

Original article

TWO TOMBSTONES IN THE ISLAMIC CITY OF ACEH, INDONESIA, DATED BACK TO THE 9TH CENTURY AH/15AD, (AN ANALYTICAL, ARTISTIC, AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY)

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Abstract:

The city of Aceh is recognized as the first landing site for Islam on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. This present study aims to identify the city's civilizational, cultural, and artistic heritage through an analytical archaeological study of two Islamic tombstones crafted in a traditional local style, which have not been published. The study adopted the descriptive approach and the analytical approach. It examined the raw material used to construct the tombstones, their manufacturing and decoration methods, their general design and functional purpose, and the decorative elements, including floral motifs, geometric shapes, architectural elements, or written inscriptions analyzed for their form and content. The results revealed the artistic harmony between ancient local legacies and Islamic influences of the artifacts understudy. The study concludes with a set of important findings in the field of Islamic archaeology in Indonesia.

1. Introduction

Aceh was known in ancient times as Ajeh [1]. This island is located on the Indian Ocean at the far northwestern tip of the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, fig. (1). It is one of the most important Indonesian islands; most of its population was Muslim. It was called the “Balcony of Mecca” or the entrance to Mecca because it was visited by Malay Muslims for purification before traveling for Hajj [2,3]. In addition, the city of Banda Aceh, the capital of the region, is considered a filling station for Muslim pilgrims heading to Mecca by sea, and the Aceh region is considered a major commercial center [4]. Aceh is considered the first landing site for Islam in Sumatra [5]. Islam entered it through Arab and Indian Muslim traders, and from there, it spread to all the Indonesian islands. Then, an independent, strong, and sprawling Islamic state was established on its land and began to struggle against Dutch colonialism [6]. Despite the entry of Islam into this region in the 1st H./7th G. century [7], its spread and the establishment of strong Islamic kingdoms occurred in the 7th H./13th D. century [8]. There is still a clear artistic continuity in the influence of ancient legacies in Indonesian society stemming from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, beliefs, and ideas. When Islam entered, the tombstones completely absorbed Islamic manifestations, accompanied by some artistic manifestations of ancient local legacies in Indonesia before the advent of Islam. These influences

were manifested in the general form or design of Hindu and Buddhist temples and the general design of traditional Indonesian homes and palaces in the past. Therefore, the artistic manifestations of ancient legacies began to go hand in hand with the Islamic artistic manifestations that followed. After being contemporaneous, competition arose, whether on the religious, political, social, or artistic levels, and the best evidence of this is the Islamic tombstones understudy, which are the product of excavations and prospecting in the Aceh region^(a). Such studies highlighted the cultural, architectural, and social influences [9].

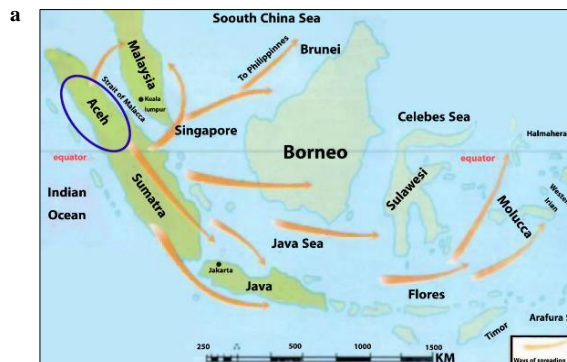




Figure (1) **a.** Aceh's location and ways of spreading Islam on the map of Indonesia [6], **b.** Aceh's location on the map of Sumatra Island [10]

2. Descriptive Study

This study covers two Islamic tombstones, each of which is characterized by being in the local inherited style, and their study can be addressed through descriptive research as follows:

2.1. The first tombstone

A tombstone dating back to Monday of the year (20 Dhul-Qi'dah 834 AH/29 July 1431 AD) is attributed to the North Aceh region on the island of Sumatra in Indonesia. It was obtained through the discoveries of the specialized excavation team at the Pedir Museum in Aceh Province, fig. (2-a). The first tombstone is featured for its rectangular shape, tapering upward, and relief engraving decorations. It is almost decorated with floral motifs of a four-petal rosette, with a leafy plant branch emerging from the sides. This artistic decorative unit is repeated six times vertically, forming an overlapping plant branch. It is intertwined and executed vertically, tending to distortion and geometric abstraction, overlapping and intertwined, its edges ending or carrying a twisted leaf at both ends, fig. (2-b). Then, it is followed by an unrealistic blooming flower, centered and executed in an inverted position. From both sides emerges a leafy plant branch, executed in an upside-down position, fig. (2-c). The general shape of the tombstone is characterized by its influence on ancient Indonesian legacies, represented by its influence on the general design of Hindu and Buddhist temples, fig. (2-b). The lower part of the tombstone includes inscriptions within a rectangular frame executed in the Naskh script in four lines, fig. (2-d). These inscriptions read: The first line: He, peace be upon him, said "قال عليه السلام"; the second line: The life is an hour, so make it obedience "الدنيا ساعة فجعلها طاعة"; the third line: This life is fleeting, and the hereafter remains "الدنيا فاني والأخرة باقي"; the fourth line: The believer is alive in both worlds "المؤمن حي في الدارين".

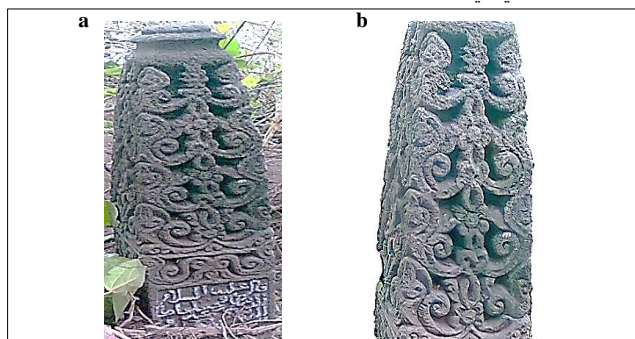


Figure (2) **a.** the general form of the first tombstone, **b.** vertically repeated decorative plant units, **c.** unrealistic blooming flower executed upside down, **d.** inscriptions executed on the tombstone

2.2. The second tombstone

A tombstone made of stone is attributed to a woman named Asiyah Bint Ahmed, who lived in the most prosperous periods of a famous Islamic kingdom in Sumatra, i.e., the Kingdom of Samudra Pasai. She lived in the eras of Sultan Zain Abidin (831-841 AH/1428-1438 AD) and Sultan Saladin (841-866 AH/1438-1462 AD) [11]. This tombstone dates to (857 AH/1453 AD). It is in the North Aceh region, Sumatra, Indonesia. It was found in the discoveries of the specialized excavation team at the Pedir Museum in Aceh Province, fig. (3-a). It was featured for its rectangular shape, crowned with an irregular geometric shape, with woven and leafy geometric decorations inside it. On the two sides of the tombstone is a protrusion or pointed protrusion influenced by ancient Indonesian architecture in general design. The tombstone rests on a rectangular ribbed base with outward and inward bounces, fig. (3-a). It is decorated with floral motifs of floral bouquets and plant leaves arranged within a rectangular frame with a lobed arch to suit the owner of this grave. In addition to the floral decorations of leaves and branches modified and braided within the shape of an inverted heart, the executed floral decorations are visible. On this tombstone are the beginnings of the arabesque, or the first signs of arabesque as an influence from Arabic floral decoration, fig. (3-a). Inscriptions are executed on three aspects only in the thuluth script with relief engraving. The inscriptions on the first side are in three lines read as follows: The 1st line: The late chaste woman passed away "توفي المرحومة العفيفة"; the 2nd line: Asiyah bint Ahmed bin Omar bin Ahmed "أسيه بنت أسية أحمد بن عمر بن أحمد"; the 3rd line: In the year eight hundred and fifty-seven "سنة سبع وخمسين وثمانمائة", fig. (3-b). The inscriptions are on one side of the tombstone in an upright position and read as follows: The best blessings be upon its owner "على صاحبها أفضل الصلوات", fig. (3-c). On the other side of the tombstone, in an upright position, the inscriptions read as follows: from the Prophet's Chosen Migration "من الهجرة", fig. (3-d).

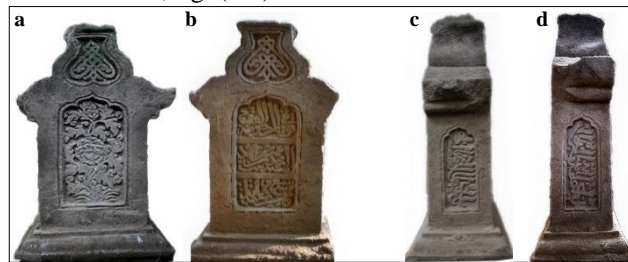


Figure (3) **a.** the general form and floral decorations of the second tombstone, **b.** inscriptions on the back side of the tombstone, **c.** inscriptions on one side of the tombstone, **d.** inscriptions on the other side of the tombstone

3. Analytical Study

The analytical study explores the raw material, methods of manufacturing and decoration, the general design, and the functional purpose. It also examines the decorative items, including floral and geometric motifs, and reads and analyzes the inscriptions in terms of form and content.

3.1. Raw material

Since ancient times, Indonesians have used stones in their daily lives, made artistic artifacts, and were famous for the art of stone carving, which continued in Islamic times in Indonesia [12]. The Indonesian Islamic kingdoms used stones to engrave on them, as evident in manufacturing their tombstones [13]. Limestone was used in the manufacture of their tombstones, as evidenced by the two tombstones under study because limestone is one of the most prominent types of sedimentary rocks and is composed of the accumulation of the skeletons of marine invertebrate animals or by chemical precipitation [14]. It consists of calcium carbonate, silica, clay, iron oxide, and a little magnesium carbonate. Its color is white or yellowish but fades over time [15].

3.2. Manufacturing and decoration methods

Engraving was used to manufacture and decorate tombstones, which was done after knowing the written text that would be executed on the tombstone. The maker used several tools, especially the chisel and the hammer, as they are used at present [16]. That is, the craftsman uses an iron chisel with a pointed tip that varies in size and thickness according to the size of the inscriptions and holds the chisel in the left hand and the hammer in the right hand. Then, he needs to tilt the chisel towards the left at a certain angle of inclination, strike it with his right hand with the hammer, and execute the required inscription [16]. Therefore, this method requires prior written design and care [17]. The methods used on tombstones varied, such as bas and high relief. For the maker to obtain recessed inscriptions, known as intaglio engraving, he engraves the writings and decorations and leaves the background [18]. The inscriptions and decorations become recessed from the engraved surface, and the engraving was done in different proportions [19]. However, in order for the maker to obtain high relief inscriptions, the maker engraves the spaces enclosed around the inscription (background) so that the inscription itself becomes higher than the level of the background [20]. These decorations are more prominent and deeper [21], protruding from the floor in a thick or thin form by controlling the engraving of the spaces between the lines [22].

3.3. The general design and functional purpose

The general design of the tombstones under study is clear physical evidence of the artistic harmony between Islamic manifestations in terms of inscriptions, content, and ancient local legacies in Indonesia before the advent of Islam in terms of the general form and design of ancient Indonesian architecture, including Hindu and Buddhist temples or ancient Indonesian houses. Accordingly, the design of the tombstone, fig. (2-b), was influenced by the design of Hindu and Buddhist temples, fig. (4-a). It features the general design of one of the Prambanan Hindu temples, the largest Hindu temple complex in the Yogyakarta region of Java in Indonesia. It dates to the

3rd Hijri/9th Gregorian century when Indian culture and Hindu religion prevailed in Indonesia. This religious complex is considered one of the largest archaeological and heritage sites in Southeast Asia. It has become an important UNESCO World Heritage Site as the largest Hindu temple site in Indonesia [23]. Prambanan was declared a World Heritage Site in (1412 AH/1991 AD) by UNESCO and has become a symbol of cultural heritage in Indonesia [24]. Moreover, the general design of a tombstone, fig. (3-a), was influenced by the general design of the old Indonesian traditional houses, especially on the island of Sumatra, fig. (4-b). This suggests that the maker may have been influenced to illustrate that man lives in the afterlife, represented by tombstones. Just as houses are designed as living spaces in the earthly realm, tombstones are constructed with similar designs and general shapes to signify the abode of the deceased. No explicit text in the Holy Qur'an indicates or clarifies the shape or design of Muslim graves. The functional purpose of tombstones is important because they are stone slabs above the grave to indicate who is buried in them. A story was narrated on the authority of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that so-and-so had died, so the Prophet (PBUH) ordered him to bring a stone, placed it at the head of this deceased person, and said: "I will find the grave of my brother with it, and bury in it those of my family who died" [25].

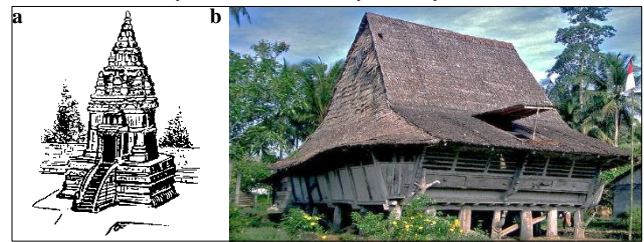


Figure (4) a, the general design of a Prambanan Hindu temple [26], b, the general design of a traditional house in the Nias region of North Sumatra [27]

3.4. Decorative elements

Decorative elements on Islamic tombstones in Indonesia vary, including floral motifs, geometric shapes, architectural elements, and inscriptions.

3.4.1. Floral motifs

A floral motif is a decorative ornament that depends, in drawing or engraving, on plant parts, such as stems, leaves, and flowers, whether branched or connected. In most cases, they are diverse, connected, and of different shapes in natural, modified, or abstract forms [28]. Floral motifs on tombstones include realistic floral decorations and modified and abstract floral decorations.

3.4.1.1. Realistic floral motifs

They are one of the most important realistic floral motifs, including branches, wavy leaves, and flowers. They were commonly used in decoration and embellishment in some tombstones in the east and west of the Islamic world. Muslim artists used them to fill every void due to flexible movement and waving [29]. Plant branches and stems have played a clear role in forming plant decorations in Islamic arts, as they link different plant units of flowers, fruits, leaves, and buds. These plant units are sometimes repeated in simple or complex

styles [30]. This was evident in the tombstones under study. Bouquets of roses, flowers, and flowered branches executed on Islamic arts are considered a European influence [31], as they are one of the favorite decorations of all Europeans [32]. Therefore, flower bouquets or vases from which the leaves, twisted branches, and branches emerge have been widespread in the Baroque and Rococo style [33]. Moreover, bouquets were decorated with roses and flowers on Islamic tombstones in Indonesia for decorative purposes, figs. (3-a & 5).



Figure (5) the design of wavy flower bouquets

3.4.1.2. Unrealistic floral motifs

Muslim artists sometimes adopted the method of modification and abstraction in floral motifs, subjected to the laws of balance, contrast, and symmetry [29]. Some modified and abstract floral motifs appeared on tombstones under study.

➤ Unrealistic blooming flower

Decoration and ornamentation with flowers and blooms is an ancient social tradition among Indonesians. Floral designs have become an essential part of the cultural heritage in Indonesia [26]. Flowers have received great attention in plant-based decorations, especially since they are the most important part of a plant, and blooming flowers have consistently appeared in Islamic art [34]. Sometimes, Muslim artists would execute plant-based decorations, especially flowers, in a modified and unrealistic style in various artworks [30]. Through Islamic artistic influences, Muslim artists in Indonesia began to develop their style in executing plant-based decorations, as they moved away from depicting flowers realistically and created modified and unrealistic designs that reflected the Islamic decoration style. Therefore, plant motifs appeared unrealistic, with blooming flowers in an upside-down position on Islamic tombstones in Indonesia, figs. (2-a & 6).



Figure (6) unrealistic blooming flower design

➤ Arabesque

Some researchers believe the art of arabesque is the art of Arabic decoration and in Islamic arts, especially in the eastern Islamic world. It is the floral motifs consisting of modified plant branches and bent, intertwined, and successive stems

that combine both modification and abstraction [35], with two-lobed plant leaves that overlap or intertwine in a beautifully coordinated geometric manner [36]. The beginnings of the arabesque or the first signs of the arabesque appeared as an influence from the Arabic floral decorations on Indonesian tombstones, fig. (3-a).

3.4.2. Geometric shapes and architectural elements

Muslim artists excelled in creating unique geometric designs characterized by balance and symmetry. They sometimes resorted to unifying and repeating the decorative element, such as arranging a flower designed in a geometric style or relying on spider webs to form horizontal and vertical lines that may be repeated and united in a complex interwoven design [37]. The idea of repeating decorative units has spread in Islamic art, as a single decorative element is chosen, and the artist takes it to fill a large space with it by repeating it several times [38]. Repetitive decorative units have appeared in most geometric and floral decorations executed on Islamic tombstones in the Aceh region in Indonesia, figs. (2-a & 7).

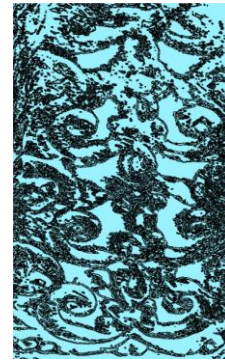


Figure (7) repetition of a decorative element vertically

3.4.2.1. Rectangle shape

Islamic art considers the rectangular shape to be a geometric shape that does not represent a basic shape because it arises from joining two squares or joining a square with parts of another square. Therefore, it is a composite shape [39,40]. Decorated rectangular frames appear on the tombstones under study.

3.4.2.2. Braided shapes

Braided shapes are formed as a result of overlapping thin double lines in a vertical or horizontal slanted manner to create symmetry and scattering in all directions [41]. Such shapes appear on the tombstones under study, figs. (3-a & 8).



Figure (8) design of braided and twisted geometric shapes

3.4.2.3. Detailed arch

The use of detailed arches dates back to pre-Islam, but their use was limited [42]. This arch was widespread in Islamic architecture and arts in the region of India and the eastern

islands [43]. Its shapes varied, sometimes consisting of five lobes or three lobes. The three-lobed arch appears on Islamic tombstones in Aceh [44], figs. (3-a & 9).

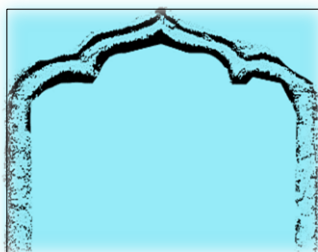


Figure (9) three-lobed arch

3.4.3. Inscriptions

Archaeological inscriptions are an important material cultural heritage [45]. Inscriptions, especially Arabic inscriptions, are an integral part of artistic work in all Islamic regions and eras, along with other decorations by the artists of Islamic eras. They were not the result of coincidence, but an artistic vision whose aesthetic experiences the artist mastered [46]. The inscriptions executed on tombstones can be analyzed in terms of form and content.

3.4.3.1. Form

Indonesian Sumatra features an abundance of Islamic cemeteries, cultural and heritage relics, and inscriptions in the ancient Arabic language executed in Naskh and Thuluth scripts with Islamic decorations similar to their counterparts in the cemeteries of the Arab-Islamic world [47]. The Naskh script has few angles, many roundness, and soft letters. It is an attributed script whose letters are subject to certain standards, scales, and proportions to provide beauty and elegance, which has helped in its widespread use [48]. The Naskh script flourished in the 7th Hijri/13th Gregorian century. It was used in writing Qur'ans and manuscripts, and engraving on buildings, coins, and tombstones [49]. It appears on Islamic tombstones in Aceh, fig. (2-a). The Naskh script resembles the Thuluth script, but the Naskh letters feature sharp angles, unlike the Thuluth letters, which have flexible angles. The Thuluth script is also characterized by the abundance of letter formation and the overlapping of words into each other in formations whose quality indicates the ability of the calligrapher. Both scripts can be easily distinguished in writing. Some letters, for example, the letter "ayn" (ع) in the middle of the word, are obscured or closed in transcription and empty in Thuluth [50], fig. (3-a). The letters of the Thuluth script are distinguished by their sobriety, elegance, and diversity in thickness [16]. There has been widespread confusion between the Naskh script and the Thuluth script. However, there is a clear difference in the shape resulting from the difference in the measurements and proportions of the letters and the thickness of the pen tip used to write each script [16]. The Thuluth script appears clearly in the inscriptions on tombstones, fig. (3-a).

3.4.3.2. Content

Muslims are accustomed to writing on stone tombstones. The interest in tombstone inscriptions has continued throughout the Islamic eras since the advent of Islam. Inscriptions serve

as a record of the names of the deceased and give information about the deceased's faith and date of death, providing important historical and social information through the tombstone texts [37]. Therefore, the inscriptions are divided in terms of content in the two tombstones under study as follows:

➤ Supplication expressions

Supplication expressions were used on Islamic gravestones [51] for prayer and peace, such as the expression "*The best of prayers*" "أفضل الصلوات", fig. (3-a).

➤ Wise sayings

Some Islamic expressions or wise sayings appeared on Indonesian tombstones for preaching, advice, and guidance, such as "This world is an hour, so make it obedience" "الدنيا ساعة" "فجعلها طاعة", and "Life is fleeting, and the hereafter remains" "الدنيا فاني والأخرة باقي", fig. (3-a).

➤ Names and titles of the deceased

Many names are mentioned in the inscriptions on the tombstones under study, as clear naming expresses the common values in the culture of society. The social analysis of names denotes various forms of activity in society related to the family, interpersonal relationships, or ideas and beliefs that shape people's behavior. Therefore, names and titles were chosen based on the social, religious, and cultural surroundings [52]. For example, the deceased "المرحومة" is used to mourn a deceased woman. It is an almost common custom among Muslims, as the name of the deceased woman is often mentioned in writing preceded by the title the deceased "المرحومة", out of respect for the fate of the deceased and in the hope that May God have mercy on this woman referred to in the tombstone and forgive her [51], fig. (3-a). Additionally, the title chaste "العفيفة" indicates chastity and purity, and the title believer "المؤمن" is linked to belief and religion, fig. (3-a). The name of the deceased is attached to his father's name, with son or daughter. This is the most common method on Islamic tombstones in the Eastern Islamic world [37]. It was influenced by Islamic tombstones in Indonesia, fig. (3-a).

➤ Date of death

The Hijri date was used to date death on Islamic tombstones [53]. It is worth noting that the first person to use the Hijri date was the Commander of the Faithful, Omar bin Al-Khattab (may God be pleased with him) in (17 AH/638 AD) when he consulted some companions [53]. They recommended the date starting from the hijra (migration of the Prophet (PUBH)) to Medina in (1 AH/622 AD). The Arabs before Islam used to date according to the great events, and the date on the Day of the Elephant was the one that was in effect among the Arabs before Islam until the Hijri date was introduced, which has been used throughout Islamic history [53]. Notably, these tombstones mentioned the Hijri date of death, with some in Arabic, suggesting the widespread stability of the Arabic language in this country. Moreover, it indicates the desire of the Muslim population to imitate the monuments of Muslims in Arab and Islamic countries in decorating graves [47]. The word died "توفي" before the date was mentioned, followed by the year "سنة" and the date in years only in the Hijri date and executed in Arabic letters, fig. (3-b). The following phrase

appeared on tombstones: In the year eight hundred and fifty-seven "سنة سبع وخمسين وثمانمائة".

4. Results

The study revealed that Two Islamic tombstones in Aceh, Indonesia, dating to the 9th Hijri/15th Gregorian century, were published to highlight the artistic harmony between the Islamic artistic heritage and the ancient local heritage. The study highlighted the city of Aceh, Indonesia. Although it is a neglected city, it is a huge commercial center and the first landing site for Islam in Indonesia. It was called the entrance to Mecca because it is a station for Indonesian pilgrims. The general design of Islamic tombstones in Aceh was influenced by the ancient local heritage, in terms of the shape and design of Hindu and Buddhist temples and the general design of ancient traditional Indonesian houses. In light of the models under study, the tombstones were made of limestone, and their decoration was mainly done by high and bas relief. Moreover, the Islamic tombstones of Aceh are decorated with various decorative elements, including floral motifs, geometric figures, architectural items, and epigraphic inscriptions. The inscriptions on tombstones were distinguished by their Arabic Naskh or Thuluth scripts to confirm the widespread of the Arabic language in Aceh, Indonesia. Furthermore, the tombstone inscriptions included supplication expressions, wise sayings, the names and titles of the deceased, and the date of death in the conventional style of Islamic tombstones in the Eastern Islamic world. The date of death was inserted in the Hijri calendar using alphabetical letters, not just numbers.

5. Discussion

Researchers have overlooked Islamic art and artifacts in Indonesia, although it is the largest region for the Muslim population in terms of number and area. The literature has mostly addressed the history of Indonesia without delving into its distinctive arts. For instance, Farhat reviewed the history of Islam in Indonesia and neglected the artistic aspect, failing to address Islamic arts sufficiently. Similarly, Sultan focused on the history and spread of Islam across all Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, without sufficiently addressing Islamic arts. In contrast, the present study tackled the artistic aspect of Islamic arts in Indonesia, focusing on Islamic tombstones. It described and analyzed these tombstones. Therefore, it is a significant study as the first initiative to focus on Islamic arts, particularly tombstones, in one of the Islamic regions of Indonesia, namely the city of Aceh. The study recommends conducting further studies on this region to uncover more of Indonesia's artistic heritage.

6. Conclusion

The study highlights the artistic harmony between Islamic artistic heritage and the ancient local heritage in Aceh, Indonesia, based on two Islamic tombstones dating to the 9th Hijri/15th Gregorian century. It demonstrated the skill of the Indonesian artist in crafting and decorating these funerary slabs, as they were influenced by the general design of Hindu and Buddhist temples, as well as the traditional old Indonesian houses in the design of the Islamic tombstones. Additionally, these tombstones were influenced by Islamic arts in Arabic inscriptions in the Naskh or Thuluth scripts, carved in relief alongside other decorations, whether floral motifs or geometric shapes. The content of

these inscriptions included supplication expressions, wise sayings from Islamic heritage, the names and titles of the deceased, and the date of death. This was the common and traditional style followed in Islamic tombstones in the Eastern Islamic world. In sum, studying tombstones is important to understand the cultural, artistic, and social heritage in the Islamic city of Aceh. Further research should be conducted to investigate this important region, as it has been neglected in the literature.

Endnotes

- (a) These Islamic tombstones result from excavations in the Aceh region. According to the excavation and prospecting work in this archaeological area, these funerary slabs are being prepared for transfer to the Pedir Museum. They have not been documented and registered in the Pedir Museum yet and remain at their discovery site.

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