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The Influences and Design Evolution in Acehese Tombstone

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Abstract

Stone carving is one of the earliest examples in Malay Archipelago be found in gravestones (Farish & Khoo, 2003) and it was identified exist during the prehistoric era which flourishing of the megalithic culture (Abdul Halim, 1087). It has certain attractive characteristics, interesting historical contents and cultural influences to be revealed. Acehese tombstone was greatly influenced by past era elements as well as Hindu-Buddhist arts and prehistoric arts. The three major influences from Persian, Hindu-Buddha and Megalithic cultures become the base of Acehese tombstone shape and decoration. The study also to interpret the meaning of shapes, types, symbols and motifs detail through studying on the typology and decorations to elevate this property as a prominent symbol of Malay Archipelago history. It is also revealed the specialties of the Malays that will increase the self-esteem besides to proof Acehese tombstone is a genius loci of the Malays. All proposed proposition are aimed in elevating the Malay-Islamic arts to the public eyes in order to spark and trigger the sense of proud to be Malay.

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Key-word: - Acehese tombstone, megalithic, hindu-buddha and sufism

1. Introduction

In the Malay world, the art has evolved since the pre-Islamic period where it has gone through various stages. According to Farish & Khoo (2003), Malay art has absorbed elements, form, ideas and values from a number of civilisation and cultural resources, ranging from paganism, animism, the Hindu Buddhist era, the philosophy and culture of Islam, as well as influences from Europe, China and India. All the art elements that from the outside of Malay World influence the image of Malay culture and the mixing elements of art enhanced the richness of Malay culture today. In Peninsular Malaysia, the art of carving is inseparable from the art of sculpture since both belong to the same field and have been practised by the Malays throughout the ages (Abdul Halim, 1987). The beginning of this art was during the transitional period. This was also a period of challenge for the Malays because of the flourishing of the Megalithic culture. The Malays then began to erect stone monuments for spiritual and ancestral worship. Stone carving is the earliest examples of Malay carving to be found in gravestones (Farish & Khoo, 2003). According to Othman (1988), the sculptured gravestones which marked Muslim grave of Peninsular Malaysia referred to by Malay as *batu Aceh* or Acehese stone which was believed originated from Aceh in Northern Sumatera, Indonesia. Acehese Tombstone is a unique terminology to a work of religiously art due to it involves the art design, calligraphy, and art on a stone (Suprayitno, 2011). Samudera-Pasai Empire was a starting point in the distribution of Acehese tombstones throughout Nusantara. It started in 13th century in the eastern part Sumatera where the oldest Acehese Tombstone was found based on Malik Al-Saleh grave (Repelita, 2009). Acehese Tombstones spread out to the most areas of Nusantara and believed is used by high class of people such as Malay royal families, chieftains and also wealthy people.

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2. Methodology

The archival data will be used to collect data and information. It is involved in form of statistic, report, graph, books, journals, articles, newspapers and bulletins. The books written by Othman Mohd Yatim (*Batu Aceh: Early Islamic Gravestones in peninsular Malaysia, 1988*) and Daniel Perret & Kamarudin Abd Razak (*Batu Aceh Johor dalam Perbandingan, 2004*) are the major reference in doing this research. Lembaga Muzium Pahang, Pekan is one of the references in helping to collect data which involves in getting the specific map location of each cemetery with Acehnese Tombstone and also writing data from the museum itself. The other organisations such as Muzium Negara Malaysia also provide related data which are useful in completing the data of general history of Acehnese Tombstone.

3. Megalithic Culture Influences

Megalithic is known as the earliest Malay stone carving. Megalithic culture is a reflection of the rich belief systems and rituals which characterized early Malaysian societies (Nik Hassan Suhaimi, 2004). The prehistoric was belief was extended to the next era with and the fragments of the culture have been brought together which create culture continuity. According to Abdul Halim (1987), the art of stone carving in Peninsular Malaysia started during the prehistoric era with the megalithic culture. As a one of earlier Malay culture, Megalithic culture used to be a monumental, spiritual and as an ancestral worship. The art of stone in Malay culture is also presenting the Malays in appreciation context of art, carving and sculpturing even though they had no knowledge of the aesthetic and artistic nature of work. The distribution of megalithic culture in Negeri Sembilan and some part of Malacca shown the art of stone carving is valuable towards historical context which the variety shapes of Megalith such as sword shaped, rudder, spoon, tortoise, snake, baby deer and else (Abdul Halim, 1987). The art of stone carving is an invaluable heritage with the lasting historical and cultural importance.

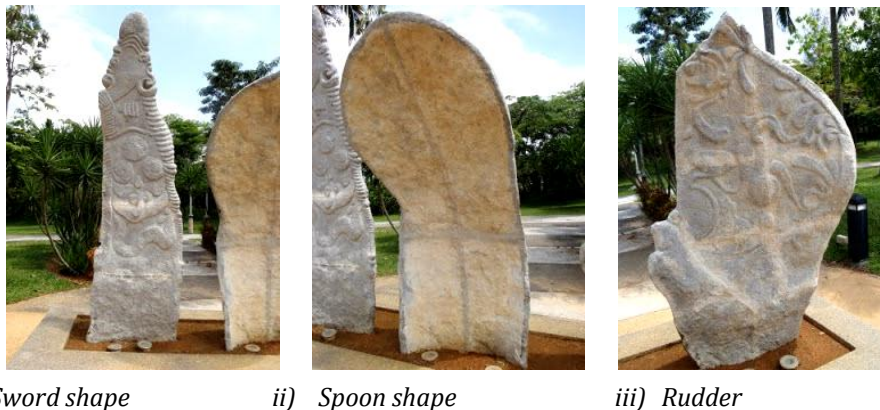


Figure 1 Pengkalan Kempas, Negeri Sembilan Megalithic by now exhibits at Muzium Negeri Sembilan

4. PLAKPLING Tombstones Influences

From the megalithic culture, it was continued by *Plakpling* gravestone which the gravestone is believed used in pre-Islamic. The tombstone is identified as transition of previous religious (Hindu-Buddha) to Islam. The characteristic of megalithic culture is identified applied by the societies at that time even the influence of Hindu-Buddha absorbing into the society. The modest and simple look with a little decoration on it closely and strongly influenced by Megalithic culture by the shape of natural looked. Hence, Hindu culture with the shape, motifs and decorations is vividly believed taken from the form of *lingga, meru and menhir*. The characteristic of *Plakpling* tombstone then continued by Acehnese tombstone with strong of other elements of Sufism and the existing elements of Hindu-Buddha. The shapes of gravestones tend to be referred the forms of pre-existing gravestones carried by Islamic preachers (Repelita Wahyu Oetomo, 2009). The most influences on *Plakpling* tombstone is can be seen on the earliest type of Acehnese tombstone such as type A, B, C, D, E, F and G. Physically, the shape is almost similar to *plakpling* tombstone by the simply look and less of decoration. The part of tombstone also has not much difference where it also divided into head, body and base (without shoulders like Types H, I, J, K, and P). The sequence of Acehnese tombstone is strongly captured by the typology and decoration changing and it take a long period and many influence especially from outside of Malay regions.



Figure 2 *Plakpling* tombstone located in Aceh, Indonesia. (Source: Mizuar Mahdi, 2015)

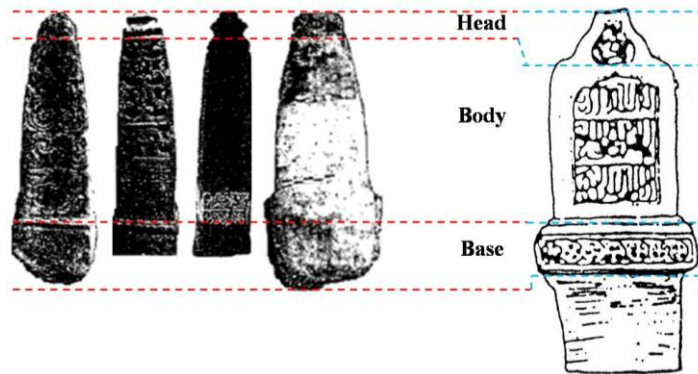


Figure 3 Similarities, relationship and continuity between *Plakpling* tombstone and Acehnes tombstone can be seen by the applied of physical form.

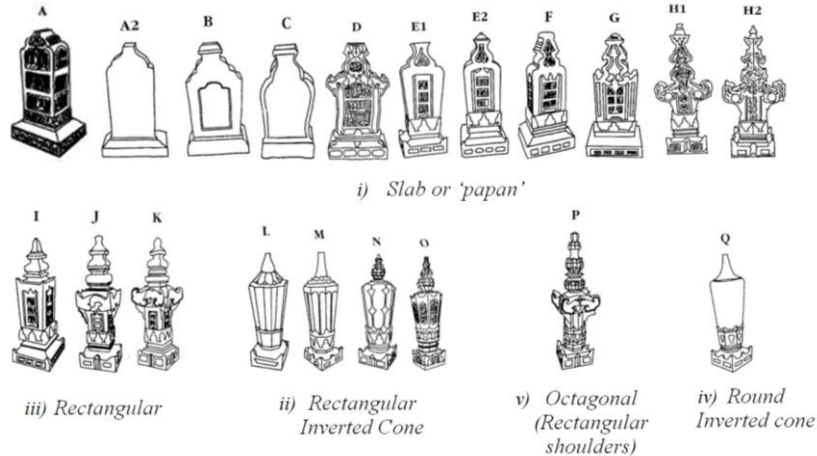


Figure 4 The types of Perret & Kamarudin typology marked with roman alphabets A-Q (Perret & Kamarudin, 2004)

5. Hindu and Buddha Influences

All Hindu-Buddhist motifs especially animals were eliminated and have been modified wisely in abstract form. The influence of Hindu and Buddha on Acehnes tombstone can be seen from the influence of *Plakpling* gravestones. The imitation of Hindu element such as *menhir* and *lingga* towards *Plakpling* gravestone as a signs of Hinduism is still strong in influencing Malay Muslims art. The gravestone gives a big influence to Acehnes tombstone which it used in pre-Islamic period. The modest look of *Plakpling* tombstone has been developed with decoration and inscription with various elements of Hindu-Buddha motifs. The shape of *lingga*, *meru* and *menhir* is applied discreetly onto Acehnes tombstone. The types H, J, K, L, M, N, O and Q are strongly influenced by the Hindu and Buddha arts by the using *gunungan* of lotus motifs where according to Othman (1988),

lotus in Buddhist symbolised divine birth and mortality. These typologies are develop from previous type of Acehnese tombstones (simple type) which the shape is three dimensional form and complex-decorated.

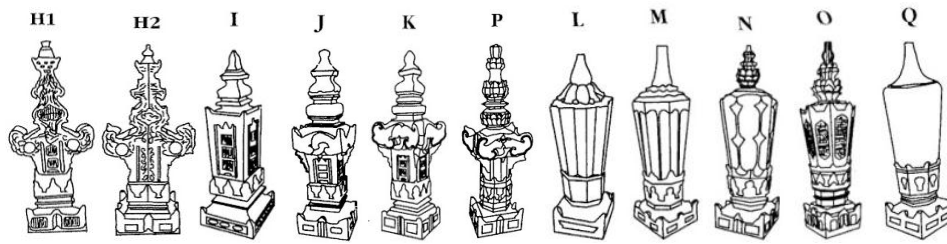


Figure 5 The over-decorated gravestones which the decoration elements carved complex and finer compared to the simple gravestone type (Othman, 1988).

The shapes of these tombstones emphasized the Hindu and Buddha elements especially in decoration parts. The usage of three dimensional elements such as lotus flower represents as purity and sacred in Hindu and Buddha religious. According to Othman (1988), lotus flowers represented in many religious arts like the Egyptian considered lotus is a sacred flower and it depicted divine purity. This is similarly with in pre-Buddhist art to symbolise the parent religion Brahmanism. The Type P, L, M, N and O are obviously used blossom lotus flower as a main decoration to Acehnese tombstone. The Type I, J and K are depicted bud of lotus which the shape is not obviously to determine. The position located at the top part of tombstone symbolised of divine purity. The highest position of the lotus also portrayed different level between human and creator. The borrowed decoration of Hindu-Buddha to Islam atmosphere is unrestricted as long as it does not violate the Islamic law or (syarak). The shapes of the tombstone also represent feature and also provide symbolic meanings. The most distinctive parts are variation shapes of the ‘head’ or ‘top’. The top is symbolised of *stupa*, *gunungan*, or *chandi* where all the symbols are a sacred place of Hindu-Buddha. In Hindu religion, *gunungan* resembled the tree of life which symbolises the highest unity in Hindu religion. *Gunungan* is symbolised as mount Mahameru or Meru where the place is heavenly abode of the gods. *Gunung-gunung* is laid upon the tree-like character with decorations and it also presenting in *wayang kulit* performance known as *pohon budi*, *pohon hayat*, *pohon beringin* or *bodi* leaf. The structure such as *stupa* and *chandi* also applied the shape of *gunungan* in order to reflect the worship to god and for the reason, the *stupa* shape has been applied too into Types A, B, C, D, E, F, G, I, J and K. The *gunungan* motif also used in Malay crafts product such as wood carving and as a motif on fabric likes batik. Overall, *gunungan* motif is widely used in many objects as symbol of worship, compliance, obedience to god and it used to depict as a highest place or level after human.

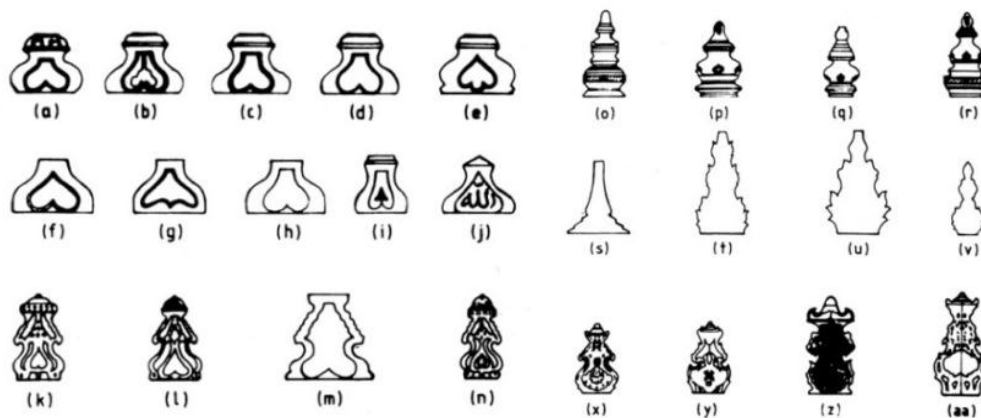


Figure 6 The shape of the top/ head/ vase also can be interpreted with *stupa* or *candi* shapes where it closely relates to the religion before Islam arrive (Othman, 1988).

6. Sufism and Cambay Tombstones Influence

Sufism or known as Islamism that brought by Muslim either by Persian, Arabs or Indian to Malay Archipelago especially during the golden age of Aceh and Malacca. Sufism also influenced because of Malay Archipelago became as transit point to them to go to China as traders. Islam in Malay Archipelago was spread based on an economic phenomenon. Islam is a peaceful and gradual religion without ignoring the previous religious norms. This fact is evidently can be found in arts and architecture and creates mix culture between existing and the new. Definitely, the influence of Islam in the Malay world has tremendous impacted in

many aspects including daily lifestyle. The influence of Sufism also can be seen to Cambay tombstone that brought by Gujerati traders. This situation also happened to Acehese tombstone. Interesting about Acehese tombstone is also absorbing Cambay tombstone design as a part of design decoration. Cambay tombstone has strong element of Persian and Middle East Asia arts where the strong element of Persian can be seen by the use of *mihrab* at the centre of the tombstone and decorated finely with Arabic inscription either Quran verses or Persian poetry.



Figure 7 Shape of *mihrab* becomes main component in Cambay tombstone design. The Arabic inscription which quoted from verses of Quran and Persian poem also carved to decorate the tombstone.

Acehnese tombstone which was developed from *Plakpling* tombstone was changed slightly by inserting the Sufism elements and shapes. From here, the shape of *Plakpling* with round shape (phallus or columnar) change to slab shape with *mihrab* and inscriptions at the centre similarly to Cambay tombstone but the physical look of Acehese tombstone still derived from *Plakpling* shape (top, body and base). The usage of *mihrab* with a quote from Al-Quran, *Shahadah* and Poems are strongly applied into Acehese tombstone. For example, Raja Fatimah tomb at Pekan with typology Type A1 strongly proving the Sufism influence. On it, it was decorated with quote from Al-Quran and Sufi poems. The poem is influenced by Persian literature which mostly telling about death and the life after death. The inscription carved finely in a frame-liked of *mihrab*. According to Othman (1988), *mihrab* in Sufism resemble as door and gate which signifies as the passageway to every Muslim after his death and it symbolised as transition into the next world to face the Creator in hereafter. *Mihrab* is a niche in a mosque indicating the direction of *kiblat* and it particularly found on the types A and B and *mihrab* is truly reflects the Muslim concept of the dead man’s spirit having to go through the *mihrab* on its journey to meet God. All the poems carved on the front surface of Acehese tombstone at Pekan such as at the tomb of Sultan Abdul Jalil and Raja represent the sorrow and the life after death where every mankind have must past through. This means, *mihrab* and poem are an element of Middle East (Persian) brought by traders and its used to resemble as Islamic art due represent by Muslim (Persian or Gujerati).

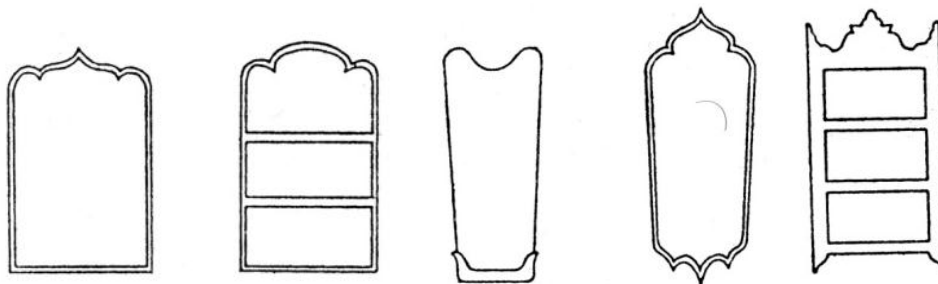


Figure 8 The types of *mihrab* that imitate from Persian architecture (Othman, 1988).

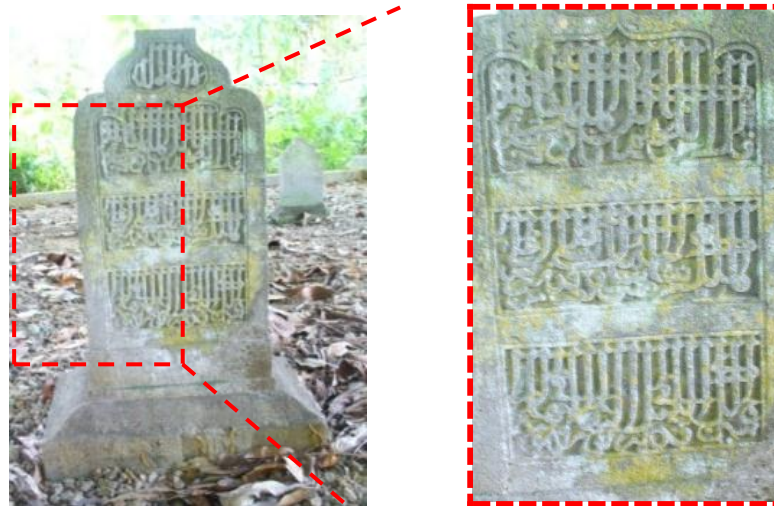


Figure 9 The tombstone at Makam Ziarat Raja Raden, Pekan, Pahang shows the mihrab beautifully carved on the surface of the tombstone.

7. Evolution of Acehese Tombstones

From the analysis, there is important thing to be concluded in order to give a better understanding. The form of Acehese tombstone has been changed from simple shape to more artistic form. The changes can be seen in sequence where the simplest form is Type A, B and C. The form is simple where it fully applied the shape of Cambay tombstone (Persian art). The form later developed by inserting *gunungan* or crown shaped on the top-centred of *Mihrab*. In this period, the Hindu-Buddha art which permanently becomes the Malay art was applied combined with Middle East art. This shape was called by Othman as ladder shape. The ladder shape was named because of the storey of calligraphy formed in tiered form. By this, Malay people expressed their cleverness and creativity in merging the external elements to make as a part of Malay art. Lastly, at the year of 1700-1800 AD, the shape of Acehese tombstone developed into inverted cone-shaped. This is modified from the previous Acehese tombstone form by reducing the motifs and elements of Hinduism and Buddhism. The *mihrab* shape has been modified into simple form with Islamic art is dominant than Hindu and Buddha art. As well as the three dimensional shape was designed hexagonal or round shape also fade up the Hindu-Buddha influence.

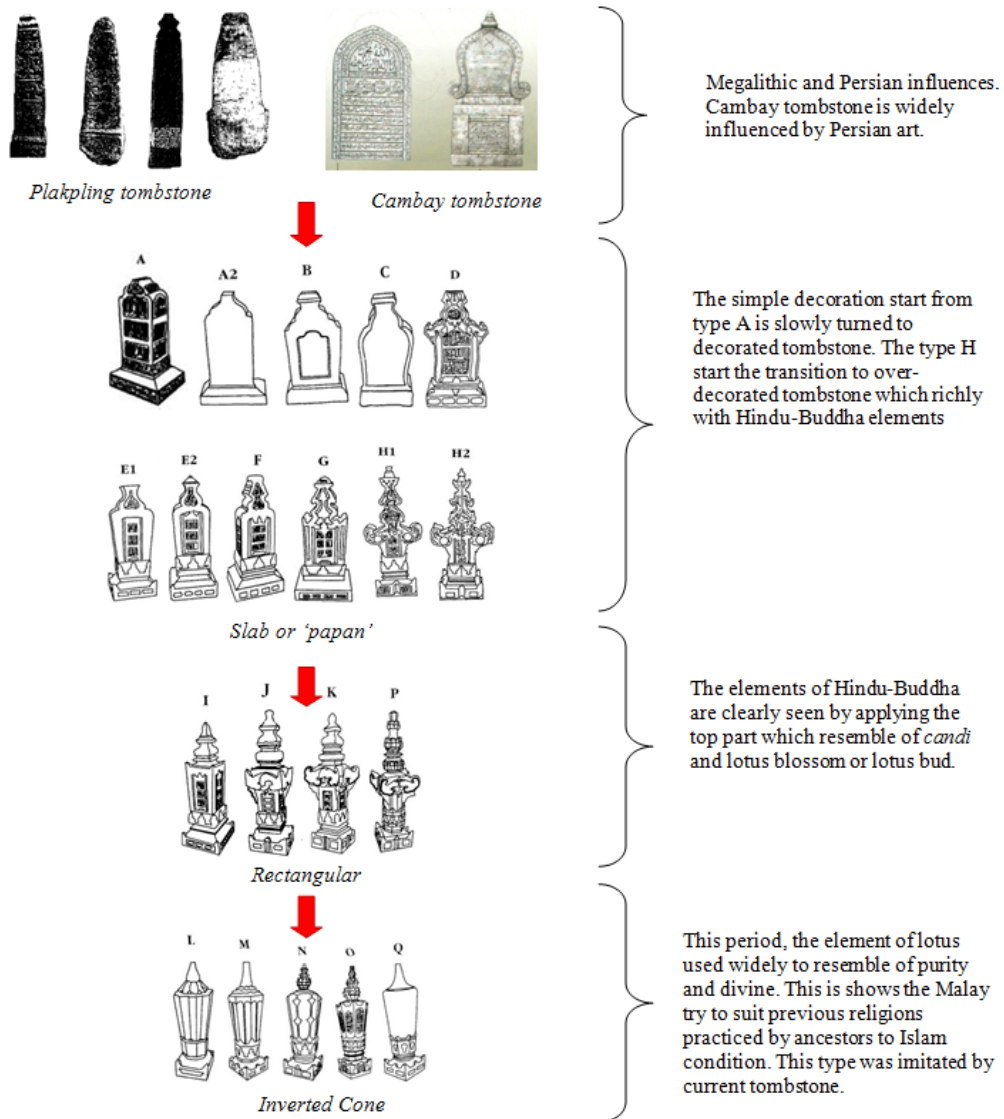


Figure 10 Design chronology of Acehese tombstone.

CONCLUSION

Acehnese Tombstone has a very unique shape, decoration, motif and structure that difficult to identify and analyse the meaning of each tombstone. The influences from religious context and other elements that displayed from the motif and philosophy still are used in marking on Muslim grave yard. As Othman said, the decorations and motifs are related to non-Islamic religious images which belong to the religious which were practiced in Peninsular Malaysia before the advent of Islam. This provides uniqueness towards Muslim-Malay in Malay Archipelago on how they interpreted local culture into Islam. The decorations with various beautiful motifs and shapes on the tombstone are symbolic towards people’s status. Thus needs to be resolved and to be sure that the motifs of tombstone decorations are different compared to the current motif of carving (wood carving especially). The strange motifs and complexity of decorations reflect the stone carving is the earliest example of Malay carving which was through of many transformations and influences from many cultures and religions has been absorbed and applied all the elements from them. This is because; Aceh Darussalam and Malacca once became a centre of education and important port in the world which regularly visited by traders and people around the world such as from India, Persia, Arab, Rome and China long time ago. This situation created cross culture between traders who visited these areas and the adoption of external arts happened indirectly by the frequent relationship. The design of the Acehese tombstone shape is greatly influenced by past era elements as well as Hindu-Buddhist art and prehistoric art. The three major influences from Persian, Hindu-Buddha and Megalithic cultures become the base of Acehese tombstone shape and decoration. The Cambay tombstone with Persian influences of pointed archway or

mihrab and *plakpling tombstone* which combination of megalithic and Hindu influence adding with Lotus motif which a strong symbol to Buddha creates the unique of Acehnese tombstone. From this believed, culture of megalithic and Hindu influences were earlier and became root of ancient Malay culture, together with this, the Persian influences came to Aceh whether direct in trading activities or brought by Indian traders to Aceh become a richer elements in Acehnese tombstone. Some motifs vividly describe the influence of external arts such as Sufism, Hindu and Buddha but some design acting as fulfil the vacancy. The influence shown in Acehnese tombstone captured the past era condition towards the strong history of Malay region.

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