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THE CHANGING IMAGE AND IDENTITY OF KOTA BHARU, KELANTAN, MALAYSIA: FROM CULTURAL CITY TO ISLAMIC CITY

Siti Norlizaiha Harun, Zuraini Md Ali, Rodiah Zawawi

ABSTRACT

An image of a city environment is a mental representation of external physical reality, while identity usually develops with the growth of a city through its inhabitants. The image and identity of a city can be valued in two ways of legibility: urban form and urban culture. In Malaysia, Kota Bharu, the capital city of Kelantan, known as a 'cultural city' (based on its vernacular Kelantanese Malay culture) is facing a dilemma of changing its identity into an Islamic city. This paper will discuss the past and current urban image of Kota Bharu as the capital and heart of the commercial centre in Kelantan. It will also analyse and conclude the issues and challenges of this historic town. One of the findings shows that the implementation of arch on new buildings which is inconsistent from the former identity creates conflict in sustaining its historical architectural values.

Keywords: Identity, image, culture, sustainable, heritage

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INTRODUCTION: FROM CULTURAL CITY TO ISLAMIC CITY

Kelantan is located at the East Coast of Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. As the capital of Kelantan, Kota Bharu is a symbol of the state and its people. It has very rich architectural and social cultural heritages from the past which are very unique identity of its people. The Kelantanese strongly hold to their culture and preserve their heritage identity which has been portrayed in their daily life. With the coming of Islam, the city gradually grew into a well known Islamic educational centre and was even called as the 'Entrance Lobby of Mecca'. However, the traditional Malay culture and arts continue to flourish and being practised by the locals.

In 1991, Kota Bharu was declared as cultural city by its previous king, Sultan Ismail Petra. The formation of Kota Bharu as the cultural city was based on 2 main factors: Historical elements and Art and Cultural Heritage (Siti Norlizaiha, 1995). Both of these elements have been assimilated and become central heart to the successful formation and development of the cultural city of Kota Bharu and the state of Kelantan in general. One of the fundamental aspects for conservation of this image is through preservation and revival of its traditional culture and buildings as well as monuments. Therefore the declaration of Kota Bharu as a cultural city reflects its authenticity

However in 2005, a daring paradigm shift after 15 years happened. The branding of Kota Bharu from the cultural city is changed to Kota Bharu Islamic City. This idea was to revive the early Islamic identity. This should be applied in the physical forms of the city such as architecture. The interpretation of Islamic city by the designers on their buildings will be discussed in this paper.

Historical Background

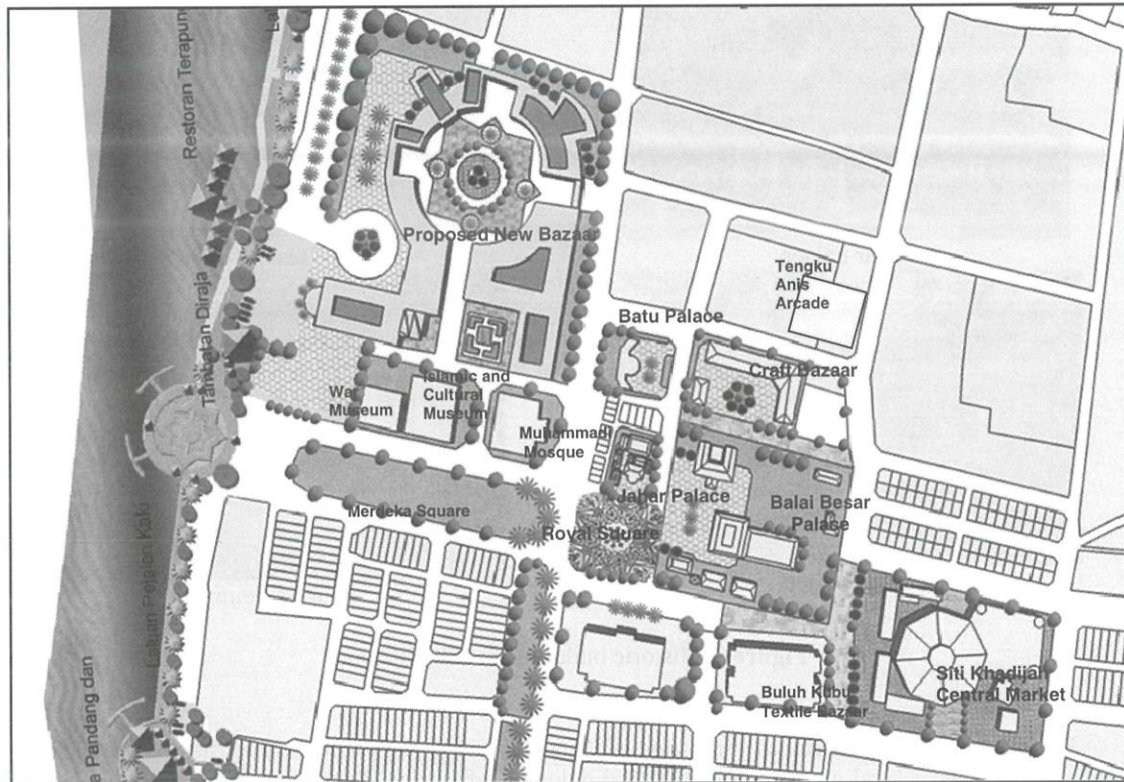
The spread of Islam in Kelantan was started since 7th century through maritime trading activities with the Middle East. The people of Kelantan accepted Islam as a way of life and they assimilated the Malay culture with Islamic principles. For example, mosque, a building for Muslim to perform Friday congregational prayer, becomes a main architectural element of existing Malay community settlements. This building was commonly built next to the ruler's home. It was constructed using local design and materials such as timber and thatch. The architectural design of the early mosque was similar to that of a local house except that it had a larger space. The mosque was also decorated with flora and fauna ornaments, which were adapted from the royal or nobleman homes. The early mosque was usually built by the entire community and it reflected the architecture of the inhabitants, for example the old Kampong Laut Mosque (Mohammad Tajuddin, 2000).

In the context Kota Bharu city, the main mosque was also located next to the royal palaces. In conjunction with the teaching of Islam, the building

was started and flourished in the palace compound. With the support from the royalty, the main mosque in Kota Bharu has become a hub that gathers Islamic scholars and learners from the entire Asia regions for centuries.

On 25th of July 1991, Kota Bharu was declared as the Cultural City by its previous king, Sultan Ismail Petra. The declaration was made on the basis of two important aspects, namely, the history of Kota Bharu and the uniqueness of its local arts and cultures which are:

- i. The historical elements that cover the beginning of palace 'Kota Balai Besar' and Kota Bharu as its capital state. This historical area is known as the cultural zone as shown in Figure 1. It covers the physical elements of buildings and monuments which have historical value and unique architectural heritage.
- ii. The cultural heritage elements which have been inherited from generation to generation such as traditional arts, royal institution, traditional cultural and norms.



Source: Kota Bharu, Local Plan Report, 2009

Figure 1: The Cultural Zone of Kota Bharu

A designated cultural zone of Kota Bharu is located around the main royal palace, which has been identified and gazetted by its Municipal Council for urban conservation. The main cultural and historical zone of Kota Bharu is situated along Hilir Kota Road and Sultan Road. The historic buildings in the cultural zone consist of several royal palaces (*Balai Besar* Palace, *Jahar* Palace, *Batu* Palace), War Museum (a former bank building), Muhammadi State Mosque, *Bank Pitis*, Independent Square and Royal Gate as shown in Figure 2. This zone also includes new buildings such as Handicraft Village, Siti Khadijah Central Market and Buluh Kubu Textile

Bazaar as shown in Figure 3. Since then, according to A Ghafar (1998), Kota Bharu has received two prestigious awards. First, from The National Land of Japan, which had selected Kota Bharu and 8 other cities around the world as "The City of Cultural Heritage". This recognition was given on the basis of local traditions, unique local cultures and tourist destinations. The second was from The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia, which awarded Kelantan as "The Best Tourism City" in 1993. The selection was based on factors of tourist arrivals, conservation activities and shopping facilities.



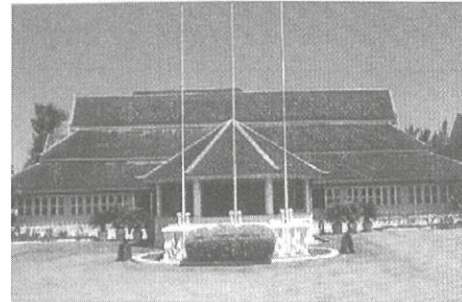
Merdeka Square



Muhammadi Mosque



Jahar Palace



Balai Besar Palace



Batu Palace



War Museum

Figure 2: Historic buildings in cultural zone

During this time, the architectural image of Kota Bharu was highlighted using historical buildings and monuments which have local architectural style and colonial influences. These historical buildings have been selected as local heritage buildings.



Figure 3: Main new buildings in cultural zone, Buluh Kubu Textile Bazaar and Siti Khadijah Market

Cultural Aspects

Kota Bharu is a unique city compared to other cities in Malaysia. Arts and cultures are the main ingredients and elements in developing its image. The cultural aspects make the city to have a sense of place. This factor contributes to promote a distinctive identity and becomes a major tourist

attraction to the city. The local culture in Kelantan is filled with the warmth of the people and their hospitality. The dominance of female, as compared to their male counterparts in social economy is very apparent. This is true as women have the highest percentage in the business sector, especially in the commercial areas (Figure 4).

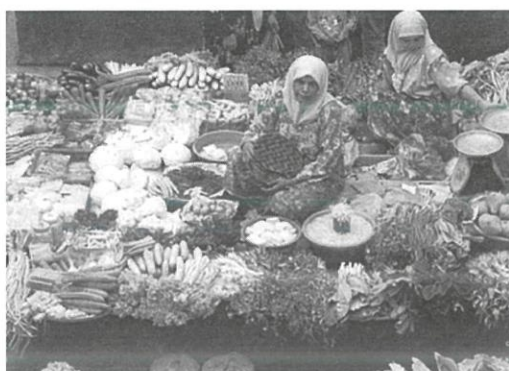


Figure 4: Inside Siti Khadijah Market, dominance of female in business

As noted before, the city and Islamic characteristic have already been well blended with the Kelantanese Malay culture since the coming of Islam. The domination of Kelantanese Malay culture is nurtured through the Islamic inclinations of its inhabitants, economic livelihood, monarchy and above all the traditional leisure activities which are unique to Kelantan as shown in Figure 5. These include traditional performance (eg: Mak Yong,

Menora, Dikir Barat, shadow puppet), traditional games, (eg: kites, top spin) and traditional craft and textile (eg: wood carving, batik, songket) as well as various traditional foods. All these tradition arts and cultural aspects strengthen Kota Bharu's image as the cultural city and this has successfully attracted millions local and international tourists annually (Siti Norlizaiha, 2005).



Figure 5: Kelantan traditional arts and culture

Kota Bharu as Islamic city: Building Design Elements

According to Antonio (1981) social integration based on religion creates a strong central power surrounding a city's life. From the historical perspective, a Middle East Islamic city is gradually developed and strengthens by a massive fort. It includes a major mosque and educational centre. Both elements function as the centre of religion and politic of that community. Others, are elements, such as market function as commercial and social centre.

In addition it also includes residential area and open space which is divided into 3 parts: arcade with retails, textile shops and open market. This also highlights the development of urbanisation in Islam

In urban aspect, Kota Bharu is grown and sustained with proper town planning principles according to Islamic township as developed in the Middle East. The focal city elements are mosque, palace and market. These elements are situated at strategic location near to each other. These reflect the

elements of Islamic town studied by Antoniuo (1981).

It is no doubt that the Islamic city layout does change from the early establishment of Kota Bharu since 1844 (Siti Norlizaiha, 1995) but still maintains its Islamic major elements. Since the coming of Islam, the assimilation of Islam into the cultural of Malay Kelantanese community is not only in its ritual but also in aspect of planning and architecture as well as in its community social cultural activities. The current context of Kota Bharu city all the Islamic elements of city exist in the city itself such as the mosque, palace, open space and commercial area. Such elements can be found in the Kota Bharu cultural zone when it was declared as cultural city in 1991 as shown in Figure 2 above.

However, in 2005 the local government decided to rebrand Kota Bharu into Islamic city by introducing Islamic concept which covers 3 directional relationships between man and god, man and man, and man and its environment. This concept of Islamic city was further developed by the Kota Bharu Municipal Council by giving a definition of an area that provides a clear and effective space in connecting with the above noted directional

relationships. To fulfil the above slogan of Islam city, the element of city design became the main aspect to be considered in planning. This is because the physical aspect of existing characteristic need to be preserved and conserved. The rapid development of the city requires appropriate pattern and building fabrics to reflect Islam identity. Currently, the application of Islamic identity for pattern and building fabric is being imposed on newly constructed building. This concept is being translated superficially on new architectural building identity and its forms as well as its façade style by highlighting the image of Middle Eastern architecture such as dome, arch and geometric motif elements. An example, for this is the recently completed Tengku Anis Arcade in the Cultural Zone as shown in Figure 6. This building was designed using arches on its external façade. Another new building with Islamic identity is Tok Guru Bazar which was completed in 2011. The identity reflects the mirrors of Nabawi Mosque in Madinah City, Saudi Arabia, especially the dome. With the similar green colour dome, the building reflects the identity Kota Bharu Islamic City.

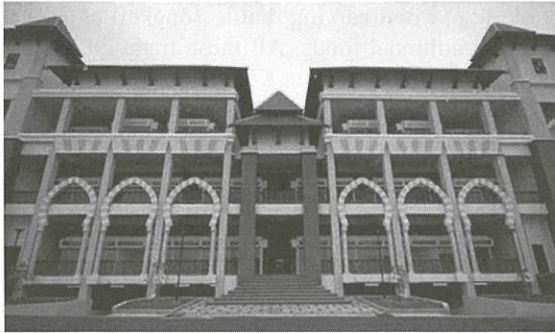


Figure 6: Tengku Anis Arcade completed in 2010 and Tok Guru Bazar completed in 2011

The other new example is the Kota Bharu Trade Centre which is also constructed in the Cultural Zone as shown in Figure 7. It was designed using domes on its corner towers, while arches and

geometric motif designs are on its external façade. The building signage is written in arabic calligraphic known as Jawi.



Figure 7: Kota Bharu Trade Centre, open in 2009

To enhance the image of Kota Bharu as an Islamic City, the following concepts are introduced in improving landscape by imposing basis of:

- a. Islamic values and identities into local identities in planning the use of water element, mosque as focal point, and providing gazebo with Kelantanese architecture
- b. local characteristics in games, art and craft
- c. local values and identities in hard landscape
- d. local traditional carvings

In contrast to the concept applied on buildings, the above concepts on the landscape are appropriate, in the sense that, it is rooted to its original identity without introducing alien elements.

CONCLUSION

The rapid growth of Kota Bharu city has contributed an enormous change into its current image. This can be clearly seen in the daring transformation of its architectural characteristic into a new concept and form by amalgamating the past and present. Such transformation is gradually accepted by the public in the building design. Today, not only architecture, motif, design, geometric pattern but also other knowledge from the past Islamic civilization has been used to revive Islamic identity.

However the understanding of what is Islamic architecture is different and debated among designers and developers. In the case of Kota Bharu, the Middle East architectural elements are more emphasize than the vernacular architecture.

Many tourists visit this city to encounter and experience the atypical ambience of its architectural, historic sites and local arts and cultures. With the current practice it may lead to a gradual fading of its tradition identity.

Therefore it is suggested that those decision makers to review and control the interpretation and

implementation of the re-branding concept without losing its traditional authenticity.

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Sekian, terima kasih.

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