

# MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE RATTANAKOSIN PERIOD.

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## ABSTRACT

This research has been revised from the studies related to Islamic cultures and societies. It also has focused on the lifestyle and community of Thai Muslims in Thailand since AD 1782. Approximately, Thai Muslims in Bangkok has contributed around 10% of the whole Bangkokians. They are the second-largest religious group from the Buddhists. This research is conducted as qualitative research with the interview methodology. It is found that the identities of Thai Muslims consist of Imam, Ibadat, and Ishan. The patterns of Mosque architectures are generated into six forms: the combination form between Islamic art and Thai culture, the form derived from foreign cultures, the form derived from Islamic empires, the form with an application of Arabian art, the neo-classical form, and the modern art form. The lifestyle of Thai-Muslims differentiates from the other religious groups in Thailand for several aspects. For example, there is no loan interest in Muslim banks. The original Halal food has been adapted to the Thai-Muslim's cultures. The combination of Thai art and the Muslim community has still existed. The concepts and lifestyle of Thai-Muslims have enabled the marketing ideas for a new group of consumers who live their lives on religious principles.

**Keywords:** Muslim Communities, Rattanakosin Period, Mosque in Bangkok

## INTRODUCTION

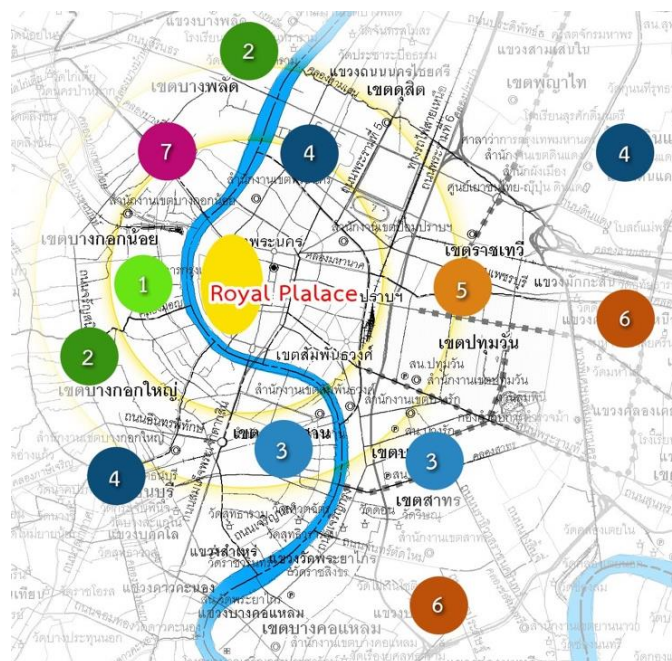
According to the archaeology evidence, the patterns on some celadon wares in the Sukhothai period were inscribed in the Persian language [1]. This can be assumed that Muslims from various countries during that time had come to promote Islamic religion in this region. In the Ayutthaya period, Persians migrated to employ the commercial transaction and to work in the government agencies. Especially during the reign of King Naria the Great, the relationship between the Thai monarchy and the powerful Safavid dynasty was strengthened. Later in Thonburi and Rattanakosin eras, Muslims from several countries relocated to Thailand, but the largest group of Muslims was from Melayu, currently Malaysia. This is because Melayu was counted as a part of the kingdom of Thailand and most Melayu citizens held Islamic religion derived from Indonesia, India, and Iran. Moreover, some local Thais had changed their religious beliefs to Islam since then.

Since the reign of King Rama 5th, his royal highness has initiated the position of Chief of the Muslim who had to be responsible for the foreigners' affairs, especially for the westerners. As well as this, this chief had to be in charge of the commercial shipping business and related offshore organizations [2]. At that time, Persian Muslims played a more important role in political and social circles in Thailand than the other Muslim groups: Indian, Java, Arabian, and Cham who had employed a commercial business for a long period. Among the diversity of Muslim groups, each of them has maintained their identities which were blended with the local culture and Pillars of Islam properly.

In AD 1945, a royal decree was issued about the Islamic patronage and affairs. The chief of Islam has been included as a civil servant title. He is supposed to lead religious activities. In AD 1997, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand was established. This council consists of the chief of Islam as a chairman, provincial committee leaders from each province around Thailand, and one-third of the committees are recruited from any provincial committees.

The duties of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand are advising the ministry of interior and ministry of education, promoting discipline related to the religious rules, and administrating the managerial jobs of Islamic committees of each mosque. The subdivisions of the Central Islamic Council are Provincial Committee Boards which consist of the Board of Mosque committees. All of them are obligated to provide proper advice to provincial governors. Finally, each mosque is comprised of Imam (a community religious leader), Quoteb (a prayer leader) and Bilal or Muezzin (a prayer announcer) [3]. All of these key figures have to contribute to the religion and widespread the concepts of Islam which are anticipated by the lifestyle of the community.

Raksamani [4] described the community establishment during the early Rattanakosin era that the royal palace was the center of the city surrounded by the government service offices in Rattanakosin Island. The communities around Rattanakosin Island consist of government officers, merchants, artisans, and farmers. According to the figure 1, it is found that the Muslims who lived closest to the royal palace was the local Thai Muslims (number 1). Around Rattanakosin Island, there were Persian Muslims (number 2), Indian Muslims (number 3), and Melayu Muslims (number 4). On the other hand, Cham Muslims (number 5), Java Muslims (number 6), and Arabian Muslims (number 7) settled their communities scattered on the outer-skirt of the city. Each community resided itself along the river or canals with a mosque as a center for daily prayer, community activities, and religious school.



**Fig. 1.** Muslim community established during the early Rattanakosin era  
*Source(s): Raksamani (2014)*

## METHODOLOGIES AND PROCEDURES

The objective of this research is to study the Muslim communities' lifestyle in the Rattanakosin era, from AD 1782 until now. Hence, qualitative research methodology has been applied through the interviews with Imams and Muslim leaders from 12 communities in Rattanakosin Island, Bangkok [5]. Purposive sampling method has been employed.

## RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Thai Muslims have a strong belief in three components which are Imam (the belief in Quran and religious leaders), Ibadat (Salat-prayer, Zakat-donation, Ramadan-fasting, and Hajj-pilgrimage to Mecca) and Ishan (Islamic code of conduct). These three components enable Muslims to live in harmony and order with the other religious followers. Islamic identities can be generated as follows.

### 1. Islamic architecture

The origin of Islamic architecture or mosque has been inspired by a mosque in the city of Medina since AD 7. The mosque is the center of the community and the house of God. Every mosque around the world is constructed with a similar architectural concept yet different details depending on the local culture [6]. Over time, the concepts of exquisite construction were derived from the Quran's doctrines. These concepts are composed of Islamic art or applied art, which can be generated as Geometric forms, Arabesque Floral forms, and Arabic Calligraphic forms. Most mosques in Thailand have been adapted these forms and building styles to the society of the Thai context. This enabled the forms and decorated art of mosques in the Rattanakosin era to look different than the other places of the world. The patterns of art can be listed as follows.

#### 1.1. Combination of Islamic Art and Thai Cultural Art

During the early period of the Rattanakosin era, the architectural concept was derived from the palace and temple in Thailand with the combination of Thai, Chinese and Islamic arts to represent the powerful linkage between the central government and Muslim administrations as can be seen from Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2.** The Mosque with Thai Cultural Art  
*Source(s): Author (2011)*

### 1.2. Foreign Cultural Art

This represents the diversity of Islamic ethnic groups: Persians, Javans, and Moguls from India as can be seen from Fig. 3.

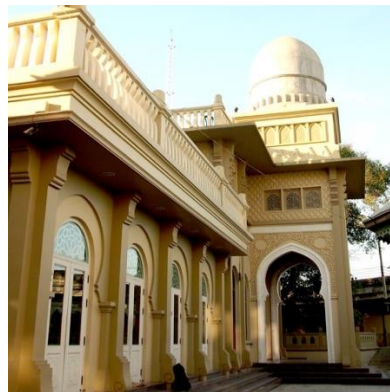


**Fig. 3.** The Mosque with Foreign Cultural Art

*Source(s): Author (2011)*

### 1.3. Islamic Empire Art

This concept is to reminisce about the flourishing era of the Islamic Empire: The Ottoman Empire as can be seen from Fig. 4.



**Fig. 4.** The Mosque with Islamic Empire Art

*Source(s): Author (2011)*

### 1.4. Arabian Applied Art

This can be counted as a unique identity of Islamic architecture which illustrates the relationship of Muslims who play a partial element of the global community as can be seen from Fig. 5.



**Fig. 5.** The Mosque with Arabian Applied Art

*Source(s): Author (2011)*

### 1.5. Neoclassical Art

This pattern looks similar to the government offices in Bangkok where European arts can be easily seen as can be seen in Fig. 6.



**Fig. 6.** The Mosque with Neoclassical Art

*Source(s): Author (2011)*

### 1.6. Modern Art

This pattern looks simple with an abstract style. There is no special identity from any ethnic group as can be seen from Fig. 7.



**Fig. 7.** The Mosque with Modern Art

*Source(s): Author (2011)*

## 2. Halal

Halal is a set of religious permissions for Muslims, such as edible and consumable products including services. Islamic permissions and prohibitions are considered as useful practices for Muslims. Halal products and services can include food, medicine, clothing, financial services, spa and wellness, hospital, hotel, education institute, and logistic services. Hence, any kinds of products or services which are not contradicted the religious rules are acceptable.

## 3. Aniconism

According to Islamic rules, no sacred animated figures are allowed for Muslims to pay homage although those figures used to be their beloved. This is because the people may elevate those beloved figures to be like god and they will not work out hard to achieve anything in their lives. They will make a wish and dedicate themselves to those artificial gods. This is not an objective of religion. More importantly, they will not believe in the unity of the god. However, humans are born to confine themselves to the aesthetic elements. It is unavoidable for them to present the aesthetic concept into the concrete form. Thus, the



solution for Islamic artists is to create their religious art in the forms of symbolic form, geometric form, organic form, and Arabian calligraphy with geometric and free forms [7] as can be seen from Fig. 8.



**Fig. 8.** Elements of Islamic artists  
*Source(s): Author (2010)*

#### 4. Loan interest-free for Muslims from Islamic financial business

This system is remarkably different from any banking system in the world and can be counted as a beneficial system for Muslims according to the religious principle. While the other banks make a profit from their loaning interest, the Islamic banks make margin from investment by becoming a stakeholder in a target business which can be a cash cow or a high-risk business. Moreover, the banks might operate themselves like leasing company who purchases some necessary products to be leased for Muslims thereafter. By operating leasing business, the banks can benefit from managing fees and the margin of leasing fees.

#### 5. Muslim Lifestyles

Muslim's lifestyle is different from the others supported by Hasun [8] who is highly interested in the human behavior of Muslims. This human behavior can be concluded as follows.

5.1. Most Muslims prefer staying at their residences to hanging around the entertainment complex. They usually spend their time on the news around the world either domestic or international. Other than that, they will attend religious activities or visit their relatives.

5.2. Their most favorite topics are family matters and nutritious food as they are likely to stay with their family most of the time.

5.3. The Muslims hold similar opinions on brotherhood, social defect matters, and social disobedience.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the early period of the Rattanakosin era, there were many things in common between Muslims and Buddhists in Thailand, so the art on the mosque appeared to be more similar to Thai cultural art than the Islamic art. This was manipulated by Muslim noblemen in the government. Chutarat [9] also supported this claim which described the lifestyle of Persian noblemen in the Thai government. Those groups of Muslims had a more crucial part in Thailand than the other ethnic groups in the political and commercial roles. After a while, the Muslim social structure was changed. Muslims who belonged to agricultural and commercial sectors grew more important than they were in the past. This affected the decorative art of mosques, too. They increased more realization of their Islamic identity. Most modern Muslims became patrons of the mosques and played an influential role in decorative art which focused on the origin of Muslim cultures. Most Islamic art is likely to be applied to mosques architectures, but some of the mosques still maintain Thai cultural art owing to its delicate quality which is worthy of decoration. Despite finest quality of Thai art, it had been applied to mosques for a brief period because of social and political aspirations. The patterns

of Islamic art in Thailand tend to be appeared in the form of Islamic art: geometric, organic, and Arabian calligraphic forms which are Muslim original art.

After the fall of the Islamic empire in World War II, Muslims in Thailand started to change their views and concepts of the pattern and decorative art of mosques from Thai art to the former Islamic forms which are international Islamic art. Modern Muslims who had been educated in Islamic countries had brought this pattern of art to Thailand. Since then, this has become the pattern of Islamic art and architecture throughout Thailand. After that, the western Muslims have changed their thoughts, lifestyle, and mosque patterns yet they have remained the former decorative art on mosques.

The factors shaping Islamic art are the global Islamic concept which is correlated to Waijittragum [10] who provided the effective factors of Islamic art in Thailand. The global Islamic culture is strict and strong while the former and ethical customs of various groups of Muslims are partial elements of art that enable the details of art to be more diverse and livelier. Another effective element is derived from the environment, local customs, economic and political conditions, and government system. Finally, the mosque patronage, an influential element, lead the possible direction of the Islamic art in Thailand.

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