

## Conference Paper

# Ideology Behind Malay Gravestone Artifacts

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## Abstract

This research considers gravestone artifacts in the environment of Malay cultural communities. The use of gravestones as cemetery markers is proof that the user communities have been subject to acculturation. The use of gravestones by Malays is a legacy of Middle East culture. Gravestones are often used in a certain way to indicate the religion of the deceased. Moslems' gravestones are usually inscribed with Arabic calligraphy. Malay gravestone artifacts are decorated with flora carvings, geometric ornaments, and Arabic calligraphy. Most of them are now stored at National Museum of North Sumatera Province, Malaysian National Museum, and library archive at Indonesian National Library. This article uses qualitative descriptions that involve collecting data concerning artifacts through interview, observation and literature studies. Data analysis is conducted using John Fiske's Semiotic Theory, which explains visual artifacts through social codes at the levels of reality, representation and ideology. After reviewing gravestone artifacts in the Malay community environments, this study identified a relationship between social aspects and spirituality. If the deceased is a poor person, the gravestone will be simple. When the deceased is a member of the nobility, a successful trader, or a government official, the gravestone can be ornate. Therefore, gravestones have various manifestations when considered with regards to their origins, shapes, and cultural ideologies.

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## 1. Introduction

Human culture has many dimensions and these dimensions always describe the uniqueness of the conserver community. Various life instruments are used by humans to pass through their life, and these instruments show their sociocultural aspects that develop along with their age. Culture comprises two dimensions, which respectively are: (1) shape dimension, consisting of (a) idea or concept, (b) activity, and (c) artifact; and (2) content dimension, covering (a) religion system, (b) language, (c) technology and life instrument, (d) livelihood system, (e) social organization system, (f) education, and (g) art (Zaidan & Dja'far, 2012: 138). Cultural products, such as artifacts, are physical evidence showing

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that there was life beings in previous times. Malay gravestone is an example that marks the existence of previous culture.

Gravestone as artifact is closely connected with the buried person. It may show the origin or the life journey of the deceased. However, some communities do not bury the deceased, or even never use gravestone. Such difference shall be reviewed. The development of gravestone artifacts at certain region and on certain period must be understood through interpretation. The sequence is that direct observation is done on the artifacts and interpretation is then made. Same process was conducted in understanding the meaning of gravestone in Malay culture.

Within Nusantara region and Malay Peninsula, including Aceh, Riau, throughout Kuala Lumpur, gravestone is a product of Islamic art. Aceh is the place where many gravestones are found in various number, size and ornaments. The production involves high level of craft, diversity of shapes, and abundance of decorations. Due to the scarcity of Islam legacies, "Aceh gravestone" becomes a remarkable monument of Islamic history in Malay Peninsula (Yatim, <http://aneukagamaceh.blogspot.com>). As told by Rabda ([www.hikayatbanda.com](http://www.hikayatbanda.com)), Aceh gravestone was an export community traded to Malaysia and Philippine, and this trade marked historical relationship among many Islam Kingdoms in Malay Peninsula.

Gravestones found at various places around Aceh, Riau and Kuala Lumpur are unique. These gravestones are the marker of cemetery and also the reminder for everyone left by the deceased. Decorative shape and style of gravestone is affected by ideology, and ideology is a factor determining social aspect of the community. Ideology is a world view professed by certain social group to promote their interest (Badara, 2012:33). Ideology, according to Raymond Williams, is a belief system professed by certain group or class but that can be conditioned through a collective process that produces ideas and meanings (Fiske, 2007:228). Gravestone artifact, therefore, is an instrument of ideology for the deceased, which must be inherited to the pilgrims or to people who know the deceased. Further review shall be conducted to understand the role of gravestone artifacts as the marker of Malay culture.

## 2. Method of Research

Method of research is qualitative descriptive. This method requires researcher to observe various gravestones exhibited in museum. Primary data of artifacts from observation were then scrutinized, documented, and grouped. To supplement primary data, secondary data were obtained from literature study and interview with informants.

Key informant in this research is a Moslem scholar who has understandings and expertise on calligraphy art. Information from the scholar is truly needed to understand Arabic letters written on gravestones found at Malay Peninsula. Both quality and credibility of the data are ensured through source triangulation, which then followed by data selection and data exposition. Data analysis process involves a semiotic theory that explains data through social codes at various levels, which respectively are: reality level, which is the mark itself; representation level, which is code or system; and ideology level, which refers to culture where mark and code are used (Fiske, 2007:60).

### 3. Data Description

Cemetery (kuburan) is synonymous with many words such as place of residence (hastana), place of resting (pasarean), place of death (jaratan), and graveyard (pemakaman). Cemetery area is mostly overcrowded by Cambodian trees. Javanese people call gravestone with term maesan (grave marker). Javanese grave marker is mostly made of woods, but simple marker is usually made of bamboos. In Sumatera, which is the part of Malay Peninsula, grave marker is carved. The elders can recognize the gender of the deceased by examining the carvings.

Nowadays, grave marker for the deceased Javanese or Malayan has used gravestone. Originally, gravestone is the stone used to tie up buffalo (maesa) that will be sacrificed on the cemetery. This procession was popular during pre-Islamic culture in Java. Sacrificing the buffalo is one of legacy inherited from Indian mythology (Hinduism), and folklore related to this activity is when Durga Mahisasuramardini, the wife of Dewa Syiwa, slayed gigantic buffalo.

Based on this folklore, there are three elements to be considered, namely, gravestone, buffalo sacrifice, and funeral rite. These elements were used during nyadran rite on village sacred place (pundhen desa). The elder (kamituwo) did the rite of suguh by burning few rice stalks while reciting offerings' spells in front of the sacred trace, which is usually cemetery (makam pundhen). On the sacred cemetery, there is always a gravestone as the mark (tetenger) that someone was buried in there. The mark mostly takes form of big tree that possibly has grown for hundred years, or the sacrifice altar.

Gravestone is a cultural product, a social evidence, and a mark or proof of final messages from the deceased to the beneficiaries. Gravestone decorated with geometric ornaments, flora carvings, and Arabic calligraphy, are very popular in Malay Peninsula. Physical evidence of gravestone was stored in museums, and this was allowed to be subject of observation and deep investigation. Observation was done at National

Museum of North Sumatera Province, Malaysian National Museum and Indonesian National Library. Several data were obtained, which are elaborated as follows:

1) Flat gravestone. This was kept in National Museum of North Sumatera Province. This gravestone is used for Moslem cemetery. Arabic letters are written on chest part, and edge part is given flora decoration. This was found in Barus District, Central Tapanuli Regency, and also becoming the proof of Islam civilization on 15th century.

2) Octagon gravestone. This is used for Moslem cemetery, and Javanese people call it Nyoni. Its decoration is concentrated on the edge or the uppermost parts, and involving a shape like lotus buds. This was found in Barus District, Central Tapanuli Regency, and also the proof of Islam civilization on 17-18th century.

3) Curly bracket gravestone. Curly bracket refers to the shape of mosque door or window. The inner part of this gravestone is mostly allocated for Arabic writings. This gravestone was found in Moslem cemetery of Mahligai, Barus District, Central Tapanuli Regency. One such gravestone was made for Rukn Al-din (Rukunudin) who deceased on 800 H.

4) Riau gravestone. It shapes like three-level crown. The lowest part is the biggest and it gets smaller to the topmost part with the tip as the smallest. The decoration is dominated by camomile floras that its creeping line symetrically arranged following gravestone shape.

5) Sultan Mansur Shah gravestone. This was kept in Malaysian National Museum. This gravestone shapes like curly bracket with Arabic calligraphy. This was found at St. Paul Valley during Portuguese's occupation over Malay Peninsula on 1918.

Pursuant to the data above, there are three styles used on gravestone, which respectively are cylinder, square, and bucrane-wing. Cylindrical gravestone has a shape like elongated round cudgel. Square gravestone is identified through its crown shape and its ornaments. Bucrane-wing gravestone can be recognized by buffalo horn design at each side part (Ambary, 1988:12). If the regional origin of gravestone is considered, there are three physical differences, which respectively are: Aceh Plak Pleng gravestone, Aceh Samudra Pasai gravestone, and Aceh Darussalam gravestone (<https://steemit.com>). Each type has same function, which is to be grave marker in Aceh. During XVI century, gravestone was used to mark the cemetery of popular Aceh scholars (Rosaguna et.al., 2016:66).



Figure 1: Variants of Aceh Elak Pleng Gravestone  
Source: [www.hikayatbanda.com](http://www.hikayatbanda.com), and National Museum of North Sumatera in Medan

Figure 1

### 3.1. Aceh Plak Pleng Gravestone

This type is actually square gravestone with pointed end. It shapes like a monumental pillar or landmarker pole. Its end is carved with lotus buds figure. Gravestone's body (central part) is given floral figure or Arabic calligraphy, which all are neatly carved in a circle way. Lotus buds figure carved on gravestone is buds that are about to blossom. It reflects expectation that the deceased will spend time in the burial plot with pleasant aroma. The deceased's name will be remembered and used as good example for family and community. This gravestone style is found at the former area of Lamuri Kingdom, in various regencies of Aceh (Figure 1).

### 3.2. Aceh Samudra Pasai Gravestone



Figure 2: Variants of Samudra Pasai Gravestone  
Source: <https://steemit.com>, and Malaysian National Museum

Figure 2

This type is designed like curly bracket pattern found in doors and windows of the mosque. This is often carved with Al-Qur'an verses, usually with two-line mushaf on the edge part. Arabic calligraphy is priority if gravestone contains messages of the deceased. Production material of this gravestone is river stone that is dominantly available in Northern Aceh and Lhokseumawe, which were the region where Samudra Pasai Kingdom was located (Figure 2).

### 3.3. Aceh Darussalam Gravestone



Figure 3: Variants of Aceh Darussalam Gravestone  
Source: <https://steemit.com>, National Museum of North Sumatera in Medan, and National Library

Figure 3

This type of gravestone is often found in Aceh and Riau. Its shape and size are varying because it has been influenced by artisans' creativity and consumer taste. In Aceh, gravestone is ornamented with tauhid and syahadat verses, while in Riau, the decoration emphasizes on camomile floras with centrally arranged creeping lines. Visually, both gravestones have camomile floras that its creeping lines are configured on each side part, and the lines are ended at center point. The difference is that in Aceh gravestone, the chest part is becoming the seeing point and this point is given Arabic calligraphy integrated with floral patterns. Floral and calligraphy patterns are made conspicuous with the prominent line that follows gravestone shape (Figure 3).

## 4. Discussion

Data of gravestone artifacts stored at National Museum of North Sumatera in Medan, Malaysian National Museum, and Indonesian National Library are then analyzed with John Fiske's Semiotic Theory. It is believed that the gravestone describes social events



happened in Malay culture. These events were encoded with social codes and differentiated into three levels, precisely, reality, representation and ideology.

#### 4.1. Reality Level (Reality that inscribed on gravestone)

Sumatera Region is a part of Malay Peninsula. Islam preachings on this region started from trading activity done by moslems from Arabian, Persian, and Gujarat, in Asian continent, including the now Indonesia. Traders consider the past Indonesia as located in very strategic spot because it resides at international trade traffic. They often spend times in this spot while conducting transaction. As time goes, number of traders who reside in the spot becomes increasing and they build moslem residence nearby sea port. They start to socialize and preach Islam religion to the native (<https://www.gurusejarah.com>). On 13th century, their socialization has produced cultural adaptation and assimilation, and from it, Malay race with Islam religion was borned (Zaidan & Dja'far, 2012: 22). Historical evidence of Islam preachings involves texts, journey logs, trade books, and physical object, including gravestone.

There are three gravestone types in Aceh, which are respectively called as Aceh Plak Pleng Gravestone, Aceh Samudra Pasai Gravestone, and Aceh Darussalam Gravestone. All these gravestone types are affected by pattern and shape considered popular during the period of 1500-1800. Gravestone is designed to stand tall like landmarker pole or village boundary pillar. Some gravestones are made elongated tall like mosque tower, while others have a shape of curly bracket like aesthetical supplements on the upper part of mosque's doors and windows. Other gravestones resemble moslem king's crown (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Types and Characteristics of Malay Gravestone  
Source: Current-batu-Aceh-typology-from-Othman-Mohd-Yatim-  
Figure-4-1988

Figure 4

Edge and inner decorations are mostly florals and Arabic calligraphy. The decorations are arranged neatly in good blend with the entire pattern of gravestone. Edge decoration that contains Al-Qur'an mushaf is made by calligraphers who have expertise in Arabic typography. Decoration can be ornamental figure or illumination that accompanies khat, which the goal is to support and magnify the beauty of Al-Qur'an verses. Mushaf is a neatly bound collection comprising many manuscripts of handwritten Al-Qur'an. The central part of gravestone is ornamented by camomile plant with its creeping lines arranged on each side part of gravestone. Sometimes, Arabic calligraphies are added into this side lines. Florals figures are arranged symmetrically to produce same configuration on each side. Interestingly, the creeping lines are like inserted into gravestone's fissures. Few geometric ornaments are given in like-circle shape and put between each part. Chest part of gravestone is usually occupied by Arabic calligraphy in certain khat style. Khat refers to a beautiful line or writing, and it always presents along with mushaf in order to produce beautiful seeing point (Achsar, 2005:5 and 20). Some khat styles are used to ornament Malay gravestone, especially Aceh gravestone, and the styles are Diwani, Farisi, and Kufi (Figure 5). Khat Diwani was created by Utsmani Turkey and well developed around 15th century pioneered by a calligrapher named Ibrahim Munif. Diwani was given only to government offices and council buildings (<https://fath-multimedia>). Khat Kufi was derived from the city where this khat was borned, the city of Kufah, and from this city, the khat is popularized into Arabian Peninsula (<https://fath-multimedia.blogspot.com>). Khat Farisi was firstly introduced by Persian calligrapher named Mir Ali Sultan al-Tabrizi, and this khat is known for its soft, fine and light visual (<https://kalamjawi.com/khat-farisi>). Arabic calligraphy styles (khat) give evidence that the artisans (calligraphers) have creativity in designing and visualizing gravestone based on demand and taste of consumers.



Figure 5: Three Khat Styles on Malay Gravestone Source: Researcher

Figure 5

#### 4.2. Representation Level (Representation of shape and decoration of gravestone)

Gravestone design is varying from simple to complex. This variation is affected by raw material and price. Cylindrical design in Aceh Plak Pleng gravestone shows geometric ornaments fused with Arabic calligraphy of Khat Diwani. This khat style is recognized



by its unique curved letter, with soft and flexible inscribe in order to make it adaptive with various other planes, ornaments, and letters. Message written with Khat Diwani will produce sense of intimacy, which in this case is associated with a good communication, and there is an expectation that verses inscribed on gravestone would be easily understood. Square gravestone has elongated body with conical tip. Its lower part is Arabic calligraphy, while the tip has a shape like cananga flower. Cananga flower always has pleasant aroma, and it represents a hope that the deceased's name will be pleasantly remembered by the people who know the deceased and the deceased may get a pleasant place in God blessing.

Other design of gravestone is square with tip or topmost part shaped like curly bracket. This gravestone is usually produced from granite. It has high sale value and can be more expensive if there is Arabic calligraphy ornaments on few parts. The example of luxurios gravestone is Aceh Samudra Pasai Gravestone, which is ornamented with Arabic calligraphy of Khat Kufi. The characteristic of this khat is rigid, square oriented, dominant straight line, upright, and resolute. This khat style is only used in gravestone when the deceased desires to deliver messages that can be visually and verbally understood. Visual strength of the gravestone is referred to the strength of interpretation and the persistency of humans to hold out their life principle. Representative quality of the gravestone is associated with humans who strongly hold out their mentality to serve God's orders in proper way. Verbal quality of the gravestone is indicated by the inscription of Al-Qur'an verses to persuade readers to obey God's orders and to avoid God's prohibitions.

Some gravestones have attractive shape with curved design. This type was called bucrane-wing type. Aceh Darussalam gravestone is in this type because the shape is like buffalo horn or crown worn by the kings in Malay Peninsula. Buffalo horn design is affected by sociocultural condition of the community. Condolence visitors pray to escort the corpse to the pleasant place of God's side, and buffalo is sacrificed to honor the pray givers with a banquet of meals. Gravestone of bucrane-wing type is mostly inscribed with Arabic calligraphy of Khat Farisi. The word Farisi is defined as hanging, and therefore, the inscribe of this Khat is like hanging on something. This Khat is easy to make, and it represents an impression of lightness in serving God's orders. Sense of lightness also refers to a condition that when God's orders are served with positive thinking and gratitude, everything will be light and pleasant.

Raw material of gravestone was mostly rocks collected from oil palm plantation. Some gravestones are made of granite, and some others need export material, which usually is marble stone. Different materials can influence the figuration process. The

processing can be faster if the rock is softer, and tender surface of the rock may facilitate artisans in sculpting or carving ornaments and calligraphy on it. Different characteristic of material may affect the shape and the aesthetic visual quality of the finished gravestone. Some finished gravestones can be coarse whereas others may be delicate. Besides raw material, the demanded gravestone type and the difficulty level of processing also affect gravestone price.

If raw material, design, processing method, and aesthetical aspect of gravestone are taken into consideration, it can be said that gravestone can be divided into many classes, and each class is associated with the deceased. Representatively, gravestone in Malay Peninsula community is understood through its several aspects such as : (1) spirituality, which refers to the faith of the deceased; (2) social status, which is strata or class based on kinship system and power hierarchy; (3) economic, which is associated with wealth status of the deceased; and (4) politic, which is related with power orientation and social right of the deceased. Design, raw material, and intricacies of ornaments can give gravestone the high aesthetical value and also luxurious impression after being embedded into the burial plot.

### **4.3. Ideology Level (Ideology of gravestone)**

Most gravestones in Malay Peninsula, especially Aceh, are decorated with variety of flora ornaments and Arabic calligraphy. This decoration is not only embedding ornamenting gravestone, but also producing good impression on burial plot of the deceased. Metaphorically, applying designs and patterns on gravestone in pleasant way is same as giving positive thinking to the deceased and sending good impression to the pilgrims or condolence visitors. In typographic term, gravestone is an implicit visual symbol indicating that the death is already coming. The ideology behind gravestone making is that moslems can use gravestone to focus their pray to the deceased and if possible, to communicate supernaturally with the deceased.

### **4.4. Belief on The Deceased**

Gravestone ideology is that the deceased wants to give a sign to the pilgrims that the deceased is moslem, religious, and pious. Those impressions are produced by ornamenting the gravestone with Al-Qur'an and camomile decoration. Creeping lines at right and left sides of the gravestone, with some going up whereas others down, are

defined as two different directions, like night and daylight, man and woman, life and death, and also success and failure, which represent the fluctuation of human faith.

Arabic typography inscribed on gravestone takes some Al-Qur'an verses, which usually are the pray for the deceased. The pray always hopes that the deceased will receive pardon, be freed from grave punishment, and be enlightened always in the dark and hopefully, be calmed. The pray for the deceased would be actualized on the gravestone through the inscribe of Arabic calligraphy that hoping for the deceased receiving God's blessing.

#### 4.5. Belief on Community (Beneficiaries)

In the other hand, gravestone with Arabic calligraphy inscribe is a message or reminder to the beneficiary or people left by the deceased. The ideology of the living beings (humans) is that they are put into test, either with abundance or scarcity, healthy or sick, wealthy or destitute, and piety or despotic. Two sides of test are configured into an object of camomile with its creeping lines directing to right and left, or to up and down. These two tests represent a fact that humans live the world with tests during which humans are tested whether they choose chaste or profane, and whether they are able to cope with the consequences of their choosing.

Arabic typography is used on gravestone as an instrument to disseminate information, which mostly in form of Al-Qur'an verses and addressed to the beneficiaries or people left by the deceased, which suggesting them to always serve God's orders. Reciprocally, the beneficiaries respect the deceased through pray (ta'ziah) and pilgrimage. Gravestone also becomes a reminder to the left-by people to be the better persons by improving faith and serving God's orders. Pilgrims sometimes pray for the left-by people to be granted with protection, lasting age, happiness, prosperity, and pure soul because God promises to multiply rewards to such persons.

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