

An Architectural-Visual Validation of the Photograph of Kuching Mosque, Malaysia

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Abstract

A curious photograph of a building has surfaced in popular and academic discussions in recent decades. Some academic studies are known to have begun using this photograph as data. They imply it as depicting the first permanent mosque in Kuching, which itself is iterated from a museum exhibition in Sarawak, Malaysia.

This study makes the case that the narratives surrounding the purported photograph are inaccurate as no documents have provided any convincing link between the photograph and the early mosque. This study aims to conduct architectural-visual validation of the building in the photograph in reexamining an uncertain institutional representation of history. Executed within an anti-positivist framework, this study commits an architectural-visual validation process by examining the photograph's origin and the building in the photograph itself with contextual and architectural information as the basis.

The study finds that the building in the photograph was incorrectly misattributed as a fort. The analysis also made use of historical timeline chronology to posit the fort is not the alleged mosque. The study offers conjectures stating the plausible cause of the misattributions based on the normative architectural design forms of a mosque but cannot ascertain further whether the fort has been used as a mosque.




Keywords: Mosque architecture, Historical reexamination, Photographic evidence, Visual analysis, Vernacular architecture.

Introduction

A photograph could tell a lot about the historical and architectural information of a place. For a building that is gone with no architectural records to salvage, there could be no secondary evidence that is more substantial than a photograph. Photographic philosophers emphasize the value of photography as content that can be read and analyzed in a variety of situations, in addition to its use as a tool for documenting and archiving (Al Sheikh, 2023). But misleading narratives surrounding a photograph can eventually obscure facts, and this can be problematic especially when it has already been shared and canonized as common knowledge. There is a possibility that a desired vision of history is at play, where institutional

representations of this history are becoming personal memories without strong clarification of its source. This paper presents a case of a particular photograph depicting what is claimed to be the first permanent mosque in Kuching, Sarawak state of Malaysia, which has circulated in popular and academic outlets. The photograph has long been exhibited in the Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum with some of its accompanying iterations shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The photograph and its interpretations in the museum exhibit.
Source: Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum (Retrieved 2023).

No	Image	Type	Description
1		Photograph	Photographic source is not specified in the exhibit. This is the primary photograph. The caption states this photograph being the first mosque of Kuching. This photograph was first exhibited in the museum in 1992. The source of this photograph is investigated and discussed further in this paper.
2		Scaled model	The accompanying scaled model is based on the primary photograph.
3		Elevation drawing	The accompanying elevation drawing of the first mosque is based on the primary photograph.

This photograph piqued the interest of this study because not only the attributions of the original source are inadequate, but the information from these also constantly reappeared in other narratives. The preliminary documentary survey has not been very productive with the links between the mosque and the photograph are non-existent, instead exists only in the forms of secondary narratives which were derived from the original exhibit, as summarized in Table 2. To further crystallize the research problem, some historical backgrounds of the Malay Muslims and the early mosques in Kuching are presented thereafter.