (1923) is one of the foremost scholars on the Islamisation process in Java. He pointed out that the minaret of Kudus in Central Java was an adaptation of an old form. Islam in Java was not opposed to established architectural traditions, due to the gradual – rather than revolutionary – Javanese conversion to Islam. Nevertheless, significant modification was restricted by the principles of decoration to observe the hadith (a



*Islamic Umayyad,
Syria 8th Century*



*Buddhist Borobodur,
Central Java 8th Century*

traditional account of things said and done by the Prophet of Islam and his companions), which prohibits the depiction of living figures. His opinion was further supported by two leading archaeologists, Tjandrasasmita and Ambary.

Tjandrasasmita (1984) attempts to prove that Islam has been sensitive to local conditions and, to a certain degree, contributed to the preservation of indigenous cultural values and traditions. Islamic propagators and Indonesians themselves have always exercised cultural tolerance in the fields of architecture, decorative art, and other aspects of culture. For example, the Mantingan mosque (1559) in Central Java and Sendang Duwur mosque (1561) in East Java display a fusion of Hindu-Javanese and Islamic elements of fine arts that demonstrates a close relationship between Hindu Majapahit and Islamic cities on the coast.

The role of ornaments needs to be underlined when looking at the integration of Islam in Javanese culture, during which artists were encouraged to adjust to new realities, instead of submitting to impositions placed on them. Islam penetrated Javanese minds slowly without force; the locals easily adapted to its principal concept of tolerance and flexibility. Sendang Duwur, as the earliest product of Javanese Islamic art, reflects the process of acculturation to which tolerance, syncretism, local genius, and

friendship contribute. According to Wales (1948), the term “local genius” is designated to certain Southeast Asians who have the ability to shape a foreign culture, and make it suitable to local conditions, and thereby create a new culture.

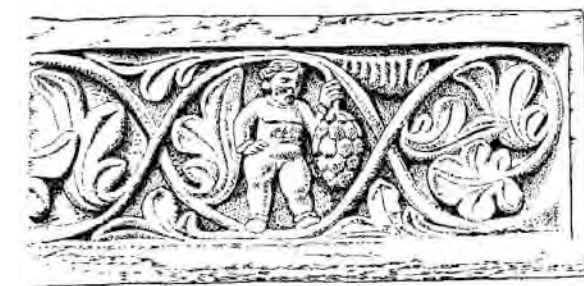
Sharing the same view of Tjandrasasmita, Ambary (1983) maintains that Indonesian Islamic art was essentially a continuation of prehistoric indigenous art. In his ‘Finding the Civilization of Islam and Archaeology in Indonesia’ (1998), he suggests that Javanese Islamic art tends to be non-iconoclastic, especially in places of worship, and does not separate architecture and ornamentation; they are integrated. He divides Javanese art into the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. According to him, (i) Hindu-Buddhist art reflects its political and cultural background, while Islamic art is not; (ii) research on the arts of the Islamic period has not been intensive and continuous, compared to that of the Hindu-Buddhist; and (iii) Islamic art has lost its continuity in certain areas. Some cultural

centres deviated from the original art forms because of the foundation of small kingdoms, different interpretations in art, and diverse tastes of local art. In short, Hindu Majapahit art was completed during the Islamic period through the incorporation of Islamic and Chinese styles.



*Roman coffin from Sidon, Lebanon 2nd-3rd Century CE
(Wilson 2001)*

In Astana Mantingan, a large number of sculpted, foliated stone medallions are combined with stylised animal forms, indicating a clever and artistic way of representing living figures, instead of rejecting them (orthodox Islam). An arrangement of kala head and deer on a doorway at the winged gate of Sendang Duwur indicates the influence of the artist’s Hindu-Buddhist predecessors.



*Greco-Buddhist Gandhara,
Pakistan 2nd-3rd Century CE
(Wilson 2001)*

In an interview (2004), Prijotomo claimed that the floral decoration at Sendang Duwur is a combination of pre-Islamic and Islamic ideas and forms. He said: "It is not real floral, but a modified one, seen as floral. This ambiguity is a Javanese characteristic. Javanese mosques use Hindu-Buddhist motifs in an Islamic way. The form is Hindu, but the idea is Islamic, or vice versa. As Islam allows freedom, everybody can make their own style, but keeping continuity."

Marwoto (2003) found many types of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic motifs in early Javanese mosques along the coastline, such as natural, fauna, floral, calligraphy, etc.. Among them, kala-makaras, floral motifs, and lotus were present in both periods. Islamic poets depict flower as a book from which one gains knowledge relating to God. While combining flowers and birds on graves is a characteristic of Islamic decorative art in Java, the representation of living figures was not sanctioned.

Sacred Mosque

The Holy Koran defines the mosque as the place where Muslims worship, and an expression of their belief in, and submission to, God was achieved through prayer. The Arabic word 'masjid' (mosque) literally means the place of prostration.

At the time of their introduction in Indonesia, the mosque and the idea of a communal prayer were new, and the Koran contains few regulations regarding the form of a mosque. Consequently, Javanese architects had the liberty to interpret its basic requirement and integrate these with their experience in building temples. It is known that pre-Islamic traditions prescribe the form, location, and structure of sacred places and what images to put inside them. Mystical Sufis borrowed these traditions based on their belief of mosques as sacred places; thus, they combined indigenous and Islamic ideas and forms in their mosques.

In 'The Javanese Mosque, a Regional Interpretation of Form and Mystical Concepts' (1996), Isnaeni discusses the continuity of pre-Islamic mysticism that is reflected in Javanese mosque elements. For instance, the multi-tiered roof symbolises a link between God and Muslims,

according to Sufis' view. A mustaka, a crown of red lotus at its apex, is a container of the essence of divine unity in Hinduism; in Islam, it embodies the ultimate goal of the mystical path to God. Soko guru (four master columns) signifies the spiritual context. Its verticality and centralisation express the ultimate unity between God and his believers, continued from the Hindu belief in the identity of self and the universal soul. In Islam and Hindu-Buddhism, water has been significant in spiritual purification rituals. In Islamic practice, ablution before prayer is required. Located in front of the mosque, water channel represents new creatures that will fill the void of the universe with life.

Pre-Islamic features in Javanese mosques indicate that Islam in Java did not initiate new forms of religious architecture. The teaching itself was more important than the physical mosque. Islam teaches that Allah has created this world as a mosque.

Hindu-Buddhist Scrolls and Islamic Arabesque

Syncretic Javanese scrolls are significant proof that Java has been and is a melting pot. A visual presentation of a large number of scrolls directly taken from temples, graves, and mosques in Java, chosen and arranged by chronology and geographical area, can offer a glimpse of the continuity in scroll styles. Hindu-Buddhist scrolls in Central Java have naturalistic and elaborate decoration, reflecting the influence of India. They run vertically in a narrow panel beside arched gates. Scrolls in East Java are simple and stylised, revealing an indigenous character. They undulate horizontally in a narrow frame, or fill a medallion. Both types are sometimes accompanied with animals, humans, and circular objects.

In Javanese mosques, Hindu-Buddhist scrolls resemble Islamic arabesque. They are an amalgamation of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic ideas and forms (geometrical, abstract, repetitive, continuous), and were created by local craftsmen.

Most scrolls in temples and mosques share common symbolisms and elements. They also appear (i) all the time (ii) over the whole surface area (iii) in different materials, (iv) in colour sometimes, and (v) adorned

with kala-makara or calligraphy. Undulating regularly, repetitively, and continuously in rhythm, scrolls seem to represent ‘the Origin of Life’ in Hindu-Buddhism, and ‘the Vision of Paradise’ in Islam.

In this regard, Islamic scrolls became symbolic in syncretic Javanese mosques despite their main function as decoration in Islamic art. Five groups of scrolls below are chosen to assess the thread of continuity (from the pre-Islamic to Javanese). The scrolls in Group 1 contain ‘the Golden Germ’ at the bottom of the scroll through makara, either natural or stylised. Those in Group 2 bear the purnaghata (a pot of plenty) or ‘life giver’ from which the scrolls emerge, while Group 3 scrolls depict a medallion that is common in East Java. Scrolls in Group 4 flow vertically (that of Agung Yogya was made during the syncretic Mataram kingdom during the Dutch colonisation era).



*Borobodur temple
(8th Century)*

*A1 W Mangkunegara mosque
(1878-1918)*

*Kalasan temple
(9th Century)*

*Hidayatullah mosque
(1750)*



*Panataran temple
(1197-1454)*

*Astana Mantingan mosque
(1559)*

*Kalasan temple
(9th Century)*

*Agung Yogya mosque
(1773)*

Three Islamic periods in Java: transitory (15C-1619), Dutch colonisation (1619-1945), Contemporary (1945-present)

Conclusion: Inherited Tolerance and Flexibility

The Javanese coined the term, ‘Bhinneka Tunggal Ika’ (unity in diversity), to stress their identity and culture. Java has been a centre where animism, Hindu-Buddhism, and Islam co-existed, moving toward a syncretic Islamic religion.

The research findings show that Hindu-Buddhist scrolls displayed its design continuity in Javanese mosques under a variety of influences, to which several reasons can be attributed: (1) a tolerant attitude to the arrival of Islam, and the Javanese’s acceptance of it; (2) similarity in the mysticism of Sufism and existing animism and Hindu-Buddhism, facilitating the transition of ancestor worship from animism to Hindu-Buddhist gods, and to Allah; (3) flexibility of Islam towards local motifs in mosque ornamentation, (4) the role of local ornaments in religious conversion, (5) orthodox Islamic ornaments made by unskilled foreign missionary; and above all (6) need to preserve Javanese traditions.

Whatever it was, the continuity was mainly attributed to ‘the sacredness’ in symbolism, rooted deeply in the pre-Islamic period. The sacred Javanese temples and ornaments were extended to mosques by mystic Sufis. As Javanese mosques were sacred (Isnaeni 1996), any motif used in mosque ornamentation became sacred and symbolic as well.

Tjandrasasmita, a distinguished scholar and specialist in Islamic archaeology, argued in an interview (2005) that Javanese Islam has a few distinctive characteristics. Javanese Muslims are greatly concerned with cultural heritage, toward which the local craftsmen contribute through their work that transcends beliefs. They made connections between the holy ornaments, which originated from Hindu-Buddhism, and Islamic influences. A continuing Islamic idea of a symbolic tree from the Garden of Eden was linked to the Tree of Life in Hindu-Buddhism.

It is known that Hindu-Buddhist ornaments are symbolic, and orthodox Islamic ones are for aesthetics. Javanese Islamic ornamentation assimilated different principles of Hindu-Buddhism and Islam, concentrating on the common aim of ‘sacredness’ in mosques. Eventually, Chinese and European influences were tossed into the mix.

As a melting pot, Java develops a Javanese Islam that is syncretic; Javanese Muslims, who cherish their cultural heritage of tolerance and flexibility, invent beautiful amalgamation of different sources to pay tribute to Allah.

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