

SAINTS, SINNERS, AND THE TOADS IN THE PULPIT

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ABSTRACT

The mosque is a spiritual haven for both saints and sinners, providing a space where profound spiritual redemption and these groups' dynamic interplay occur. Notwithstanding, there is a distinct theoretical gap in scholarly discourse regarding the symbolism of repentance (*tawbah*) within traditional mosque architecture, considering its significant role in shaping the spirituality of both saints and sinners. Given these circumstances, this paper examines the intricate relationship between saints, sinners, and the symbolism of *tawbah* in mosque architecture, particularly focusing on a motif in the pulpit (*minbar*) of a traditional Malay mosque in Melaka through a traditional Malay prose narrative (*hikāyat*) which manifest the symbolism of the same. It employs a hermeneutic reading of the MSS 2968, the "Small Message to Describe the Night Journey and the Ascension" (*Risālat Laṭīfat fī Bayān al-Isrā' wa-al-Mi'rāj*) (1767) authored by 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Falimbānī, alongside a case study of significant and contemporaneous mosque architecture, particularly the toad motif in the pulpit of Masjid Tengker, Melaka (1728). It was found that the right-facing toad symbolises saints and spiritual purity, while the left-facing toad represents sinners and spiritual deviation, wherein the transformative potential inherent in *tawbah* is depicted by the symbolic transformation of the latter into the former. In conclusion, the mosque emerges as a profound symbol of spiritual redemption, catering to the needs of both saints and sinners. The significance of this paper is underscored by its contribution to Traditionalist thought, revealing the interconnectedness of Malay-Islamic architecture and literature and providing a robust conceptual framework for future research on the subject.

Keywords: Symbolism, pulpit, saints, sinners, repentance

1. Introduction

It was narrated that Abū Hurayrah said: "The Messenger of Allāh (may Allāh bless and give him peace) said: 'When one of you enters the mosque, he is in a state of prayer, so long as the prayer keeps him there, and the angels will send prayer upon anyone of you so long as he remains in the place where he prayed, saying: "O Allāh, forgive him; O Allāh, have mercy on him; O Allāh, accept his repentance."'" (Sunan Ibn Mājah: 799)

In the sanctified echo of Abū Hurayrah's narration, the mosque stands as a mediator between the celestial and the terrestrial, where every entrant is swathed in prayer's grace. It becomes a haven where the air itself is stitched with invocations for mercy and forgiveness, a testament to the profound need for repentance (*tawbah*) among all, particularly the sinner. This space, hallowed by Prophet Muḥammad's assurance of angelic blessings, offers not simply respite but a vibrant tableau of *tawbah*. It is in the mosque's symbolism that we find an architectural symphony—a silent but potent chorus for the hopeful and the contrite alike. To engage with this scholarly pursuit, this paper seeks to unravel the dynamics between saints and sinners through the mosque's architectural symbolism. It is an entwining of divinity and design, where architectural elements and motifs are not just mere structures and decoration but sentinels of perpetual intercession, chanting: "O Allāh, accept his repentance."

The silent stones of the mosque, standing as sentries of spirituality, bear the weight of unspoken symbols, among them the profound script of *tawbah*. Nevertheless, there remains a blind spot in scholarly circles, a lacuna where the translation of remorse into the architectural vernacular of the mosque has been left unarticulated. The importance of probing this theoretical gap springs from the mosque's role as both scaffold and sanctuary in articulating a believer's penitent journey. For saints and sinners who tread its sacred ground, understanding how *tawbah* is encoded in the edifice can offer a deeper communion with the divine. This understanding transcends aesthetics, imbuing the

mosque's structural elements with a language that, if deciphered, gives voice to the mute concrete in narrating tales of mercy and return. The mosque's architecture, thus, becomes not only a repository of culture but an active participant in the narrative of redemption.

This paper aims to fill this crucial theoretical gap by systematically examining the concept of *tawbah* as embodied in the architectural symbolism of a traditional Malay mosque in Melaka. By harnessing the rich reservoir of traditional Malay literature, the paper offers a provisional conceptual framework to understand how Malay-Muslims externalise their spiritual beliefs through mosque architecture. The journey begins by exploring three conceptual confluences: the Traditionalist School's architectural symbolism, the intertwining of *tawbah* and the traditional mosque, and the intersection of literature and architecture. The methodology then delves into the hermeneutic analysis of a traditional Malay prose narrative (*hikāyat*) and a case study of a traditional Malay mosque and its pulpit (*minbar*). The paper culminates by unravelling the intricate symbolism of *tawbah* embedded within the pulpit's design, ultimately enriching our understanding of Islāmic spirituality and architectural expression.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 The Traditionalist School and architectural symbolism

In the scholarly sanctum of the Traditionalist School, architectural symbolism emerges as a profound discourse of metaphysical realms, transcending mere structure to convey the intangible whispers of ancient wisdom. Guided by luminary thinkers such as René Guénon and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the School's exponents reveal a spatial cosmos where each edifice tells a celestial narrative, anchoring historical truths in a dialogue between form and eternity. This intellectual lineage, nurturing minds like Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, peels away the mundane to uncover layers of esoteric significance. With an unyielding allegiance to transcendent principles—original, universal, and communal meaning—the Traditionalists sculpt a critique of modernity's horizontal sprawl (Akkach, 2005; Burckhardt, 1987; Khan, 2003; Snodgrass, 1990). In their vision, architecture is not an act of individual creativity but a sacred act of recollection, where the building becomes nature's echo (Burckhardt, 2007; Oldmeadow, 2011; Schuon, 2007), a silent testament to the divine (Azzam, 2013; Clark, 2013; Schuon, 2007), and the flesh housing the spirit of religious life (Burckhardt, 1987; Kharul Amali Daharun, 1991; Nasr, 1997). Their steadfast and stylistically resonant work elevates the understanding of symbols from decorative elements to conduits of divine presence, beckoning the Muslim community (*ummah*) towards a higher state of being.

The study of architectural symbolism in traditional mosques presents a scholarly odyssey beyond the veneer of structural artistry and into the soul of Islāmic culture. Traditionalist scholars, esteemed navigators on this journey, delve into the rich symbolisms of mosques, advancing a thesaurus of forms indelibly linked to metaphysical dimensions (Hazwan Ariff Hakimi et al., 2023b). In the venerable city of Malay-Islāmic Melaka, local intellects, even those not donning the Traditionalist mantle, rally to interpret the mosque's iconography with a lens focused on inherent meaning rather than mere physical allure (Nur Dalilah Dahlan & Mohd Shahrudin Abd Manan, 2021; Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria, 2022). This converging academic fervour speaks to a shared recognition: the mosque is more than an architectural archetype—it is a diorama of divinity, encapsulating wisdom that transcends time (Hailane Salam et al., 2023; Harlina Md Sharif, 2019; Nor Zalina Harun et al., 2022; Nur Dalilah Dahlan & Mohd Shahrudin Abd Manan, 2021; Nurfarahhana Ismail et al., 2022; Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria et al., 2021). Enshrined as the jewel in the crown of Islāmic architecture (Aziz, 2004), the

traditional mosque serves as a cypher, revealing layers of insight into the sacred tapestry woven by generations of faithful, a testament to an architectural lineage as a vessel of immortal narrative.

The mosque pulpit's architectural essence, as chronicled by Burckhardt (1976) and Aziz (2004), unfolds a silent dialogue with the mystical Ascension of Prophet Muḥammad. Burckhardt's ascension imagery, alongside Aziz's elaboration of a sacred connection, harmonises with the emblematic function of the pulpit, resonating deeply with the zenith of the Ascension itself—the divine mandate of prayer dissemination. However, Burckhardt's depiction of an empty throne seems incongruent, as the sermon-giver imbues the pulpit with purposeful presence in Melakan mosques, a contrast to the evocative but unoccupied ascension he perceived. Whereas his account overlooks the pulpit's fine details, the pointed absence of elaborate steps in these sacred spaces does not diminish their symbolic potency. The pulpit transcends its physical form with intricate designs that amplify spiritual resonance, giving architectural form to the Ascension's narrative (Hazwan Ariff Hakimi, 2024). Regrettably, the literature remains silent on the symbolism of *tawbah* through this pulpit—this internal architectural element's potential to embody such symbolism begs scholarly exploration, suggesting a rich seam of study hitherto untapped.

2.2 Repentance (*tawbah*) and the traditional mosque

The traditional mosque, a hub of sanctification, looms as a sanctuary for both the virtuous and the wayward, where edification meets *tawbah*. It stands, in Martin Lings' words, as a “crystallization of sainthood” (Lings, 1997)—a realm where saints, in their nearness to the divine, might not seek sanctuary, yet their very sanctity becomes an anchor for the sinners (Schuon, 2007). Here, the mosque transcends mere structure to become the spiritual crossroads where the sacred meets the profane. Embodying this dichotomy is the poignant narrative of Prophet Muḥammad and Abū Lubābah, whose tale of sin, self-imposed exile, and subsequent redemption unfolded within the hallowed walls of the Prophet's Mosque in Madīnah. In the fabled act of Abū Lubābah's chaining himself, we observe the mosque as more than a place of prayer; it emerges as an arena for profound transformation.

According to legend, after Prophet Muḥammad's return from Tabūk, Abū Lubābah fasts for seven days by chaining himself to a pillar in the Prophet's Mosque. As God accepts Abū Lubābah's repentance, he insists that the Prophet personally untie the chains. For his repentance to be considered “full,” he also insists on undertaking some penance after gaining forgiveness—he swears to leave his home and give away his things as a charity. The preceding narrative depicts the saint-sinner-mosque triad in which, through the Prophet, Abū Lubābah's repentance was not only accepted by God in the former's mosque but also memorialised in the latter's Pillar of Repentance, which still stands today as a reminder to the sinner of Abū Lubābah's remorse and God's ever-forgiving grace. Enshrined within the Prophet's Mosque, the Pillar of Repentance stands not merely as a relic but as a poignant emblem of the mosque's enduring sanctity; here, the legend of Abū Lubābah's chains dissolves into a narrative of divine clemency, sculpting a space where the righteous and the errant alike are beckoned to the transformative embrace of *tawbah*—a confluence where sin is refined into virtue.

Curiously, in the vast expanse of academic discourse, the embodiment of *tawbah* through architectural symbolism in traditional mosques, including those in Melaka, remains an understudied realm. This lacuna is especially intriguing given the potent anecdote of the Pillar of Repentance, which vividly captures *tawbah*'s deep resonance within the Islāmic tradition. Despite the thematic weight of such tales, there has been an academic reticence to thoroughly interrogate how edifices of faith mirror spiritual transformation. This paper addresses the oversight with a literary sleight of hand, positioning the agency of literature as a fulcrum to leverage a richer understanding of sacred spaces.

It champions the silent teachings encoded within mosque walls, excavating layers of meaning that have remained hidden without a theoretical or empirical torch to illuminate them. By weaving an intricate analysis of traditional Malay literature, the paper unveils the proverbial “text” in the texture of the traditional Malay mosque, inscribing a hitherto untold chapter into the annals of theological and architectural scholarship.

2.3 Literature and architecture

The proposition of conflating literature with architecture—a pairing as unconventional as it is insightful—challenges the academic orthodoxy, urging a renaissance in scholarly thought. In this crucible of interdisciplinary inquiry, literature becomes a facet of the conceptual framework, augmenting our understanding of Malay-Islāmic architectural ethos. Tracing its intellectual pedigree to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the fusion advocates for digging into the rich soil of language and literature to grasp the spiritual and aesthetic blueprint of the traditional mosque (Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, 2015; Syed Naguib al-Attas, 1969). Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi (2000) amplifies this chorus, arguing for a symbiotic analysis that unravels the psyche of the Malay-Muslim civilisation through its literary and architectural manifestations. Rather than a repository for historical artefacts, this synergistic approach transforms architectural history into a living testament of cultural relevance, granting it a new lease on scholarly life (Borden & Rendell, 2000). Herein lies a profound reimagining of disciplines, not as distinct entities but as entwined threads in the fabric of the Malay-Islāmic worldview.

In the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, the interwoven strands of Islāmic literature and architecture manifest a symbiotic elegance, with each discipline casting light on the other’s profound and intricate contributions to the region’s cultural lexicon. Unlike the fecund narrative decorations of the region’s Hindu-Buddhist temples, Islāmic architectural ornamentation forges a distinct path (Kerlogue, 2004). It steers clear of the visual storytelling epitomised in ancient Java, instead choosing the whispered eloquence of Arabic calligraphy to express the divine (Abd Rahman Hamzah, 2011). However, this seeming reticence masks a deeper communion with the literary arts. The Malay-Muslim craft did not succumb to obscurity post-Islāmisiation; instead, it adapted, with the symbolic language of mosque motifs acting as quiet custodians of cultural narrative. In the absence of overt scriptural calligraphy (Abd Rahman Hamzah, 2012), these motifs bear silent witness to a heritage rich in meaning, asserting a comparable gravity of symbolism. Here, in the evolving canvas of sacred spaces, the absence of figurative representation echoes the presence of an unspoken yet textually anchored theology.

In the rich tapestry of traditional Malay literature, prose narratives (*ḥikāyāt*) stand as the woven narratives that chronicle the juxtaposed realms of romance and biography, peopling the literary landscape with sagas of spiritual finesse (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). These prose narratives, especially those articulating the concept of *tawbah* in Islām, serve as conduits transmitting the cultural ethos and collective conscience of the Malay-Muslim community. They venerate the life (*sīrah*) and prophetic miracles (*muʿjizah*) of Prophet Muḥammad (Braginsky, 2004), a tradition sedimented through translations and transcriptions that have found voice in the communal symphonies of Malay festivals (Ismail Hamid, 1983). Here, the *ḥikāyāt* unfurl not just as didactic recitations but as living stories that map the contours of the spiritual life, offering vivid emblems to be emulated (Braginsky, 2004; Ismail Hamid, 1983). This paper mines the depths of such narratives, aligning the literary symbolism of *tawbah* with its architectural counterparts within the pulpit—a scholarly endeavour that promises to illuminate the shared Weltanschauung etched into both word and wood.

3. Methodology

The discerning application of hermeneutics to the traditional Malay *ḥikāyat* of MSS 2968 *Risālat Laṭīfat fī Bayān al-Isrā' wa-al-Mi'rāj* by the author provides a methodological compass for charting the text's dense topography of *tawbah*. This deep hermeneutic dive is not random but informed by four compelling considerations. Prominently, the *ḥikāyat* offers rich examples that entwine with spiritual life, inviting emulation, and delivering didactic resonance on the theme of *tawbah*. Second, its origin in the golden era of Malay literary output confers a historical lustre and authenticity, illuminating it as a quintessential cultural product (Braginsky, 2004). Third, its temporal nexus with the construction of the Melakan mosque endows it with an architectural significance—a synchronous artefact reflecting the era's spiritual ethos. Lastly, the manuscript's completion and accessibility solidify its value as a research object, ensuring the analysis is underpinned by an academically rigorous exploration of its literary parameters and subparameters.

MSS 2968, titled the “Small Message to Describe the Night Journey and the Ascension” (*Risālat Laṭīfat fī Bayān al-Isrā' wa-al-Mi'rāj*) (Figure 1), authored by 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Jāwī al-Falimbānī on 17 Rajab 1181 A.H. (9 December 1767 C.E.), stands as the earliest manuscript depicting the Night Journey and the Ascension in the Malay world (Hazwan Ariff Hakimi et al., 2023a). Predating similar works by over four decades, it offers a comprehensive 55-folia narrative. Beginning on folium 4verso and concluding on folium 52verso, the manuscript meticulously details Prophet Muḥammad's Night Journey and Ascension. Folium 5recto to 18verso (14 folia) recounts the first part of the Night Journey, folium 18verso to 46verso (29 folia) narrates the Ascension, and folium 46verso to 50verso (5 folia) concludes with the second part of the Night Journey. This manuscript not only provides a seminal account of these spiritual events but also serves as a vital cultural artefact, reflecting the integration of Islāmic concepts into Malay literature.

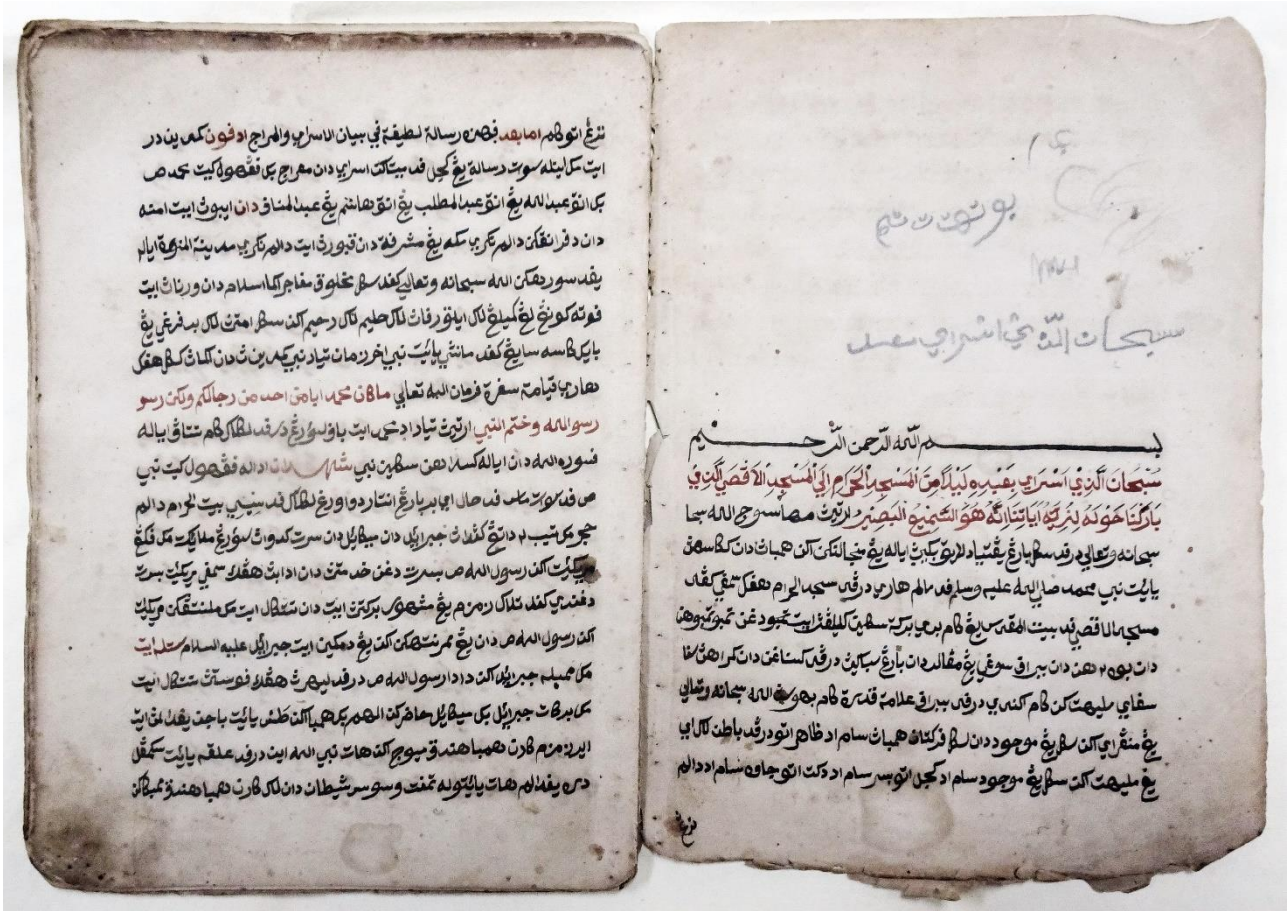


Figure 1: The opening pages of the manuscript of the MSS 2968 *Risālat Laṭīfat fī Bayān al-Isrā' wa-al-Mi'rāj*

The intricate case study of Masjid Tengker, a formidable exemplar of a traditional Malay mosque in Melaka dating back to 1728, has been astutely chosen to examine the manifold means by which the architectural parameters and subparameters of the building expresses the symbolism of *tawbah*. This mosque was explicitly selected for its historical and architectural merit, borne from a time when Dutch colonial influence purportedly infused a decorative richness into the local structures. Located in the administrative hub of the colony, its architectural splendour is anticipated to contrast starkly with that of more modest rural mosques, thus presenting a unique case for study. Furthermore, its esteemed status as a national heritage building, under the protection of Jabatan Warisan Negara, lends credibility to the preservation and authenticity of its design elements. These reasons justify Masjid Tengker's potential to provide rich insights into the vernacular expressions of religious and cultural tenets through its physical form.

Masjid Tengker in Melaka (Figure 2) is not only an architectural landmark but also a historical mosaic reflecting the confluence of diverse cultures since its construction in 1728. Nestled on the venerable Jalan Tengker, the mosque has evolved from a humble edifice of timber and coconut fronds to a fortified symbol bearing Borneo ironwood pillars and brick renovations (Azizi Bahauddin & Hakimi Ahmad, 2018a, 2018b; Liu, 2022; Napisah Karimah Ismail & Muhammad Harris Bossley, 2021). Its appellation, resonating with Minangkabau or Portuguese linguistic roots (Farah Azwati Shafie, 2010; Rosli Nor, 1998), aptly captures its heritage as a hub for multicultural dialogue. The mosque is celebrated for its unique seven-tiered minaret, an octagonal spire that remarkably marries

local architectural styles with a pagoda influence, epitomising the eclectic nature of Melakan design. The blending of traditions flourishes within, from the prayer niche's Chinese motifs to the prayer hall's Corinthian columns, each element an ode to the melting pot of Malay, Indian, and European influences. Once the state mosque, Masjid Tengkeru now stands as a proud emblem of Melaka's richly woven religious and cultural tapestry.



Figure 2: Masjid Tengkeru, Melaka

Despite its diminutive scale, the pulpit of Masjid Tengkeru (Figure 3) captivates with its ornate design, conspicuously distinguished as a pivotal interior feature and yet often neglected by architectural historians. Recognised for its ceremonial prominence (Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria, 2022), the pulpit anchors the mosque's interior, where the sermon-giver (*khatib*) imparts the Friday sermon, juxtaposing profound religious practice with intricate artistic expression. This craftsmanship is articulated through elaborate domed roofs and multitiered crowns, with academic discourses revealing a conjectured composition of either twelve or eleven characteristic features meticulously dissected by researchers (Nor Adina Abdul Kadir et al., 2019; Nur Dalilah Dahlan & Mohd Shahrudin Abd Manan, 2021; Syaimak Ismail, 2015). Its aesthetic palette, a vibrant tapestry of gold, red, brown, and green hues, evokes traditional Chinese artistry (Nor Adina Abdul Kadir et al., 2019), while botanical and calligraphic motifs suggest a cross-cultural tapestry, interlacing Jawanese and Chinese influences. The pulpit's crafting, attributed to Chinese artisans, resonates with the mysteries of trans-ethnic collaborations, underscoring the collective heritage within Melaka's spiritual edifice and embodying a multisensory narrative of cultural amalgamation and consecrated dialogue.



Figure 3: The front and right sides of the pulpit (*minbar*) of Masjid Tengker, Melaka

This paper employs a rigorous combination of textual, document, and comparative analyses to uncover the intricate symbolism of *tawbah* in traditional Malay mosques. Textual analysis of the manuscript MSS 2968 meticulously examines its literary parameters and subparameters of symbolism, revealing nuanced insights into *tawbah* that would remain obscure under cursory scrutiny. This deep dive not only elucidates the concept of *tawbah* but also forms a provisional conceptual framework essential for subsequent analysis. Document analysis of the mosque's architecture according to its architectural parameters and subparameters of symbolism, on the other hand, assesses its physical conditions and symbolic idiosyncrasies, providing a tangible context for the literary findings. Finally, literary and architectural findings were further organised and analysed using comparative analysis according to their attendant parameters and subparameters of symbolism to synthesise the literary and architectural data and highlight similarities and differences between the manuscript and the mosque. This methodical approach uncovers possible affinities and interconnections, offering a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic interplay between literature and architecture, thus validating the conceptual framework developed earlier.

4. Findings and discussion

Within the sacred geometry of the mosque, the pulpit soars as a silent testament to *tawbah*, the transformative repudiation of sins. Each Friday, as the sermon-giver mounts the pulpit, the act becomes a rhythmic reenactment of *tawbah*, where every upward step palpably echoes Prophet Muḥammad's own Ascension through the seven Heavens. In this deliberate climb, detailed in the *Risālat*, each riser is a metaphorical rung on a ladder of divine ascension, a potent symbol for the shedding of worldly shackles. The top of the pulpit represents not just a physical high point but the

pinnacle of spiritual purity, an architectural milestone where the echoes of human imperfection meet the profound silence of divine forgiveness. For congregants, this ascension crystallises the essence of *tawbah*—each step is a reminder that the path to enlightenment is carved with the steady footholds of reflection, renunciation, and the sacred promise of renewal.

The toad motif ensconced within Masjid Tengker’s pulpit (Figure 4) presents a rich tapestry of symbolism, serving as a poignant emblem of the human condition—sainthood and sin intertwined. This solitary amphibian, depicted in orientations of contemplative duality, captures the essence of those besmirched by moral transgressions as well as those luminescent with saintly virtues. The contrast of the toad against the plum blossom tree claws at the dichotomous nature of wisdom and vice (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996; Cooper, 1987; Martin, 2010; Olderr, 2012). As the toad faces right and left, it encapsulates the spectrum of human complexion and character—those unblemished and consistent in virtue against those in the flux of spiritual transformation. In the silhouettes of these creatures, we find the whispered narrative of change: the three phases of the moon (Cooper, 1987; Martin, 2010; Olderr, 2012) cradling the journey from sin to sanctity, a visual echo of Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension—a metamorphosis capturing the sinners’ *tawbah* and the pristine state of saints within the Islāmic arcadia of redemption.



Figure 4: The back plate decorative panel finished with toad and plum blossom tree motifs on the front side of the pulpit (*minbar*) of Masjid Tengker, Melaka

To begin, I would like to point out that, in accordance with the Islāmic tradition, which favours the right over the left in various matters such as purification and eating (Sunan Abū Dāwūd: 33), and with Muslims’ aspiration to become the Companions of the Right (Al-Wāqī’ah: 90–91), the symbolism of both right- and left-facing toad motifs could never be more divergent, as the former carries positive qualities associated with saints while the latter negative ones associated with sinners. The *Risālat* attests to this, narrating, among other things, a very fragrant smell emanating from the doors on Prophet Ādam’s right and a very foul smell emanating from the door on his left. Jibrā’īl, who accompanied Prophet Muḥammad to the seven Heavens, disclosed to him the foreboding phenomena that distinguished definitively between both orientations:

Now the doors on the right are the doors of Heaven, and the fragrant smell that is issued from them is the breeze from Heaven. Now the doors on his left, therefore are the doors of Hell, and the foul smell that is issued from them is the breeze from Hell. (fol. 21r)

The positive symbolism of the right-facing toad motif formed a pair of characters featured in the *Risālat*, namely people with white complexions and “whose belief is unmixed with vice” (fol.

29r–fol. 30v) whom Prophet Muḥammad met during his Ascension to the seven Heavens alongside a man who disappeared into the Light of the Throne

who on Earth his tongue was soft by reciting the remembrance of Allāh, may He be exalted, meaning his tongue was always reciting the remembrance of Allāh every time, and his heart was tied to the mosque meaning he always went to the mosque for congregational prayers and all other worship, and he did not perform acts that would lead to treason toward his parents ever (fol. 37r–fol. 38v)

whom the Prophet encountered during his Ascension to the Throne of the Compassionate. They form the Companions of the Right mentioned in the Qur’ān, whose purity of faith is directed by God’s infinite wisdom and inspiration and embodied by the right-facing toad motif. This three-legged toad can be interpreted to represent the celestial archetype of human perfection exemplified by Prophet Muḥammad and his fraternity of prophets above and beyond their lesser perfections of saints comprising “the truthful ones, the witnesses, and the righteous” (Al-Nisā’: 69).

The two branches of the “family of true men” or “Kings of the Earth” are made up of members of the solitary ones, whose leader is al-Khiḍr, and the “saints of the outer world,” among whom are led by the prophets (Lings, 2011). Saints are, in my opinion, the “souls of their age,” to borrow a phrase from the English playwright and poet Ben Jonson. Each serves as a generational pole or prototype of a traditional civilisation. Frithjof Schuon went so far as to suggest that because the saint neglects the world and is devoted to God, as opposed to the sinner, the former is the only one who can claim to be entirely “normal” and have “full right” to live (Schuon, 2011). It is no surprise, then, that the right-facing toad motif, despite its denaturalised appearance according to the Divine Law (*Sharī‘ah*), was depicted in its significantly “normal” form in the foreground, alongside the five-petalled flowers of the plum blossom tree in full bloom in the background, to symbolise the saint’s lifeworthy nature.

If anything, the negative symbolism of the left-facing toad motif comprised various characters and settings represented in the *Risālat*, particularly people who consumed wealth from usury and orphans alongside people who committed adultery, all of

whom were heavily tormented, their appearances were very despicable, and in one report, the stomachs of the people who consumed such wealth were as immense as houses, and people who committed adultery were suspended by something so immense (fol. 21r)

and people whose complexion was changing, “whose good deeds are mixed with bad ones” (fol. 30v) whom Prophet Muḥammad encountered during his Ascension to the seven Heavens. The Prophet also witnessed thick smoke on Earth and heard a clamouring voice manifesting

all of the Satan who is throwing upon the eyes of all the sons of Ādam until they never reflect upon the creation of the Earth and the Heavens, and if they were not thus, surely all the sons of Ādam would see upon the wonders and the beauty of the creation of the Heavens and the Earth (fol. 45r)

during his Descension to the House of the Holiness. They are the Companions of the Left mentioned in the Qur’ān (Al-Wāqī‘ah: 41), whose depravity is driven by Satan’s infernal and man’s inverted natures and embodied by the left-facing toad motif. This motif, associated with injustice, might be taken to actualise the ultimate transgression of one’s Covenant with God, which is an act of injustice (*ẓulm*)—“the putting a thing in a place not its own” (Lane, 1968)—against oneself. The motif represents the terrestrial archetype of human defect, its terrestriality signifying Satan’s expulsion from the Garden and branding as “those who are humbled” (Al-A‘rāf: 13). It has direct affinities to

Lui Hai's grotesque three-legged toad, which lived in a deep pool and emanated a venomous vapour upon the people in Chinese mythology.

In contrast to what I have said about saints, sinners of this world, whose head is Satan and whose flaws that were once deemed aberrations became the norm with time, are rarely of the same species. Sinners, like shadows on the border of non-existence on a moonless night, can be described as being forgetful of spiritual truths. They are neither indifferent to nor deny higher realities. Sinners are cut off from the centre and, more importantly, the vertical axis that connects their terrestrial level to its celestial equivalent. Losing both centrality and verticality causes faith (*dīn*) to deteriorate. According to al-Ghazālī, the sinner who has nothing of his faith except the Profession of Faith with him has compromised his body save his spirit and may as well be on his deathbed (Stern, 1990). The sinner's deathworthy nature is thus depicted by the left-facing toad motif in its significantly "abnormal" form in the foreground and the skyward unopened petals of the plum blossom tree flower buds in the background.

The attentive viewer may ask why both right- and left-facing toads were symmetrically placed on the pulpit's back plate decorative panel. To satisfy such interest, we must portray in its entirety the fantastic sight of the people whose complexion was changing in the three rivers as witnessed by Prophet Muḥammad during his Ascension to the seven Heavens:

[Therefore those whose faces were changing stood. Therefore then they got into a river. Therefore they got out of it.] Therefore vanished what changed their complexion, but a little was left. Therefore then they got into a second river then they bathed in it. Therefore they got out of it. Therefore vanished what remained, but a little was left. They got into a third river, they bathed in it. Therefore they got out. After that, therefore their complexion became white like the complexion of their friends. Therefore they sat together with all of their friends on the sides of the Prophet of Allāh Ibrāhīm, upon him be peace [...] Therefore Jibrā'īl said, "[A]nd now the people whose complexion was changing, therefore are people whose good deeds are mixed with bad ones, but they have repented from their bad deeds, therefore their sins were pardoned by Allāh, may He be exalted, and now the rivers, therefore the first is Allāh's pardon, and the second is Allāh's blessings, and the third is their Lord shall give them to drink of a drink most pure." (fol. 29r–30v)

Both right- and left-facing toads were shown to the viewer symmetrically to represent choice, not just between becoming a saint or a sinner, but more crucially, the opportunity to become a repenting sinner who strives to be a saint. In the final option, the sinner is born with the ability to repent and make restitution for his mistakes. He can reach the ranks of saints, prophets, and angels if given enough time. However, if he dies a sinner, Hellfire is simply a temporary punishment for purgation, after which he can return to his original dwelling in Paradise. Symbolically, the left-facing toad is granted a second life and turns into a living one by being poured water from the well of the Abundant Good on its deathworthy body while turning its head and body to the right to indicate its reorientation to normalcy. At the same time, the plum blossom tree's flowers bloom with blessings upon the toad's return to its primordial state.

A few words must be said about the plum blossom tree, which represents the tree of traditional Islām, whose trunk, branches, and fruits signify Islāmic reality over time and space, with its roots firmly anchored in the soil of divine revelation (Nasr, 2012). The sinner reestablishes the Covenant with God through the saint by attaching himself to the tree, echoing the first loyalty sworn by some of the believers to Prophet Muḥammad beneath the tree (Al-Faḥ: 18). Aside from the sinner's desire to rise above his fallen nature, his proximity to this tree of tradition is the sole criterion for determining his

lifeworthiness. The left-facing toad's proximity to the trunk of the plum blossom tree represents the possibilities of formal alteration and refinement. On the other hand, the proximity of the right-facing toad to the same is the source of its formal existence and stability.

If the left-facing toad can shift its head and body to the right, one wonders if the opposite phenomenon might be possible—could the saint become a sinner? I respond in the negative: no. A sinning saint would be a misnomer and glaring evidence of his counterfeit spirituality. While saints, unlike prophets and angels, are not sinless, it is well known that all of them used religious litanies to ask God for continued guidance, such as “Our Lord, make not our hearts swerve after having guided us, and bestow upon us a mercy from Thy Presence” (Āl ‘Imrān: 8). Nevertheless, saints are protected from sin by God's favour, as stated in the prophetic tradition: “All of you are sinners except whom I have pardoned” (Jāmi‘ at-Tirmidhī: 2,495). Because not a single saint encountered by Prophet Muḥammad during his Ascension committed sins, the chance of the right-facing toad turning its head and body to the left is nil.

5. Conclusion

The traditional mosque is not merely a physical sanctuary but a locus of profound spiritual interplay, holding the keys to redemption for both the saint and the sinner. This interplay is vivified through the mosque's role as a gateway to transcendent ideals, as epitomised by the allegorical right- and left-facing toads in the pulpit. It serves as a palpable reminder that within the realm of the sacred, pathways to forgiveness and moral resurgence are perennially open. Saints, in their gentle guidance, and sinners, in their search for grace, converge beneath the intricate multitiered roofs in a collective pursuit of divine favour. This duality reflects a theological framework where mosques facilitate a continuous dialogue between earthly transgressions and the aspirational reach for piety—a dynamic interplay of identities where redemption is an accessible horizon, not a distant mirage. Thus, mosques emerge as theatres where the vivid script of Islāmic redemption is eternally enacted, guiding adherents through the nuances of spiritual renewal and moral accountability.

As the final brushstroke completes the canvas, this paper positions the traditional Malay mosque at the heart of an ongoing scholarly dialogue, intertwining the tapestry of the Traditionalist School with the rich patterns of architectural symbolism. Through the study of *tawbah* symbolised within the ornate toad motifs carved upon Masjid Tengker's pulpit, a bridge has been constructed over the chasm separating architecture and literature from their Islāmic underpinnings. This scholarly pursuit unmasks a vibrant tableau of Malay-Islāmic legacy, an interweaving of aesthetic and narrative threads that have long yearned for a reunion. The significance of this research lies in its efforts to replenish the scant corpus of Traditionalist thought, offering a conceptual framework that promises to bolster future intellectual edifices. In doing so, it beckons future scholars to venture deeper into the hallowed intersection of form, faith, and folklore, charting new courses through the oft-neglected waters of traditional knowledge and spiritual geography.

This paper heralds a broader investigative sojourn, proposing the extrapolation of its theoretical compass across the expanse of traditional Malay *hikāyāt* and mosques. The vibrant spectrum of divergent outcomes that may bloom from such inquiries does not diminish the value of this conceptual framework. Instead, it underscores the tapestry-like complexity of cultural research, where distinct hues represent varied manifestations of the underlying processes at play. Guided by the knowledge that *tawbah* is but a singular, integral fragment in the intricate mosaic of Islāmic architectural symbolism, future researchers are entrusted with a compelling charge: to diligently seek out the remaining tesserae. By piecing together each sliver of cultural and spiritual vernacular, academics

can aspire to craft a complete and nuanced portrayal of the symbolic narratives etched within the very foundations of traditional Malay mosques. The quest is imperative, tantalisingly vast and rich with the promise of profound scholarly revelations.

It was narrated from Anas that the Messenger of Allāh (may Allāh bless and give him peace) said: "Every son of Ādam commits sin, and the best of those who commit sin are those who repent." (Sunan Ibn Mājah: 4,251)

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