



JOJAPS

eISSN 2504-8457



Journal Online Jaringan Pengajian Seni Bina (JOJAPS)

An Intepretation of Acehnese Tombstone

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Abstract

Batu Aceh or Acehnese Tombstone is believed to have been originated from Aceh in Northern Sumatra which is used from the late 15th to the late 19th century (Othman, 1988). The most privileges about Acehnese Tombstones that they are exhibit the variety of shapes, designs, sizes, ornamentals and decorations. Acehnese tombstone admitted consists of richest values to be studied whether from the shape of the tombstone typology or decoration on the facade. The design of the Acehnese tombstone shape is greatly influenced by past era elements as well as Hindu-Buddhist arts, Sufism and prehistoric arts. All the elements in design make Acehnese Tombstones really unique, different and significant as a one of greatest masterpiece in Malay Archipelago. The study on the design of Acehnese Tombstone is a way to tell the public about Malay heritage that worth to preserve permanently.

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Key-word: - Acehnese tombstone, shape, design, hindu-buddha, sufism and prehistoric

1. Introduction

Batu Aceh, well known as Acehnese Tombstone is believed originated from Northern Sumatra named Aceh. It was used from the late 15th to the late 19th century and it is one of genius loci of the Malay people. Even though Acehnese tombstone is not a popular heritage property among researchers compared to heritage buildings, it presents variety of shapes, designs, sizes, ornamentals and decorations to be studied. It can be studied from different angle or perspectives from history, decorations, design and influences of the design. It gives a strong identity to the Malay people as well as to Malay Islamic art and culture. The influences of Hindu, Buddha, Sufism and Megalith in Malay culture is also provides an interesting interpretation study that may give a spectacular result at the end. According to Othman (1988), the part of the Batu Aceh shows variation in shapes which from the 'head' or 'top' part to the base. The special about Acehnese tombstones is also derives to the cosmological concept into architecture and structure expression which closely related to religious itself. The concept of balance, symmetrical and proportion seen applied to the Acehnese tombstone typology and decorations. The geometrical designs such as straight, crossed and intersecting diagonally lines, rectangles, diamonds, rhomboids; triangles; circles and ovals which carved on the most of the decorations enrich the tombstone as a heritage of the local. Other than that, this kind of tombstone also apply design principle such as repetition of the motif, balance of the shape and harmony in term of decorations which makes it one of proportion heritage man-made from the Malay. According to Ismail (2002), Malay craftsmen applied five types of motifs, namely flora, fauna, calligraphy, geometric and cosmos onto the carved components and flora is one of the most dominant motifs. Carved tombstone is one of stone carving art in Malay expertise. The study on tombstone art also closely related to other art of carving especially in woodcarving art. Even both (wood and stone carving) possess many similarity in terms the used of motif (Halim, 1987), there are several some parts that distinguish stone carving to other art carving.

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2. Methodology

Qualitative research technique will be used to collect data and information. The qualitative approach which as a ‘participant observation’ had facilitated to comprehend the aspect that related to the subject. The archival data 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. The sources from local authority, Majlis Daerah Pekan such as study area’s map and plan also helps in getting the useful information. While Lembaga Muzium Pahang, Pekan is the major reference body in helping to collect data which involves in getting the specific location of each cemetery with Acehnese Tombstone. The other organisations such as Muzium Negara Malaysia and Yayasan Warisan Johor also provide related data which are useful in completing the data of general history of Acehnese Tombstone. Besides, the method of observation onto Acehnese Tombstones at Daerah Pekan was done through identifying current element on site research with using photograph, sketches and interview session with the museum officer. Observation towards cemeteries that marked with Acehnese Tombstone in Daerah Pekan has been choosing as case studies to examine the decoration, motif, design and polar.

3. Gunungan or Mahameru

According to Othman (1989), the head shape of the types C, D and E reflects the form of *gunungan*. *Gunungan* laid upon the tree-like character with decorations where the shape resembled the tree of life and it used to be the highest unity in Hindu religion. *Gunungan* is resembles as *Mahameru* mount and it is heavenly mountain abode of the gods. According to Hindu religion, the mountain indicates a holy place where this place is for gods and deities, made the mountain is a highest level of place in the life. This situation is parallel with Archipelago Press (2001) where the mountain rested on the belief of supernaturally powerful places and it is reflects the abode of the Gods. The mountain rested on the belief of supernatural powerful places and it is reflects the abode of the Gods. In Malay society, the *gunungan* also used in many products and crafts in Malay culture such as wood carving and as a motif on fabric likes batik.

4. Pyramid, Stupa and Candi

From the shape and design, Acehnese tombstones clearly use the concept of pyramid. The concept of pyramid also widely used and applied in Malay craftsmanship such as Malay structures, houses, ancient *candi* and mosque’s roof. The elements of *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) also using triangle or pyramid concept. Pyramid or triangle shape is a sacred symbol in Hindu and Buddha religions where the form is imitates of Mahameru Mountain. The pyramid shape has been applied and interpreted by ‘*gunungan*’ or ‘*gunung-gunung*’ shape which it used widely in the Malay structures and carving and batik motifs. According to Faizal (2012), after the invasion of Islam in the region, all Hindu-Buddhist motifs especially animals were eliminated and have been modified wisely in abstract form. The shape of *stupa* is influenced from Hindu-Buddha which has been applied into types A, B and F used exclusively on the head part of Acehnese tombstones. The head of Types G and H is clearly resembled as miniature *chandi* (Hindu- Buddhist temple). The tiered roof of *chandi* and parts of the lotus plant are subject to religious symbolism in other cultures.

5. Cosmological Belief

Cosmological belief concept is a symbol of the existence of a highest being of the spiritual world. Cosmological concept is formed with a layer of status in a shape of pyramid. The upper layer conceptually symbolised of God and the rest bottom layer is a various layers of His creature. From observation, the basic shape of all Acehnese tombstones is derived from pyramid which closely related to the concept of cosmological belief. This can be seen in all types especially at the upper body. The upper body which contains top, head and shoulders forming tapered shape towards the top.

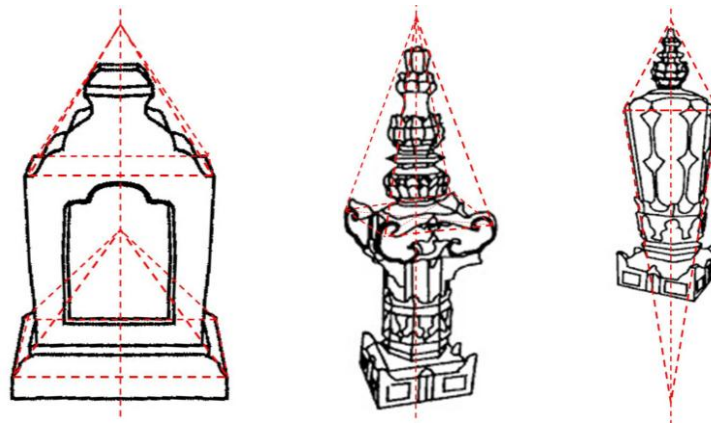


Figure 1 *Gunungan* and pyramid shape clearly formed Acehese tombstone in order to symbolise the sacred of *Gunung Mahameru* or divine place.

6. Balance, Repetition and Harmony

In terms of design, Acehese tombstone applied balance in every design. The balance itself creates a symmetrical form which clearly can be seen from the typology and shape. Even researchers have classified Acehese tombstone is divided into classes and shapes such as buckle wing, slab, rectangular, inverted cone shapes or cylindrical shapes, all forms and shapes of Acehese tombstone types are still balance and symmetrical in design. Acehese tombstone has been designed balance by taking the middle line as the centre line and symmetrical in both sides. All of the tombstones are equal even the shapes are varies. The vertical line is made up as a reference line to proof a balance and symmetrical creation. It also can be seen to the decorations and motifs carved on the surface of the tombstones. Every decoration looked like mirror from each side especially from the left and the right side. Balance also can be determined as perfectionist either in life of Muslim of other religion. In Islam, the balance of world and hereafter is claimed in achieving a perfect life and blessed. That is why every form in architecture or designs is always balance as well as to reflect the religion design concept especially in Islam. The repetition is use to harmonise the decoration and look. It can be interpreted as value added to the decoration and enrich the other elements by use them continuity. All the arrangement of the decoration and motifs create harmony and cohesive design which truly represent Malay among the most creative people in the world. In Islam, harmony is a one of important and necessary elements in order to create balance and peace in life. The elements which arrange beautifully will produce a better product at the end.

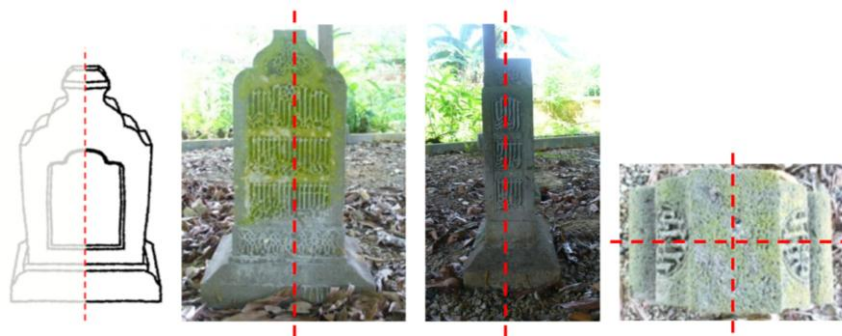


Figure 2 Centre line divided Acehese into two part to prove the balance and symmetrical.

7. Proportion

Based on an interview with Norhaiza (2010), all Malay structures such as archway especially is looks like human form with it build proportion and proper with top/head, shoulders, body and feet. This concept could build a strong structure which coincided with creation of mankind by Allah. From this, proportion concept is fully applied in designing Acehese tombstone by imitating the form of human physical and the human physical is closely applied to achieved balance and proportion in design.

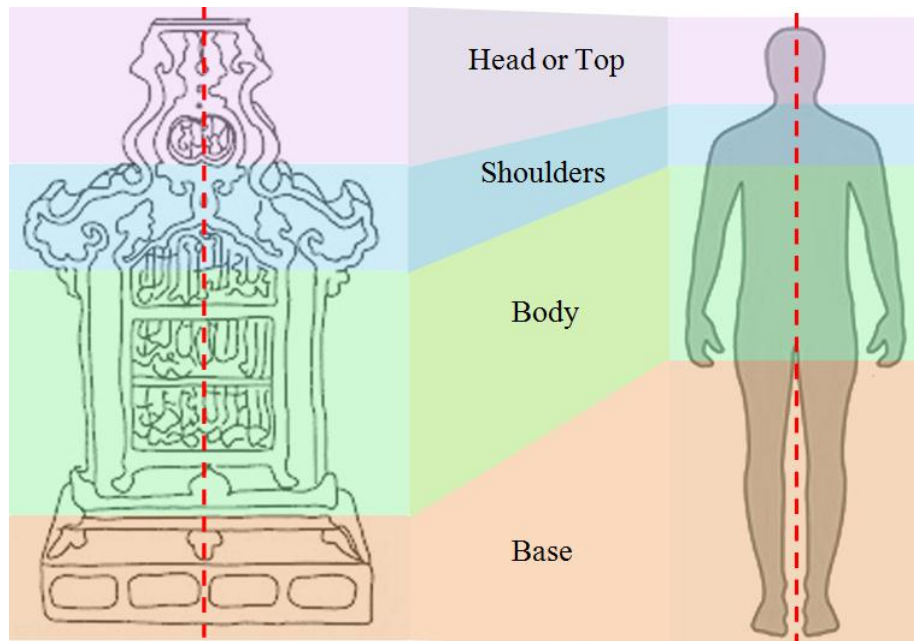


Figure 3 Similarity between human physical with Acehese tombstone. The imitation is to achieve balance, symmetrical and proportion structure.

A notable example is Borobudur temple in Indonesia which used the concept of human physical as key concepts to achieve a balance. According to Mark Long in borobudur.tv website (retrieved in 2012), distribution on each side is very clearly describes the head, body and foot (base) where every tier or layer represents the status of the Hindu-Buddhist religious. The tiers of Borobudur temple and Acehese tombstone design are similar to each other and this situation proves that this concept is extensively used by Malays in every design and architecture. Reflecting to the similarity of human body, Malay people were obtained applies the creation of mankind by Allah to create a perfect and fine structure as the completion of the creation of man. Hence, if compared to all Islamic gravestones such as *Plakpling*, *Cambay*, *Madurese* and modern gravestones, Acehese tombstone is the most perfect, symmetrical and balance creation which the production is based on the intelligence and wisdom of the Malay people. The concept of balance, symmetrical and proportion are not only applied to the Acehese tombstone typology, it also applied to the motif decoration carved on the surface of Acehese tombstone. The usage of geometrical designs on all the decorations such as the used of lines either straight, crossed and intersecting diagonally; rectangles, polyhedrons, diamonds, rhomboids; triangles; circles and ovals. Several design especially at the base are using repetition motif. The repetition motifs ordinarily carved articulated around the base part.

8. Decoration

According to Othman (1989), decorations of the Acehese tombstones can be divided into two categories which are inscription and symbols. The inscription decorations always found is Arabic calligraphy which is used either ‘Late Kufic’ or Naskhi while symbols decorated almost the surface of Acehese tombstones either on head, body, shoulders or base where it carved in the image of flowers, geometrical shapes, spider web or net, *mihrab*, vines and vase.

Calligraphy

There are a few Acehese tombstones in Peninsular Malaysia used inscription as a decoration. The inscriptions are usually decorated with quote from Al-Quran and Sufi poems which mostly telling about death and the life after death. The calligraphy was translated as ‘Gate’ that the poem sounds as “Death is a gate and all men go in there at” (gravestone of Raja Fatimah at Pekan, Pahang) while the gravestone of Sultan Abdul Jalil/Jamil at Pekan translated as ‘Door’ represent the sorrow and the life after death that every men must past through (Othman, 1989).

Floras

The head part are the lotus plant as well as to the types K, M and N. Lotus flowers represented in many religious arts where the Egyptian considered lotus flower to be sacred in that it depicted divine purity that similarly with the meaning in pre-Buddhist art where the symbolism of the flower was borrowed by the Buddhists directly from the parent religion Brahmanism. The flower was symbolised divine birth and mortality (Othman, 1989). Besides lotus, other flowers such as Acehese flowers also identified

used as a motif on the gravestones. The examples of typical Acehese flowers are *boengong kalimah*, *boengong awan-awan*, and *boengong awan si tangke*. These flowers were identified as usual motif in incorporated into the decoration. The motifs used as a signature of local expertise and enrichment purposes. According to Othman (1988), the combination of decorations with floral designs on Acehese tombstone are associated with religious symbolism in Islamic Art. The combination of decorations in other materials of used like wood also admitted by Faizal (2012) where the Islamic art carving usually combined geometric patterns with calligraphy and there are also combined with flora that always found in mosque, tombs, palaces and houses.

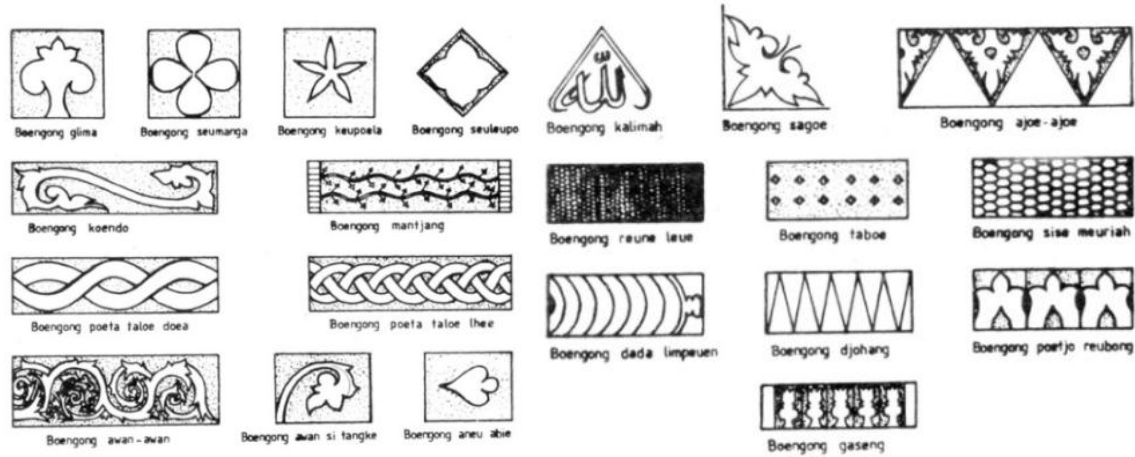


Figure 4 The various motifs of the Acehese flowers (Othman, 1988).

Vines

Vines can be identified in various forms on several types of Acehese tombstone. The vine stems resembles the geometric form of Acehese tombstones. Some of vines pattern was formed in the form of an arabesque. Arabesque is defined as intricate and fanciful surface decoration generally based on geometrical patterns and using a combination of flowing lines, tendrils etc (Othman, 1988). The vine can be interpreted as a channel to connect or link two or more in order to produce a harmony in design.

Spider web and geometrical

According to Othman (1989), the ‘web’ is interpreted as a ‘net’ where both are symbolised of the same idea. The depicting of the net with the lotus could have a symbolic meaning contrary to this such as holding or drawing together divine objects. Another interpretation of this design could be that it is the meshing in a veil. The basic geometrical shapes associated with religious symbolism are not confined to the Islamic world as many researchers say. He amplified that the geometric shapes such as also related with Judeo-Christian with concept of cosmos. It same with the rosette motif also used at Christian churches and Muslim mosques in the form of wall decorations and windows. The geometrical designs are always susceptible to more than one interpretation which most of the shapes are associated with religious (Othman 1988), but some motifs carved on the gravestone is to fill the vacancy (Oetomo 2009). From here, some of the motifs design came out with meaning and some of motifs are just to fulfil the vacancy especially the motif at the base part.

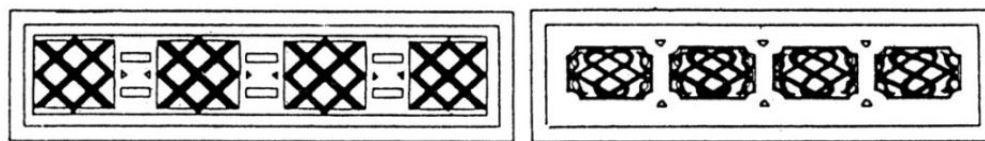


Figure 5 The web or net design on Acehese tombstones (Othman, 1988).

Rosette

Rosette or rose shape in the form of geometric motifs also can be found on Acehese tombstones decoration. The form of rosette can be seen symmetrical and balance which can be represented as lotus seed. The lotus symbol is widely used to represent purity and divine. The balance itself also to show the formal in design which mostly the religious architecture or design used widely. Rosette petals arrangement is shown by the geometric arrangement of unity. It can also be given as the spatial interpretation contains Sufistic meaning. Carved roses are usually found on the surface of the authors called a curve shoulder into (curly shoulders). Othman stated Snouch Hurgronje prefers to call it as earrings roses and shoulder into the curve as the ear. He argued that kind of tombstone shape usually was marking to the woman deceased. The flowers and earrings have the same connotation to Othman that represents women. The rosettes are 5-8 cm in size and in the same position on each shoulder. Othman (1988)

opinion that the rosette is basically a geometrical design and it used for religious symbolism and religious art. The motif can be seen on mosques throughout the Middle East, Asia Minor and Iran. The fact that the circle, or rosette, contains petals or segments is no way symbolically religious meaning and he considered the undecorated discus on the curly shoulders of Acehnese tombstone symbolizes the ‘pure’ form, which the decoration is not intended as a sexual symbol indicating a woman. Othman interprets the rounded shape engravings on the types H1 and H2 as rosette motif which reflecting Judeo-Christian art, but from the observation, the motif is closely imitates lotus pod. As we know, lotus is a sacred flower which strongly reflecting Hindu and Buddha religions.

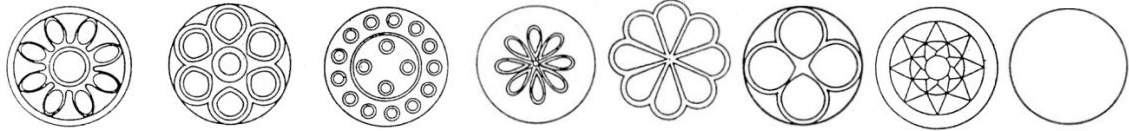


Figure 6 The motif of rosette (Othman, 1988).

Mihrab

In islam, *mihrab* is a niche in a mosque indicating the direction of *kiblat*. It is also as a frame for quotations from the Koran, the *Shahadah*, Sufi poems or floral patterns. The mihrab also can be representing a door or a ‘way into a life after’. This is parallel with the function of the mihrab in mosque where it located at the front which people face it during praying. According to Faizal (2012), when the Malay accepted Islam as the way of life, the carvers has been actively producing an artwork based on Islamic art as we have seen nowadays the calligraphy often worked together with the flora and geometric forms. In Sufism, the *mihrab*, door and gate, signifies the passageway which every Muslim, after his death, has to take into the next world to face his God, his Creator (Othman, 1988). Othman (1988) considered that the decoration of *mihrab* on the gravestones is truly reflects the Muslim concept of the dead man’s spirit having to go through the *mihrab* on its journey to meet God. The meaning motif is the usage of *mihrab* and Kufic calligraphy which strongly reflects Islam religion and Persian literature, poem.

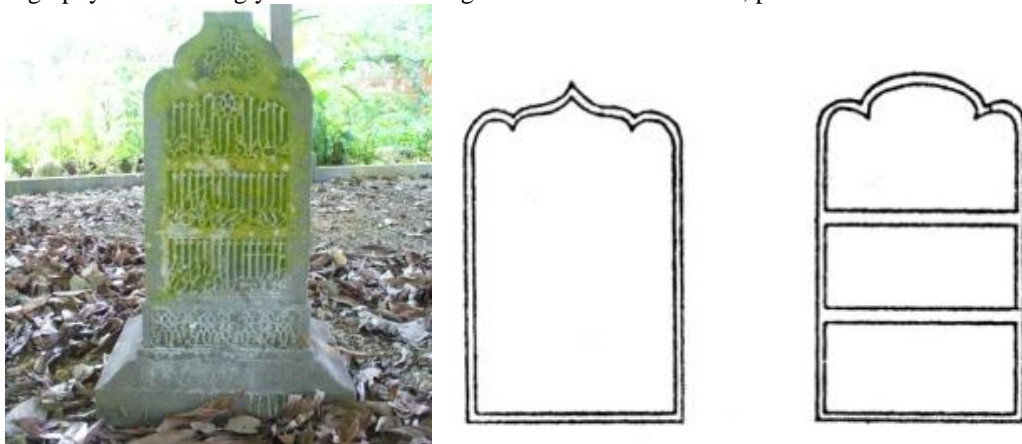


Figure 7 The example of *mihrab* types (Othman, 1988)

Vase shape

On each side of the surface on the head of some of Acehnese tombstone, there is a deep-cut motif in the form of a vase. One of example of Acehnese tombstone contains of Sufi poem. According to Othman (1989), the upturned vase motifs of type M may be interpreted as the continuous pouring of water on the grave. It also an imitation from the stupa/candi shapes which represent *gunungan*.

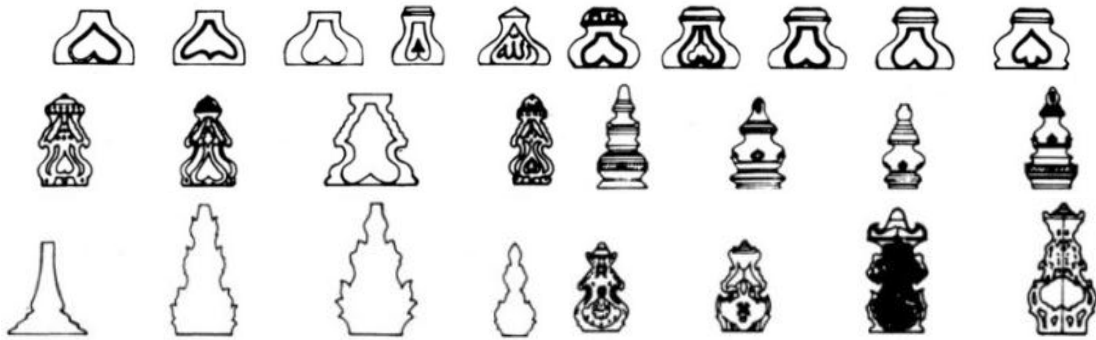


Figure 8 The vase shapes used on Acehese tombstone design (Othman, 1988).

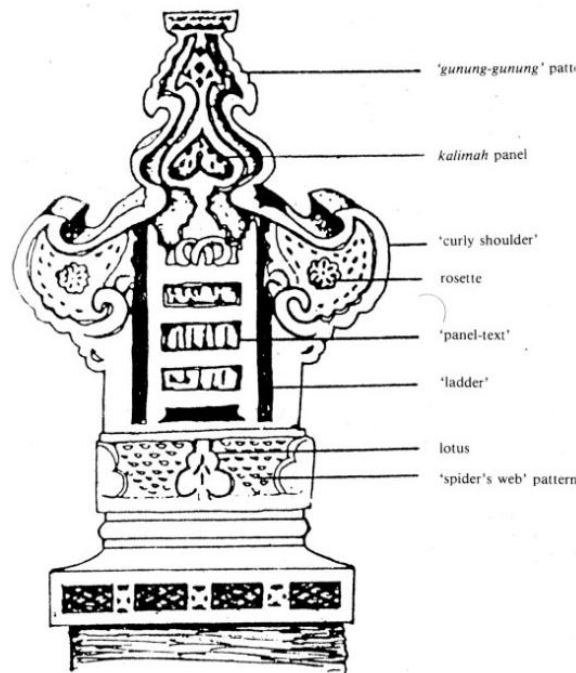


Figure 9 The overall feature of Acehese tombstone (Othman, 1988).

Conclusion

Essentially, the art of carving had a great influence from the way of daily life that based on observation of the nature (Ismail Said, 2002) whereupon when the arrival of Islam after the 14th century transformed the art of Malay carving into abstract or natural forms (Farish and Khoo, 2003) and this situation provide a new image of Malay world. The art of Malay stone carving is a study to discover the art of Acehese Tombstones. Acehese Tombstones is genius loci of the Malay people that give a strong identity to the Malay people and to Malay Islamic art and culture. The interpretation or meaning of the Acehese tombstone decorations are wide and it can be any meaning based on researchers' interpretation and understanding. According to Repelita (2009), the motifs on the tombstones thrive in line with the era where the crowded and various motifs have been used and some of tombstones look scaly due to laden with motifs. Decorations of Acehese tombstone are various where it shows vividly the influence of many cultures. The elements of Hindu-Buddhist are vividly depicted by using of lotus motif and the Persian and Islamic culture represented by the *mihrab* form included with Arabic script and Sufism poem. These elements make Acehese truly unique and special. The characteristics and shapes of Acehese gravestones is different between period which some of era used over decorated gravestones that reflecting the status of the period. In context of interpretation, the meaning can be anything base on the knowledge of researchers. Some researchers state the decorations come out with its meaning and art interpretation and some can be meaningless and acted as filling of the vacant space. This is truly showed that art is subjective thing to interpret and nothing is wrong when dealing with this situation.

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