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Revitalising Traditional Malay Cultural Identity Based on Early Muslim Gravestones in Penang Island

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ABSTRACT

The Batu Nisan Aceh in Penang, particularly that of Tunku Syed Hussain Al-Aidid, has received limited scholarly attention, often overshadowed by colonial narratives centred on Francis Light and the British acquisition of the island. This historiographical gap has contributed to the marginalisation of Malay cultural identity as the original settlers of Penang. It has obscured the region's broader historical connections to the Dar al-Islam of the Islamic West. This study aims to revitalise and reposition Malay cultural identity by conducting a visual analysis of the decorative repertoire on Tunku's tombstone, contextualised within Penang's historical landscape and its ties to Aceh, as well as the Turkic-Islamic dynasties of India and the Eastern Islamic world. The findings indicate that Malay-Islamic art in Penang exhibits clear cultural and aesthetic links to the Turco-Persian artistic tradition, propagated by Islamic dynasties such as the Ottomans, Rasulids, Delhi Sultanate, and the Kingdom of Ormus. This is reflected in specific motifs on Tunku's tombstone, including the Rubʿ al-Hizb (۞), ciharberk, mihrab images, kitʿa, zencirek and salbek, many of which are common in Qur'anic illumination (tezhib). These shared visual elements suggest transregional artistic exchange, possibly initiated during the reign of Ottoman Sultan Suleymān I the Lawgiver (r. 1520–1566 CE) or earlier. Contrary to earlier claims that Tunku's tombstone is an "imitation," the analysis confirms it to be a unique and original design, with its motifs serving as symbolic markers of the deceased's status, lineage, and spiritual authority. This study underscores the need for further research into Malay heritage in Penang, where symbolism in ornamentation often conveys identity and societal role in the absence of inscribed names, reflecting a cultural preference for modesty, hegemony and reverence.

Keywords: *Batu Nisan Aceh, Malay-Islamic art, Turco-Persian, Tunku Syed Hussain, Penang*

INTRODUCTION

The history and cultural significance of early local settlers in Penang is often overshadowed by the unethical and deceitful British acquisition by Francis Light in 1786 CE, which marks the island's separation from the Kedah Sultanate. It is deemed unethical as historically accurate facts are often left out, particularly those involving local existing Malay communities. This results in illogical and over-exaggerated attribution towards the British occupation as the sole founder and establishment of Penang Island. This deception is detrimental as it diminishes the local community's cultural identity and significance, who were the original settlers of Penang Island long before the arrival of Francis Light near the end of the 18th century (Ahmad Murad 2015).

The effects of this can be visibly seen today, as the cultural identity of the early Malay settlers in Penang Island is not significantly highlighted in places that were once the centre for Malay-Muslim communities. Hence, it is vital to revive the cultural identity of the Malays who were the original inhabitants of the Island that had existed before the British acquisition, as Francis Light himself had met and made dealings with the local Malays.

Research Background

According to Francis Light's personal journal, he recorded encountering approximately 30 Malays along the shore of Tanjung Penaga (present-day Fort Cornwallis) four days after he arrived in Penang (Mahani 2012). At that time, Penang Island was known by different names among local communities. The Malays of Kedah and Seberang Perai referred to it as Tanjung Penaga, a name likely derived from the abundance of *penaga* trees in the area that is now Fort Cornwallis. Meanwhile, Sumatran communities called the island Pulau Kesatu (The First Island). This designation was reportedly introduced by a renowned seafarer from Lingga named Ragam, who frequently travelled between Lingga and Kedah for trade (Mahani 2012). Intriguingly, Light's journal also notes that the Malay group that settled in Tanjung Penaga was led by a figure known as Nahkoda Kechil, whose birth name was Ismail. He was the younger brother of Haji Mohammad Salleh, also known as Nahkoda Intan (real name: Raja Nan Intan Ibni Almarhum Tengku Pateh Sebatang), both of whom hailed from Sumatra and were related to the Minangkabau royal lineage (Ahmad Murad 2015; Mahani 2012). Historical sources suggest that Nahkoda Intan played a foundational role in the establishment of the Batu Uban settlement between 1710 and 1734 CE. With permission granted by Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin Muazzam Shah II (r. 1710–1778 CE) of Kedah, Nahkoda Intan founded a Minangkabau village on Penang Island (Mahani 2012). This early settlement was further solidified by the construction of the Batu Uban Jamek Mosque in 1734 CE, which remains intact today. The mosque also houses the grave of Nahkoda Intan, located beside its main structure (Ahmad Murad 2015). According to Ahmad Murad (2015), the territory developed by Nahkoda Intan extended as far as Tanjung Penaga by 1734 CE, although his primary efforts were focused along the Batu Uban coastline. His brother, Nahkoda Kechil (Ismail), was responsible for the administration of the Tanjung Penaga region (Ahmad Murad 2015; Mahani 2012). However, it is important to note that the family and kin of Nahkoda Intan were not the sole Malay presence on Penang Island (Pulau Kesatu) during this period.

Based on the journals written by Macalister and Sir George Leith (the first Governor of Penang from 1800 to 1804 CE), it is stated that there were already two or three original inhabitants of Penang Island in 1786 CE, and more than 2,000 people were living on the island 60 years earlier (1726 CE). This was made evident based on the presence of burial grounds covering an area of about two square miles in Penang (quoted Mahani 2012). Sir George Leith was also informed of a navigable channel extending from the Tanjung Penaga area to Pulau Jerejak (Jerejak Island), which encompassed Batu Uban, facilitating the passage of large seafaring vessels. This detail is corroborated by the personal account of Nahkoda Intan's great-grandson, who, during a recent interview at Masjid Jamek Batu Uban, recalled ships passing the mosque and deploying *tongkang* (lighters) to obtain fresh drinking water from its well on shore (Personal communication, 20 July 2024). While Macalister and Leith did not specify the exact locations of early settlements and burial grounds, subsequent journals corroborate that they likely referred to areas along Pinang River, Perak Road, and Datok Keramat (Mahani 2012). For instance, Stevens's 1929 journal identified several pre-colonial inhabited sites, notably an 18-acre village and burial ground at Datok Keramat. Stevens further referenced a 1705 CE journal, which recorded Datok Keramat's habitation for 90 years prior, suggesting Malay presence in the area since approximately 1615 CE (quoted in Mahani 2012).

Based on historical documentation, the Datok Keramat village was founded by an individual known as "Datok Keramat," who was originally from Sumatra and of Acehnese descent (Mahani 2012). Interestingly, previous research conducted in the Teluk Jelutong district in 1795 CE revealed that the burial grounds in the area belonged to an individual known as Datok Maharaja Setia, a Kuala Muda Nobleman who inherited them from Datok Keramat and owned 50 acres of land surrounding them (Mahani 2012). The presence of Acehnese people in Tanjung Penaga, along with the other Sumatrans—Nahkoda Intan and Datok Jannatun from Minangkabau—is made more apparent by the arrival of Tengku Syed Hussien Al-Aidid (a member of the Acheh royal family and of Arab descent) in 1792 CE, who settled in Lebuh Acheh and became one of the wealthiest men in Tanjung Penaga as he had monopoly over the spice trade (Mahani 2012). It is said that Datok Maharaja Setia is a kinsman of Datuk Jannatun, who was previously a minister at the court of Pagar Ruyung and a blood relative of the Pagar Ruyung Sultan in western Sumatra, but came to Penang in 1749 CE due to differences of opinion over religion and customs (Mahani 2012). Despite this, Datuk Jannatun was the person responsible for opening the hilly areas around Batu Uban until Gelugor after the land was granted to them (Datuk Jannatun and his younger brother) by Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin Muazzam Shah II, the reigning Sultan of Kedah from 1710 until 1778 CE (Mahani 2012).

Additionally, several other Malay pioneers were present during Francis Light's era, including Pah Kechil (from Batu Bara, Indonesia), Jamaluddin and Nakhoda Che Salleh (from Lingga, who developed Permatang Damar Laut), Nakhoda Seedin (from Deli), Panglima Long from Setul (who established Teluk Kumbar), and Lebai Tampak from Deli (who founded Balik Pulau) (quoted in Mahani 2012). While the Bayan Lepas area was established by Haji Mohammad Salleh shortly after Francis Light landed in Tanjung Penaga and met each other in 1786 CE. Haji Mohammad Salleh (d. 1837 CE)—not to be confused with Nakhoda Intan from Sumatra, despite having similar names—was also known as "Haji Brunei" due to his Bruneian origin (Mahani 2012). With the help of Nakhoda Kechil and several other Malays to open the village of Jelutong, Haji Brunei had attracted many immigrants from Brunei in the ensuing years. One of which is the arrival of a Brunei noble family in the mid-19th century CE, headed by Pangeran Jaafar—the grandson of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin II (1828–1852 CE)—together with his siblings after a major disagreement over the election of a new *pemancha* (Mahani 2012). Their existence and presence in the Bayan Lepas area are evident based on the burial ground of the Brunei people (Tanah Perkuburan Islam Bayan Lepas), which vividly displays their unique cultural identity through the design style and ornaments of the tombstones.

Problem Statement

The presence of early Malay-Muslim settlers in Penang Island is evidenced by the discovery of their burial grounds (Mahani 2012). These sites are significant not only as material proof of early settlement but also as markers of cultural identity, as reflected in the designs and ornamentation found on their tombstone (Noor and Khoo 2003). However, the tombstones of these early settlers, particularly those of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* type, have been understudied in terms of their artistic and cultural significance. This research gap is due to two primary reasons. First, earlier studies primarily focused on the identification, documentation, and compilation of early Muslim burial sites and tombstones (*Batu Nisan Aceh*) across the broader Southeast Asian region, without directing specific attention to Penang Island (Perret and Ab Razak 1999; 2004; Othman 1988). While this focus was justified at the time—given the need to establish a broader typological and geographical survey—there was limited effort to analyse the aesthetic elements, motifs, and transregional cultural connections embedded in these tombstones (Feener et al. 2021). Although Mahani (2014) compiled an important survey of historic mosques and *Keramat* (shrines of Muslim saints) in Penang dating from 1730 to 2012, her study remained focused on historical context. It did not include analysis or visual documentation of the artistic elements found on the tombstones.

Similarly, the only known references to the existence and typological style of *Batu Nisan Aceh* tombstones in Penang are by Perret and Razak (2004). Still, even these works prioritised typological classification over detailed art historical analysis. Their contributions were essential for updating the typological sequence of newly discovered tombstones, yet they overlooked the formal, symbolic, and iconographic dimensions of the artistic repertoires. This leads to the second key issue: the neglect of artistic elements and the absence of systematic visual analysis, which can result in fragmented interpretations and erroneous conclusions. Such oversight risks marginalising the historical value of decorative motifs and may contribute to the misconception that these elements are insignificant to the construction of Malay cultural identity in Penang. This assumption is especially detrimental, as it overlooks the potential of ornamental and visual forms as repositories of cultural memory and expression. To address this gap, the present study focuses on the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tombstone of Tunku Hussain Al-Aidid, located in the vicinity of Masjid Lebuh Aceh, George Town. Despite its artistic merit, this gravestone has previously been dismissed as an "imitation" without sufficient explanation or analytical justification (Perret and Razak 2004, 51). The selection of this gravestone is based on its exceptional state of preservation—despite some corrosion—compared to other tombstones on Penang Island, and the fact that it remains under a shaded and well-maintained structure, allowing for clearer analysis of its decorative and iconographic content. This tombstone, therefore, offers a valuable opportunity to engage in a more nuanced and holistic exploration of the Malay-Islamic artistic heritage embodied in the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition on Penang Island. Through this study, the research aims to contribute toward a deeper understanding of the formation of regional Islamic visual culture and its role in shaping Malay identity in a transregional context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of tombstones/gravestones from the *Batu Nisan Aceh* type in Southeast Asia was first studied by Othman bin Mohammed Yatim in 1985 for his doctoral thesis. His research focused on the origins of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition, which he believed started from northern Aceh in Sumatra—hence the name of the object, which literally translates as "gravestone from Aceh"—which then spread towards the Malay Peninsula and other parts of the archipelago from the 13th until the 19th century CE (Othman 1985). The object was of immense interest as the tombstones were particularly used for Sultans (kings) and royalties in the Southeast Asia region, where the shapes of the gravestones were unique and heavily decorated with fine carvings of motifs and ornaments, which represented the identity of Malay cultural tradition in the early period of Islamization in this region. However, Othman's interest was more focused on compiling, documenting and organising the different typologies of *Batu Nisan Aceh* chronologically, as well as identifying the distribution of these objects throughout the archipelago (Othman 1985; 1988). Although his analysis included the artistic repertoires as well as reading and translating the epitaph carved on the *Batu Nisan Aceh*, but less attention were given towards the motifs and ornaments as the historical context for the earliest Islamic evidence in the archipelago region—based on the typography chronology of the *Batu Nisan Aceh*—was deemed more significant (Othman 1985; 1988; 1998; Othman and Abdul Halim 1990).

His typology sequence and research were later joined and refined by scholars such as Ambary (1998), Perret and Ab Razak (1999; 2004), Repelita (2008), and Suprayitno (2011; 2012). Despite this, their interest is similar with Othman's, that is to establish, refute, propose and introduce a new set of typography sequences in the pre-existing 14 "Othman Yatim Type" (OYT) *Batu Nisan Aceh* typology labelled as Type A–N (Othman 1988). In addition to this, each scholar has their own views on the formation and history of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition in Southeast Asia. Their central debate was concerned with identifying the origins of the tradition, where relative-comparative analysis of the typology and artistic repertoires with other grave and tombstones in

several burial sites across the Muslim world was given great interest. Although several scholars had attributed the cultural formation of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* geographically with Gujerat and Cambay in West Coast India (Moquette 1912; Lambourn 2008a), but Guillot et al. (2008) had also suggested certain parts of the Eastern Islamic lands (Persian region) to have strong probability of culturally ties with the formation of the gravestones in the Southeast Asia region.

This is further supported by Marrison's (1955) analysis of the early Persian influences in the Malay people's life, which is vividly evident in language, religion (Sufism), culture, literature and epics from 1280 until 1650 CE, which he believed came from Iran or "Persianized India" through Malabar (southwestern coast of India) to Samudra-Pasai in Sumatera. Fatimi's (1963) research was also pointing towards the same direction as he discovered that the early Islamic history of Malay Peninsula—particularly Champa as the Champa Pillar dated 1035 CE was discovered in Phang Rang (Fatimi 1963; Othman and Abdul Halim 1990)—had connection with Muslims of Turkic stock from the Ghaznavid Dynasty (977–1186 CE) during the reign of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (999–1030 CE) in India. Despite this, the connection had more effect on culture than on the Islamization of the region. Nonetheless, our understanding of the cultural formation of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* is still in its infancy, as we are still lacking a proper analysis of the subject, particularly in terms of its motifs and ornaments.

This problem is much more severe in the study of *Batu Nisan Aceh* in Penang. To my knowledge, there is only one scholar who acknowledges the existence of *Batu Nisan Aceh* in Penang, that is Perret and Razak (2004). While Mahani (2014) examines the graves of *keramats* (Muslim saints) on Penang Island in a broader sense, her study does not specifically address *Batu Nisan Aceh*. According to Perret and Razak (2004), the only *Batu Nisan Aceh* in Penang Island can be found within the vicinity of Masjid Lebuh Aceh, Georgetown, which belongs to the family and followers of Tunku Syed Hussain Al-Aidid. These tombstones can be found in the open area or housed under a small wooden pavilion structure, known in Malay as a "*Langgar*," located on the right side (west direction) of the Masjid Lebuh Aceh. Although there are a few *Batu Nisan Aceh* at the site, but Perret and Razak only acknowledge two sets of *Batu Nisan Aceh* located in the open area (outside of the wooden pavilion)—believed to be Tunku Syed Hussain's relatives—tagged with the code MMLA 1 and MMLA 2 (*Makam Masjid Lama Lebuh Aceh*) and categorised as *Batu Nisan Aceh* Type N and Q respectively (Perret and Razak 2004, 458–459). The *Batu Nisan Aceh* Types N and Q were additional typology types that Perret and Razak added from the pre-existing OYT (Perret and Razak 2004; Othman 1988).

While other gravestones that they mentioned, particularly another two sets of *Batu Nisan Aceh* located east of MMLA 1 and MMLA 2 (inside the wooden pavilion), are claimed to be an "imitation," thus were not included in their analysis (Perret and Razak 2004, 51). They were also not certain as to which tombstone belonged to Tunku Syed Hussain Al-Aidid—as no name was carved on the tombstone despite being decorated with motifs and ornaments—but assumed that one of the two sets of tombstones placed inside the pavilion (dated to be from the early 19th century CE) must belong to him (Perret and Razak 2004, 51). Nonetheless, this conjecture is problematic as their claim is not befitting of the elite status of Tunku as an Acehnese royalty and wealthy merchant in Penang Island during that time.

The discussion becomes even more complicated as recent research by Muhammad Nabil and Hafiz (2019) discovered 23 additional *Batu Nisan Aceh* in Penang Island—which were previously not identified and included by Othman (1988) nor Perret and Razak (2004)—of which 21 of them are considered new and not documented or analysed before. With this discovery, they had to create seven new sets of typology sequence of the *Batu Nisan Aceh*, such as A2, D2, R1, R2, S, T and U, as the newly discovered tombstones did not fit in the existing typology sequence proposed by Othman (1988) as well as Perret and Ab Razak (1999; 2004). With this new sequence, the previously identified *Batu Nisan Aceh* by Perret (MMLA 1 and MMLA 2) from Types N and

Q were newly categorised as PPLA 16 and PPLA 17 (*Pulau Pinang Lebuh Aceh*) that belonged to typology Type R2 and R1, respectively (Muhammad Nabil and Hafiz 2019). They also refute the tombstones located inside the pavilion—believed to be the graves of Tunku Syed Hussain (based on their size) and his immediate family members—as an imitation, but an original type of *Batu Nisan Aceh* (Muhammad Nabil and Hafiz 2019).

While Muhammad Nabil and Hafiz's new sequence introduces further complexity and questions, prompting many critical Islamic art and art history scholars to favour visual stylistic analysis over typology for chronological sequencing (Lambourn 2008a; Blair 2006), their research is nonetheless valuable. It represents the sole comprehensive study identifying and documenting the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition in Penang Island and Seberang Perai, an area previously overlooked. Despite this, Muhammad Nabil and Hafiz's focus mirrors that of Othman and Perret: to establish the Islamic historical context in the Malay Peninsula and to identify and document *Batu Nisan Aceh* discoveries across various locations. In doing so, they have again overlooked the significant artistic repertoires on the gravestones. These repertoires offer crucial data regarding the cultural identity of the Malay community on Penang Island and the acculturated influences shaping the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition throughout the Malay Peninsula.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this study is art history and visual analysis, which will enable a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the selected archaeological objects. Archaeological objects such as gravestones are favoured in art history study as they are the early seeing sources of history in the Malay Archipelago but are often neglected, making the potential data they provide rarely studied or exploited (Feener et al. 2021; Lambourn 2008a). In addition to this, the archaeological objects are then analysed in the context of Islamic art history in the Malay Archipelago, which analyses motifs and ornaments with different variations and regional preferences, which are thoroughly studied visually. The art history method—in the context of Islamic art—is defined by Grabar (2006) as an approach that analyses the different qualitative variations of "things" made by man in terms of its technique of manufacture or other connotations such as style, composition, proportion, colour, motif, mode and others physical and visible characteristics, which are a complex combination of style and subject matter. The formal analysis of artistic creations and archaeological objects, known as formalism, primarily aims to analyse form and style by emphasising their visual or material aspects (Riegl 2018; Bell 1914). Formalism is favoured in the study of art history as it posits that the necessary information to comprehend a work of art is contained within the art itself, including the context, the reason for its creation and the historical background (Reigl 2018; Carroll 2013; Bell 1914). Therefore, the art history method will be used in this study to analyse three main components found available in the selected *Batu Nisan Aceh*, that is, the motif, stylisation and history of the local cultural tradition. The motifs are then further identified and separated into three different categories, namely floral, geometry and calligraphy. Despite this, the analysis will focus mainly on the motif and stylisation as compared to calligraphy, as the epitaph has been subjected to numerous research before. Therefore, this method proves essential by combining visual analysis with historical textual evidence to discern early Malay cultural identity in Penang. The Islamic art found on the tombstones is particularly significant, providing crucial visual data on regional artistic developments where textual records are scarce.

THE HISTORY OF TUNKU SYED HUSSAIN AL-AIDID

Tunku Syed Hussain Al-Aidid—known as "Raja Pulau Pinang" and considered the third wealthiest individual in the state for several years—is a descendant of Aceh royalty with Arab-Hadhrami bloodline. According to historical records, his lineage can be traced back to Sultan Jamal al-Alam Badr ul-Munir (1703–1726 CE), who belonged to the Arab-Hadhrami family of Jamalullail *sayyids* who arrived in Penang Island in the year 1791 CE and settled with his family and entourage in Lebuh Acheh (Muhammad Nabil 2020; Mahani 2012; 2014; Lee 1995). According to Lee (1995), it is said that Tunku Syed Hussain and his family left Aceh in 1770 CE for Riau and settled in Kuala Selangor, where they built a thriving business and later came to Penang Island as one of its first settlers. Based on historical records, among the commodities sold by Tunku Syed Hussain are pepper, rice, betel nut, dammar, gold and other commodities exported from Aceh (Lee 1995).

Although Tunku Syed Hussain held considerable importance as a leader within the Malay-Muslim and Acehnese communities of 18th-century Penang (specifically the area between present-day Armenian Street and Lebuh Acheh) (Mahani 2011; 2012; Lee 1995), detailed information concerning his life remains notably scarce. Among others, Tunku Syed Hussain was a wealthy businessman that had major influence over the Aceh-Penang sea trade and was invited by the *panglima sagis* (a group of powerful chieftains in Aceh) to become Sultan replacing Sultan Alauddin Jauhar ul-Alam Syah (ruled 1795–1815 CE and 1819–1823 CE) but later appointed his second son, Syed Abdullah (regal name Sultan Saif Al Alam, ruled 1815–1818 CE) to replace him as Sultan of Aceh (Lee 1995). As a person of great wealth, he was also deemed a reliable figure by the British authorities to the point they asked Tunku for a loan of 50,000 and 30,000 Spanish dollars at 12% interest in July 1815 and August 1816 CE respectively, as well as rented the official residence of the Penang Governor from him (Lee 1995, 220). In addition to this, he was also responsible for establishing the area for Muslim pilgrims to gather and prepare their journey to Mecca by sea until 1976 CE (Mahani 2011; 2014). Due to this, the area was known as "*Pekan Melayu*" (Malay Town) or "*Jeddah Kedua*" (trans. Second Jeddah) (Mahani 2011). Among the commodities that were sold in the *Pekan Melayu* (Lebuh Aceh, Armenian Street and Kampung Kolam) were *kitabs*, clothes, *songkok*, *tarbus*, *kopiah*, items related to hajj pilgrimage, *capal*, jewellery and houses (Mahani 2011, 87).

THE ARABS IN *LEBUH ACEH*

The presence of Tunku Syed Hussain in Lebuh Acheh catalyzed the immigration of Arab Hadrami *Sayyids* and Acehnese natives. According to Mahani, Arab immigration to Penang Island occurred in three phases: first, an influx from diverse regions within the Malay Archipelago (*Nusantara*), such as Aceh; second, arrivals from Singapore after the 1819 CE establishment of a British trading post; and third, the immigration of Arab people from India, particularly Gujerat (Mahani 2011, 70–71). The Arabs that came from India consist of two groups, the *Illappai/Labbai*, who were Tamil Muslims from the Coromandel coast—the richest among them are known as *Marakayar*—and the *Mappilas* from Malabar that were responsible for spreading the *Shafi'i* madhhab to the Malacca Sultanate (Mahani 2011, 65). Despite historical records identifying their origin as India, both groups nevertheless claimed Arab lineage (Mahani 2011, 65). Hence, the term "Tamil" or "India-Muslim" is rather confusing as it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the term refers to geographical location (West Coast or southern India) or ethnicity as the Indian subcontinent is historically inhabited by Arabs, Persian and Turkic—other than locals—after the spread of Islam towards the east of *Dar al-Islam* in the 7th century CE (Asher and Talbot 2006; Rawlinson 2001). Therefore, the term "Tamil" or "India-Muslim" could also be referring to Arab-Persian who lived and intermarried with the locals in the Indian subcontinent or the geographical location of the port they set sail for Penang, not referring to Indian/Tamil ethnicity entirely. This notion is

supported by Perret's (2017) analysis of Nayna Husâm al-Dîn bin Nayna Amîn *Batu Aceh* tombstone located in the Tungku Ulee Blang cemetery area in Pasai, northern Sumatra. Although the title name of the deceased, "Nayna," is derived from the Tamil word "*naynar*"—which suggests the individual originates from southern India—Perret (2017) believes that the deceased is of Arab-Persian descent from the *Mappila* group that inhabits the port area. This is supported by the marble stone used for his *Batu Aceh* tombstone, which was imported from Cambay, Gujerat and features Persian decorative elements, including a poem by Sa'dî (also known as Saadi Shirazi), a famous Persian poet in the 13th century CE (Perret 2017, 238).

There was also a direct immigration of Arab people from Mecca, Hadhramaut and Yemen to Penang Island in the 19th to 20th century CE, where 23 Arab families are identified. This includes Aljunid, Al-Aidid, Al-Sagof, Al-Attas, Al-Makki, Al-Bahgdadi, Al-Basrawi and Al-Juffri, to name a few (quoted in Mahani 2011). Despite this specific influx, the island's population was remarkably diverse, comprising Europeans, Bugis, Acehnese, Minangkabau, Padang, Rao, Talu, Mandailing, Asahan, Batak (deported from Batubara port near Medan), as well as Siamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Persian, and Chinese communities (Mahani 2011; Izrin Muaz 2011). Highlighting the Arab, Persian, and Turkic ethnicities, even when they originated from India, is crucial due to the significant cultural influence of their artistic vocabulary on Malay-Muslim cultural objects. This influence is particularly evident in two illuminated Islamic manuscripts discovered in Penang.

THE MANUSCRIPTS AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first manuscript is a Penang copy of the *Taj al-Salatin* (The Crown of Kings), originally composed by Bukhari al-Johori (of Johor) in Aceh in 1603 CE, and copied by Muhammad bin Umar Syaikh Farid in 1824 CE. The second is an illuminated Qur'an manuscript belonging to the Merican Family (Gallop 2017). According to Gallop (2017), the *Taj al-Salatin* manuscript is unusual in that it features Western Islamic decorative characteristics, which set it apart from other examples of Malay illumination. Its initial text frames, for instance, show a strong influence from 17th and 18th-century Indo-Persian and Ottoman artistic vocabularies, deviating from the common Southeast Asian double-decorated frames distinguished by their arched outlines (Gallop 2017). Other distinctive features include the format of decorated frames on facing pages, which are "hung" from a vertical border along the spine. The colour palette, dominated by two shades of blue and gold, is also atypical for Southeast Asian Islamic manuscripts, where red and yellow are customary, but common in those from the western Malay world (Gallop 2017). Moreover, the illumination employs white pigment, rather than "reserved white." It features text lines on the first two pages set within black-edged cloud bands against a gold ground—a decorative device prevalent in Indian, Persian, and Ottoman manuscripts but rare in Southeast Asia (Gallop 2017). An additional compelling detail is the mixture of languages: the scribe's name and pious benedictions are in Arabic, yet the date is in Persian. This extreme rarity for a 19th-century Malay manuscript leads Gallop to propose that the scribe was likely of Indian descent, possessing familiarity with Malay, Arabic, and Persian (Gallop 2017, 119).

The Merican Family Qur'an offers another significant indication of the cultural formation within Penang's Malay-Muslim community. According to Gallop, the original owner for the manuscript was Muhammad Noordin Merican—the name "Merican" stipulates that he belongs to the *Marakayar* group and considered as a "Jawi Peranakan," a term originally used referring to an intermarriage between Indian-Muslim with local women but changed in 1860–1870s for local people born in Penang with Malay bloodline (Mahani 2011, 66–67)—but was passed to several people in 1877 CE until it reaches Che Ahmad Nachar (Ma' Wan) (Gallop 2017, 120–121). It is interesting to note that Muhammad Nordin Merican was a Muslim from Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu who came to Penang in 1820 CE, and the Noordin family had fleets of ships that

sailed to and from ports along the Straits of Malacca, Burma, China, India, the Middle East and Europe (Gallop 2017). While Gallop describes the physical characteristic—artistic vocabulary and technical format—of the manuscript, she was uncertain about the origins, as there was a mixture of Indian, Malay and Aceh influences (Gallop 2017). The only characteristic that ties this manuscript to the previously mentioned *Taj-al-Salatin* is the shape of the outer lobed arches of the double-illuminated frames (Gallop 2017, 123).

Nevertheless, Gallop subsequently identified notable resemblances between the Merican Family Qur'an and Omani Quranic manuscripts dating to the mid-17th century CE. Specifically, the Penang Qur'an exhibits extraordinary affinities in its decorated rectangular *juz'* frames and its predominant use of red, a characteristic colour in Omani Quranic manuscripts (Gallop 2017, 124–125). Although Gallop suggested the Merican Family Qur'an might have been brought to Penang from Oman or Yemen, she remains hesitant about this conjecture. She states that "despite all these commonalities with artistic traditions from westwards of the Malay World, there is no suggestion that a foreign idiom has been transplanted wholesale... yet was also sensitive to the Southeast Asian preference" (Gallop 2017, 119, 125). While intriguing, it is difficult to resist questioning the peculiarity of the similarities shared between the Merican Family Qur'an and the Omani Quranic manuscripts, where one starts to wonder what connection does Penang have with Oman?

THE INDIAN OCEAN MUSLIM NETWORK AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The clue towards Omani-Penang relation might rest in Elizabeth Lambourn's analysis of the *Khutba* and Muslim networks in the Indian Ocean from the end of the 13th century CE until the 16th century CE (Lambourn 2008b; 2011). An analysis by Lambourn (2008b) of the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* (Light of Knowledge), a significant collection of documents from the Aden customs house (*furda*) in Yemen, likely compiled by the Rasulid Sultan Al-Ashraf 'Umar (1295–1296 CE), unveiled a list of stipends (*rātib*) and salaries. This list, estimated to be from the early 1290 CE, specifies payments disbursed to 60 Islamic judges (*qādīs*) and preachers (*khatībs*) at more than 40 distinct sites along the western and southeastern coastlines of the Indian subcontinent. The document holds considerable significance, revealing both the strategic importance of a vast geographical area—extending approximately 5,000 km along the western and southeastern Indian subcontinent, from Sind to northern Tamil Nadu, encompassing major ports, inland centres, and minor settlements—and the community's allegiance (*tā'a*) to the Rasulid Dynasty (1228–1454 CE). This fealty was cemented by citing the ruler's name during Friday sermons (*khutba*) and 'Eid prayers, thereby establishing a "special political-economic relationship" and enabling a complex web of interactions with Islamic polities beyond *Dar al-Islam* (Lambourn 2008b).

This, in turn, indirectly highlights the Rasulids' involvement in the Indian Ocean trade. In the 13th century CE, Aden was crucial for the *Karim* trade (*Karimi merchants*), facilitating the movement of spices and textiles from India through the Red Sea to Cairo. Furthermore, Yemen served as an important source of highly prized madder dye for Indian textile manufacturing and provided an alternative supply of cavalry horses for the Indian army (Gallop 2008b). It is important to note that the Rasulid Dynasty (1228–1454 CE) was a Sunni Yemeni dynasty of Oghuz Turkic origin that governed southern Yemen and Tihāma, with Ta'izz as its capital. Prior to their rule, the Rasulids had participated in Turkish invasions of the Middle East under the Seljuks and served as envoys (*rasūl*) for the 'Abbāsid caliphs. They also acknowledged the Ayyūbids and 'Abbāsids as their overlords (Bosworth 1996, 108). Following the success of the Sunni Rasulid's conquest of securing San'ā from the Shi'i Zaydī Imāms in 1229 CE, their rule was extended eastwards in Hadramawt and Zufār, near modern Salāla in the southern port of the Sultanate of Oman, in which a side branch of the Rasulid family members governed there for a

while (Bosworth 1996, 108; Smith 1995, 456). In addition to this, Bosworth (1996) also mentions that a far-flung trade was conducted from Aden—an important port under the control of the Rasulids, where ships sailing between the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean stopped—to India, Southeast Asia, China, and East Africa.

It is crucial to note that the stipends received by the *qādīs* and *khatībs* were not exclusively limited to Yemeni individuals. The region was a cosmopolitan hub of diverse Muslim communities, including Indian Muslims of various regional origins, as well as Arabs and Persians with differing degrees of acculturation. Supporting this, the Rasulids also maintained a list of gifts (*tashrīf*) for prominent figures in India, determined by their position (governor or ruler of a specific port) or their influence on trade between India and Aden (Lambourn 2008b). A notable personality mentioned in the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* documents is Malik Taqī al-Dīn al-Tībī (d. 1302 CE), the *Marzubān al-Hīnd* (an ancient Sasanian title designating the Ruler of the Marches), who was the brother of Shaykh Jamāl al-Dīn, the influential Iraqi merchant ruler of Qa'is Island in the Persian Gulf (Lambourn 2008b, 62). A Yemeni chronicle, *al-'Uqūd al-lu'lu'iyya* by al-Khazraji, provides another example. It details a 1393 CE letter from the port *qādī* of Calicut addressed to Rasulid Sultan Al-Ashraf II. This letter formally requested, on behalf of an assembly of leaders (*jamā'at rū'asā'ihā*) comprising "honoured merchants and great leaders," permission to invoke the Sultan's titles and name in the *khutba* (Friday sermon) delivered from Calicut's *mimbar* (pulpit). This act, signifying allegiance (*tā'a*), was granted by the Sultan (Lambourn 2008b). Based on the letter, the group leaders comprised six prominent individuals who constituted the council of the port's Muslim merchants and notables. These were Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Ghassanī, Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī al-Qawwī, Zayn Alī al-Rūmī, Nūr al-Dīn Shaykh Alī al-Ardabīlī, Sa'd al-Dīn Mas'ud, and Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad al-Khūzī. Their ethnic and geographical diversity is evident from their epithets: a Turk (al-Rūmī), a Persian/Khurasani (al-Ardabīlī), an Arab from the Ghassan tribe (al-Ghassanī), an individual from Khuzistan (al-Khūzī), and potentially a Deccani or Gujarati (Lambourn 2008b, 75).

Lambourn (2008b) clarifies that the Rasulids were not unique in receiving requests for the inclusion of a ruler's name in sermons. This practice persisted from the 13th to the 16th century CE across the western and southern Indian Ocean, involving various Islamic dynasties. Notable examples include Muhammad ibn Tughluq, Sultan of the Delhi-based Tughluq Dynasty (1325–1351 CE), whose influence reached Deccan and southern India by circa 1327 CE, and rulers of Hormuz/Ormus in the early 14th century CE (Lambourn 2008b). The Kingdom of Ormus, established in the 11th century CE, evolved from a Kerman Seljuk Sultanate dependency into an autonomous tributary of the Salghurid Turkmens and the Ilkhanate, controlling territory from the eastern Persian Gulf to Bahrain (Vosoughi 2009). While the exact name of the relevant Hormuz Sultan remains elusive, accounts by Shabānkāraī and Natanzi confirm that Mahmūd Qalhatī, who ruled Hormuz from 1243 to 1278 CE, expanded his dominion to include islands and coastal regions such as Qa'is, Bahrayn, Qatif, Tazvin, Zufar, Qishm, Kharg, Qalhat, Daba', and Julfar on the Arabian coast, alongside areas in Hindustan and Pakistan (Gwadar) (Lambourn 2008b; 2011). Further proof comes from the bilingual Sanskrit-Arabic inscription at Somnath Patan, western India, which features Mahmūd Qalhatī's name and full titles in its record of endowments to a mosque built in 1264 CE by Fīruz ibn Abī Ibrāhīm al-'Iraqī (Lambourn 2008b).

In addition, the sermons also mentioned the names of the Salghurid Sultan of Fars, Abū Bakr ibn Sa'd ibn Zangī (r. 1226–1260 CE), and Malik of Hormuz Sayf al-Dīn (r. 1417–1436 CE). An attempt by Sayf al-Dīn's brother, Fakhr al-Dīn Turān Shāh II, to use the Timurid Sultan's name in the sermon, however, failed. The name of the Ottoman Sultan, Sultan Suleymān I (Suleiman the Lawgiver, r. 1520–1566 CE), was also cited, as the Ottomans controlled the northern Red Sea after their 1517 CE conquest of Egypt. Their influence extended to Yemen and Aden by 1560 CE, and they were recognised as guardians of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina (Lambourn 2008b; 2011). It is crucial to note that all these Islamic dynasties, which maintained political-economic

relations with the western and southern coasts of India, were either practitioners, advocates, or patrons of Turco-Persian culture. These were part of the broader Islamic-Persianate dynasties, characterised by a blend of Turkic, Turkish, Kurdish, Iraqi, Indian, and Arab origins (Eaton 2019; Potter and Vasoughi 2010; Asher and Talbot 2006; Canfield 2002; Bosworth 1996).

If we were to compare the timeline with Southeast Asia, the period between 1290 CE to 1436 CE—where the names of the discussed Sultans were mentioned in the sermon of the entire western and southeastern seaboard of the Indian sub-continent—fall within the death date of Sultan al-Malik al-Salih (1297 CE), a Muslim king from the Samudra-Pasai kingdom (1280–1523 CE) in northern Sumatra (Perret and Ab Razak 2017; Perret 2017). Although many historians believed that Sultan al-Malik al-Salih was the first Muslim king of Samudra-Pasai, Syed Muhammad Naquib (2011) differs and states that a particular al-Malik Muhammad al-Taymī al-Qurashī from Monghyr (northeastern India)—known as a *fakir* in the Malay Annals and a descendant of Abū Bakr as-Siddiq, the first caliph (or ʻAlī, the fourth caliph)—was the first Muslim king of Samudra-Pasai, who is of Arab-Quraish lineage, not the fictitious Merah Silu/Silau (Syed Muhammad Naquib 2011, 17–25). He based his argument on the usage of the title "*malik*," which was exclusive for Arab kings—similar to the Mamlūks of Egypt and Syria (1250–1517 CE)—and was not simply an imitation (Syed Muhammad Naquib 2011, 25–26).

This argument, however, becomes complex when considering that the Turkic/Bahri Mamlūks (1250–1382 CE) were primarily Qïpchaq Turks with additional Kurdish, Iraqi, and Mongol components (Bosworth 1996, 78). This raises ambiguity regarding Syed Muhammad Naquib's assertion of "malik" as an exclusively Arab designation. Nonetheless, Syed Muhammad Naquib clarifies that the 13th-century use of "Sultan" in Sumatra denoted an independent kingdom's ruler, not an ethnic marker (Syed Muhammad Naquib 2011, 25). This distinction is noteworthy, as "Sultan" initially served to differentiate Turkic Ghaznavid and Seljuk rulers from Arab-Muslims (10th–12th century CE) before becoming a generalised title for Muslim kings in later centuries (Asher and Talbot 2006, 19). Ultimately, individuals of Arab, Persian, Turkic, and other backgrounds, adhering to Turco-Persian royal court customs and maintaining political-economic ties with India, represent key early arrivals in Southeast Asia from the 9th century CE (Eaton 2019; Syed Muhammad Naquib 2011; Asher and Talbot 2006; Canfield 2002; Fatimi 1963).

This notion is further supported by archaeological evidence from Lhokseumawe (Pasai, Aceh), where four tombs (*makam*) bearing the Persian honorific title "*khawâdja*" were discovered (Perret et al. 2017). "*Khawâdja*" translates as "lord," "master," or "man of distinction," and was commonly used for Sufi teachers in the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia (Murray et al. 1933). The individuals interred are Khawâdja Muhammad b. Sulaymân (d. 1450 CE), Khawâdja Tâdj al-Din b. Ibrâhim (1453 CE), Khawâdja Raja Hasan Khân b. Raja Khân Marhûm (1461 CE), and Sultân Khawâdja Ahmad (d. 1513 CE) (Perret et al. 2017, 67). Although images or descriptions of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* type for these four *Khawâdja* tombs are absent, another tomb with the same title designation was found in Johor, known as "Makam Sayong Pinang Dua Belas no. 5" near the Sayong river (Kota Tinggi district). This tomb belongs to Khawâdja Haydar (Perret et al. 2017, 67). Despite being considered "special" or "unique," not much analysis has been conducted on Khawâdja Haydar's tomb beyond its designation as the oldest *Batu Nisan Aceh* in Malaysia (dated 1452/3 CE). It aligns with the Othman Yatim typology, Type A, or the Perret and Razak 2003 typology, Type D, similar to that of Sultan al-Malik al-Salih (1297 CE) in northern Sumatra, which is considered the earliest in Southeast Asia (Perret et al. 2017; Perret and Razak 2017).

Additionally, several other "special" *Batu Nisan Aceh* tombstones exist in the Pasai region, specifically at Kuta Kareueng, Tungku Sareh, Tungku Sidi, Tungku Said Syarif, and Tungku di Iboih. All these gravestones were erected with marble imported from Cambay, Gujarat (Perret 2017). The cemetery area of Tungku Sidi is particularly noteworthy as it belongs

to the Abbāsid Caliph family. It contains the tomb of Emir ʻAbd allâh (d. 1414 CE), a descendant of the second-last caliph from the Abbāsid Dynasty in Baghdad, alongside his wife, Sittî Radjahân binti al-Malik al-Mu'azzam Paduka Lar/Laz Khân (d. 1434 CE), who was of Turkic origin (Perret 2017, 233–234). In contrast, the royal cemetery in Kuta Kareueng houses the tombs of Sultan al-Malik al-Salih's descendants. This includes Sultan Zayn al-ʻÂbidîn I (d. 1400/1 CE), al-Malik al-Salih's grandson, who was a significant figure in Pasai's history for his efforts to integrate Samudra-Pasai into Dar al-Islam (Perret 2017, 233)—an endeavour akin to the Indian coastal communities' allegiance to the Rasulid Dynasty previously discussed. Also interred here is Malika (Princess) Râbghisâ Khâdira (d. 1428 CE), daughter of Zayn al-ʻAbidîn I, whose marble tombstone features exceptionally beautiful and intricate decoration (Perret 2017).

Although the tombs/gravestones in these areas typologically differ from typical *Batu Nisan Aceh* prototypes, their artistic repertoires are analogous in several respects. This includes the language of inscriptions (often Arabic, despite the prevalence of Malay and Persian for Sa'dî poems), the inscription format, and the use of *thuluth* and *naskh* cursive calligraphy (Perret 2017). These details suggest that the Pasai region—or northern Sumatra generally—was influenced by the Turco-Persian artistic tradition. While the elements, motif types, and essence remained consistent, this tradition later acculturated with local culture in terms of symbolic choice, arrangement, and combination. In line with this, Guillot et al. (2008) identify the period between 1340 and 1400 CE in Samudra-Pasai as a "Turkish interregnum," citing traces of Turkish titulatures on royal tombstones and linking this to the presence of Bengali Muslims. This finding is further supported by Lambourn's (2008b) analysis of *Khutba* and Muslim networks in the Indian Ocean. She notes a 1393 CE attempt by the rulers of the Sumatran Samudra-Pasai Sultanate and Bengal's Ilyas Shahi dynasty (1342–1487 CE)—whose founder, Shamsudin Ilyas Shah (1352–1358 CE), was a Turk connected to the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 CE) (Bosworth 1996)—to have their names read in Calicut's *khutba*. Although this request was refused, Lambourn (2008b) asserts that the pairing of Bengal and Samudra-Pasai during this period was not coincidental, attributing it to the "Turkish interregnum" mentioned by Guillot et al. (2008).

Another interesting fact is the letter written by the *Pādshāh* of the Aceh Sultanate, Sultan Alā' al-Dīn Ri'āyat Shāh al-Qahhār (1530–1568 CE) to the Ottoman Sultan Suleymān I the Lawgiver in 1565 CE, requesting help to fight the Portuguese by asking for siege cannons as well as experts in fortress and galley construction (Lambourn 2008b). The Ottoman ruler was entreated to offer assistance with the condition that the ruler of Aceh would offer his allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan, therefore turning Aceh into an Ottoman province (Lambourn 2008b, 140). Although Lambourn did not elaborate further on Aceh's response towards the Sultan's offer, but referring to the English translation of the original letter written by "His Majesty's Servant Lutfi" (a respected Ottoman court official), Aceh agreed to become a formal tributary of the Ottoman Empire who is "no way different from the governors of Egypt and Yemen or the beys of Jiddah and Aden" (Casale 2005, 53). Regardless of this agreement and the Sultan's action to send 15 war galleys for a mission to Sumatra between 1567 CE and 1569 CE—to participate in the Acehnese siege of Malacca in 1568 CE—most of the expedition's supplies were rerouted to Yemen to suppress the Zeydi rebellion in 1567 CE (Casale 2005). Nonetheless, Lutfi's letter mentioned several important points that are relevant and important to our discussion.

In his letter, Lutfi documented contacting members of the "Rumi" diaspora in India during his voyages between Istanbul and Aceh. This included Chingiz Khan, the ruler of Surat, and Karamanlıoğlu Abdurrahman, a local strongman in Gujarat. Both were part of a Turkish-speaking Gujarati elite warrior class descended from Ottoman émigrés (Casale 2005). Interestingly, the title "Karamanlıoğlu" (Turkish for "son of" or "descendant of") suggests Abdurrahman was either from Karaman or had familial ties with the powerful Beylik of Karaman/Karamanids, a Turkish Anatolian Beylik that flourished in south-central Anatolia from 1250 to 1487 CE (Leiser 2010; Köprülü 1992). Furthermore, Lutfi noted that when the Acehnese ambassador returned to

Sumatra from Istanbul in early 1568 CE, he brought 500 Turks, likely for cannon production and craftsmanship (Casale 2005, 54).

Additionally, mid-1570s CE *Mühimme* documents reveal public declarations of allegiance to the Ottoman state from Calicut (on the Malabar coast, southern India), Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), and the Maldives (Casale 2005, 60). While these areas were not under direct Ottoman rule, this evidence demonstrates a significant socio-political and economic connection between India and Istanbul, involving other Turkic and Arab Islamic dynasties. Such interactions clearly influenced local cultural formation and acculturation across lands stretching from Anatolia to Southeast Asia. Consequently, the hypothesis of incorporating Southeast Asia into the Turco-Persian cultural sphere appears logical.

In 1849 CE and 1850 CE respectively, two letters—one in Jawi-Malay and one in Arabic—from Acehnese Sultan Mansur Syah (Alauddin Ibrahim Mansur Syah, r. 1857–1880 CE) to Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1876–1909 CE) affirmed Ottoman sovereignty over Aceh dating back to the reign of Selim II (1566–1574 CE). This claim is corroborated by Ottoman archival materials, specifically the "*al-dafatir al-sultaniyya*" (sultanic record-books), and by a letter from Mansur Syah's envoy—Muhammad Ghauth—to Hasib Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Hijaz in 1850 CE (Kadı et al. 2011). These historical correspondences also attribute the establishment of the Sumatran sultanates to Sinan Pasha, an Ottoman Grand Admiral (served 1550–1553 CE under Suleymān I the Lawgiver, r. 1520–1566 CE; later Grand Vizier in 1580 CE). Legend further asserts that Sinan Pasha personally founded these sultanates and secured the Acehnese Sultan's allegiance (Kadı et al. 2011, 168). While Sinan Pasha's physical presence in Aceh is uncertain, his mention is significant given his well-documented defeat of a major Yemeni rebellion (1568–1571 CE) using an Ottoman fleet initially intended for Aceh (Kadı et al. 2011). Despite the consistent theme of Ottoman sovereignty over Aceh found in both Lutfi's and Mansur Syah's letters, a lack of clarity exists regarding which Ottoman Sultan definitively established Aceh as a province. Göksoy resolves this ambiguity by positing that official relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Aceh Sultanate began under Sultan Suleymān I the Lawgiver and endured through the period of his successor, Sultan Selim II (Göksoy 2011, 68).

For these reasons, Sultan Mansur Syah repeatedly declared Aceh's loyalty as an Ottoman vassal in his letters from 1837 to 1859 CE (Kadı et al. 2011). Although some historians doubt this claim, deeming it fictitious due to the Acehnese Sultan's asserted Rumi descent via a shared Minangkabau-Rum Emperor lineage (Kadı et al. 2011, 170), legends and documents corroborate Aceh-Ottoman links, including validated 16th-century sources and occasional visits by Ottoman officials (Kadı et al. 2011, 168). Further proof lies in the supplicatory positioning of Mansur Syah's seal at the bottom of his letters—a gesture emphasising Aceh's vassal status and humility. This specific formatting indicates Mansur Syah's familiarity with and continuation of a practice introduced at Sultan Suleymān I the Lawgiver's court in the 16th century CE (Kadı et al. 2011, 165). This perceived lineage and vassal state to the Ottomans influenced the formation of Acehnese identity (Kadı et al. 2011, 164), likely holding more cultural than political impact. This "identity" subsequently spread to the Malay Peninsula, evidenced by a map drawn for the Ottomans and later validated by Muhammad Ghauth. The map centres Sumatra with Acehnese influence stretching across Southeast Asia, describes Bandar Aceh as "the seat of Mansur Syah," labels the Malay Peninsula as "Anadol" (Anatolia), and designates the ports of Kedah, Selangor, Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Patani as "representative of Sultan Mansur Syah" (Kadı et al. 2011, 173). While scholars view this as Mansur Syah's attempt to aggrandise his kingdom for Ottoman persuasion (Kadı et al. 2011, 173), Aceh's cultural influence across the Malay Peninsula and parts of Southeast Asia is nonetheless validated by the pervasive *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition. The only peculiarity in Mansur Syah's claim is the omission of Johor, despite it having the largest number of *Batu Nisan Aceh* compared to the other listed states.

Returning to Penang, Izrin Muaz (2011) describes the Acheen Street (Lebuh Aceh) enclave as initially having a distinct Arab character, a legacy of Tunku Syed Hussain's early settlement with his Hadrami and Yemeni *Sayyid* retinue. However, by the mid-19th and early 20th centuries CE, the area developed a multi-ethnic disposition due to the influx of Jawi Peranakan, Rawa, Talu, and Minangkabau individuals (Izrin Muaz 2011). Malay became the preferred medium of communication, and intermarriage between various Arab clans and local Malays grew common. This phenomenon led to a cultural evolution, fostering a hybrid Arab-Malay culture through their intermingling and cultural integration with the "Malays" in Sumatra and the Malay sultanates in the early 20th century CE (Izrin Muaz 2011). This process, in turn, produced a unique blend of Islamic influences with existing local elements, forging a distinctively Southeast Asian artistic vocabulary. Critically, Izrin Muaz does not explicitly define "Arab culture," leaving ambiguity as to whether it refers to aspects like attire, intellectual traditions, cuisine, or specific Islamic art forms (e.g., Umayyad, Andalusian), or indeed the Arab-Persianate Islamic art culture widely spread by the Abbāsid and later adopted by successive Islamic dynasties in the Middle East as the Turco-Persian tradition. Nonetheless, with the historical and Aceh-Penang relationship established, this study now turns its attention to Tunku Syed Hussain's *Batu Nisan Aceh*.

TUNKU SYED HUSSAIN'S *BATU NISAN ACEH*

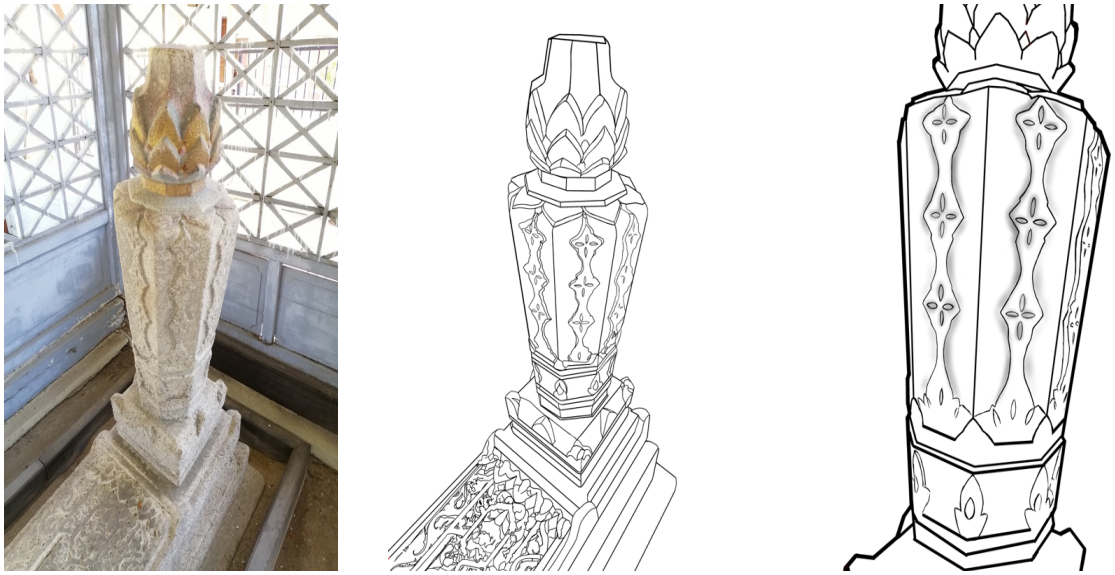
Detailed information on Tunku Syed Hussain's tombstone is scarce in existing literature. While Othman (1988) and Perret and Razak (2004) have extensively surveyed the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition, neither explicitly mentions Tunku's gravestone. Nevertheless, Perret and Razak (2004) refer to MMLA 1 and MMLA 2, two gravestones in the Masjid Lebuh Aceh cemetery, with MMLA 1 sharing the closest typological resemblance to Tunku's and classified as Type N—a *Batu Nisan Aceh* style from the 17th to 18th century CE (Othman 1988). A central concern, however, arises from Perret and Razak's (2004) dismissive categorisation of both MMLA 1 and MMLA 2 as "imitations" without providing further elaboration. This ambiguous labelling prompts several interpretive questions: does "imitation" denote a replica of an "original" *Batu Nisan Aceh* from northern Sumatra? Could it refer to a disjunction between typological form and decorative repertoire, where an 18th-century form exhibits motifs from earlier periods? Or does it imply that the gravestone was crafted by non-Acehnese artisans, potentially replicating traditional forms devoid of their original aesthetic context?

Photo 1 The *Batu Nisan Aceh* of Tunku Syed Hussain in Masjid Lebuh Aceh

Source: Author (2025)

While these questions remain unresolved, the most plausible explanation for the typological discrepancies points to differences in provenance and craftsmanship. Specifically, the tombstone may have been produced outside northern Sumatra, the cultural heartland of the *Batu Nisan Aceh* tradition, potentially utilising different materials and exhibiting varying standards of workmanship. This hypothesis gains credibility when contextualised with Hurgronje's (1906)

report, which indicates a significant decline in *Batu Nisan Aceh* production in northern Sumatra during and after the Aceh War (1873–1904 CE). Consequently, Penang emerged as a new centre for Muslim gravestone production, inheriting and adapting the Acehnese tradition. Although the *Batu Nisan Aceh* exported from Penang in the late 19th and early 20th centuries CE no longer conformed to classical Acehnese forms (Hurgronje 1906), their ornamental vocabulary still offers valuable insights into the evolving cultural and artistic identity of the Malay-Muslim community in Penang. Thus, even if Tunku's gravestone is an "imitation" in material or origin, its decorative elements remain critical artefacts for understanding the transmission and transformation of Islamic art traditions and provide insights into Malay identity in the region.



a b c

Photo 2 Detail tracing of Tunku's *Batu Nisan Aceh*. The four-petaled flower *ciharberk*, *Qanādīl* shape and candle-like motif present at Tunku's tombstone: (a) The overall form of Tunku's tombstone; (b) Detail tracing of Tunku's tombstone to visibly highlight the *ciharberk*, *Qanādīl* and candle-like motif; (c) Further detail on the *ciharberk*, *zencirek*, *Qanādīl* shape of the tombstone and candle motif

Source: Author (2025)

The first direct mention of Tunku Syed Hussain's tombstone appears in Muhammad Nabil's 2020 Master's thesis (designated as "PPLA 18"), where he classifies its typology as Type N, following Perret and Razak's (2004) sequence. However, a discrepancy exists between Perret and Razak's (2004) *Batu Nisan Aceh* survey (which compares gravestones across Johor and other regions) and their 1999 survey (analysing Johor gravestones exclusively). Specifically, the 2004 Type N typology was previously categorised as Type L in their 1999 survey, with subtle differences in description. According to Perret and Ab Razak (1999), only two Type L gravestones were found in Johor (BSAW 2 and BCHA 1), located in the Makam Batu Sawar and Bukit Chapal cemetery complexes. In contrast, their 2004 survey identifies 34 Type N gravestones both within and outside Johor: seven in Johor, 20 in Kedah, three in Melaka, two in Negeri Sembilan, one in Pulau Pinang, and one unknown (Perret and Razak 2004).

Although detailed physical characteristics and measurements are provided, the analysis of decorative elements remains unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, a common characteristic shared by Tunku's tombstone and some Type L and N typologies is the octagonal top (eight-point geometry), which tapers downwards to combine with a square base (Photos 2 and 3). The surface of each of these eight sides is adorned with four-petaled flowers carved in a rhombus shape. These four flower-rhombuses on each surface are vertically combined and linked, creating a chain-like appearance (Photos 2a and 2c). The upper body connects to the lower section of the

tombstone, featuring motifs shaped like triangular leaves. Furthermore, the head of Tunku's tombstone is adorned with eight large petals combined with an octagonal geometrical shape that flares upwards, resembling a three-layered bud (like lotus or ginger torch petals). However, its peak is unfortunately missing (Photo 3).

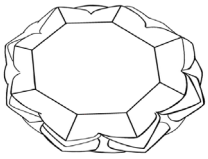


Photo 3 An overhead view of Tunku's *Batu Nisan Aceh* to highlight the octagon shape of the tombstone

Source: Author (2025)

Although both Muhammad Nabil (2020) and Othman (1988) analysed the Islamic art ornaments on the tombstone, their approach was too general, emphasising pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist elements like Mount Meru and lotus flower motifs. This over-generalisation left many decorative elements unrecognised and unscrutinized, particularly within the context of Islamic art and Southeast Asia's connection with other Islamic lands to the west. Consequently, this creates a void, alienating Southeast Asian Islamic art from the broader Islamic world. Therefore, the ornaments on Tunku's tombstone will be analysed within the context of Turco-Persian artistic repertoires, aligning with the historical background discussed earlier.

The octagonal shape of Tunku's tombstone (Photos 2 and 3), a previously unexamined peculiarity, can be understood in the context of Islamic art as a *Rub el-Hizb* (۞). This eight-pointed star, formed by overlapping two squares, literally means "quarter of the party" (from Arabic *Rub* for "one-fourth" and *hizb* for "group/section"). Although commonly serving as a decorative marker for a quarter *hizb* in the Qur'an, this motif also holds historical significance as the "Seljuk Star" (associated with the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum, 1077–1308 CE) or the Seal of Solomon (*khātam Sulaiman*), occasionally appearing as an octagon or hexagram (Muhammad Uzair 2023; Ariza Armada 2017; Dumas and Dumas 1989). Its prominence in Islamic art stems from its symbolic representation of legitimising power (authority or rightful rule) and its propitiatory values (attracting blessings, divine protection or spiritual power). Furthermore, it is sometimes linked to the *ahl al-bayt*, the descendants of Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Ariza Armada 2017; Dumas and Dumas 1989). Beyond its association with the *Rub el-Hizb*, the octagonal shape also resonates with the Sufi concept of the "Breath of the Compassionate" (*nafas al-Rahmān*), as taught by Ibn al-'Arabi and detailed in his *Futūhat al-Makkiya* and *Fusūs al-Hikam* (Sutton 2007). Within this metaphysical framework, divine creation originates from the Divine Breath, resulting in the manifestation of the four classical elements: air, water, fire, and earth. These elements collectively embody cosmic equilibrium and ontological unity, signifying a return to Allah SWT as the absolute source of all being. The octagonal form, created by overlapping two squares, visually encapsulates this cosmological principle (Sutton 2007). This geometric embodiment is notably present in *Zellij* (mosaic tilework) of the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) and al-Andalus, particularly within Islamic architecture (Bloom and Blair 2009; Broug 2008). A similar application of geometric principles is observed in *Girih* (strapwork) tiles, characteristic of Turco-Persian Islamic art during the Seljuk and Timurid periods, which rely on a system

of five standardised geometric tiles: the decagon, bowtie, hexagon, rhombus, and pentagon (Bloom and Blair 2009; Necipoğlu 1995).

However, before the Seljuk Turks popularized it, the octagon star symbol was used as political, cultural and Sunni symbol for the Umayyad Dynasty in territories of Greater Syria and on Arab-Sasanian dirhams as well as in al-Andalus (Iberian Peninsula), particularly on coinage during the reign of the seventh caliph, Sulaymān ibn ʻAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (715–717 CE) (Ariza Armada 2017). These coins—specifically known as "Al-Andalusi" coins—have one significant element that characterises them, the octagon star symbol in the centre. Although Ariza Armada (2017) hypothesized several meaning for the octagon star symbol—as the "canting arm" of al-Andalus or referring to the eastern Umayyad (capital in Damascus, Syria) as the symbol was brought to al-Andalus by Musa ibn Nusayr, the governor of Maghreb—but the most relevant meaning related within the context of Tunku's tombstone is the relation of the star symbol with the 53rd surah of the Qur'an, An-Najm (translates as the star) which is a symbolic reference to the "truth of the revelation" or the Qur'an itself. Another meaning for the symbol is related to the sayings of the Prophet (*al-'ahādīth*) that tell the stars are related to the "dwelling garden" of paradise (*jannah*) and are the guides in the faith (Ariza Armada 2017). Even though Ariza Armada did suggest another connotation—the stars are security (*amān*) for the "sons of Fātima" that has *shī'īa* tendencies—where she claimed it is based on a *hadith*. Still, the said *hadith* was not found in the Sunni tradition except for different hadith mentioned in *Sahih Muslim* in "The Book of the Merits of the Companions" where it is stated:

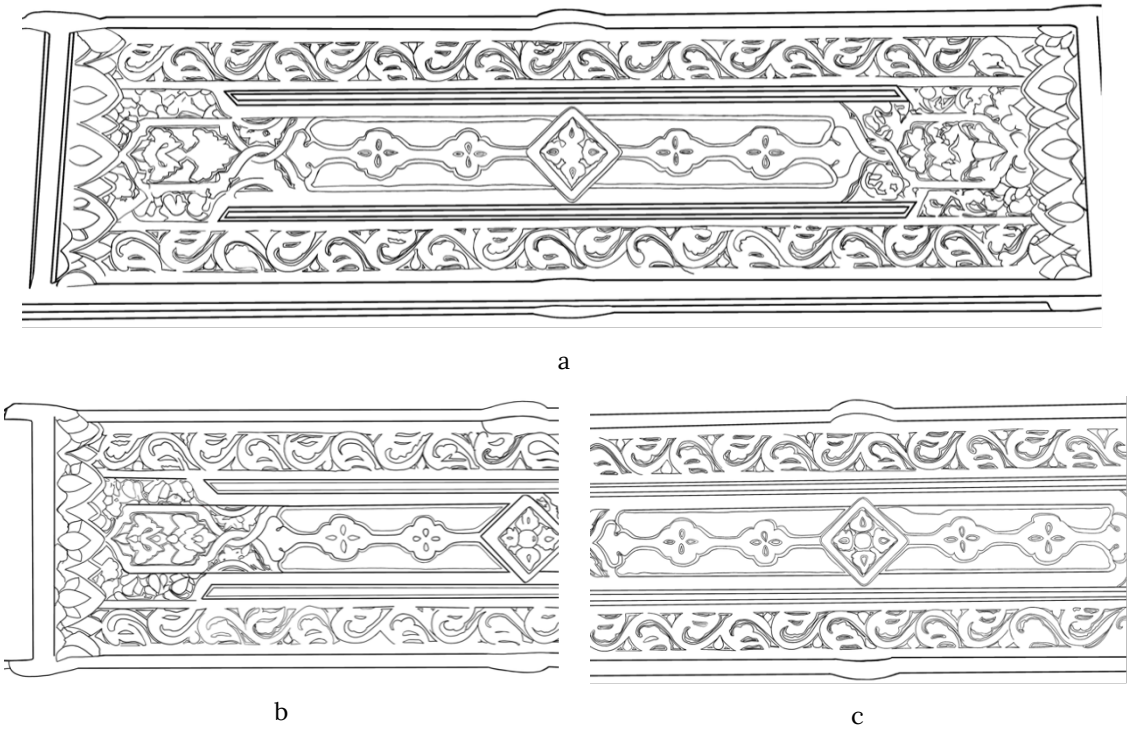
> ...The stars are a source of security for the sky, and when the stars disappear there comes to the sky, i.e., (it meets the same fate) as it has been promised (it would plunge into darkness). And I am a source of safety and security to my Companions, and when I would go away there would fall to the lot (of my Companions) as they have been promised with, and my Companions are a source of security for the Ummah and as they would go there would fall to the lot of my Ummah as (its people) have been promised. (Muslim ibn al Hajjaj 1971)

Hence, these interpretations correspond well with Tunku's character and credibility, as he is a descendant of Aceh royalty with Arab-Hadhrami bloodline (*ahl al-bayt*), the leader of the Malay community in Lebuh Aceh, a saint (*walī*), as well as an *ulamā* who teaches and preaches the religion of Islam to the surrounding community in present-day Georgetown. The sanctity quality of Tunku is further emphasise by the four-petaled flower (Photos 2b and 2c)—specifically known as the "*penç*" or "*ciharberk*" motif which is Persian for "a flower with four petals" that belongs to *khatā'ī/hatayi* (flower) group of motifs categorised under the seven modes of Islamic ornamentation (*naqqāshi*) referred as "*haft asl*" (Muhammad Uzair et al. 2024; Muhammad Uzair 2023) or the *nuqtas* (stop) and verse dividers (*waqf*) flower motifs that are found in Qur'an illumination as markers for the end of a verse (Onat 2015, 164)—that is arranged to look like a chain (vertically from top to bottom) which leads towards the bottom part (foot) of Tunku's gravestone. This placement and arrangement makes Tunku's gravestone to look like a vessel, particularly a *qanādīl* (قَنَادِيل) with a *misbāh* (مِصْبَاح) (Photos 2b and 2c)—*misbāh* means the source of light (N*ū*r) enclosed in a vessel as understood based on Surah An-Nur verse (24:35) in the Holy Qur'an, while *qanādīl* refers to lantern or hanging lamp that is a reference to a physical objects (vessel) that houses the *misbāh* inside—which is a motif that is frequently used in "mihrab images" to mark or indicate graves, tombs, headstones and various objects associated with or used in the context of burial sites of scholars, saints (*awliyā*), Sultans and other pious or prominent individuals (Khoury 1991). It functioned as a symbol often associated with death and eschatology—that is closely related to Sufism as the light (N*ū*r) symbolises existence, guidance, knowledge and truth—where the practice began to be employed in Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Yemen from the late 11th century CE onwards (Khoury 1991).

This interpretation is further reinforced by the presence of a candle-like motif (Photo 2c) located near the bottom of Tunku's gravestone. This element completes the symbolic reading in which the gravestone may be understood as representing the *qanādīl* (lantern). The candle signifies the *misbāh*, metaphorically embodying Tunku as the Nūr (light) of guidance and knowledge. Such iconography aligns with motifs commonly found in the mihrab image tradition. Despite this, Tunku's gravestone only employs three motifs commonly found and constitutes a complete mihrab image, that is, the *misbāh/qanādīl*, arabesque and the candle motif. This suggests that the elements/motifs were deliberately acculturated and selectively integrated into the overall composition to convey a specific symbolic meaning rather than being the result of mere imitation, replication, or an arbitrary assemblage intended to form a new typological style, as some would suggest. This indicates that the craftsmen responsible understood the purpose and meaning of each motif employed to highlight and reflect Tunku's status properly.

A similar theme and set of motifs appear on the cover of Tunku's tombstone (*penutup makam*) (Photo 4a), albeit with a slightly different arrangement and the introduction of several new elements, including the *kitʿa*, *zencirek*, and arabesque motifs (Photo 4). The *kitʿa* typically refers to a small octagonal or hexagonal panel (Photo 4b) used in Qur'anic illumination (*tezhib*) to frame calligraphic inscriptions of Qur'anic verses, *hadīth*, or prayers (Onat 2015, 152). However, in the context of Tunku's tombstone, the *kitʿa* is rendered in an elongated hexagonal form, within which are integrated both the *zencirek* and *ciharberk* floral motifs—the latter intricately carved within a rhombus and placed centrally within the *kitʿa* panel (Photo 4c). The *zencirek* is a chain-like, interwoven ornamental design composed of interlocking loops or rings, sometimes arranged in geometric patterns or chain-like patterns. This motif has long been associated with Qur'anic illumination, manuscript decoration, and calligraphic panels—from the Seljuk period through the reign of Ottoman Sultan Suleymān I (r. 1520–1566 CE), widely considered the "golden age" of Ottoman manuscript art (Onat 2015; Gruber 2010; Birol and Derman 1991). While the continuous and unbroken quality of the *zencirek* is often interpreted as symbolising eternity, divine unity, or the infinite nature of knowledge (Birol and Derman 1991), its placement and combination within the Tunku tombstone's *kitʿa* is unorthodox, particularly given that the *kitʿa* traditionally houses only calligraphy.

Another notable deviation is observed at both ends of the *kitʿa* panel. Instead of the typical triangular-bud-shaped *salbek* (Photo 4b)—a motif commonly associated with the *shamsa*, a central medallion form in Qur'anic illumination—the design incorporates smaller, interwoven *kitʿa* panels, each enclosing a *salbek* motif. This unconventional treatment of *tezhib* elements may reflect a process of acculturation, wherein Malay artistic traditions reinterpret classical Islamic motifs to form a distinctive regional aesthetic. However, in the Acehnese context, these adapted motifs are known by local terms: the rhombus housing the *ciharberk* is referred to as *boengong seuleupo*, the *salbek* as *boengong glima* or *boengong sagoe*, and the arabesque designs are identified as *boengong awan si tangke* (Othman 1988, 91). However, it is important to note that Othman's general classification may be rooted in contemporary interpretations and identification—which has slight qualitative variations—rather than being grounded in the historical Turco-Persian tradition, which would consider the symbolic meaning, composition, placement, and formal structure of these motifs in greater depth.



a b c

Photo 4 An overhead view of Tunku's *Batu Nisan Aceh* to highlight the octagon shape of the tombstone: (a) The overall ornaments on the cover of Tunku's tomb (*penutup makam*); (b) Detail tracing of the smaller *kit'a* panel on the left end of Tunku's tomb that houses the *salbek*; (c) Detail tracing of the *kit'a* panel, *zencirek*, *ciharberk* and arabesque motif

Source: Author (2025)

Based on this analysis, it may be inferred that the ornamental features and artistic repertoires employed on the tombstone serve—either directly or symbolically—as indicators of the deceased's identity, particularly with respect to status, lineage, and role within the community. This interpretive framework extends beyond more commonly assessed aspects such as the size of the tombstone, the complexity and quality of its carvings, or the richness of decorative elements. It is therefore plausible to propose that the absence of a name inscription on Tunku's tombstone, despite the presence of sophisticated Islamic artistic forms, reflects a deliberate symbolic strategy. Under conventional practice, especially within the Islamic funerary tradition, one would expect the inclusion of calligraphic inscriptions bearing the deceased's name. The deviation from this norm suggests that the aesthetic and symbolic use of Islamic motifs was intended to communicate identity and status implicitly rather than explicitly. This approach appears consistent with tombs and graves attributed to saints (*awliyā'*) and scholars (*'ulamā'*) of royal or aristocratic descent, and possibly those believed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (*Ahl al-Bayt*). This contrasts with the tombstones of Sultans, which typically include name and title inscriptions accompanied by other elements such as declarations of faith, Sufi poetry, prayers, and a distinctive slab-type typology. This proposition is further substantiated by a comparative analysis of Type L and N tombstones from various regions, such as Kedah (MDRLANG 5, 8, 10, 13, 17, 18; ALORKI 1, 2, 3, 7, 9; LANGB 2 and 3; AKBUK 1 and 2; LIMBUNG 1; MSRAJ 1 and 2; ALGDA; KKED), Melaka (BBRG I/11, BBRG I/16; KALIM), Negeri Sembilan (AMELT 1; BTRAS), Pulau Pinang (MMLA 1), and Johor (BSAW; BCHA). In all of these cases, the names of the deceased are absent. Yet, the decorative features, form and elements provide meaningful visual cues about the individual's identity, socio-religious status, and potential position or role within the community. Such findings highlight the semiotic significance of funerary ornamentation as a valuable source of historical and cultural data, revealing not only individual identity but also indicating broader cultural networks that extend beyond Southeast Asia. Moreover, these artistic strategies reflect the evolving formation of a distinctive Malay-Islamic cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

The visual analysis of the artistic repertoire found on the tombstone of Tunku Syed Hussain reveals that the Malay-Acehnese and Malay-Penang cultural identities are deeply influenced by the Turco-Persian artistic tradition, particularly through elements derived from Qur'anic illumination (*tezhib*). As a result, Malay-Islamic art shares notable affinities with the Persian, Indian, and Ottoman visual vocabularies, while maintaining distinctiveness in the arrangement, combination, motif selection, and symbolic interpretation of decorative elements. This study demonstrates that Tunku Syed Hussain's tombstone represents a unique and original expression, rather than an imitation, as every ornamental and symbolic component meaningfully correlates with his status, lineage, and attributes. However, this conclusion should be approached with caution when applied to other *Batu Nisan Aceh* tombstones in Penang, particularly those classified under Types I, J, K, L, and M in Othman Yatim's typological sequence. Of particular interest is MMLA 1, located just outside Tunku's *langgar* (burial structure), which has been categorised as a Type L/N *Batu Nisan Aceh*. Despite its smaller size and external placement, the decorative elements of MMLA 1 closely resemble those found on Tunku's tombstone. Although the identity or relationship of the deceased to Tunku remains unknown, the qualitative characteristics and symbolic ornamentation may indicate shared social or spiritual status, possibly pointing to a similar lineage (*ahl al-Bayt*) or role within the religious community, such as that of a *walī* or *ʿulamāʾ*. These findings highlight the importance of conducting further research to establish a more comprehensive understanding of Malay-Muslim identity in Penang, especially through the lens of regional Islamic funerary art. This tradition privileges symbolic representation over direct textual identification, a practice that may reflect a deeply rooted cultural ethos of humility, hegemony and reverence—qualities that are often regarded as integral to Malay cultural values. It may also signify a subtle expression of affiliation or allegiance to the broader Muslim networks and powerful Muslim dynasties of the Islamic West. Therefore, revitalising and recontextualising this unique artistic heritage can significantly contribute to preserving the visual and spiritual legacy of Malay-Islamic civilisation in Southeast Asia.

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