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Simpora XV**

The 15th Regional
Symposium of
The Malay Archipelago

A black and white photograph of a traditional wooden building, likely a historical structure in the Malay Archipelago. The building features a steep, ornate roof with intricate carvings and a balcony with decorative railings. The image is positioned in the lower right corner of the page, set against a solid yellow background.

Resilience of Culture & Symbolism in Built Environment

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 15TH REGIONAL
SYMPOSIUM OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO**
SIMPORA XV: 2024

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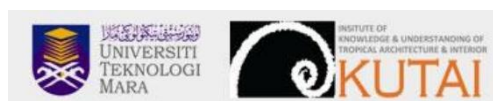
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REVITALIZING IHSANIAH ISKANDARIAH MOSQUE: HERITAGE CONSERVATION, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: The Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque in Kampung Kuala Dal, Perak, is a significant cultural and architectural landmark, built in 1936. The mosque is renowned for its unique bamboo panel walls (*kelarai*) and its fusion of traditional Malay craftsmanship with Islamic architectural influences. However, the mosque faces challenges of structural deterioration, especially with its bamboo walls succumbing to environmental damage and pests, and it is underutilized by the local community. Despite conservation efforts, the mosque remains mostly inactive, used only for occasional religious events. The revitalization of the mosque is essential for preserving its historical and cultural value while transforming it into a vibrant community hub. Strategies for this include preserving its architectural integrity through eco-friendly materials and techniques, such as thermochemical compression densification, to enhance durability. Furthermore, fostering community engagement through educational workshops, cultural events, and heritage tours can help strengthen the mosque's role as a space for learning, cultural exchange, and tourism. Revitalization can drive local economic growth and tourism while deepening community pride and intergenerational cultural connections. By involving the community and leveraging modern technologies, the mosque can thrive as a living heritage site.

Keywords: Heritage, Mosque, Cultural Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Various forms of mosque architecture have been built across the country since Islam began to gain a foothold in Malaya centuries ago. Behind the construction of each mosque lies a unique history, often connected to the sultanate, religious figures, and the colonial period. Each mosque also possesses distinct architectural features, influenced by the choice of building materials, carpentry techniques, and architectural styles.

The Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque is one such mosque with a historical past that may not be widely known. Although it is no longer in regular use, the mosque remains an architectural gem. Its heritage continues to attract visitors, drawn by its distinctive architectural style, which sets it apart from typical mosques in the surrounding area and throughout Malaysia.

Located in Kampung Kuala Dal, Perak, the Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque represents a unique fusion of traditional Malay craftsmanship and Islamic architectural influences. Built in 1936, it was commissioned by Sultan Idris Murshidul'adzam Shah, the 28th Sultan of Perak (Harun et al., 2008), to honor his father, Sultan Iskandar Shah, and his son, Sultan Iskandar Shah II, highlighting its deep royal connections.



Figure 1 Inauguration plaque inscribed with the date of the inauguration of Kampung Kuala Dal Old Mosque. (Source: Official Portal of the National Heritage Department)



Figure 2. The inauguration ceremony of the mosque which was completed by His Majesty Sultan Iskandar Shah the 30th Sultan of Perak

The uniqueness of this mosque is evident in its construction design, which resembles a birdcage. According to Harian Metro (2016), the distinct feature of this two-story mosque is its entirely woven oil bamboo walls, known as *dinding tepas/tepus*, which create the illusion of a two-story structure despite having only one floor. The mosque also features 20 windows adorned with engravings of bean sprouts, crescent moons, and stars. Its walls are composed of two types of paneling: bamboo and wood. The upper level is fully constructed with bamboo panels, while the lower level incorporates both bamboo and wooden panels.

1.1 Problem Statement

Its distinctive bamboo panel walls (*dinding kelarai*) highlight the intricate artistry of local weavers, making it a rare and valuable heritage site. As Hunt (2012) describes, many cultural heritage sites feature wooden artifacts crafted by artisans, showcasing their artistic ability due to wood's availability and ease of use. Furthermore, wood is a renewable resource, as a new tree can be planted to replace one that has been cut down.

Although *kelarai* is a traditional and eco-friendly material for wall construction, it has several drawbacks under varying climatic conditions. Its deterioration is largely driven by the fact that traditional materials such as bamboo are vulnerable to environmental factors, including irregular rainfall and temperature fluctuations. Since parts of the mosque were damaged in 2008, the Department of National Heritage has made efforts to mitigate further deterioration. However, sections of the walls have continued to suffer significant damage over the years.

Currently, the mosque is used only for occasional religious events, with minimal community involvement. Its underutilization as a functional space limits its potential to foster cultural and educational engagement. Without consistent programs, such as workshops or heritage events, the mosque misses opportunities to connect with both locals and visitors. Its unique architecture and historical significance could attract tourists, yet it remains largely inactive, diminishing its role as a vibrant community hub. This inactivity risks weakening the community's connection to the mosque, reducing both pride and participation in its preservation. Expanding activities and improving accessibility could transform it into a lively, multifunctional space for all.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 History of Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque

The Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque, located in Kampung Kuala Dal, Padang Rengas, is about 4.8 kilometers from the Royal City of Kuala Kangsar and only 2 kilometers from the PLUS Toll Plaza leading into Kuala Kangsar. Constructed primarily of wood, the mosque is situated on the left side of the road from Kuala Kangsar to Taiping and is easily recognizable.

The Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque was built by Sultan Iskandar to fulfill a vow after one of his sons recovered from an illness (*Majlis Perbandaran Kuala Kangsar*, 2022). Kampung Kuala Dal was chosen as the mosque's location because His Majesty, along with dignitaries and the royal

family, often picnicked at Lata Bubu, a royal retreat near the village. During his visits, he frequently saw villagers praying in a dilapidated *madrasah*. Moved by compassion for the local residents, he commissioned the construction of the mosque, naming it Ihsaniah Iskandariah in his honor.

According to Harun et al. (2008), based on previous narrations, the mosque was built using courtesy funds from Sultan Iskandar Shah at a cost of approximately RM8,000.00. It was constructed on a plot of land verbally endowed by a nobleman, Juragan Abdul Shukur Bin Mohammad Ali. The construction was led by Chinese craftsmen, while the weaving of the walls was carried out by several local artisans, including Panjang Noh, Ngah Gadoh, Wan Ibrahim, and Kulop Ngah.

2.2 Current Usage of Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque

The Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque ceased regular use in 1976 after the construction of a new mosque, Masjid Al-Wahidiah (Department of National Heritage, 2024). Masjid Al-Wahidiah was built on the same site to address the spatial limitations of the original mosque. With the establishment of the new mosque, Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque is now used only on special occasions, particularly during holidays and festive celebrations. The condition of the mosque after it was vacated in 1976 is shown in Figure 3. Over time, its function has gradually declined, and it remains in a state of disrepair with no specific activities being carried out. Today, the mosque primarily attracts the attention of researchers interested in architecture, wood carvings, and *kelarai* weaving.



Figure 3 : The condition of the mosque after it was emptied in 1976. (Source: Official Portal of the National Heritage Department)

However, the National Heritage Department initiated conservation efforts to revitalize the mosque in 2008, as shown in Figure 4. Despite these extensive efforts, the mosque's bamboo panels and other structural elements continue to deteriorate, threatening its historical integrity.

To preserve the original materials, the walls were reconstructed using the same materials bamboo and wood. For the bamboo panel walls, the weaving designs and patterns remained faithful to the original, ensuring authenticity. Additionally, the width and thickness of the bamboo strips were replicated to match the originals. The shape and arrangement of the weaving patterns were carefully positioned according to the original layout, with each bamboo panel wall precisely measured for accuracy.



Figure 4 : After conservation work in the year 2009. (Department of National Heritage, 2024)

2.3 Material of Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque

The Malay community has long utilized weaving and *kelarai* techniques to produce various everyday items, such as *mengkuang* mats, *rombong*, baskets, and walls (Ahmad Zakaria et al., 2018). Among the traditional wall decoration techniques used are weaving and carving. *Kelarai*, as shown in Figure 5, is a weaving technique that was historically used to decorate the walls of palaces and Malay houses. In some regions, *kelarai* refers specifically to woven bamboo used as walls or partitions within houses, while in other areas, this type of weaving is made from a material known as *tepas*. The creation of *kelarai* or *tepas* results in a structure that is strong, rigid, and coarse, making it suitable for use as a space divider. Mohd Aripin and Muhammad (2017) stated that the *kelarai* weaving technique serves not only as a decorative element but also enhances ventilation within a space. However, changes in modern building structures have rendered these traditional wall decoration techniques less suitable for contemporary use. As a result, modern buildings have adopted alternative methods for wall decoration.



Figure 5 : Example of Kelarai (Source Ismail et. al., 2023)

Unfortunately, bamboo is an organic material and, therefore, prone to decay. Due to the harsh climate and heavy rainfall, these organic materials have not been able to withstand the test of time. The mosque's bamboo panel walls, built nearly 15 years ago, have now deteriorated and require replacement. Figure 6 shows the current condition of the *kelarai* walls of Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque.



Figure 6 : Current condition of the *kelarai* walls of Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque, Padang Rengas. (Source: Syed Abdul Haris et. al., 2024)

2.1 Role of Heritage Buildings in Community Identity

Heritage buildings like the Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque are vital for preserving cultural identity and fostering community pride. They serve as tangible connections to the past and provide local residents with a sense of belonging. Engaging communities in the preservation and utilization of such sites strengthens their relevance and ensures intergenerational appreciation (Ahmad Zakaria et al., 2018).

Currently, the mosque is not fully serving its intended purpose as a community hub; it functions primarily as a venue for prayers and small events during Eid and Ramadan. It is

evident that the community does not actively use the mosque throughout the year. As a result, a significant opportunity is being overlooked—one that could transform the mosque into a multipurpose space for education, culture, and tourism.

Due to the lack of regular events and dedicated staff, the mosque has not been able to develop into an educational center for multicultural activities. For instance, it could offer courses on Malaysian architecture, Islamic art, or traditional bamboo weaving, actively engaging locals in learning and reconnecting with their cultural heritage. Additionally, courses on Islamic history or Malay architecture could provide valuable insights for students.

Furthermore, the mosque's inactivity limits its appeal to tourists and individuals interested in its architectural and historical significance. If such important sites are not actively utilized and engaged with, they risk becoming mere artifacts rather than living heritage. *Harian Metro* (2016) highlights the need for new strategies to revitalize the mosque. The inclusion of diverse activities and improved accessibility could facilitate its transformation into a dynamic, multipurpose space that serves both the community and tourists, ensuring its relevance for generations to come.

2.3 Challenges in Revitalization

The bamboo panels of the mosque, while central to its identity and architectural appeal, are particularly vulnerable to environmental factors and pest damage. Continuous exposure to rain and humid conditions accelerates their deterioration, while termites pose a significant threat to their structural integrity. These signature features are costly to repair, as they require restoration by artisans skilled in the traditional art of weaving, which incurs substantial expenses for both materials and labor. This makes it challenging to maintain the durability of the panels while ensuring their authenticity remains uncompromised. Without proper treatment and regular maintenance, termites can severely weaken the *kelarai* walls (Afzanizam Muhammad et al., 2012). Restoring these panels demands specialized craftsmanship and significant financial resources. More importantly, preserving the authenticity of the panels while enhancing their durability presents a considerable challenge. To address these issues and extend the lifespan of the *kelarai* wall panels, the implementation of effective maintenance and conservation strategies is essential (Bredenoord, 2024).

Modernizing the mosque to tackle these challenges adds another layer of complexity. Incorporating contemporary materials or techniques to improve structural longevity risks compromising its historical integrity, potentially altering the very elements that make the mosque culturally significant. Conversely, adhering strictly to traditional restoration methods often limits the building's adaptability for modern uses, such as serving as a multifunctional space for community and educational activities. Striking a balance between preservation and functionality is crucial to ensuring the mosque remains both a protected heritage site and a valuable community asset. As suggested by Syed Abdul Haris et al. (2024), while *kelarai* panels are more affordable and hold cultural significance, they require frequent maintenance, especially in humid and termite-prone climates. Therefore, they propose that fiber wall

panels, although more expensive, offer superior durability compared to *kelarai* panels. However, fiber panels may lack the natural aesthetic appeal and cultural authenticity of traditional *kelarai*.

Compounding these challenges is the limited involvement of the local community in the mosque's conservation and use. The disconnect between residents and this heritage site weakens the sense of collective ownership and responsibility. This is particularly evident among the youth, who may not fully understand the mosque's historical and cultural significance. Their active participation is essential to ensuring the long-term presence of conservation efforts in the area. Encouraging community engagement and instilling a sense of pride and responsibility in the younger generation is crucial for preserving the mosque for future generations (Taufik Shahidi et al., 2022).

2.4 Strategies for Revitalization

When it comes to preserving the mosque's distinct characteristics and enhancing their longevity, the focus is on utilizing eco-friendly materials. Sustainable materials are essential for maintaining the mosque's iconic features while improving their durability. Additionally, innovative techniques such as thermochemical compression densification can significantly extend the lifespan of the panels. This method not only strengthens the material but also reduces its susceptibility to decay over time, thereby safeguarding the mosque's structural integrity (Ismail et al., 2023).

Community engagement through educational outreach can foster stronger connections between the local community and the mosque. Cultural workshops, such as bamboo weaving classes, can help revive pride in local traditions and craftsmanship. Moreover, organizing heritage events including tours, exhibitions, and religious gatherings can attract diverse audiences and raise awareness of the mosque's historical significance. These activities encourage shared experiences and cultivate a deeper appreciation for the heritage site and its role within the community.

Integrating the mosque's history into educational programs can help instill a sense of awareness and responsibility in students. Collaborations with schools and universities can transform the mosque into a valuable learning resource, offering insights into its architectural and cultural importance. Storytelling sessions and lectures can further enrich participants' understanding of the mosque's historical role and the significance of conservation efforts.

Digital tools provide a powerful platform for increasing the mosque's visibility and accessibility. Virtual tours and mobile applications can allow global audiences to explore its unique features remotely. Additionally, social media campaigns can play a crucial role in promoting the mosque as both a cultural landmark and a tourist destination, drawing attention to ongoing conservation efforts and engaging a wider audience.

CONCLUSION

Revitalizing the Ihsaniah Iskandariah Mosque presents a unique opportunity to preserve an important cultural landmark while fostering economic growth and strengthening community bonds. The preservation process will focus on safeguarding the mosque's distinctive architectural features, particularly its bamboo panels, using appropriate methods to maintain the structure's integrity. By utilizing suitable materials and modern conservation technologies, the mosque can withstand environmental challenges, ensuring its cultural and historical significance is preserved for future generations. This meticulous effort will maintain the mosque's authenticity, allowing it to remain a rich reflection of the nation's architectural heritage.

From an economic perspective, revitalization can play a key role in boosting local tourism and generating business opportunities. Transforming the mosque into a cultural and educational destination will attract visitors, increase foot traffic, and create avenues for local artisans and small businesses to thrive. Activities such as weaving workshops, educational programs, and guided tours will not only enrich the visitor experience but also provide direct economic benefits to the local community. This integration of cultural preservation with economic development offers a sustainable model in which heritage and modern needs coexist harmoniously.

Additionally, revitalization will foster deeper community engagement and pride, particularly among younger generations. Involving local residents through cultural programs, educational initiatives, and social media campaigns will cultivate a sense of ownership and ensure the mosque remains an integral part of the community. Encouraging youth participation will strengthen their connection to cultural heritage, creating a sustainable model for preserving the mosque's legacy. These efforts will help transform the mosque into a hub for learning, cultural exchange, and social interaction for years to come.

Achieving this objective requires multi-stakeholder participation, including collaboration between the public, local government, and preservation experts. Balancing contemporary conservation techniques with the principles of heritage stewardship will be challenging but essential. Leveraging modern technology, such as social media and virtual tours, can enhance the mosque's visibility, making it a prominent heritage destination. With a well-executed revitalization plan, the mosque's architectural and cultural significance as well as its role as a community center and a crucial symbol of Malaysia's national identity will be successfully preserved.

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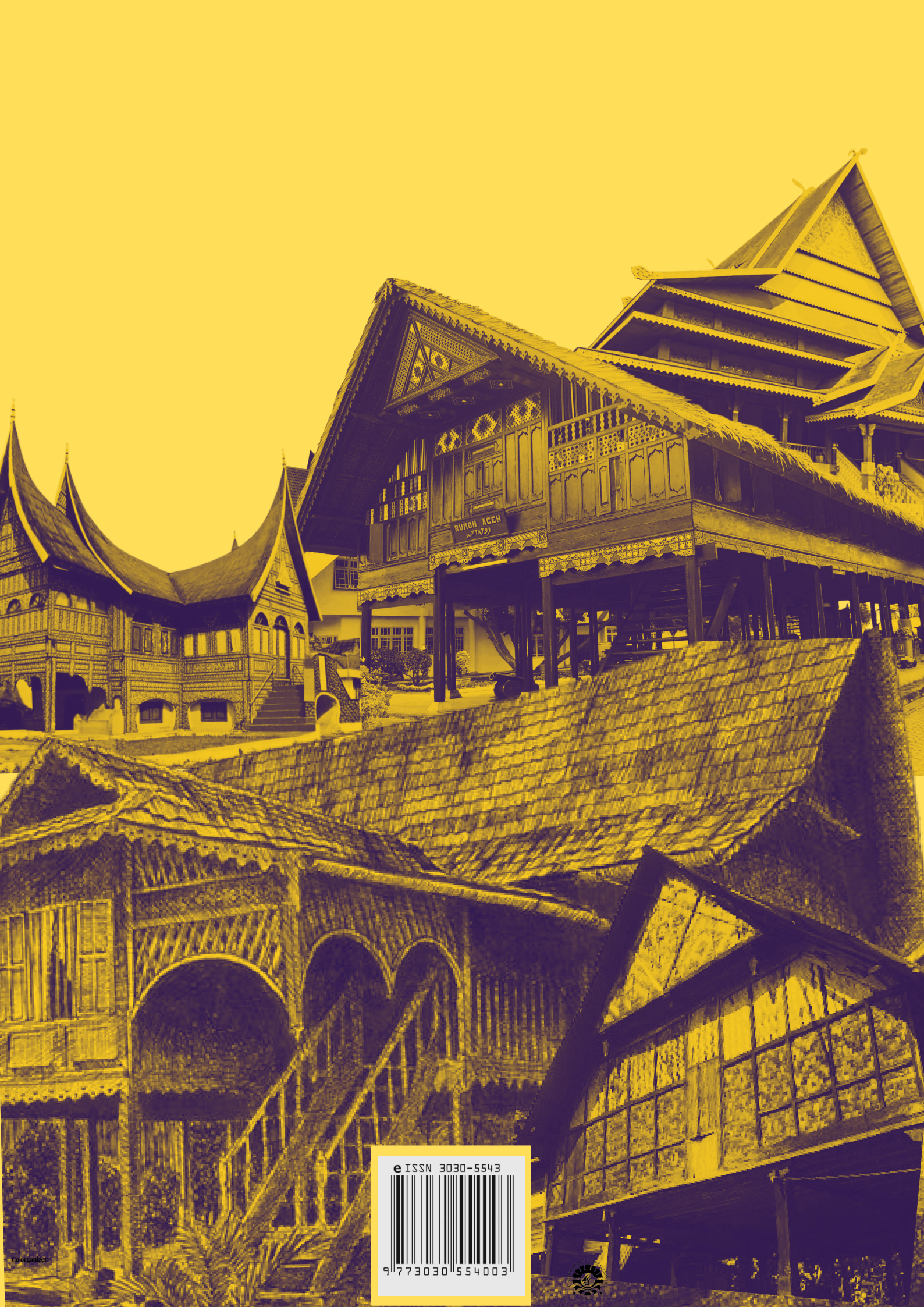
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