



**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY**  

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**SINGAPORE**

**THE ART OF ‘NONE’ TO ‘NUR’:  
MEDITATING LOSS IN RELATION TO ISLAMIC AESTHETICS  
AND SPIRITUALITY WITHIN MOSQUE SPACES IN  
CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE**

**MUHAMMAD NOOR ISKANDAR BIN OTHMAN**

**SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA**

**2018**

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts (Research)

**2018**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*For the dreamers who feel so much spirit and consciousness in Art,  
And the soul craving for the Light to fill the longing in the Heart.*

I dedicate my gratitude to the Almighty for the bounteous blessings, both manifested and hidden, amidst this journey of discovery.

To my supervisor, Dr Gül İnanç, who guided me with conviction, and all rivers of trust and patience, I am forever indebted to your presence.

To my family— Mama, Bapak, Aisyah, Idaffi, Iqram and all of whom extends, thank you for being my night breeze, mountains and all of sunrays. I love you with all of my heart, unconditionally. To my family across continents, thank you for offering me love across your hearts and prayers, across palms, for making this world breathtaking and breathless.

To the unformidable pillars of strength— Ms Hong Bee Kuen, Assoc. Prof Michael Walsh, Assoc. Prof Andrea Nanetti and the faculty as well as staffs of NTU ADM, your relentless support is invaluable. To my coursemates both in ADM and HSS, thank you for being ebbs of liquid gold I sip each day.

To the generosity of Mendaki for believing in my promise, especially Aisyah for constantly making it easy, National Heritage Board for their generous support and to all mosque personnel who welcomed us into their spaces in trust.

To everyone else especially Murni Iskandar, Ustaz Muhsin, Prof. Dr. Amir Zekgroo, Dr. Leila Hajmehdi Tajer, N. Huda, Syukri, Arshad, Jamal, Faiz, Wahidah, Rui, who have crossed paths with me, thank you for amplifying your voices and casting shadows on mine. I am forever honoured and humbled.

## SUMMARY

Islamic art evolves across time and space as different communities embody varying veneers of the faith. This is reflected in the shifting architectural articulations of sacred spaces moving towards an arguably more perplexing narrative of urbanisation, bureaucratization and secularisation of the 21st century.

For the Muslim community in Singapore, it can be observed that a more controlled political landscape has espoused a streamlined religious discourse. Such tendencies are translated into mosques vernacular wherein structured phases of mosque-building take precedence, evidently prioritising function over form since the 1970s until present. As a researcher and art practitioner, as well as a Singaporean Muslim, changes within the mosque ecosystem being the *situ* of research, predicate a sense of losing within the Self. These encounters with loss encompassing both the physical facades and spiritual bulwark form the main inquiries of the research.

Inspired by the Sufistic framework of interiority, the thesis is designed to ruminate on the metaphorical wombing of the mosque through abstraction of its Image. This *carrying of the mosque within the Self* allegorises the manifestation of Divine Light (*Nur*) as Art. Where sentient experience of the researcher is central, the research oscillates between a two-track exploration—a hermeneutic analysis of past scholarship as well as a heuristic visual exploration as autoethnographical approach; in an attempt to reclaim beauty in losing.

The reflexive posture in visually encountering the loss within mosque—in seeing, reading and responding through art will culminate unto an experimental artwork and cartographic journal entitled **Nur** and **Journur** respectively. Within all these, the research aims to mediate the poetics and politics of loss whilst intermingling the transcendentals of faith and art, as well as the agency of the artist.

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*“There is a candle in your heart, ready to be kindled. There is a void in your soul,  
ready to be filled. You feel it, don't you?” - Rumi*

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background: Experiencing Mosques, Feeling Lost*

Light almost always fades away. I recall sprawling across the womb of the Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque in Shiraz, Iran in the winter of 2015. As the sun bowed out from the gaze of the worship space, I mourned over the gradual dissipation of the pinkish lights reflected from the kaleidoscopic stained-glass unto my skin. I remember the first mosque I stepped into at age six. A quaint one obscured in the eastern corner of Singapore, enveloped by the military bases and Changi prison at Horchurch Road—Masjid<sup>1</sup> Awam (also known as *Madrasah Azamiah Al-Islamiah*). Changi plays home to one of Singapore's pride, the Changi International Airport. The call to prayer, the Adhan, can be heard interlaced by the blaring jet streams not too high above the dome of the mosque. The mosque had a 'kampong' aesthetic like many olden ones that traced back to the settlements period of Singapore.<sup>2</sup> My family stopped going to that mosque around the year my grandfather passed away in 1995. A few years later, *Masjid Awam* was torn down in what I heard was towards the ethos of security development by the

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<sup>1</sup> *Masjid* is a Malay word loaned from Arabic which means to prostrate in prayer, it is widely used in Nusantara (Malay archipelago). Tajuddin, in his book, provides a breadth of interpretation of this word. Mohamad Tajuddin Haji Mohamad Rasdi, *The Architectural Heritage of the Malay World: The Traditional Mosque* (Johor Darul Tazim: Penerbit Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2000), 27.

<sup>2</sup> For example of the Kampong anecdotal accounts, see Hadijah Rahmat et al, *The Last Kampung Mosque in Singapore : The Extraordinary Story and Legacy of Sembawang* (Singapore: Masjid Petempatan Melayu Sembawang in collaboration with Berita Harian, 2007).

Defence Science Technology Agency (DSTA)<sup>3</sup>. Horchurch Road itself cease to exist today. My experiences with mosques in Singapore today are almost always about loss and losing.

‘Awam’ is deemed as a Malay loan word from Urdu that refers to the common public or the masses.<sup>4</sup> It can be widely accepted that mosques are the most public place to have a private endeavour for a practicing Muslim. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan offered that for a space to be created, a place has to transit from one to another. Inevitably, these two notions are codependent; the place alluding to physical dimensions and space a more esoteric quality.<sup>5</sup>

A mosque, identifying as a site allocated solely for the purpose of Islamic worship, I feel, holds the brevity of place and space as it transcends the physical loci unto the deeper realm of metaphysics, congruent to many notions of Islamic theology. Both the tangible and intangible treasures of experiences ranging from the collective worship experience to the unique perception of mosque artistic expressions encompassing the representations and the shifts, the seen and unseen— I believe contributes in nesting the mosque ecology. One can argue that the experience within the mosque ecosystem becomes deeply layered over time, valleyed with growing

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<sup>3</sup> Muis, “Notis Pemindahan Kubur-Kubur di Kawasan Masjid Awam Changi,” *Berita Harian* (Singapore), February 20, 2001.  
<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Microfilm/Search?RN=NL22834>

<sup>4</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6.

streams of consciousness, memories, imaginations and wisdom. He/she begins to see, reads and perceives these spaces beyond just spaces to be within but to feel for, intermingling their senses with the margins of religious experiences. My sense of Self is indispensable from the rhetoric of this research, not solely geographical, but also in its poetics and politics. While I am unequivocal about the holistic aesthete experience that denotes a full sensory experience including the aural and tactile, my visual affinity is notably prime.

I am very sensitive to the visual veneers of mosques, the skin of their interiors and shells of their exteriors. Mosque architecture is deemed as the grandest form of Islamic Art and evidently as subliminal gateways of faith<sup>6</sup>. My visual inclination compels me to share this postulation. I wonder if others perceive the beauty the same way I do, if they peep at the webs of the rugs between *rakaahs*<sup>7</sup> the way, whether losing a familiar corner of a mosque paves a discomfort? Are these seen as a natural order of observations for most or are they lost in the perils of qualia? I suspect there exists a commonality especially in a place where the congregational act of worship is chiefly the reason for the mosques' nascency much like Carl Jung's Collective Unconscious<sup>8</sup>, if one were to identify mosques as 'archetypes' of Islamic Image.

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<sup>6</sup> Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, *Rethinking the Mosque in The Modern Muslim Society* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia, 2014), 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Rakaah* refers to the single unit within the performance of prayer. The frequency varies depending on different sets of prayer. For readings on gestural symbolism of the prayer, see Marion Holmes Katz, *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Carl G. Jung and R. F. C. Hull, *Mandala Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 36.

We are constantly steered by morphing, transient crossroads in the ethos of urban culture. In Singapore, these changes became more robust post independence especially since the 1970s as many agencies were created to manage agenda of respective communities including the Islamic Religious Council (Muis) established in 1968 to oversee the concerns and interests of Singapore's Muslim populace.<sup>9</sup> We witnessed the losing of buildings, familial heritage, uprooting of communities, vestiges and remnants of attachments. Mosques, like any other houses of worship, suffer the same fate. As mosques in Singapore expand to accommodate the masses, their designs jarringly modernize, their minarets, domes, pulpits and *mihrab*<sup>10</sup> displaced; these were some of the apparent changes seen and felt.

Gradually, the condition of losing manifests more of an inner peel. Apart from the abstraction of mosque archetypes that I had grown to know, the spiritual experience of being in the womb of the mosque itself feels oddly out of place. A wound seems to cut at the core. I gather a certain pathos is forming towards the spirit and soul of this ecosystem. In the thesis, I contextualize these suppositions into the visual culture of an researcher-practitioner.

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<sup>9</sup> Norshahril Saat, *Faith, Authority and The Malays: The Ulama in Contemporary Singapore* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> *Mihrab* refers to the niche center of a mosque wall pointing to the direction of Mecca known as the *qibla*. Muslims orientate towards this direction during prayers.

### *Conception of Research Problem : Art of Losing?*

My practice as a visual artist largely focuses on photography and poetry the last years, departs and strands upon abovementioned sentimentalities and even larger threads like Death- namely of an Image or Idea. In *Perspectives on Loss: A Sourcebook* edited by John Harvey, the studies show that most individuals intrinsically attribute loss to death.<sup>11</sup> The recurrent visual representations employed in my artworks included Islamic funeral shroud as well as unweaved prayer rugs. In particular, I produced a body of work entitled *Paradie* in 2014 revelling my fascination towards the notions of ‘Exist’ and ‘Exit’, exploring the themes of losing and spirituality in the unseen, a trope so quintessential to Islam. One of the images that underwent the experimental process was a photograph of the Sultan Mosque in Singapore (Fig. 1). The process which manipulated the inkjet printing method forced the colour pigments to continually run through the non-emulsive side of the photo paper. Over time, the latent image loses its forms, definitions and clarity. Through this artistic process, I gained an epiphany in the abstraction of physical spaces that morphed nothingness into a new habitude of seeing, a new aesthetic. This birthed my curiosity that all these notions have a common thread— and more importantly, can be designed into an art-based research framework.

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<sup>11</sup> John H. Harvey, *Perspectives on Loss: A Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 4.

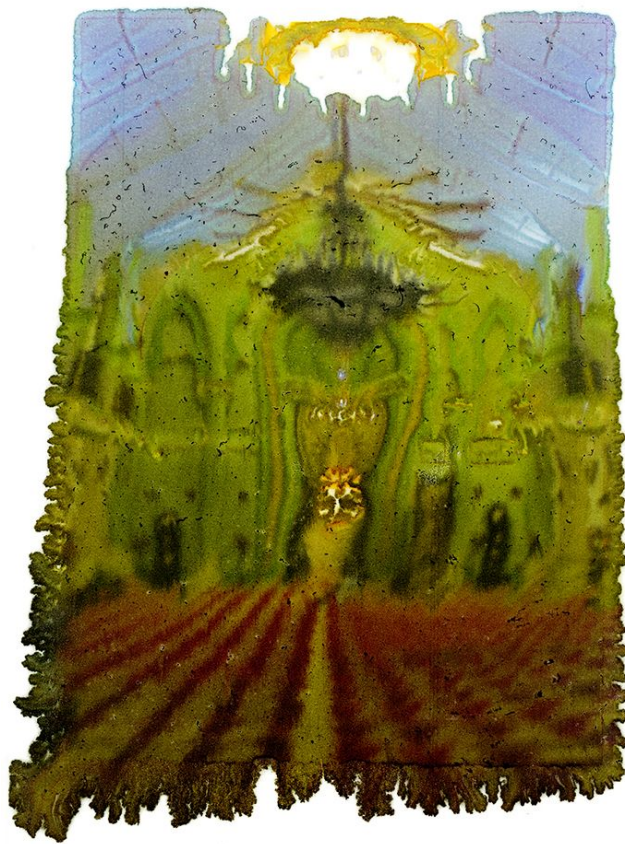


Fig 1. Untitled, *Paradie*, 2014

While these tropes— loss, beauty, faith can be convoluted, they grapple the roots of my research. The irony is not lost here as loss would also be an analogous condition to highlight the intermingling of spiritual spaces and aesthetics, or at least how I feel when observing the Islamic mores in Singapore. I believe that for many, losing can be quite the lament, whereas I am more intrigued than sentimentalised by it. I latch unto these assumptions that there must be some poetry behind losing in relation to Islamic art aesthetics, and consequently, how these poetics have an effect on spirituality on those within the ecosystem. I wonder if losing signals a tragedy or is a void actually needed to rediscover the beauty of devotion?

According to the *Oxford Dictionaries*, 'Loss' is deemed as the condition of lost. 'Lost' is defined as that which "has perished or been destroyed; ruined, esp. morally or spiritually; (of the soul) damned." It is followed by the "condition of which one has been deprived; not retained in possession; no longer to be found."<sup>12</sup> My encounters with losing, in this regard, encompass the following:

- A. visual culture of art, architecture and design
- B. intrinsic spirit of mosque ecosystem
- C. conversations between art and faith

I sense that this feeling of detachment is not just an isolated case for me, engaged in solipsism, but actually extends to the larger Muslim community in Singapore. I am concerned that this phenomenon takes place due to a 'cultural negligence', a gaze away from aesthetics, the art and beauty of the sacred space. Within these contemplations, the following hypotheses are manifested:

- 1. Is there beauty in losing through the lens of Islamic spirituality and visual culture?**
- 2. If so, can we manifest this beauty using art approaches and processes with contemporary mosques in Singapore as *situ*?**

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<sup>12</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "Lost, n.," accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.uleth.ca/view/Entry/110416?result=1&rskey=oPUt15&>.

### *Conception of Research Purpose : Unlosing Art?*

The reflexive research oscillates between sentient experience and theoretical analysis, attempting to unravel the potential connection of all these threads; loss, light, prayers, beauty, ala a cartographic mapping. The chief purpose of the research is to reelect the dialectic between loss and Islamic art aesthetics as well as spirituality through both analytical and creative processes. Neither intended as a discussion of mosque architectural or theological history nor an investigation of the psychology behind losing, instead the research strives to meditate and mediate loss from the perspective of Islamic Art and Image. *Meditate* signifies a rumination while *mediate*, a reconciliation of sorts. I am passionate to bridge this feeling of loss to unearth Art as Light.

To acclimate the mosque ecosystem as breathing storytellers, experiencing mosques beyond an architectural expression is vital. This research draws the axis within the art, artist, the space and the worship. The research aims to employ new ways in understanding these notions within scholarly and artistic diptych; a) amalgamate notions of loss, beauty and spirituality and b) elevate the artist agency within religious rhetorics. The cross-pollination of the worshipper, artist and researcher influences the design of the conceptual and methodological frameworks. Establishing this as an arts-based research is important as essentially, I want the artist voice to be noted as purposeful, responsible and relevant in carrying the conversations of spirituality within social and academic complex. This research trails where Abdul Ghani Abdul Hamid

depart in his work<sup>13</sup>, urging other academics and artists to enhance their experience towards the relationship of the mosque and the art in Singapore. This arts research is determined to elucidate new approaches of using art practice to understand how the processes can aid an understanding of another aspect of life; in this instance, philosophy of religious experience.

It is evident that the undercurrents of the research will be extensively experiential and experimental, with the researcher-practitioner Self being the nexus. The purpose of this research although stems from an intimate pathos, attempts not to romanticise loss but instead, project a logos to build the ethos of spiritual experience for the *awam*, metaphorically reimagining *Masjid Awam* again.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Ghani Hamid, *The Mosque, The Art: A Brief Note on Muslim-inspired Art in Singapore* (Singapore: Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya, 2002).

CHAPTER ONE:  
**SENSING THE LOSS**

## Chapter Overview

This chapter will commence with a thematic review of literature, in search of anchors to the profound interwovenness between Islamic art and spirituality, whilst maintaining the mosque and its shifts as the vantage point of the research hypothesis. Acknowledging the vast possibility of literature, the review surveys only pertinent discussions to be carried out from a macro to a micro perspective. The streamlining from the global understanding of the topics to a very locale posture of Singapore's ecosystem is essential, and will mirror much of the research investigation.

Having assessed the limitations of literature, the chapter will sieve out a significant concept to devise the theoretical framework, itemising the relationship between Islamic aesthetics and spirituality in an attempt to deepen the conversation of particular gaps within. Devising the framework is critical as it espoused on the hybridity of thesis as both a hermeneutic analysis and heuristic practical approach. Consequently, the design of the methodology and strategies can proceed, to be espoused onto the ensuing chapters.

## Literature Review

### *The Multiverses of Islamic Art Discourse*

Coursing through the veins of Islamic art and aesthetics means sifting through a dense forest, often convoluted and sometimes stumped. Avinoam Shalem's article *What Do We Mean When We Say 'Islamic Art'?* pitches itself upon this premise, a critique to revise Islamic art history. There are so many layers in inspecting the nature of Islamic art, themes undefined, niches unresolved, grounds unbroken. This ongoing complexities are evident through Shalem's concluding remarks: "Does Islamic art exist beyond the framework of Western art history? Do the arts of Islam need to be discussed and interpreted within visual theories relatable to the field of Islamic studies? And, lastly, how should one rewrite the visual history of these arts?"<sup>14</sup>

Art expressions originating from communities of the East has been studied extensively by scholars through a historical, cultural, anthropological lens including Ananda Coomaraswamy who extended this gaze into the more philosophical and metaphysical aspect as he looked into the "divine dialectic of the transformation of religion into art and art into religion" through Indian art.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Avinoam Shalem, "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Islamic Art'? A Plea For A Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam." *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>15</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Rama Ponnambalam Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), xx.

The Greek word 'Aesthetic' refers to a branch of thought that in spite of conflicting paradigms, is often most understood as the concern towards pleasing the senses through beauty and the art.<sup>16</sup> Drawing Platonic references, Coomaraswamy explored an enlightening look at aesthetic and its limitations in his chapter, "A Figure of Speech or a Figure of Thought?", in which he suggested an oversight on deeper contemplation of lives as we apply this parameter of "science of the soul."<sup>17</sup> Attempting to ground this Western-centric<sup>18</sup> trope of Aesthetic into an eastern Islamic worldview seems impassable as it is highly subjective what more, an incompatible dispersion from the Western core. While some choose to define Islamic Art in relation to these Western conventions, over time, the thrust of Islamic Art aesthetics began to entail their own exegeses and agencies. But what then, can we call beautiful in Islam? Does the supreme text of Islam, the Quran, informs aesthetic judgment? Where does "mosqueness" exists in all of these forays?

Oleg Grabar when discussing similar virtues in his seminal texts underlined the over-complexities in even theorizing these threads. Having considered discussions by theorists stemming from shifts in multiple meanings across time and space, including the Orientalist effect as well as Western critics, Grabar argues that "it is foolish, illogical and historically incorrect to talk of a single Islamic artistic expression. A

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discourse of Islamic Aesthetics in relation to its precedents, see Deborah L. Black, "Aesthetics in Islamic Philosophy," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 75-79.

<sup>17</sup> Coomaraswamy and Coomaraswamy, *Essential Coomaraswamy*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> The use of West (and East) here, while acknowledging a rather, systematic product of Eurocentric scholarship and definitions, is in the aim of consistency and misconfusion.

culture of thirteen centuries which extended from Spain to Indonesia is not now and was not in the past a monolith, and to every generalization there are dozens of exceptions.”<sup>19</sup>

This shows the fluid nature of Islamic art which in essence, shape-shifts organically according to the land and conception of the people of the land which supports the permutations of Islamic art as “Islamicate art” or “art from Islamic tradition”<sup>20</sup> These views speak of multiple modernities that might happen simultaneously, translated into variants of Aesthetic when it reaches the shores of the Muslim verse(s). Kenneth George provides an exemplar of a localised interpretation of art in the Muslim verse as he formed these observations around Indonesian artist A.D Pirous.<sup>21</sup> Such anthropological approach provides deep reasoning of how an art-practitioner performs by autonomy or by the consciousness of Islamic artistry. One needs to understand that although the Quran is set in stone, the laws and education in accessing the text evolves in accordance to the context of time and situation. In fact, the margins of religious experience might be dispensable when looking at Islamic Art as championed by Oliver Leaman in his seminal work, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* that speaks of expression negating the spiritual lens as an “interference with aesthetic

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<sup>19</sup> Oleg Grabar, *Islamic Art And Beyond* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 247.

<sup>20</sup> Suhaili Osman detailed this in her study of the Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal Indonesia and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. See Suhaili Osman, “Expressing Islam: A Study of the Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal Indonesia and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia” (master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth M. George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in A Muslim Lifeworld* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell), 2010.

appreciation".<sup>22</sup> These multitudes confirm the contention of a unified narrative addressed by Dirlik:

It may be that a day will come when everyone around the world will conceive of the world and its history in identical ways. Until that day arrives, however, we need to be attentive at all times to the limited standpoints and visions from which we think and write history, regardless of how global or universalistic we may wish to be. Societies around the world past and present have thought about the world and its history differently, which must enter as a fundamental consideration into any practice of world history.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of such improbability in forming core definition, many historians and scholars have taken upon themselves to identify various styles that fit into the margins of their categorisations. For instance, over the years, experts on respective fields emerged in strands of calligraphy, manuscript arts, textile arts, miniatures, applied arts, architecture to name a few— all of which are deemed under the constellation of Islamic art and appealed to a sense of Islamic aesthetic- irrespective of the identity and intention of the artist and artisan. While Lois Lamya al-Faruqi begins to look at Islamization through sound arts, Christiane Gruber was involved in manuscript studies, Sheila Blair is renowned in calligraphy study; it is evident that with these come a variety of vision and views in all encompassing aspect of the arts. It is not caustic to believe that in all instances, such scholars are always deriving or arriving from/to a similar womb, the aesthete spirit of Islam- or Islamicate societies. For the latter, I argue will still have implicit contact and even rootedness with shared values of the faith.

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<sup>22</sup> Patrick S. O'Donnell, "Review of Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction by Oliver Leaman," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 2 (2007): 271-75.

<sup>23</sup> Arif Dirlik, "Performing the World: Reality and Representation in the Making of World Histor(ies)," *Journal of World History* 16 (2005): 410.

The effort remains today to reframe the theories of Islamic art continues today with Idham Mohammed Hanash's formulation of a structure that "paves the way for an epistemological shift from viewing Islamic art as a material concept having to do with beautiful rarities and relics that have grown out of Islamic cultural and artistic creativity, to a theoretical concept associated with a vision, a principle, a theory and a method."<sup>24</sup>

### *The Universe of Spirituality within Islamic Art*

While there are complications meandering the epistemology of Islamic Art, the thesis is chiefly concerned with the above theoretical aspect of Islamic spirituality. Spirit is identified as the "deepest values and meanings by which people live"<sup>25</sup>, often alluding to the inner sense of universal human experience. Although much of contemporary thoughts on spirituality shows a dispensability from religion, Islamic spirituality is inseparable to the Oneness of Divine (*Tawhid*) presence. Seyyed Hossein Nasr expressed that this "principle of Unity lies at the heart of the Islamic message and determines Islamic spirituality in all its multifarious dimensions and forms."<sup>26</sup> It is of no surprise Coomaraswamy was a strong champion of the Godliness within art. In fact, he is seen as the co-founders of the Perennialism, also called the Traditionalist School.

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<sup>24</sup> Idham Mohammed Hanash, *The Theory of Islamic Art: Aesthetic Concept and Epistemic Structure* trans. Nancy Roberts (London: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publ., 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 508.

Art in Coomaraswamy's legacy, like Nasr's, alludes to the Metaphysics, Mysticism and the practice of Sufis. Sufism or in Arabic, *Tasawwuf*, assumes the principle of interiorisation based on a threefold meaning of tasawwuf according to the Muslim law (*sharia*), the mystical consciousness (*tariqa*) and the Truth (*haqiqa*).<sup>27</sup> This inner dimension is rooted in the concept of Divine Love.

Many religious scholars have transcribed the three dimensions of Islam; *Islam* (practice), *Imaan* (faith) and *Ihsaan* (spiritual perfection). And unsurprisingly, the final dimension is the most deep in its elaborations and attainment. It, too, alludes to the mystical beauty of the unseen. Prophet Muhammad once proclaimed that Allah is Beautiful and Allah loves beauty. Beauty is an innate quality of God which emanates into His creations and signs. However, as there are no explicit conventions of beauty stemming from the Quran, such bouts of lyricality within the verses and prophetic sayings (hadith) enable interpretations of aesthetics within the creed, including allegations against art itself.<sup>28</sup> In Navid Kermani's *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*,<sup>29</sup> he, too, substantiated this spiritual dimension within the aesthete; that which includes sound, senses, touch, apart from visual experiences and

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<sup>27</sup> Although the term Sufism has been evolved into a somewhat leary image in majority of the Muslim community, I used the word in the sense of an individual seeking to attain Tasawwuf. For a good etymology, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 17-29.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion on beauty in the Quranic spectrum, see Hasan Bolkhari Ghehi, "Aesthetic and Concept of Beauty in Quran," *International Journal of Arts* 7, no. 1 (2017): 1-5, doi: 10.5923/j.arts.20170701.01 and Saeid Hassanpour Loumer, "Quranic Themes and Reflections in Islamic Art and Architecture," *Trends in Life Sciences* 3, no.3 (2014): 471-481.

<sup>29</sup> Navid Kermani, *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015).

impressions. But not many scholars hold the acquired positions of Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, both of whom have elegantly amalgamated these two universes. Notably, there are varying schools and sects, including Shiism, Sunni, Ismā'īlism thought within the Persian Shi'ism, and Sufism, where discussion of such nature transcends the theological divisions fit for a different study. Despite this, the nature of Sufism in the overlapping of these streams seem to be entrenched in renowned scholars like Martin Lings, Henry Corbyn as well as Annemarie Schimmel. Although deemed as Orientalists, their contribution towards the convergence of art and mysticism are invaluable to our discourse. These scholars' entrenchment with Islamic spirit of expressions, coupled with the artful philosophy of thinkers like Al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn 'Arabi even to those deemed heretics like Mansur al-Hallaj, Suhrawardī and in the regional context Hamzah Fansuri from the Malay World all have trodden the same theoretical 'sacred space'. The discourses by these scholars seem to have form the tradition of Sufistic aesthetic resonance that Burckhardt and Nasr indulged in.

### *Mosque Spaces as Sacred Architecture*

To fathom the canon of losing within mosque spaces, one has to dissect the cross-section between the space and the sacred. *Sacred Architecture* by Caroline Humphrey and Piers Vitebsky provides a seminal overview on how various spaces carve meanings in the intangible through concrete and cement whilst simultaneously understanding how these spaces, across religions, not only speak of a Higher Order but of civilisation throughout Mankind itself and their reflections into ways of living.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Caroline Humphrey and Piers Vitebsky, *Sacred Architecture* (London: Duncan Baird, 2003), 8.

Consequently, Juhani Pallasmaa's thought-provoking essays on architecture and senses offer a philosophical veneer to these concepts, that resonates with mosques as our archetype, indulging in symbols and simulacra and more relevant to our discussion, the waning of our imaginations—both individual and collective—in an ethos of surging displacement of the Islamic Image. Pallasmaa offers a postulation that resonates:

If imagination and images have emancipated the human race (in the past), couldn't the re-humanized image liberate us again? Couldn't the poetic and embodied image, the unselfish, disinterested, and authentically curious imagination open up an optimistic future and emancipate us again? This book was written with the belief that we can liberate and sensitize ourselves through a re-mythicized and re-poeticized understanding of the world, and that human imagination is autonomous, self-generative, and limitless.<sup>31</sup>

These encounters with space draws parallel not only to Tuan's previously discussed ideas but also to David Morgan's argument whereby there are ways of seeing that invest object with spiritual significance<sup>32</sup>. Such texts provide deep insight on spiritual expressions unto ascribing realities within the human condition, as well as laying foundations for thesis whereby the condition of losing within mosque becomes a spiritual experience. Beyond Islam, religious architecture has always been the most exalted form of space. Michael Crosbie, in his chapter from *Transcending Architecture* edited by Julio Bermudez, cited this "numinous" factor tracing Rudolf Otto's

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<sup>31</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery In Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, (USA: University of California Press, 2005).

philosophy on containing the holy within a structure.<sup>33</sup> Evidently, the compilation of Bermudez's book shows a salient margin of contemporary practice and theology. A sharp thesis lies in Robert Oakes' take on awareness of God's presence and God's essential unobservability that he argued can be taking place through constituency of other sensory perceptions say someone's visual detection of a sunset.<sup>34</sup>

### *Reading Mosque Spaces as Art*

This very sensemaking of the intangible exists within mosques. The mosque is regarded as the House of God but the landlord is duly unseen. The unobservability however speaks so much of both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions... forms and formlessness. Mosques converge both architectural marvels as well as expressions of Islamic artefacts. Architecture within Islamic art is possibly the most extensively written. Not only are these objects of art the largest in scale, the distinct faculties of thought, philosophy, practice circumscribe the mosque ecosystem. Thus, most scholarships cover vast fields including the historical, political, social and architectural aspects of mosques.

This means that the earlier literature on mosques serve to delineate the historicity of mosques since the Prophet's time to the Ottoman legacy. Nasser Rabbat

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<sup>33</sup> Michael J. Crosbie, "Calling Forth the Numinous in Architecture," in *Transcending Architecture*, ed. Bermudez Julio, Ott Randall (USA: Catholic University of America Press, 2015) 225-30.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Oakes, "Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability," *Religious Studies* 17, no. 3 (1981): 357-67.

draws the existential dilemma of representations and disengagements of 'Islamic Architecture'<sup>35</sup> which at times are seen to be fractured from Islamic art. It is noticeable that most literature revels in the novelty of the Eastern Islamic lands. Again, this reflects the overarching simplification for a singular node of Islamic architecture. Amidst the identity crisis, it is noteworthy that mosques benefit from an obvious association with religious architecture hence always seen under the banner of Islamic art in any case. Jale Erzen confirms how the philosophical decorations in art of building and search for meaning can never be divorced when reading mosques.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, a post-modernist introspection emerged within respective communities. We see case studies done spanning the Iberian peninsula, Iran, India to Indonesia. Evidently, a similar theme of assessing both the form and function are engaged, in accordance to the idiosyncrasies of their respective geography. In fact, such works provide a glimpse of how mosque architecture has been adopted from the conventions of unified Islamic art and architecture into their own trickled versions. While comparative studies between architectural articulations are bound to be made, the formalistic demands of mosques are always addressed; such as the dome, the *mihrab*, the minaret. Hence, it is safe to say the visual acuity of mosques within the architectural framework ought to be congruent to the Islamic sense of beauty and art.

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<sup>35</sup> Nasser Rabbat, "What is Islamic Architecture Anyway?," *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>36</sup>Jale Nedjet Erzen, "Reading Mosques: Meaning and Architecture in Islam," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 1 (2011): 125-31.

## *Contemporary Crisis of Change within Mosque Spaces*

Over time, aesthetic judgment shifts alongside the changing taste, practicality and adaptability of communities, also against other universal externalities like urbanisation and secularism. As the study perceives loss not under an antagonistic scrutiny, an understanding of the re-codification of architectural design slurs as well as new ways of seeing is needed. There are numerous texts that speak of the embrace of such substantial changes or perhaps a rational grasp of it. The literature review reveals that many are being written on a rethinking or remodelling of mosques' paradigms that govern these shifts. This includes Ahmad Hamid's revering of *Hassan Fathy* as an analogous figure in championing progressive mores. Notable arguments made relevant to this discourse include the supposition in the absence of a coherent modern muslim worldview. A vital view of his purported that "If Islam were to be understood as a religion of the present, as well as of the hereafter, intrinsically utilitarian, egalitarian and delightful, it would become clear that Islam is also intrinsically modern, though with God, not man, at its center."<sup>37</sup> Closer to home, Mohamad Tajuddin Haji Mohamad Rasdi contributes largely to the discourse as he gazed into the tradition and modernity strain within the Malay world, particularly in Malaysia. His contemporary, Abdul Halim Nasir also dabbled in the sphere of architectural heritage. In fact, it is optimistic seeing "contemporary challenges" appear into the discourses of mosques spaces.

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<sup>37</sup> Ahmad Hamid, *Hassan Fathy and Continuity in Islamic Architecture: The Birth of a New Modern*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010) 35.

*The Concept of Nothingness and Nur in Islamic Spirit*

In reconciling this contemporary crisis of loss, much is to be scoured for literature that deals with seeing the beauty in loss, losing and nothingness or to a large extent, a void. The discourse between void and sacred spaces in Islamic context is elegantly surmised by Titus Burkhardt:

sacred art is not necessarily composed of images, even in the widest sense of this term; it may simply be the exteriorization of a contemplative state and in this case it will not reflect particular ideas, but will qualitatively transform the ambiance, with a view to its integration in a spiritual equilibrium whose center of gravity is the invisible. It is easy to recognise that such is the nature of Islamic art: its object is above all the ambiance of man—whence the dominant role of architecture—and its quality is essentially contemplative. Aniconism does not lessen this quality; on the contrary, by excluding every image that could invite man to fix his mind on something outside himself and to project his soul in an individualizing form, it creates a void<sup>38</sup>

In fact, these ideas draw association with the aesthetics of death, representational forms of funerary art and tombs section of Burkhardt's seminal *Art of Islam*<sup>39</sup>. This notion of void inspired Nasr to conceive an entire closing chapter to his seminal book *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. In propagating his philosophy, Nasr sees the spiritual significance of the void as one of the most "important direct consequences for art of the metaphysical principle of Unity."<sup>40</sup> Such concepts of void have also been

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<sup>38</sup> Titus Burkhardt, "The Void in Islamic Art," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 4, no. 2 (1970), accessed March 20, 2017, [http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/The\\_Void\\_in\\_Islamic\\_Art-by\\_Titus\\_Burkhardt.aspx](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/The_Void_in_Islamic_Art-by_Titus_Burkhardt.aspx).

<sup>39</sup> Titus Burkhardt, *Art Of Islam, Language and Meaning, Commemorative Edition* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art And Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 185.

vastly theorised in a spectrum of spiritual systems since the advent of Greek philosophy. Although the concept of void is more pronounced in other world beliefs notably in Eastern philosophies such as *Mahāyāna* Buddhism and Japanese Zen genus, Sufistic tradition has also intrinsically revered this mantle of void. The most obvious one that resonates to Burckhardt's argument is *fana*. This notion of nothingness or "cavity" of the Self resonates with Coomaraswamy in his studies of numbers and Indian metaphysics in 1934.<sup>41</sup> This concept of void is not only physical, but also emotionally veined as evident in works of Sufi mystics such as Jelaludin Rumi, Attar and Hafez. Many scholars such as Gulzar Haider have also abridged both spirituality and aesthetic quality through such philosophy such as *Tawhid*.

Another concept that seems to emerge customarily within such axis is Nur— the Divine Light. While 'None' encapsulates the sense of losing detailed in the introduction, 'Nur' is the prescriptive goal of this research. While Light in the secular sphere usually refers to "the natural agent or influence which (emanating from the sun, bodies intensely heated or burning, and various other sources) evokes the functional activity of the organ of sight."<sup>42</sup>, *Nur* maintains various hermeneutic definitions under the Islamic theology. Rooted in Quranic verses, *Nur* typically signifies divine illumination of God or some may confer, the Prophet himself. *Nur*, at times spelled as Nūr and Noor, is also widely used as an appellation to mostly female names in the

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<sup>41</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Kha and Other Words Denoting "Zero" in Connection with the Metaphysics of Space." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 7, no. 3 (1934): 487-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/607850>.

<sup>42</sup> light, n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezlibproxy1.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/108172?rskey=ULiBa9&result=1#eid> (accessed June 28, 2017).

Malay world. I propose that this sense of losing can be seen as a derivative *Nur*. While the word *Nur* appears forty-nine times in the Quran albeit various derivatives, it remains most prominent in Chapter 24, the Verse of Light (*an-Nur*), all of which is discussed incisively by Afnan Fatani in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*.<sup>43</sup> Like other metaphysical aspects of the religion, interpretations are rampant amongst different groups of Muslims but it is commonly noted that the prime figures were Al-Ghazali and Suhrawardi. The interweaving of the two thoughts exists in Al-Ghazali's *Mishkat Al-Anwar* (The Niche for Lights), where discourse on light mysticism becomes a seminal confluence within Sufism.<sup>44</sup> Another site to maneuver the deep layers of *Nur* is in Shaykh Tosun Bayrak al Jerrahi al Helveti's interpretation of *Suhrawardi's Hayakal Al Nur (The Shape of Light)* while Mehdi Aminrazavi lined a bulk of Suhrawardi's works shaping the book, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* in 1997. Such texts are remotely soliptic within the Philosophy framework for an arts discourse to partake in and may risk a limited analysis. Meanwhile in 2012, Hussein Abdul-Raof listed the possible variants in his *Theological Approaches to Qur'anic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative Analysis* namely Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi as well as Avicenna, all of three were labelled and studied widely by Hossein Nasr as his book, *The Three Sages of Islam*. The connection with Nasr provides an opportune bridge between Sufi mysticism and the expressions of Art this thesis aims to explore. Nasr has emphasised the importance of light as a spiritual substance<sup>45</sup>, echoing Burckhardt who sees light as

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<sup>43</sup> Afnan Fatani, "Nur," in *The Quran: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2006) 467-68.

<sup>44</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 259-286.

<sup>45</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 50.

sovereign in Islamic art as “ perfect symbol of Divine Unity”, citing the example of the Alhambra architecture that “transforms stone into light”.<sup>46</sup> Seemingly, light appears as a unifying motif of the Islamic civilisation<sup>47</sup>— a field we have learnt to be convoluted as König would suggest to be in a “transcultural crossfire.”<sup>48</sup>

*In context : Contemporary Crossfire in Singapore Mosques*

The themes surrounding loss discussed above are observed within mosque spaces in Singapore. Within this context, it is imperative to investigate the root cause of changes to the visual rhetoric, signalling to the emergence of a void. Much of what is discussed in Singapore’s literature about mosques or its art, stems from a larger socio-political discourse like State hegemony. In fact, the only publication locally that speaks about mosque under the lens of Art is A. Ghani Hamid’s *The Mosque, The Art: A Brief Note on Muslim- Inspired Art in Singapore* in which he admired how mosques “preserve Islamic art”,<sup>49</sup> positing on how mosques functions as vessels of art, they safeguard these superseded expressions like Islamic carvings and calligraphy. A vital point to note is Islamic Religious Council (Muis) role in steering the challenges of the Muslim community in Singapore in the 21st century including mosque interests. In their self-published Annual Reports and Mosque Conventions in 2005 and 2011, Muis

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<sup>46</sup> Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 79-80.

<sup>47</sup> Afif Bahnassi, “Art and Aesthetic Creativity,” in *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture (Vol. 5)*, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (Beirut: UNESCO, 2003) 560.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel König, "Islamic Studies: A Field of Research Under Transcultural Crossfire," *Transcultural Studies*, no. 2 (2017), 10.

<sup>49</sup> A. Ghani Hamid, *The Mosque The Art*, 14.

surveyed the historical and social dynamics of contemporary mosques. Prior to these efforts, a fortnightly series on 'Masjid Kita' (Our Mosques) were featured in the Malay-language newspaper, *Berita Harian*.<sup>50</sup> Muis led the conversation with their rather descriptive than prescriptive publications, disabling much room for layered discourse. The book commissioned by Muis in 2007 entitled *Continuing the Legacy: 30 Years of Mosque Building Fund In Singapore* is such example where an objective gaze into the phases of mosques building, followed by their justifications ensued. A few years after the conception of the Mosque Building Fund (MBF), a number of publications were published as studies or reports for the community. In transition, discourse towards religious politics from Singapore's scholars including Lily Kong, Chua Beng Huat and Sharon Siddique to name a few, emerged. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies has also published and edited many journals and books coursing along similar themes of politics of religious landscapes of Singapore amidst change.<sup>51</sup>

A more scholarly focus on stylistic concerns can be identified through the works of local scholars such as Imran Tajudeen whose expertise on vernacular styles in Singapore and beyond have contributed an immense archi-historical gaze including a propagation of the *Nusantara* (Malay Archipelago) aesthetics<sup>52</sup>. Tajudeen rejects the

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<sup>50</sup> Nur'adilah Mahbob and Shamsul Jangarodin, "Warisan Dan Sanubari Masyarakat Islam Singapura," *Berita Harian* (Singapore), September 16, 2011. <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Microfilm/Search?RN=NL31619>.

<sup>51</sup> For consolidated discussions on politics of plurality, see Lai Ah Eng, *Religious diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies jointly with Institute of Policy Studies, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Refer to URL, <https://nus.academia.edu/ImranbinTajudeen> for full bibliography of works.

“reductive notion of a single ‘archetype’ of the vernacular Nusantara mosque” where he instead, posited the “framework of typology and model variations used to elucidate the manner in which structure and form in the vernacular Nusantara mosque are modified in accordance with material expediency and local symbolic motifs in different regions.”

<sup>53</sup> Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi also supports the heterogeneity of *Nusantarian* aesthetic, highlighting the influence of climatic, technological and socio-political factors in these modular variations<sup>54</sup> echoing our understanding of the multiversal Islamic art as a whole genre. Identifying nostalgic form of loss, aside from the relevant news clippings at the National Archives and National Library Board pertaining to demolition and shifts in the 90s, Hadijah Rahmat *et al.* also contributed in archiving remnants of one old-generation mosque in the book *The Last Kampung Mosque in Singapore: The Extraordinary Story and Legacy of Sembawang*. She was also featured in a Malay television documentary, *Transformasi: Seruan* (Transformation: The Call) on the evolution of mosques in Singapore <sup>55</sup> With regard to the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, where Tajudeen worked within the framework of architectural heritage, the Urban Development Authority published several preservation guidelines for National Monuments. This series is insightful in determining how the State sets the

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<sup>53</sup> Imran Tajudeen, “Adaptation and Accentuation: Type transformation in vernacular Nusantarian Mosque Design and Their Contemporary Signification in Melaka, Minangkabau and Singapore,” in *ISVS IV: Pace or Speed? 4th International Seminar on Vernacular Settlement, Ahmedabad India, February 14-17, 2008: Proceedings* (Ahmedabad : Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University, 2008) 143-62.

<sup>54</sup> Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, “Mosque Architecture in Malaysia: Classification of Styles and Possible Influence,” *Jurnal Alam Bina* 9, 3 (2007): 1-37.

<sup>55</sup> The documentary was broadcasted on Mediacorp channel, *Suria* in late 2017 whilst the thesis final chapters were written. It can be viewed online at <http://tv.toggle.sg/en/shows/transformasi/info>.

benchmark for architectural standards including mosques.<sup>56</sup> This way, a comparison can be deliberated in tracing the canon of losing within historical conventions.

Where it stands, most study in contact with the religious spectrum fragments only as cultural ethnography and anthropology mostly of the Malay community or particular segments of sectarian tradition, possibly due to the strong academic leverage of the National University of Singapore Malay Studies faculty. From the same department, in 2017, Khairudin Aljunied published a chapter of ‘Cosmopolitan Mosque’ in the book *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*<sup>57</sup>, as he lined the historical as well as shifting function of the mosques in Singapore, perhaps paving way for more interfaith inclination. The role of art within all these tangents is still pretty much insignificant. A close inspection at the bibliography of Malay Muslim community shows a lack of discussion pertaining to the concern of aesthetics in mosque within Singapore.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Preservation of Monuments Board and Urban Redevelopment Authority, *Sultan Mosque Preservation Guidelines* (Singapore: Preservation of Monuments Board, 1991)

<sup>57</sup> Khairudin Aljunied, “The Cosmopolitan Mosque” in *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> A full list of mosque-related publication can be found at Hussin Mutalib, Rokiah Mentol and Sundusia Rosdi, *Singapore Malay/Muslim Community, 1819-2015: A Bibliography* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016) 256-261.

## Significance

The study of mosques in Singapore is largely confined to the socio-political frameworks, focusing on politics rather than poetics, resulting in works of quantitative nature and measure. Nevertheless, my research would hopefully inspire further conversations on art and sacred spaces, that tend to be more reserved narratives and perspectives, in and around Singapore. The need to situate the beauty in loss within the Islamic art framework is more pressing especially with the rise of spirituality and “search for soul of Islam” in Singapore as purposed by Hanisah Abdul Sani in her research<sup>59</sup>, as well as the inevitability of secularisation, tugging religiosity with expansion and contraction. This proposal of bridging nothingness to Light, both ideal aesthetic quality within Islam should be seen as a renewed invigoration in dealing with one’s spirituality or their coping with loss. When assessing the trajectory of Islamic art, I argue that one tends to be exposed to more formulaic understanding of it; the patterns, the symmetry, the layout, the material. Also, there is a lack of bridging the concepts of material to immateriality, often deemed mutually exclusive. Through the sifting of literature, I also find apparent limitations that accentuate my research hypothesis on 1) loss or nothingness as philosophy of beauty and spirituality, 2) intimate experiences of Self within sacred spaces in Singapore and 3) using mosque terrains to converge Art and Faith. Gaining traction of such conversations can also help to fill the scholarship dearth in assessing the aesthetics within sacred spaces in Singapore. There is too, a

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<sup>59</sup> Hanisah Abdul Sani, “The Rise and Role of Tariqa Among Muslims in Singapore - The Case of the Naqshbandi Haqqani.” (master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2010).

lacuna in the dialogue between Faith and Art, and thus, a need to bridge this lapse. I urge that more can be done both in terms of research as well as art practice towards the convergence of these two themes. Fusing the roles of the art practitioner and researcher allows for discussions that do not diminish the legitimacy of one or the other in speaking of such themes.

With the dynamics of Singapore's governance, the dearth in such studies is unsurprising. From the lack of experience in such conversations where discussions on religion is deemed as hypersensitive, artwork creation by poets and artists within this epistemology is lacklustre. The research is vital in cementing the role of the artist in this conversation. In particular, photography and image-based installation need to be viewed as legitimate forms in spiritual artmaking especially since they deal with theories of light and the unseen. Reintroducing Sufistic ideas will also help to alleviate notions of insularity and tension plaguing the Muslim community between sectarian divides by adding colours to the monolith. And by colours, I sure hope the research will help to prosper the legitimacy of the voice of the artist where aesthetics will make its way back into the representations of the spiritual spectrum in Singapore. And this research will mark even if the slightest, a historical recording of an intimate experience and the need for that experience to be reflected onto the fabric of the community at a point in time and space as a preamble for future researchers.

## Methodology

### Sufistic Interiority as Conceptual Framework

As a multimodal research relying on conceptual and art-informed aspects of qualitative research, the methodology consists of a framework that ensures both tracks go through a cogent shared endeavour— 1) a theoretical analysis and 2) art-based investigation; engaging a reflexive dialectic of mediation and meditation surrounding the Self. It is useful to note that most of the research process originate from the former phase of research, informing the practical process which comes later. From the literature review, I was inspired by the dimension of interiority to frame my hypothesis. This interiorization speaks of an inward contemplation integral to Islamic spirituality and mysticism especially in the Sufism theoretical framework. While Al-Ghazali articulated this philosophy of inwardness when discussing religious sciences, Burckhardt and Nasr peg it to aesthetics purporting an unbound affinity between the two. Nasr detailed this interiority to be connected linguistically to the *ruh* denoting spirit or *ma'na* connoting inner meanings.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, in theorising Islamic art, this inwardness represents the sublime perfection of the divine when relating to symbolism<sup>61</sup>. Posturing as an aesthete value, the esoteric dimension (*batin*) of Islam can be related to the dissolution of material corporeality of forms into the immaterial, in our case the losing of the Islamic Image into an inner contemplation of beauty. “Deeply human

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<sup>60</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> See Idham, *Theory of Islamic Art* for comprehensive discussions on theories of Islamic art.

encounters” as mentioned by Tuan in his epilogue consists of “feelings and intimate experiences which are inchoate and unmanageable to most people, but writers and artists have found ways of giving them forth”.<sup>62</sup> Such conviction supports the hybridity in sensing, mapping, feeling and filling the loss within mosque spaces in Singapore.

### *Wound to Womb : A Hermeneutic Theoretical Analysis*

For the theoretical aspect, the thesis engages in a hermeneutic reasoning—*wound*, being the loss to *womb*<sup>63</sup>, the interiority distilled from the theoretical framework. Wombing, in our framework refers to the process of *de-mosquing* the mosque to *re-mosque* it into the heart of the worshipper. Our exploration will suggest the collapse of the material seeing of the physical mosque into the interiorising it within our senses. To reimagine a way of seeing, we need to learn what is being displaced. As such, the mosque, its historical shifts as well as contextualising the Singapore’s condition of losing are ways to map the foundations of reading mosque as an Islamic Image. The exploration of wound to womb, speak of this very duality of the exoteric and the esoteric philosophy of beauty. In a study of aesthetics in Javanese Islam, Dufford and Emby traversed along the model of “inner aesthetics”, which was inspired by Ghazali’s veneration of the inner beauty which “can only be perceived by the eye of

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<sup>62</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 202.

<sup>63</sup> While not espousing on the gendered attachments of womb namely the relation of femininity with worship and nature, Murata discusses this domain extensively. See Satchiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam : A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany : State University of New York Press : 1992), 203-225.

the heart and the light of man alone.”<sup>64</sup> In order to mediate the contemporary loss of outward “mosqueness”, we delve into the womb of Islamic spirituality.

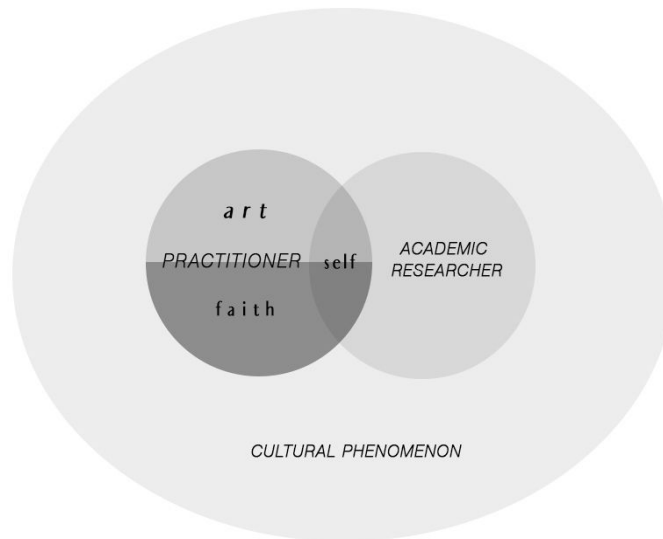
*None to Nur : A Heuristic Practical Approach*

The framework of interiority, too, influences the performative part of the research. *None*, within the practical component of the thesis meditates on the phenomenon of loss, more so the “death of the mosque image”. This is in line with my visual practice of image-making and photography. *Nur*, extracted from the literature review as Divine Light, while postulates to the *re-mosquing* of the Abode of God within, also allows for these tracks of understanding: *Nur* as knowledge, *Nur* as Art and ultimately, Art as *Nur*, the art component. Using the concept of interiority, the thesis will explore how *Nur* facilitates the abstraction of mosque image within visual culture. The application of tacit knowledge through an embodied practice-theory experience, from being in mosques, reading mosques, reading about the mosques, to collecting data revolving around the themes, to birthing a critical synthesis from the data, is emphasized. In turn, this conceptual framework will be applied into my creative work.

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<sup>64</sup> Dufford and Emby cited Malaysian painter Sulaiman Esa’s exhibition catalogue in journal article, Sulaiman Dufford and Zahid Emby, “The Aesthetic Feeling in Javanese Islam,” *Asian Culture and History* 2, no. 1 (January 2010): 134.

## Autoethnography as Method



The involvement of the researcher-practitioner here is quintessential. Furthermore, I posit that ‘practitioner’ as a native in practicing the religion itself. The multiagent shadowing of the Self in the process of this research calls for a shared, reflexive dialogue of reasons and emotions. Thus, the performative stance of research process is key. It is to note the nature of the research will be practice-led (not to be mistaken with practice-based), meaning “the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice.” McNamara supports my idea of this endeavour that demands a:

complex, back-and-forth interaction between the practice and its conceptual framework or articulation. It forces one to consider how each component – the creative practice and exegetical research framework– is capable of producing knowledge, and thus of furnishing unique understanding and insights. No theory or history or context will ‘apply’ readymade to a particular creative practice, nor should it be expected to. This is where the development and forging of new knowledge occurs.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Andrew E. McNamara, “Six rules for practice-led research,” *Text: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, Queensland University of Technology (2012).

This new understanding acquired through practice can be deemed as *Nur*. In the aim of sustaining the performativity of a practice-led research, the researcher-practitioner is required to position himself within the cultural complex of systems and processes. As the grand inquiry stems from my reflexes towards the phenomenon of losing within mosque spaces; intimately then to the fore of community, drawing inspiration from tenets of an autoethnographical approach is congruent. Autoethnography is a qualitative “approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” This approach is deemed as a non-conventional gain that “challenges canonical” structures of research.<sup>66</sup> Employing conventions of ethnography and autobiography to engage in and write on, this method relegates both process and product. This resonates with Tuan’s suggestion of the need for experiential approaches in understanding sacred space.

Evocative autoethnographies are at times seen as “self-indulgent” and “narcissistic”<sup>67</sup> as the researcher suspends his/her objectivity from conforming to a larger societal science and context, these “disruptions within symbolic interactionism” is seen as a legitimate challenge to traditional modes of ethnography, both in the executing and writing of the research.<sup>68</sup> While the “validity, reliability and objectivity”

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<sup>66</sup> Carolyn Ellis, T. E. Adams, and A. P. Bochner., “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no.1 (2011).

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas L. Holt, “Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no.1 (2016): 19.

<sup>68</sup> J. Patrick Williams and Muhammad Kamal Jauhari bin Zaini, “Rude Boy Subculture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Collaborative Construction of an Analytic and Evocative Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 45, no.1 (2014): 3.

when it comes to evaluating such works, is disputed<sup>69</sup>, new researchers begin to ground their style by employing analytical awareness into the approach. This is in line with the five tenets in formulating a methodological rigor as highlighted by Williams and Zaini:

- researchers being “complete” insiders,
- analytically reflexive,
- visible in the research,
- committed to an analytic agenda,
- engaging other informants.<sup>70</sup>

The research will subscribe to this recommendation as my autoethnographer Self straddles within the mosque ecosystem; drawing evidence to corroborate with, analyse and respond the thesis assumptions accordingly to the conceptual framework. This is to ensure that in spite of the subjective and poetic nuances, a competent research form still hold. Ideally, a critical academic nearness as well as distance is maintained; both in anchoring the abstract of theological notions as well as palliating the hard vessels of conventional jurisprudence. This again, resonates the idea of writing as “subjectively empowering as they were pedagogically instructive.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Holt, “Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story,” 19.

<sup>70</sup> Williams and Zaini, “Rude Boy Subculture”, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 20.

## **Research Tools**

### Archival/Secondary Sources

Much analysis is to be drawn from past scholarship on mosque ecosystems. An excavation of historical documents and evidences circulated by official statutory boards like Muis, National Library Board and National Heritage Board are carried out especially from their reference collections. This will supplement a preliminary understanding of the politics of change during the theoretical phase of the research. Such data may include news clippings, media coverages, video reels, official publications and consolidated materials.

The research demands an engagement in inferential and interpretive synthesis of past literature in deriving new philosophical meanings especially with Sufistic leanings. Drawing from the existing secondary scholarship for the gist of conceptual research, a critical analysis of other artistic and academic collaborators are endeavoured to investigate the research problem within the epistemology of the “participatory cultures”. These data can be found physically through literature archives in Singapore and abroad, as well as extensive database on JStore, Google Scholars and other credible web-based sources available. Textual and visual analysis may also include case studies of works of art including visual art and poetry relevant to the discourse of research.

### *Research Trips*

As part of preliminary studies in experiencing mosques, conducting immersive sojourns overseas have also been done notably in Malaysia since our nation-building identities have once shared a common trajectory. This means that trends of change and continuity might have similar threads. A particular mosque to note is the *Masjid Negara* in Kuala Lumpur. This has been beneficial in understanding the similar patterns of evolution in aesthetics, if any. On that ground, I also engaged in immersion trip to West Asia notably Iran, Andalusian region of Spain, Iberian Morocco, the Balkans, as well as South Asia in the last year to immerse in communities with more prominent Sufistic influences. Most of the visual and data recordings will be channeled into the practical work while theoretical underpinnings drawn from these trips may also be referenced in the chapters of the research where deemed relevant.

### *Creative Component*

Lastly, it is good to note that 25% of the research criterion would encompass a practical undertaking served to complement the theoretical framework of thesis. Adopting the autoethnographical approach allows for this "performativity"<sup>72</sup> aspect of research to be facilitated. This means that data-collecting through experiential and artistic explorations provide substantial reflexes for the researcher-practitioner. My set of artistic intervention befits the seeing-feeling veneer of the research in the form of

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<sup>72</sup> Tami Spry, "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis," *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no.6 (2016): 706-732.

photography (image-making technique) as well as poetry (inner senses). This will allow room for metaphorical explorations, reflections and dialogue within my own practice as I draw from my own past artistic developments within this discourse as well as acquired knowledge from the theoretical analysis engaged in the earlier phase of research.

To apply the new interpretations informed by theory into practice, a conceptual art project entitled **Nur**<sup>73</sup> will be undertaken. Streamlined along visual culture, the task of experiencing the mosques in Singapore is being developed— to read, to reconcile, to respond. The stages of the art project are to observe the visual veneers of all 70 standing mosques listed in the Muis website in mainland Singapore, to photograph these spaces as archival and art data, thereon engaging in an experimental image-making that in our case, dying/dyeing process using said collected data.

With the original body of work in tow, the plan is to produce an intimate art-prayer book entitled **Journur**— a synthesis of journal and *Nur*. **Journur** will document this artwork whilst at the same time, trace and compile the journey of this research including fragmentaries from the thesis explorations sophisticatedly. While **Journur** treads on the more subjective conduits of the research, it is compelled to put forth that derivation of enlightenment for the audience.

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<sup>73</sup> Throughout the thesis, the concept of *Nur* will be italicized whilst the artwork, **Nur** would be emboldened in order to differentiate.

I plan to draw inspiration from artist and cultural historian Azra Aksamija. In her prescriptive *Mosque Manifesto*<sup>74</sup> published in 2015, she navigated through research-based projects on aesthetics approaches and sensibilities in mosque designs to propose a space of coexistence as her response towards polarities riddling Islamic ecosystem. Her visionary use of wearable material enables the experiments to be applied forms of research, that allow for greater involvement of the body of the worshipper in the axis of representation and function. A particular relevant project to our discourse is the “Nomadic Mosque” where wearable clothes extend to prayer rugs, redefining the placemaking of mosque; its fluidity and its formlessness.

As such, **Journur** aspires to systematically compiles poetical processes and investigations to present to the public. This initiative goes beyond an artmaking process but in turn, a memento of losing and an effort to preserve visual documents as heritage and research data for future researchers and artists.

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<sup>74</sup>Azra Aksamija, *Mosque Manifesto: Propositions for Spaces of Coexistence* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2015)

CHAPTER TWO:  
**MAPPING THE LOSS**

## Chapter Overview

This chapter embarks on the theoretical strait— mapping out the visuality of mosques from macro to micro vantages also with my own native observation. This includes a global survey of mosque representation, the stylistic evolution before honing into the situ of research being the contemporary mosques in Singapore, poised with a political quagmire. Through this historical aspect, the chapter threads along the fluid dynamics of the mosque as an Image and the dissonances riddling the mosque bodies in Singapore, stifling its aesthetic stakes.

The survey part on mosque is not to espouse on the features or architectural similitudes at length but as a precursory site to introduce the idea of mosques as fluid representational Image of Islam that is prone to the idea of losing, a spiritual and aesthetic disconnect; one whose stakes susceptible to politics of change and hegemony control- or even total disregard. Recounting the Singapore story is not so much aimed at an historical underpinning but as to supply understanding of the aesthetic disconnect/the sameness to mosqueness/confusing suits of the contemporary and, how politics might have led to this disconnect and hence the need to redeem this through art later into the thesis.

## Fluidity of Sacred Space: Mosques Bodies as Art, Image, Identity

The metaphorical schema between space, art and faith this research partakes resonates with that of Gulzar Haider's illuminating paper, *Faith is the Architect, Reflections on the Mosque* which suggests that the spirit of Islam itself informs how a mosque is to be constructed. Haider describes a Muslim's desire for the Hidden Beautiful (*Batin, Jameel*) of God whose presence cannot be materialized in its countenance as "aesthetic angst"<sup>75</sup>, that catapults much of Islamic artistic pursuits. One might question if the faces of mosques today have been sculpted solely out of this thirst for the Divine Image not the desire of Man in his own worldly cosmos?

In light of the "unity in diversity" versus "diversity in unity" quandary amongst art historians like Avinoam Shalem who denounces the thesis of meta-similitude when gazing at Islamic art as severely problematic<sup>76</sup>, the mosque arguably remains amorphous, transcending the margins of both the associated and dissociated. This diversity one may argue lies at the fluidity of mosques' stylistic forms as well as the modalities of functions. This signifies that the architectural typology of mosques concerns itself beyond theology, unshackling the "aesthetic angst".

The *raison d'être* of mosques spaces is always worship. The word 'mosque' derives from the Arabic '*masjid*' rooted from the verb '*sa-ja-da*' meaning "to bow down or prostrate in worship to God" wherein; five times a day Muslims rest their

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<sup>75</sup> Gulzar Haider, "Faith is the Architect: Reflections on the Mosque," *Faith and the Built Environment: Architecture and Behavior in Islamic Cultures* 17, Lausanne (1996): 68.

<sup>76</sup> Avinoam Shalem, "What do we mean when we say 'Islamic art'? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam," *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 6 (2012): 9.

foreheads on the ground as an act of submission required by the faith.<sup>77</sup> While it is contestable that works of art from the Islamic tradition may be absolved from the spiritual dimension of the creed, mosques “celebrate, at their most fundamental level, the Oneness of God and they serve as spatial catalysts that help facilitate the spiritual journey of a worshipper towards God.”<sup>78</sup> While on one hand, the functional aesthetics of a mosque can divorce itself from the assertion of “meta-similitude”, the sanctity of oneness in purpose remains unadulterated. Ozayr Saloojee purports:

These architectures, after all, create a regular axis between anywhere on this planet (upon which humans have been placed as stewards and vicegerents, according to the Qur’an) to the Ka’ba in Mecca, believed by Muslims to have been first built by Adam, then restored by Abraham and Ismail, and lastly cared for by Muhammad. This is perhaps the ultimate exemplar of unity through diversity, that the manifold communities of Muslims around the world (from America to Zambia) all turn towards this First House, recognizing the larger arc of a spiritual and community ethos that underpins all the spaces of Islam—past, present, and future.<sup>79</sup>

Since the time of Prophet Muhammad, the creation of mosques went through impulses of change. While these sacred bodies contain perennial tenets of Islam, the aesthete domains of mosques continue to be influenced and arguably augmented in the grandeur of their architectural slang and formal structures. These spatial poetics of the architecture seem to be influenced by the politics of time and geography, in large by the

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<sup>77</sup>Analysis of the hermeneutics of the word “masjid” with support of hadiths is presented in Akel Ismail Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 37. Also see, Rasdi, *Rethinking the Mosque*, 5-8. for introductory elaborations on the etymology.

<sup>78</sup> Ozayr Saloojee and Richard Vosko, "A Dialogue on Sacred Space," *Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* 48, no. 3 (2015), accessed May 22, 2017, <http://faithandform.com/feature/a-dialogue-on-sacred-space>.

<sup>79</sup>Saloojee and Vosko, *Dialogue on Sacred Space*.

demands and needs of the Muslim fraternity. Since there is no derivative of mosques in the Quran, there is a sense of autonomy in the creation of these spaces. Of what Salojee suggests as “probabilistic nature” of architecture in the Quran, the sacrality of spaces always relate to “beauty, serenity and wonder, emphasizing that the ultimate purpose of creation” recognizes “God’s majesty, mercy and elusive beauty.”<sup>80</sup> This way, such relationships denote the affinity between artistry and the cosmology of the Divine—an affinity while captured in different lenses, always points to the same picture. In *Theology of a Mosque*, Christopher E. Longhurst comprehensively detailed the form, function and design of this Islamic architecture in their “embodiment of the fundamental message of Islam.”<sup>81</sup>

Over the thousand of years since the first Quba mosque built in 622 which became the prototype of early mosques in the Islamic tradition<sup>82</sup>, these lenses became more pronounced in symbol, representation and identity— exuding a sense of “mosqueness”. In the pioneering years, integral elements were always present like the *qibla* wall signifying the direction of Mecca called the *mihrab*, also the *minbar* which is a free-standing structure where the *imam* delivers sermons to the congregation.<sup>83</sup> Over time, features which become iconic visual cues of Muslim consciousness today were

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Christopher E. Longhurst, "Theology of a Mosque: The Sacred Inspiring Form, Function and Design in Islamic Architecture," *Lonaard Magazine* 2, no. 9 (2012): 3.

<sup>82</sup> Moya Carey and Caroline Chapman, *An Illustrated History of Islamic Architecture: An Introduction to The Architectural Wonders of Islam, From Mosques, Tombs and Mausolea to Gateways, Palaces and Citadels*, (Wigston: Southwater, 2012), 18.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 23.

added namely the minarets and domes (*Qubba* in Arabic) of mosques. Minarets were documented to have been built in the cradle of the 8th century as tall towers to hail the prayer call. Minarets derive from the Arabic word ‘manara’ which is “etymologically linked to notions of fire and light” thus, an icon of “spiritual illumination”<sup>84</sup>. The question remains if the contemporary mosques with warping beacons, signal a displacement of the Islamic spirit.

The visual representation of Islam hallmarked during the succession of caliphates and dynastic changes which made architectural expressions including mosques an ever dynamic form of impressionable consciousness be it for vessels of grandeur, power and legitimacy commemoration.<sup>85</sup> The architectural vernacular of mosques varies globally, regionally and locally more so, with growing influence, imitation and innovation. From the successive empires such as Ottoman, Selcuks, Timurids, Mamluks, Mughals, Fatimids, Umayyads, Abbasids to name a few, mosque architecture underwent stylistic shifts<sup>86</sup>. An amalgamation of styles may also be developed like the Saracenic style that are prevalent in many pioneer mosques in colonial era of Singapore. These changes introduce new typology of mosques like the hypostyle, arab-style, four-iwan as well as the central-dome mosque variation<sup>87</sup>, all the

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<sup>84</sup> Longhurst, “Theology of a Mosque: The Sacred Inspiring Form, Function and Design in Islamic Architecture,” 10.

<sup>85</sup> For accounts of politics of power especially during the Ottoman excellence, see Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in The Ottoman Empire*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

<sup>86</sup> For the evolution of style of architecture, see Gulzar Haider, “Islamic Architecture and Urbanism,” in *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture (Vol. 5)*, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (Beirut: UNESCO, 2003) 633.

<sup>87</sup> Carey and Chapman, *Illustrated History of Islamic Architecture*, 20.

more layering the image consciousness of the *ummah* in different communities, context and upbringings. In between these prominent styles were lesser known adaptations of regional vernaculars like the Chinese, Nusantaraian<sup>88</sup> as well as Sudanese accentuations.

As the mosque achieves a status of the *communal hub* of the Muslim community, a concept which actually derived even during the time of the Prophet, much of its attachments grow in institutionalization.<sup>89</sup> The mosque becomes part of an integrated complex or *kulliye*, where other major architectural demands take precedence like the *madrasah*, the hospital, garden courtyards, funerary structures, baths, kitchens and other social or communal annexes. This trend of expansion reaffirms the non-static premise of a mosque that Omer eloquently refers to “a means not an end”.<sup>90</sup> But perhaps this line of thought too, is problematic as I argue that ideally, mosques should be pivoted as both a mean and an end— where the conversation with God is absolute and thus, not negated. This way, function does not always have to supersede form.

In contemporary times, adaptability and sustainability of mosques are steered by modern trends. New paradigms in designing mosques are aided by technology or

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<sup>88</sup> Imran Tajudeen provides a survey of vernacular mosque models notably their developments and influences since 15th century Nusantara until today. See Imran Tajudeen, “Adaptation and Accentuation,” 143-62. Also see Rasdi, “Mosque Architecture in Malaysia”, 17-33.

<sup>89</sup> Spahic Omer, *The Mosque as a Community Center: A Concept and Evolution* (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 2014).

<sup>90</sup> Spahic Omer, “Towards Understanding Islamic Architecture,” *Islamic Studies* 47, No. 4 (Winter 2008), 483-510.

innovations for social responsibility, ecological and environmental cultivations. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is one notable example of a prize for such prime excellence. Imdat As proposed the idea of a “convergent mosque” in 2006, an online mosque concept integrating virtual and physical terrains.<sup>91</sup> In fact, amidst the post-modernist criticality, mosques are being used as an inner medium of political agenda. In the mid of 2017, news of a “liberal mosque” opening in Berlin went viral in the Muslim world, drawing backlash with some deeming this avenue to have “no concept of religion.”<sup>92</sup> Mosques too are used to subvert state agencies in order to reduce the presence of religious autonomy or pluralism with the banning of objects of minaret or just the banning of mosque construction itself, especially in some European cities. Also in European cities, measures in countering bouts of Islamophobia is by adopting such futuristic elements like light minarets instead of sound projection during the call to prayer to assimilate by being less pronounced and alien.<sup>93</sup> At the other niche of the spectrum lies the House of One also to be constructed in Berlin<sup>94</sup> totally indulging the loss of “mosqueness” itself. The sacred building wherein a mosque, church and synagogue will integrate in the domain spells of perhaps a contemporary rhetoric of a search for religious cohabitation in the 21st century.

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<sup>91</sup> Imdat As, “The Digital Mosque: A New Paradigm in Mosque Design,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 60, no. 1 (2006): 54-66.

<sup>92</sup> Sabrina Pabst, “Liberal mosque in Berlin draws criticism” <http://www.dw.com/en/liberal-mosque-in-berlin-draws-criticism/a-39353066> (accessed August 03, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Pooyan Tamimi Arab, “A Minaret of Light: Transducing the Islamic Call to Prayer?.” *Material Religion* 11, no 2. (2015): 136-163.

<sup>94</sup> A full mission statement can be seen at the official website, <https://house-of-one.org/en>.

Mosques seem to hold a division of two (or more) contrasting ideals as it is one of the more pronounced art expression which exists not only as art for art's sake but orbits around the pragmatism of the society and its presence not only affecting the users of it but the ones around the ecosystem. As discussed, the form and function of mosques are indispensable dilemma. This is also coupled with the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, East versus West. The rift between the scholars (*ulama*) and the rulers (*hukkam*)<sup>95</sup> too seems to be an age-old crisis pertaining to the governing body of divine spaces, now evolving to rhetorics between statehood and religious institutions. Akel Ismail Kahera in his salient study of American mosques spoke of this mixed affiliations in the “spiritual and material” and dual impulses between “religious commitment and secular disengagement”.<sup>96</sup> It seems warranted to notice that aesthetics have been reduced to such chasm- in this sense as opposed to functional pragmatism, instead of complementing. Masud Taj draws this dichotomy of contrasting identity crisis as “mosque as a machine-for-meditation” and “mosque as a site-for-social-action”.<sup>97</sup>

Having delved into the politics of mosque evolution, one might argue that perhaps the peak of mosque creation during the caliphate expansion made the multiplication of mosques at that time the representation archetype of “mosqueness” ever since. Even after the fractures from the singular fraternity of the *ummah* from the

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<sup>95</sup> Omer, *Mosque as Community Center*, 32.

<sup>96</sup> Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, 135.

<sup>97</sup> H. Masud Taj, "Mosque: Cube and Circle," *Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* 48, no. 3 (n.d), accessed December 17, 2016 <http://faithandform.com/feature/mosque-cube-and-circle/>

Islamic caliphate towards multi-modern diasporas today, the mosque archetype entrenched into our visual vernacular is that of a rectangle cube with sets of minarets, dome, a crescent and a moon. A quick online search of mosque vector graphics would attest to this assumption. Even within the Muslim community, such habituation of algorithms seem to be prevalent as any visual tracings of mosques within our consciousness is standard and traditional in that sense. Gulzar Haider previously discussed this phenomenon:

There are generally two positions held by the protagonists of a mosque as an essential symbol of Islamic presence: one that wishes change through technology and modernity, and the other that aims for recognizable imagery. The first forms the majority and upholds change and adaptability as a strong formative force in all spheres of its newly adopted life in the non-Muslim West. And it is precisely this pursuit of novelty, as an end in itself, that has produced mosques with flying saucer domes and rocket minarets. The pursuit of a modern minaret is in itself indicative of the compulsion to seek change lest lack of change be taken as a sign of stagnation and cultural death.<sup>98</sup>

These imaginations embed into the visual culture of mosque, informing our consciousness and memories of how a mosque looks like especially by the Muslims experiencing the space presently. Granted, when this conditioned visual acuity gets blemished by the reimagined, reconfigured changing demands of society, a loss is certainly bound to be felt. The question to ask then is the loss a necessity and can it become idyllic in line, with the search for Islamic beauty?

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<sup>98</sup> Gulzar Haider, “‘Brother in Islam, Please Draw us a Mosque’. Muslims in the West: A Personal Account,” in *Expressions of Islam in The Buildings of Islam*, ed. Hayat Salam (Singapore: Concept Media/The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1990), 158.

## Context: Mosques in Contemporary Singapore

The narrative of the fluidity of mosques both in form and function carries a legitimate rhetoric that the loss is quite possibly, a natural preoccupation of continuity. Under this pretext, I aim to investigate if such trends of visual representation resonates with the Singapore story. While it is vital to note that mosques have always existed before modern Singapore, the scope of this research focuses on post-independence Singapore especially since the consequential year of 1968 when the Islamic Religious Council (Muis) was formed where shifts in Islamic representation, conception and consciousness, spilling into the architectural vanguard are noted. The period also saw the resurgence of Islam in the Malay archipelago.<sup>99</sup>

Since 1965, the agency of the government took center stage amidst the decentralisation of village residents into new town centers while at the same time keeping up with the state ideal of multicultural and religious, ensuring the need of each member of society is catered to.<sup>100</sup> Muis assumed this role in forging ways to reroute and reroot the passages for the Muslim community since its establishment in 1968 when the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) was installed. Muis became a legitimate representative for the Muslim community<sup>101</sup>, where authoritative presence

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<sup>99</sup> Norshahril Saat, *Faith, Authority and The Malays*, 25-33.

<sup>100</sup> Tong Soon Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (1999): 88.

<sup>101</sup> Suzaina Kadir, "Uniquely Singapore: The Management of Islam in a Small Island Republic," *Islam and Civilisational Renewal (ICR)* 2, no. 1 (October 2011): 159, <http://www.icrjournal.org/icr/index.php/icr/article/view/210>.

remains pervasive.<sup>102</sup> the advent of Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (MBMF) previously known as the Mosque Building Fund (MBF)<sup>103</sup> in 1975 is the most instrumental to our discussion. This scheme employs a monthly deduction from the Central Provident Fund of Muslim workers to contribute to building of new mosques for growing neighbourhoods, later paired to aid Yayasan Mendaki's educational and social programmes for the underprivileged amongst the Malay/Muslim community.<sup>104</sup> Muis's role as the custodian of Islamic culture in Singapore has always been present and well documented albeit mostly self-commissioned. A slew of such publications was presented during the cradling years of the MBF such as *Management of Mosque Rules* gazetted in 1978<sup>105</sup>, Mansor Sukaimi's *Dynamic Functions of Mosques: The Singapore Experience* in 1982<sup>106</sup> and *New Generation Mosques in Singapore and Their Activities* in 1986<sup>107</sup> to name a few. In these, the public was introduced to studies conducted, plans drafted as well as addressing key challenges amidst unprecedented demands of the society. Three decades later, the commissioned book by Anthony Green in 2007 entitled *Continuing the Legacy: 30 Years of the Mosque Building Fund in Singapore*

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<sup>102</sup> Eugene K. B. Tan, "Keeping God In Place," in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 67.

<sup>103</sup> This acronym will be used throughout the thesis for consistency and by default, this is mainly used when referring to the scheme instead of the revised name.

<sup>104</sup> Enon Mansor and Nur Amali Ibrahim, "Muslim Organizations and Mosques as Social Service Providers," in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 460.

<sup>105</sup> Muslim Religious Affairs Division, *Management of Mosque Rules*, (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 1978).

<sup>106</sup> Mansor Hj. Sukaimi, *Dynamic Functions of Mosques: The Singapore Experience*, (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 1982).

<sup>107</sup> Muslim Religious Affairs Division, *New Generation Mosques in Singapore and Their Activities*, (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 1986).

was put forth, illustrating the milestones and missions of Muis pertaining to mosques.

In the foreword, the then Mufti of Singapore Syed Isa Mohd Semait claimed that:

In many ways, the MBF mosques have been a blessing to the Muslim community in Singapore, and the MBF mechanism has served beyond its original function as a solution to the shortage of funds in building mosques. In fact, the MBF mechanism enabled the Singapore Muslim community to remain steadfast in their religious life during Singapore's redevelopment, particularly in the 1970s. This was a period of rapid change; a time when people had to forgo the familiar and were thrust into new neighbours and a new way of life. During this time, the MBF mosques performed the role of both the anchor that steadies and the point that gathers Muslims in the community.<sup>108</sup>

Contemporary mosques are seen as vessels curtailing the fractured communal spirit of Muslims in Singapore due to the displacement from villages to urban towns.<sup>109</sup> To ease the transition, mosques are integrated within self-sufficient neighbourhoods. Thereon, Muis has been active in the construction of at least 24 mosques over the course of the 30 years. These new structures are to facilitate Muslims in their religious and social endeavours. In a way, in spite of sparse distribution of mosques at farther nodes of Singapore, it seems safe to say that Muis was in pursuit of a unified representation of mosque spatial and visual and spatial identity bounding Muslims across the nation with a sense of coevalness. The systematic plans Muis have ordained through the years are unmistakable. The project of building a socio-religious identity; on how religiosity is to be conceived but also consumed accords the spatial complex but has it been successful?

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<sup>108</sup> Anthony Green, *Continuing the Legacy: 30 Years of the Mosque Building Fund in Singapore*, (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2007).

<sup>109</sup> For a comprehensive understanding of key scopes and challenges in the post independence governing strategies, see Lily Kong and Brenda S. A Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of "Nation"* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

Surveying the architectural articulations of mosques during the MBF era may help us understand the (dis)congruence in the adaptation of mosques in mirroring the modern day realities. Four typology models of the MBF were arbitrated. Phase 1 Pioneers-Grand mosques were constructed between 1976 to 1980, as Pioneers-Grand mosques. Phase 2 takes place over the next fifteen years as Nusantara mosques, introducing native Malay flavours. From 1996 to 2005, Phase 3 jumps onto a Contemporary Singapore Model of Compact Urban Mosques whilst rounding up to Performance-Friendly urban mosques in Phase 4 between 2006 to 2010.<sup>110</sup> These different phases were of systematic deliberations and dialogues held between Muis's MBF Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) as well as elected architects of the mosques. In the first three stages, the MBF had endorsed the construction of 22 new generation mosques in new housing vicinities. In phase 4, Al-Mawaddah Mosque at Sengkang was completed in 2009. The last mosques in the projected plans are the Maarof Mosque and Yusof Ishak Mosque opened in 2016 and 2017 respectively<sup>111</sup>. Throughout these phases, the tussle between form and function is apparent as Muis experimented on what suits are to be adorned by the contemporary mosques. The dilemma of representation emerge; are spaces demarcated by racial, gender, sectarian and language markers? Does a mosque retain its Malayness or appeal to a more inclusive visuality? As such, one who experiences the spaces may be experiencing a detached sense of mosqueness, where mosque identity seems to run inorganically without an artistic gaze.

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<sup>110</sup> Green, *Continuing the Legacy*, 75.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

*Encountering Mosques : An Aesthetic and Spiritual Disconnect*

Through a native lens of experiencing, much has been observed through my being within sacred spaces. The most apparent within these intersections lies an aesthetic disconnect. Art seems to be disregarded within the newer spaces as the architectural articulations slurred into a series of calculated abstraction. While I was attending to the visuality of mosques around the world, more attention to detail were given to the craftsmanship of older mosques. This can be seen for instance, in the grand calligraphy glossing the walls of the Grand Mosque in Bursa and the Šarena Mosque in Tetovo where meticulous paintings were part of the interior skins of mosque. By contrast, the contemporary mosques in Singapore exude a starkly toned down artistic elaborations with plain embellishments. (Fig. 2a)

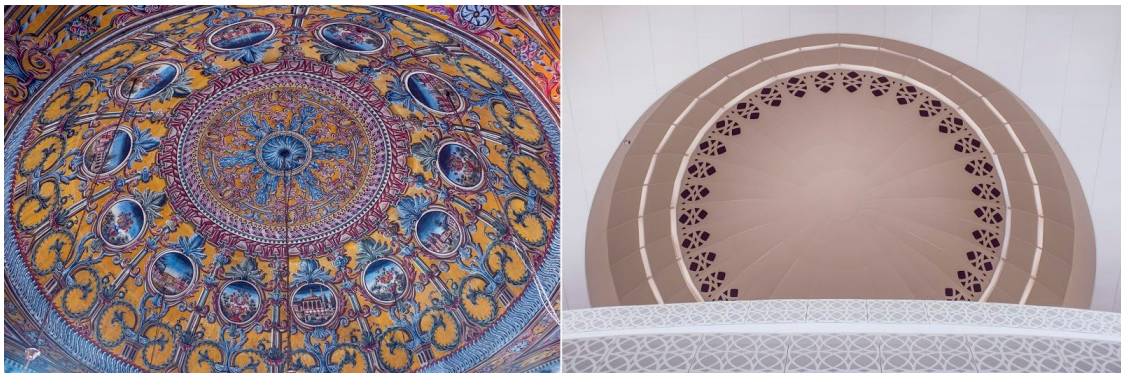


Figure 2a Šarena Mosque in Tetovo and Maarof Mosque in Singapore

Such minimalistic and reductionistic trends of mosque image were evident across the iconic features of the mosque. I noticed a concerted dissolution of how minarets trim and slim in their sculptural erect, how the *minbar* scales back in its artisan quality to an elusive component, how the *mihrab* loses its due intricacies (fig. 2b

and 2d). In some of the newly built MBF mosques, we see examples of these mosque features exists as inconsequential strip of wall indentation and structure which some may perceive to be an afterthought. I also noted that elements like colour codings and geometric patterns, too, become fragmentary in fashioning the changing suit of new age mosques in Singapore. New renditions of older mosques that underwent the Mosque Upgrading Programme brandished open-concept spaces without much recesses, segments, partitions within their interior spaces (fig. 2c). Perhaps this is to cater to increasing size of congregation. But, I cannot help but wonder if the permeability of mosques disenchant the otherworldly realm they ought to possess.

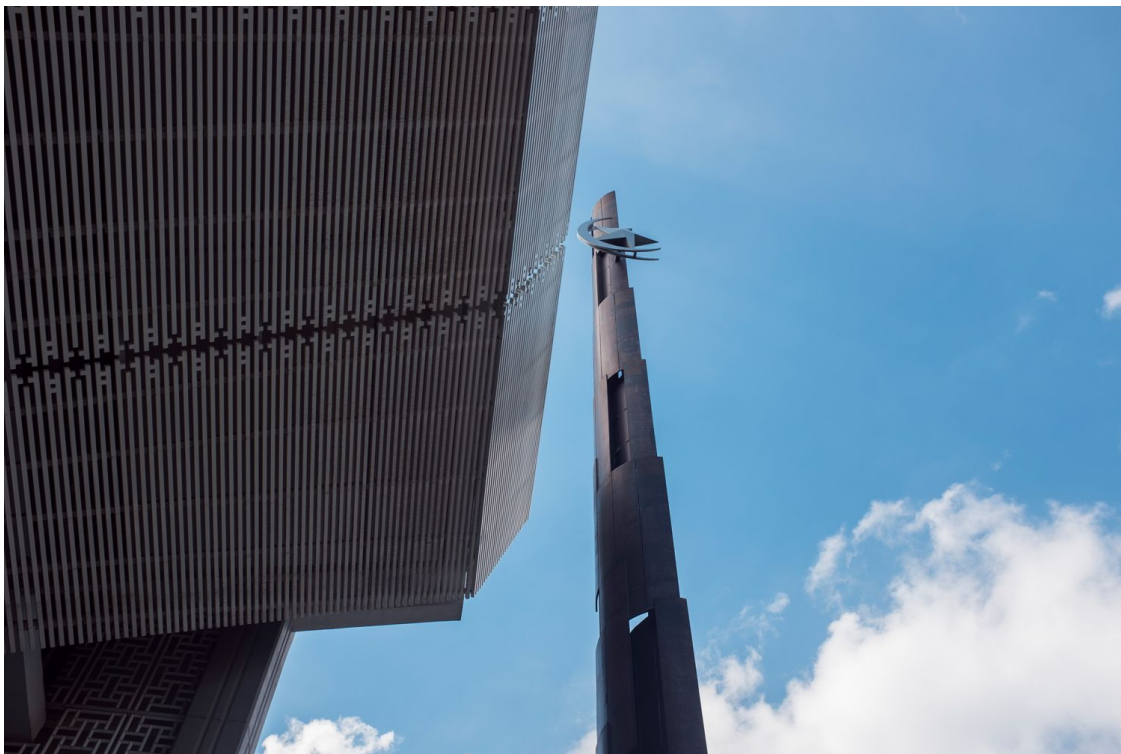


Figure 2b Minaret of Assyafaah Mosque signalling a new age aesthete

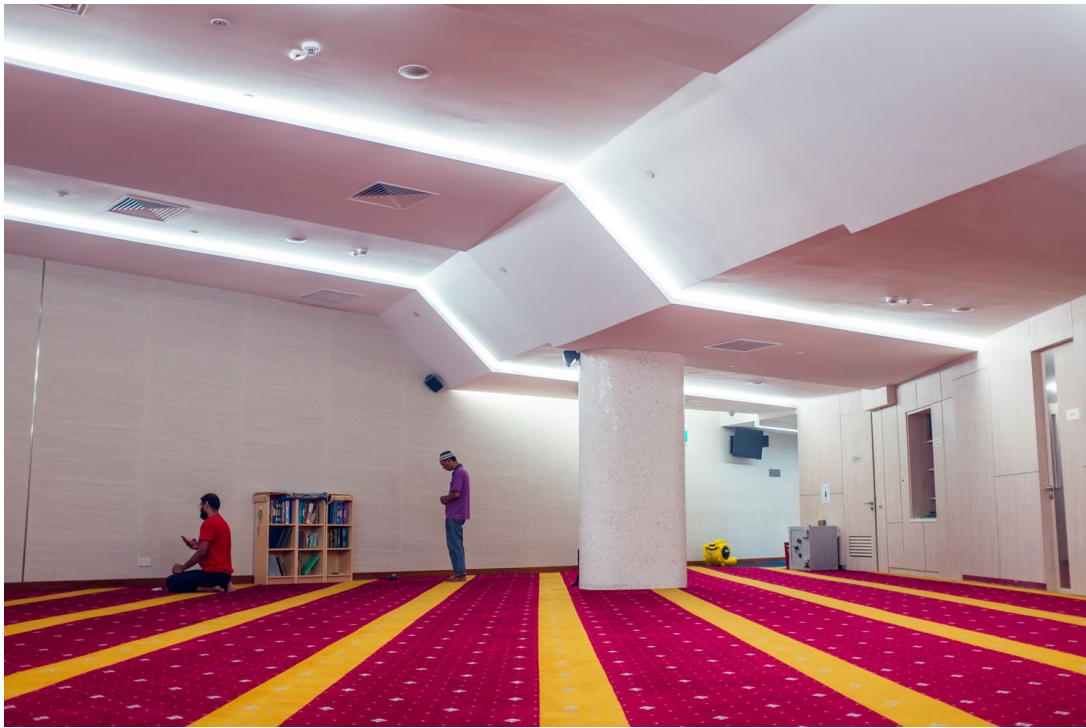


Figure 2c Moulana Mohd Ali after Mosque Upgrading Programme renovation in 2015

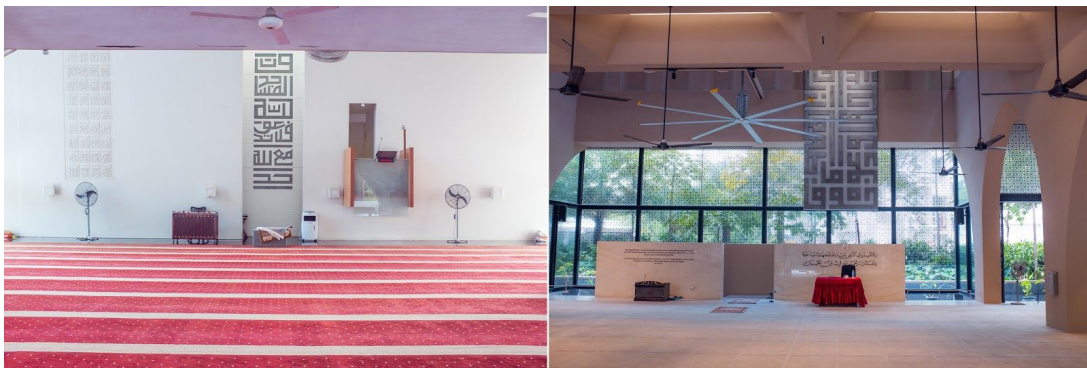


Figure 2d Assyafaah Mosque and Al-Islah Mosque in Singapore

It is also telling how visual conflicts in the form of technological oddities like surveillance cameras flagging the *mihrab*, neon-green exit signs, installation of large fans eclipsing domes or the striking digital prayer times indicator, can be observed in close contact to the prayer halls. The interception of modern age polarities creep into the fore of visual equilibrium of the contemporary mosques. These new elements

hinder the ease of seeing the mosque space as a concordant image. One group of mosque users particularly afflicted by these obstructions are the female users whose spaces are usually at the upper levels. Besides the already existing physical demarcation typically by a layer of cloth, the view of the mosque interior is further impeded by off-putting features as seen in Fig. 2e. Alongside these incompatibilities, a visual clutter seems characteristic of mosques today. I noticed ventilation units at times positioned right at the centre of the mihrab. Multiple standing fans and their wiring systems are always in line of sight, disrupting the overall aesthetics. I believe such dissonance, one way or another, contributes to the loss of spiritual stability when one experiences the mosque space visually.



Figure 2e Examples of visual obstructions photographed from the female prayer spaces



Figure 2f Example of visual culture in a local mosque interior

If I may add, I noticed that a bureaucratic presence pervades the mosque spaces today. While I embarked on a photography expedition of the mosques, although most were obliging, some personnel were suspicious of my intention claiming that they have to safeguard the sanctity and sensitivity of mosques when seen in the public eye. Others remain unsure of the modus operandi on handling artistic interventions, declining my advances, requesting for official permit. The administering offices still seem most apparent as the first layer of experiencing the mosque, contrary to my experiences abroad. Blemishes alike dampen the illuminating spirit of mosques especially when art is sidelined from the ecosystem.

*Reimagining the Mosque Image : Losing Art within Sameness Rhetoric?*

One may argue that the aesthetic clutter may be due partly to Singapore's cosmopolitan culture where the syncretization of different vantages is upheld. Khairudin Aljunied noted that "mosques in Southeast Asia are also places that enable different faiths, persuasions, ideologies and temperaments to interact, collaborate and amalgamate to give rise to a dynamic environment."<sup>112</sup> While this holds true in his assessment of the "high degree of heterogeneity"<sup>113</sup> of mosques across Southeast Asia including citing Hajjah Fatimah Mosque built in Singapore in 1846 which incorporated Islamic and Christian architectural forms, one can retort that this cosmopolitanism has in fact been mangled with after the MBF era and especially so, post-9/11 when a contrasting rhetoric began to unfurl— to assimilate and to normalize, to not stand out. Through a close observation of the MBF mosques, it is evident that the physical aesthetics of mosques under the plan were streamlined into standard faddisms. Where systems are in place in a closed circuit, template effects are practical and ease the mobility of construction. Imparting replicative and structural rigidity into the intangible and poetic spirit in discourses like religion is worrisome. Not only are Muslims as active participants of society encouraged to integrate allegedly dubbed by then Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew<sup>114</sup>, one might wonder if the cultural landmarks, too, are

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<sup>112</sup> Khairudin Aljunied, "The Cosmopolitan Mosque" in *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective* (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>114</sup> "MM Lee speaks again on Malay-Muslim integration", *The Online Citizen*, <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2011/04/10/mm-lee-speaks-again-on-malay-muslim-integration/>, (accessed May 28, 2017).

seamlessly gloved into the aesthetics of modern day Singapore, a cosmopolitan urbanscape, with tolerance for diversity but at the same time, discreet in their celebration for it. To assimilate here means to adopt the architectural idioms of contemporary Singapore narrative. This sameness provides an inconspicuous wedge into the collective statehood under the banner of “one nation, one people, one Singapore.” Although not articulated in audacity, it is an implicit challenge how the government are cautious and always mitigating over the volatility of any religious-racial lambast. Within a multiculturalism vanguard, religion is often a sensitive trope for fear of it clawing into the political margins, it is sensible this employment of strategy by the government. This leads to the stifling of religious culture into a subordinate subservient factor, contained and inorganic in nature. Such instances were not anything new as in 1974, “as part of the noise abatement campaign, the government and Islamic organisations in Singapore decided to redirect the loudspeakers of the mosques inward, where it originally faced the exterior of the mosque.”<sup>115</sup> Bobby Wong in *Accumulation, Stocking for the Future: Assyafaah Mosque as Archival Art* noted the same trend:

Reading Muis online paper posted on the web titled *Re-modeling Mosques – Mosque Convention 2005*, they certainly expressed the desire for Singaporean Muslims to take on challenges posed by change and not moribund themselves and also adopt scientific rationality even when it comes to religious matters. In the paper, Muis also called on Singaporean Muslims to assimilate and avail themselves to the open global economy by being receptive to diversity and to maintain an ironically, cosmopolitan outlook...What is of interest was the adoption of an architectural language. Absent are the dome, the traditional minarets and the arabesques and any Islamic idioms that may signify mosque. The architectural language is typical of contemporary Singapore.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Tong Soon Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space," 89.

<sup>116</sup> Bobby Wong, *Accumulation, Stocking for the Future: Assyafaah Mosque as Archival Art*, accessed May 22, 2016, [http://www.mmg.mpg.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/gcc/Bobby\\_Wong.pdf](http://www.mmg.mpg.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/gcc/Bobby_Wong.pdf).

Wong asserted that the “innocuous” and “unaffiliated” aesthetic is an attempt at societal singularity.<sup>117</sup> “Minarets at modern mosques certainly look more like contemporary art pieces nowadays,” he was cited to say at another outlet.<sup>118</sup> Mosques are no longer novel enclaves but open fixtures for the populace as vocalised in *The Changing Face Of Mosques In Singapore* published in 2013. Included remarks are by Zaini Osman, Mosque Development Head at Muis who claimed that “mosques have to change their outlook to stay relevant to Singapore’s modern context”, countering public view that Al-Mawaddah Mosque unveiled “more like a shopping center” instead of a worship site.<sup>119</sup> Also cited were Kurjanto Slamet and Tan Kok Hiang, architect from Ong&Ong and director of Forum Architects respectively, both of whom defended the modern outlook as idyllic “openness” and “inconclusiveness” in a 2012 conference coordinated by the National Heritage Board, *Singapore's Islamic Architecture in Transition*. With regard to Assyafaah Mosque, Forum Architects was cited to have purposefully strayed from the

literal adaptation of icons typically associated with Islam. These are the dome, the arch, the traditional minaret and traditional arabesque patterns. Quite a few of these traditional symbols stem from Mughal, Ottoman, Mamluk or Safavid cultures, and thus have little relevance to the cultural context of Muslims and Malays in Singapore. However, recognising that 'historical imagery' can be a powerful means of communication, the design adapted and created contemporary versions of the arch, the minaret and the arabesque patterns. The

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Kash Cheong, “Singapore Mosques Get Modern to Keep Up With Times” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-mosques-idUSTRE51H45T20090218> (Accessed February 16, 2017)

<sup>119</sup> NewZzit, “The Changing Face Of Mosques In Singapore” <http://newzzit.com/stories/the-changing-face-of-mosques-in-singapore>, Aug 17, 2013 (Accessed August 20, 2017)

result is that the complex is easily identifiable as a mosque, in contemporary and global Singapore.<sup>120</sup>



Figure 2g The shell-like exterior of Al-Ansar Mosque after upgrading works in 2015, reminiscent of Bugis+ shopping mall exterior located at 3 New Bugis Street

With this comes a larger quagmire of streamlining spirituality wherein only one way of seeing, feeling and engaging Islam emerges. Under such monotony, one needs to be aware what values are being discarded and subjugated into the grander ideals of the authority. It is admirable the hand Muis and the government steered in becoming cultural agents for the Muslim society, however, some scholars have raised on how intrusive their approach is in engendering meanings. The ‘ideological hegemony’<sup>121</sup> in religious supervision cripples the already polemic dilemma between form, function and outlook of contemporary mosques within pluralistic society. Lily Kong views the

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Introduced in Lily Kong, "Ideological Hegemony and the Political Symbolism of Religious Buildings in Singapore," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11, no. 1 (1993): 23-46.

dominion of government into religious landscapes to implicate on the “establishment, demolition, relocation and conservation” of sacred spaces, stating that:

‘efficiency’, ‘pragmatism’, and ‘orderly growth’ form the guiding principles in land-use planning. As a result, urban renewal has generally emphasised demolition and reconstruction rather than conservation. In putting this policy into practice, between 1974 and 1987 the government has acquired and cleared 23 mosques, 76 *suraus*, 700 Chinese temples, 27 Hindu temples, and 19 churches for public development schemes (MoC, 1987)<sup>122</sup>

Kong also argued on the limited vocality of the mass when engaging ‘public interest’. This is in line with our preliminary question on the stakeholders of the mosques especially in the aspect of visual particularities. While Kong acknowledged the many competing motivations of what constitutes an idyllic public space, she addressed the danger of the government’s executive “right in representing the whole nation.” Another contention is the loss of the spiritual sanctity of Islam when the amalgamation of religious and state ideals occur. Kong highlighted that grassroots leaders were in support of *chang* as a necessity in promoting development. This paradigm was propagated to be of religious value in advancing not just spiritual but material welfare as well as the persuasion that the spirit of Islam transcends the physical seat of the mosque. She cited the speech by ruling politician, Ahmad Mattar whom she felt should be challenged:

Mosques, like other buildings, are but an assemblage of bricks and concrete. For a mosque to become a spiritual household, warm and welcoming to those outside—joyful, harmonious, loving and forgiving to all those inside, it should have life breathed into it through the congregation and their participation in the activities organised. Although all of us gathered here tonight admire the structure and design of this beautiful mosque, we must not forget that the spirit of worship does not lie in the building and design alone; it lies within our hearts...if we are steadfast in our faith and sincere in our thoughts, the physical setting and atmosphere are really not that important in drawing us near to God.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 27.

Granted, Kong strongly willed the disregard for sacredness within the “modernist approach to planning in which buildings are provided because of the functions they fulfil, while other values are de-emphasised, if not totally ignored.”<sup>123</sup> Having said that, we can note that this co-optation of religion into state vision is not exclusive to Islam alone. In another study involving the loss of permanent home for churches, it is interesting to note that Kong acknowledged the constant need to find balance the “paradoxical tension between the idealist’s celebration of placelessness and the materialist’s attention to the concrete demands of placement” as coping mechanism for loss.<sup>124</sup> It seems that for the Singaporean Muslim experience, the scale seems to be set on different determinants altogether; on the overt roles mosques are suited up with leading to even the displacement of this idealist or materialist discourses. The contemporary mosques in Singapore have muddled Masud’s labels of mosques as site-of-social-action and machine-of-meditation into “machine of actions”. Over time, mosques have conglomerated into more corporate than community vestiges namely in extensions such as the mosque cluster system as well as the mosque shared services<sup>125</sup>, along with the creation of Warees Investments as part of the mosque ecosystem. Presently, the topical debate is on the role of mosques as emblems to counter Islamic radicalism and Islamophobia, as transparent bodies providing intra-faith dialogue,

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 35-43.

<sup>124</sup> Lily Kong, "In Search of Permanent Homes: Singapore's House Churches and the Politics of Space," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1573-1586, doi: 10.1080/00420980220151664.

<sup>125</sup> Overview of new structural services can be seen in Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muis), *Mosque Convention 2011* (Singapore: Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, 2011).

outreach programmes in shedding misinformation to Non-Muslims. For this reason, the Harmony Centre was established in October 2006 at An-Nahdhah Mosque.<sup>126</sup>

The mosque spaces are burdened with tensions pegged to the larger fabric of cultural and religious identities. How do we represent a harmonious image of mosqueness amidst discordant suits? Under restraint, one might question if the communal spirit like the anecdote where the villagers collected bottles that form the base of the Sultan Mosque today<sup>127</sup> has dissipated. Community interest should not be reduced to only a passive democracy but also a strong involvement of what and how their voice can be represented.

No matter where the faultline cracks, layers of loss are evident. I contemplate the agency of art explorations and education which have been disembodied from the chasms and schisms within mosque spaces as well as the larger climate of religiosity. Perhaps there can be rendered an artful gaze unto the condition of losing— wherein losing signifies the extinguishing of such fissures altogether? I recall a photograph I took in a mosque at Skopje where the image became a serendipitous blurring of forms giving way only to the glaring beauty of light. (Fig. 2h) I contemplate if there is a way to ruminate on this confrontation losing as a way of unearthing more light and devotion into the fore of our consciousness.

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<sup>126</sup> Elaborations of mosques roles can be seen in Aljunied, “The Cosmopolitan Mosque”, 36.

<sup>127</sup> Green, *Continuing the Legacy*, 17.



Figure 2h A photograph of a mosque interior in Skopje, Macedonia where light becomes the central focus

CHAPTER THREE:  
**FEELING THE LOSS**

***“The wound is the Place where the Light enters you” - Rumi***

## Chapter Overview

This chapter pivots on the meditation of loss; the wound as a consonant of beauty. Using the framework of Sufistic interiority, the chapter indulges in the notion of wombing the Image of the mosque within the heart of the worshiper as a transcendental quality, rid of divisions and aesthetic verklemt. By using multimodal forms of analysis including scholarship on Sufi spirituality, as well as aesthetic references of Sufi thinkers and poets, analysis relating to the central theme of the unseen as a result of loss is engaged. This hermeneutic approach will complement my heuristic lens of autoethnography as I observe, self-reflect and attempt to sense-make this within the framings of Sufistic thought.

Discussions of loss as a spiritual aspect will be made in line with Sufistic concepts like *fanaa* and *faqr* that speak of losing towards the state of void and death. To weave the aesthetic aspect, we discuss how in Islamic art, concepts like mimesis, dissolution and abstraction of forms, points back to inner equilibrium. This equilibrium will espouse on the notion of Man's primordial homecoming towards God. This symbiosis will be an enlightening segue for our last chapter and practical component in mediating all these threads together.

## De-mosqueing the Mosque : From Wound to Womb

The perpetual search for beauty within the sentimentality of loss is a notable contemporary challenge. If indeed “He (God) made beautiful everything He created”<sup>128</sup>, there must be affirmative beauty repleted in this trajectory of losing, this wounding into a void. The consideration between void and sacred spaces in Islamic context discoursed in 1970 when Titus Burckhardt exposed, albeit prematurely that the space in Islamic art “is ordered in such a way that it reposes entirely in itself; it is not an expanse which waits to be traversed; its void is like the mould or womb of a motionless and undifferentiated plenitude.”<sup>129</sup> This very wombing of the wound within the phenomenon of losing the Islamic image amongst contemporary mosques in Singapore is what the thesis aims to expound over this chapter and the next. The autoethnographic spirit is more uninhibited in the following explorations where the poetic, metaphoric as well as symbolic nuances become vivid.

In the Islamic tradition, faculties of the unseen is an intrinsic belief. In fact the consciousness of the omnipresence in worship exists in this Quranic verse, “And to Allah belongs the east and the west. So wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah. Indeed, Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing”.<sup>130</sup> Akin to the symbolism of the wound, much of the margins of Islamic worship resemble this concavity, an unseen transaction, void to be filled. Burckhardt surmised the contemplative repose in Islam to

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<sup>128</sup> Quran 32:7, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

<sup>129</sup> Titus Burckhardt, "The Void in Islamic Art".

<sup>130</sup> Quran 2:115, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

encompass a “spiritual equilibrium whose center of gravity is the invisible.”<sup>131</sup>, culminating into the fore of Islamic aesthetics. Within the interior of the mosques, I observed such concavities evident in the hollowing of the *mihrab* wall, the barren navel of the prayer hall and the caved spine of the *rehal* (Quranic book-rest) mirroring the curvature of the palms held in togetherness during supplications. These cavities point to the illusion of nothingness, of something present but escapes the human vision. I project this correlation of losing towards the dying of the representational Image of mosques in Singapore. Dufford and Emby noted the aesthetics of birth and death in Islam as integral attitudes towards the psychology of religion.<sup>132</sup> I once experienced on a fortuitous Friday, the celebration of *aqiqah* (tradition of sacrifice on the occasion of a child's birth) held right after funerary prayers.

This arc from seen to unseen, in the visual trajectory of mosques, threads along the tropes of birthing, existing, dying and rebirthing in new *ma'na* (*meaning*). The contemporary crisis of receding imageries, might seem like a dissipation process but if we situate it within Islamic contemplation, death is seen as the ultimatum to beauty of the human existence, in a sense to meet The Creator of all that is beautiful. This homecoming speaks of that desired endpoint to see the mosque as the womb, as the void becomes a vessel. The abstraction of the mosque archetype from the material to immaterial suggests this process of “de-mosquing”—where the corporeal mosque uproots from our vision, enabling the abstract mosque to manifest metaphorically. The liquidity, fluidity and mobility of mosque spaces within this concept of interiority

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<sup>131</sup> Burckhardt, “The Void in Islamic Art”.

<sup>132</sup> Dufford and Emby, “The Aesthetic Feeling in Javanese Islam”, 139.

means the believer ought to carry the mosque within their bodies. There is a profundity that the womb of the growing wound provides a house for the mosque to reside in and thus, reframe a favourable perception towards losing. In an interview, Nasr spoke of this “not having a home in the universe” whereby the Sufistic propensity to disenchant the notion of physical homes allows one to evade superfluous attachment.<sup>133</sup> In parallel, if one substitutes the concrete idea of a physical mosque into a mosque that exists only inside the heart, then the lamentation of losing mosqueness becomes a non-factor.

“And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein”<sup>134</sup> This intimacy of God within can be deemed to implore the same metaphor as having the mosque within the corpus of the Self. In a way, it speaks of that foremost tenet of Islamic art, the *Tawhid*, the indivisible oneness. If the mosque is known as the House of God (*Baitullah*) and if we carry that House in the womb/wound of our heart, we are closest to attaining this spiritual union. The heart as a vessel resonates with the act of Haj pilgrimage, where the pilgrims are in the state of *ihram*<sup>135</sup>, in white garments unadorned, unthreaded, unsewn, stripped of division and distinctions, very much resembling the funeral shroud, retreating into nothingness, to a void, a *fitra* (primordially in Islamic thought) as they circumambulate the *Kaaba*. As they let die the worldly edifices of their Self, they go in tandem with the

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<sup>133</sup> Kaleem Hussain, “Interview with Prof Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” *Muslim Heritage*, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/interview-prof-seyyed-hosseini-nasr>.

<sup>134</sup> Quran 50:16, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

<sup>135</sup> A sacred state which a Muslim must consecrate into to perform the major pilgrimage (Haj) or the minor pilgrimage (Umrah).

void within the *Kaaba* in Mecca itself, encapsulating “the absolute silence and emptiness requisite of the human soul who longs to hear the Divine Voice.”<sup>136</sup> While chanting the *talbiyah*, “*Labbayka Allahumma labbayk* (Here I am, Allah, I am here)”, this experience of void symbolises the most profound form of spirituality —returning back Home, being one with God.

### **Losing as Spiritual Aesthetic**

The discourse of losing cannot be dispensed from the epistemology of Islamic spirituality. Arguably, losing directs us to the most poignant part of existence —death; a trope integral in the perspective of a Muslim in his journey. “And worship your Lord until there comes to you the certainty (death)”<sup>137</sup>, speaks about this quintessence of afterlife, ascribed in the six articles of faith. While in the 99 Beautiful names of God exists *Al Muhyi* (The Giver of Life), there too exists *Al Mumit* (The Bringer of Death). Contemplating death is considered as an act of worship in Islam.<sup>138</sup> The mausoleums and tombs in Islam have over the years been regarded prime Islamic architecture. While in most Islamic traditions, where mourning death is “a spiritual state of equipoise and surrender, utterly non-grasping, utterly timeless, that also seems to be nurtured and matured by the Islamic prayers”<sup>139</sup>, some sectarian communities see mourning as

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<sup>136</sup> Dufford and Emby, “The Aesthetic Feeling in Javanese Islam,” 139.

<sup>137</sup> Quran 15:99, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

<sup>138</sup> Abdul Gafar O. Fahm, “Brief Analysis of the Meditation on Death in Sufism: With Reference to Al-Ghazālī and Rūmī,” *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society* 4, 3 (2014): 7.

<sup>139</sup> Dufford and Emby, “The Aesthetic Feeling in Javanese Islam,” 140.

ritualistic, with much attachment towards commemoration of loss in the spatiality of dargah and shrines.<sup>140</sup> In a way, our research aims to procure this act of womb-ing the tomb.

In Sufistic tradition particularly, the notion of death rifts into a more symbolic adage of losing the Self, the idea of “dying before you die.”<sup>141</sup> In his analysis of death amongst Sufi polymaths especially Al-Ghazali and Rumi, Fahm noted this act as one of “self-effacement”. It is to our interest to look at Al-Ghazali’s denouncement of the material wealth and life as a preacher for his ascetic pilgrimage, retreating into a “seclusion (‘uzla), engaged in meditation (*tafakkur*) and other ascetic exercises in order to purify his soul from all that is other than God” where the meditation of death becomes the central fixation.<sup>142</sup> The Sufi inner contemplations are very much derived from the foundation of prophetic thought (*hadith*). As referred by Fahm, the Sufi scholar Maneri quoted ‘Aishah, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad as asking the Prophet, ‘who are those that would be ranked with the martyrs on the Day of Judgment? And the Prophet replied "Anyone who thinks about death twenty times each day and night." After Rumi, Fahm likens this to “‘becoming earth’, losing the fleshy soul, ruining the body, freeing the self”.<sup>143</sup> This is of interest to us, in reconnecting the

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<sup>140</sup> For elaborate discussions of funerary tradition and attachments, see Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>141</sup> This term can be seen used by Annemarie Schimmel, *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The life And Work of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 157-158.

<sup>142</sup> Fahm, “Brief Analysis of the Meditation on Death in Sufism”, 11.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 9-13.

tomb to the womb, as we carry the losing of the mosque within. Rumi's line off his poetic verse "death means life and life means death"<sup>144</sup> intertwines the condition of loss as a natural order to attain love. He further asserted, "Oh, the life of lovers consists in death: thou wilt not win the (Beloved's) heart except in losing thine own."<sup>145</sup>

The analogy "prison of self"<sup>146</sup> denotes the need for annihilation of the Self or Ego, a concept in the Sufi tradition known as *Fana*. *Fana* means to cease to exist or quite literally means to pass away. This act when fully realised will attain the transcendental state of *Baqa*' (subsistence) and "finally become ready for the direct vision of God"<sup>147</sup>, in relation to the verse, "All things in creation suffer 'annihilation' and there remains the face of the Lord in its majesty and bounty".<sup>148</sup> Alas, these spiritual stages enable one to "see Him in everything"<sup>149</sup>; even in absence. Al-Attas made reference to this idea "Die before ye die" —it is the same as saying: "Return before ye actually return"; and this refers to the subjugation of one's self by one's real

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<sup>144</sup> Ghazal 3172, as cited from Franklin Lewis. *Rumi: Swallowing the Sun* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2008).

<sup>145</sup> *Mathnawī*. Vol.I, line 1751, as cited from Fahm, "Brief Analysis of the Meditation on Death in Sufism", 1.

<sup>146</sup> An analogy used by Rumi cited in Franklin D. Lewis. *Rumi - Past and Present, East and West The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2014).

<sup>147</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Fana," accessed April 2, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fana-Sufism>

<sup>148</sup> Quran 55:26–27, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

<sup>149</sup> Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani. (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom, 2010), 15.

self, one's animal soul by one's rational soul."<sup>150</sup> I add to this view that this subjugation of the Self is of the inner *Nafs* (ego), expounded by Ghazali in his rhetoric of *fiqh-al-nafs* (discernment of the self).<sup>151</sup> If we were to allude these conceptions into our condition of losing, it would itemise i) our anxiety of loss and ii) desire for Islamic representations as mere receptacles of worldly ego, and if we were to denounce this sentimentality of losing then can we revel in the beauty of it. A counterpart of these spiritual conduits is *Faqr*, which embodies this discussion in its entirety of losing and death to be one with God. This "spiritual poverty", according to Islamic esoterism, is in fact the seed sowed towards the dying before death. *Faqr* "signifies the positive attitude of total independence from worldly needs."<sup>152</sup> *Faqr* is what Fahm noted as self-effacement and the reason behind Ghazali's retreat into asceticism (*zuhd*). It is by this "extinction" that the "divine station" is attained (*al-mâqam al-ilâhî*), which René Guénon suggested as "the central point where all the distinctions inherent in the more outward points of view are surpassed and where all the oppositions have disappeared and are resolved in a perfect equilibrium."<sup>153</sup> It is serendipitous to note that the word "*maqam*" has been appropriated into the Malay language to mean "a place of burial" for respected figures, a term of niche and detachment amongst the majority Muslim

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<sup>150</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomenon to the Metaphysics of Islam: an Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the World View* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), 1995), 59.

<sup>151</sup> Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 117.

<sup>152</sup> For in depth discussions on the terminology, see N. Hanif. *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Sufis: Central Asia and Middle East* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2002), 472.

<sup>153</sup> René Guénon, "Al-Faqr," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 7, 1 (1973), accessed 21 April, 2017, [http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Al-Faqr-by\\_Rene\\_Guenon.aspx](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Al-Faqr-by_Rene_Guenon.aspx).

community in Singapore alluding to the spiritual detachment sensed within sacred spaces here. Guénon fortified “that ‘poverty’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘childhood’, are no more than one same thing, and the process of being stripped which all these words express culminates in an “extinction” which is, in reality, the fullness of the being.”<sup>154</sup> I especially favour the denotation of “childhood” signalling a return back to the primordial state of *fiṭra* in achieving this state of completion. In Sufi anthropology, this would be called *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (The Perfected Man), in line with the relook into losing where to be nothing is to be everything.

The extinction of such distinctions and oppositions to reach equilibrium as purported by Guénon in nature, I deem fit to include the stylistic divisions, spatial definitions, concrete demarcations, disparities, iconic representations and archetypal visions of contemporary mosque spaces. Prof. Dr Amir Zekrgoo, professor of Islamic and Oriental Arts in International Islamic University of Malaysia, during our discussion supports my view:

And that’s how we have this famous mystic Hallaj saying *Ana-Haqq* (I am the Truth) or some may deem to be “I am God”. Such expressions refer to the illusionary existence of all creatures – including man – as compared to a single true reality that is the Divine existence. What Hallaj and other mystics of the same line claim is that nothing else truly exists, save the existence of God alone. The same concept is expressed through form in the floral and geometric patterns used in the Islamic architecture. See for instance at the colourful interior of the ceilings of the mosque domes in Iran. Sheikh Lufullah Mosque is an excellent example. There we have an abundance of colourful shapes and motifs; as the shapes that create the pattern design of the dome move closer to the top-centre of the dome they get smaller and gradually lose their identity as they go up. The independent shapes are stripped off their individual identity while the pattern become more important; and the pattern too loses its significance and melts in the central point at the top of the dome. From one angle, the central point– that has no dimension and is literally invisible – gives meaning to the pattern and to the individual motifs and shapes; but from another angle it takes their existence

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

and significance away from each and every one of the elements. The entire pattern resemble the pattern of Hajj, the circumambulation of countless beings around a single hollow structure— that represents the invisible Divine. This is a visual representation of the state of *fana* when one (shape, person, individual...) experiences nothingness through realization of his insignificance.<sup>155</sup>

He offered the idea of ‘floatingness’ that elucidates the process of annihilation from *faqr*’ to *fana*. Only when one culminates that void, can there exists a space to situate the mosque inside one’s heart, to be one with God again. In the *Rubai ’yat*, Rumi professed this dance-like trance, “Oh daylight, rise! / Atoms are dancing/ The souls, lost in ecstasy, are dancing”<sup>156</sup>. The *sama*<sup>157</sup>, an exalted act of remembrance originating from the Rumi-inspired Mevlevi order embodies these derivatives. Nasr elegantly surmised this bodily enactment of primordially towards the Islamic spirit of losing as:

entirely woven from symbolic elements, which all concur on the same goal, the *dhikr*<sup>158</sup>, the call to the Divine. The very costume of the dancers is charged with significance. Their headgear, a large tarboosh of brown felt, represents the vertical dimension, the axis that escapes the tribulations of desire and passion; it represents also the tombstone and reminds the wearer of the unavoidable door of death, the ephemeral nature of this lower world, and the necessity for seeking in this life the Truth which does not die. At the beginning of the session, the dervish wears a black robe which he removes at the time of the dance; this means that he is abandoning his gross individuality in order to appear purified before the master of the dance and before his brothers. The white robe in which he then dresses signifies the shroud in which his corpse will one day be wrapped, and at the same time it prefigures the resurrection and the joyous meeting with the Divine Beloved.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Personal communication with Prof. Dr. Amir Zekrgoo, Kuala Lumpur, February 13, 2017.

<sup>156</sup> Roger Y. Clark. *Stranger Gods: Salman Rushdie's Other Worlds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>157</sup> Also referred to as *sema*, or whirling dervishes in the secular view.

<sup>158</sup> A ritual prayer or litany in remembrance of Allah

<sup>159</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 508.

## Losing as Aesthetic Spirit

Within our meditation of losing, such artful iteration of spiritual expressions enfold into Islamic aesthetics. When we speak of annihilating the disparate forms and corporeal substances of the mosque image, artists within this ecosystem have embraced this sense of abstraction in representing the divine message. Within the crosshairs of aniconism and iconoclasm<sup>160</sup> in visual representation, Faruqi labeled this Islamic art tendency as the “dissolution of matter.”<sup>161</sup> As an emanation of his/her religio-cultural ideology within the epochal of *Tawhid*, the artist’s use of stylization wherein:

rendered in such a way as to give more the impression of design than of the naturalistic portrayal of creatures or objects. Second, the artist affected by Islamic ideology further molded his artistic style to express the utter transcendence of the Divine by "dissolving" or, better, "disguising" the material world with which he worked. He evolved two techniques or stylistic devices for expressing this non-naturalness of Allah. The first of these stylistic tendencies involves a "camouflage of structure," the second, a "disguise of materials."<sup>162</sup>

Mimesis, within the code of visual culture in Islam, alternatively, strives for the poetic metaphors in conveying the artist’s points across.<sup>163</sup> Akin to the metaphor our discussion aims to traverse with ‘none to nur’ and ‘wound to womb’, such implicit element is laden in the symbolism of mosque architecture. Analysing the 14th century

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<sup>160</sup>For the detailed historiography of visual culture and the criticism of seeing in Islam, see Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 55-89.

<sup>161</sup> Lois al Faruqi, “The Aesthetics of Islamic Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 355.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Shalem, "What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’?,” 15.

Sultan Hassan mosque in Cairo, Tammy Gaber summed her experience on how the mosque allegorises the architecture of paradise:

The experience of the prolonged entry allowed for the clear separation of the public world into another, unearthly place. At the end of the *megaz*, the opening to the courtyard was an overwhelming sight: the spatial expanse, bright light, and the completely different soundscape of the water fountain and lingering birds hushed the loud, busy, outer world. The abundant light, in contrast to the dark *megaz*, coming from the courtyard opening above, along with the four-pointed *iwans* led the gaze heavenward. The unpredicted void, roughly more than a cube, seemed carved out of the monumental mass of the madrasa mosque.<sup>164</sup>

Not only are mosques symbolic of the afterlife, the architectural design propagates this idea of losing the worldly dimension upon entering the space through the “prolonged entry”. The carving out of the void that belies the mosque interior signifies the womb where the axis of the unseen takes place. This meta-interiority facilitates the worshipper losing of the Self within. I observed that the contemporary mosques in Singapore while lacking in the transcendence of a paradisiac journey toward the prayer hall due to spatial pragmatism, benefits in the State rhetoric of being religiously transparent and porous. While the intention may not have been aesthetically motivated, the propagation of an open religion mimics this actualisation of the “dissolution” aesthetics.. Burckhardt noted that the excessive abstract forms in Islamic art accentuate this idea of a void through its infinite tapestry as it “dissolves mental coagulation just as the contemplation of a stream of water, of a flame or of leaves trembling in the wind can detach the consciousness from its inward “idols”.” He went on to detail the seamless transition of materials into the floatingness we discussed earlier:

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<sup>164</sup> Tammy Gaber, "Paradise Present." *Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* 48, no. 3 (2015), accessed November 5, 2016, <http://faithandform.com/feature/paradise-present/>

This somewhat irrational passage from the circular base of the cupola to the square of the supports is something that Turkish architecture seeks to avoid; it replaces the pendentives by a clearly articulated element, which is called muqarnas in Arabic and which is often compared to stalactites, whereas it is really more in the nature of an alveola composed of niches which overlap into one another; by means of their geometrical play, the passage from the continuous and "fluid" form of the cupola to the rectangular and "solid" form of the supporting walls appears as a gradual crystallization: the cube of the building "coagulates" from out of the undifferentiated unity of the cupola, and since the latter always represents heaven, it is the continuous movement of the heavenly sphere which is suddenly immobilized in the plenitude of the pure present.<sup>165</sup>

Within this manifestation of pure presence, the mosque architecture is seen as the vessel towards divine transcendence while at the same time, a void. This duality of vessel and void can be justified by the integral concept of *Zahir*, the manifested and *Batin*, the hidden, in the spiritual dimension, also the divine attributes of God. All these discussions on interiority will not take place without the immateriality of the outer dimension. You need a material to seclude, to transit a movement inward.<sup>166</sup> Hence, the esoteric and exoteric in Islamic thought are crucial in fathoming loss. *Zahir* is the world of bodies whereas *Batin* is the world of souls. The *Zahir* allows space for mosque image retreat into the *Batin*. You need the loss to gain the light, you need the wound to have the womb, and you need to lose the outer mosque to conjure the inner mosque. Dr. Zekrgoo pointed out a key tenet of Islamic calligraphy, 'khalvat' being the seclusion or emptiness within the page. This 'negative space' enables the work to breathe. In a successful calligraphy, the importance of 'khalvat' (negative space) complements the

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<sup>165</sup> Burckhardt, "The Void in Islamic Art".

<sup>166</sup> For supplementary reading on the etymology of *Zahir* and *Batin* with an embryological connotation, see Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment And Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 14.

‘jalvat’— the manifest, i.e. the written *khat* or the positive space of the scroll.<sup>167</sup> The *Zahir* allows space for the retreat into the *Batin*. Here we relate back to the intention and action of Islamic thought. While the action of losing forms occur, the intention of achieving a greater state of beauty emerges. Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar identifies this as the sense of unity in their long-term discourse of Islamic architecture especially in the Persian epistemology. This duality mirrors as one “of earth, corporeal, outward to the enveloping heavens (macrocosm); and inward direction toward the hidden treasure that is the seat of Divine spirit (microcosm)”<sup>168</sup>. In the same virtue, they espoused upon the concept of the ‘Creative Man’, arguing that “because Man, the microcosm, is the mirror image of macrocosm, he contains all the possibilities of the universe within himself...Man is the pivot between the arc of descent and ascent”<sup>169</sup> In their works, they supported this idea of space as the “locus of the universal soul”; where in “space, not shape, should lead in the generation of form”.<sup>170</sup> This supported their theory of “positive space” carved in Islamic architecture is where the place of Man is located, that facilitates this uninterrupted continuity of cosmic macro-microcosm within. This enables the spatial connection to “flow rapidly through the transition, like air moving through a venturi tube, and expands into the culminating spaces, pushing the membrane of domes outward and making them taut; transforming the walls of

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<sup>167</sup> Personal communication with Prof. Dr. Amir Zekrgoo, Kuala Lumpur, February 13, 2017.

<sup>168</sup> Hamid Aghaei Rad, “Gnostic Views in Contemporary Islamic Architecture (In Case of Ardalan),” *DIMENSI – Journal of Architecture and Built Environment* 41, no. 1 (2014): 22.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>170</sup> Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity; The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 15.

rooms into transcendent niched volumes; and turning the ornament of surfaces into poetic testaments of the will of the soul to return from whence it has come.” The expansiveness towards the primordially of Man towards God supports the inner equilibrium we have been discussing, that while “indefiniteness of space can be given direction”, it is being reconciled with the eventual exclusion of tensions between heaven and earth.<sup>171</sup>

This “exclusion of tensions” links us back to that floatingness, the dissolution of the concrete, the death of divisions, echo the spirit of many poetry works in the Sufi tradition, where the call for the metaphorical undressing of walls is in order. The 17th century Sufi mystic, Bulleh Shah wrote: “Destroy the mosque, destroy the temple / do as you please; But do not break the human heart / for God dwells therein!”<sup>172</sup> Four centuries later, Elif Shafak wrote in her Rumi and Shams inspired novel, *Forty Rules of Love*, “You can study God through everything and everyone in the Universe, because God is not confined in a mosque, synagogue, or church. But if you are still in need of knowing where exactly His abode is, there is only one place to look for Him: in the heart of a true lover.”<sup>173</sup> Both poetic verses poignantly surmised the trajectory of this chapter from its cradling idea of un-mosquing the physical mosque and wombing the mosque into the wound of the heart of the worshipper.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 13-17.

<sup>172</sup> Mahmood Jamal, *Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse From the Early Mystics to Rumi* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>173</sup> Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 58.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
**FILLING THE LOSS**

## Chapter Overview

This crucial chapter bridges the translation of our corroborated theoretical findings into the creative component. *Nur* here symbolizes that derivative beauty the research aimed for since the cradle of its inquiry. Inspired by the concept of *Nur* as outlined in our methodology, I attempt to use the spiritual Light as an agent of mediation. The chapter begins with a brief overview of *Nur* within the Islamic framework. Consequently, the chapter then looks at *Nur* within Islamic aesthetics, elaborating on the permeating and dispersing quality of light, that supports our previous idea of formlessness. This leads into the framework of interiority, a melting inwards of the material while the worshipper embodies *Nur* within.

With these undertakings, the chapter closes with merging art and *Nur* with the exegesis of my practical work entitled **Nur** utilizing photography and image making processes. This wordplay purports art method as an enlightenment for the Self and community. I expanded on **Nur** through its incorporation of discussions throughout the thesis including notions of abstraction, dying as well as wombing the mosque within the Self. This symbiotic undertakings will act as a culmination of a holistic research in elevating the artistic agency within a spiritual discourse.

## **Light as Nur: Spiritual Light as Reconciliation**

The notion of inward wombing we delved in the previous chapter culminates in the synthesis of losing and light. While we have displaced the physical mosque from our visual vanguard, beauty derives only when the void is filled with the manifestation of *Nur*, an Arabic word denoting ‘light’ within the Islamic epistemology. *Nur* in the concern of our meditative discussion, originates from one source of Divine Light but involves two types of explorations, the aesthetic as well as intellectual considerations.

While light encompasses a spectrum from scientific substance to physical matter, *Nur* transcends into a more symbolic nuance that stemmed from the Quranic verse of *Nur*, informed through a poetic parable that:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth / The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp / The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star / Lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree/ Neither of the east nor of the west / Whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire / Light upon light / Allah guides to His light whom He wills / And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things<sup>174</sup>

One can elucidate that our reconciliation of the condition of losing through the interiorization of the material to the immaterial affords this profound quality of light in our desire for beauty. Another example of *Nur* within Islamic spirituality lies in the supplication of light known to be recited by the Prophet upon entering mosques as detailed:

O Allah, place light in my heart, and on my tongue light, and in my ears light and in my sight light, and above me light, and below me light, and to my right light, and to my left light, and before me light and behind me light. Place in my soul light. Magnify for me light, and amplify for me light. Make for me light,

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<sup>174</sup> Quran 24:35 , trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

and make me light. O Allah, grant me light, and place light in my nerves, and in my body light and in my blood light and in my hair light and in my skin light.” (Bukhari) “O Allah, make for me a light in my grave... and a light in my bones.” (Tirmidhi) “Increase me in light, increase me in light, increase me in light.” (Bukhari, adab al mufrad) “Grant me light upon light.” (Bukhari)<sup>175</sup>

While the concept of *Nur* has been illustrated spanning time and interpretations by classical as well as contemporary scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi and Suhrawadi, *Nur* in our contemplation remains within the perimeters of Islamic aesthetics which intimately mirrors the theological spirit. Nasr attributed the interplay of light within space in its “crystallisations of light, limpid and lucid, illuminating and illuminated”<sup>176</sup>, a quality that is ever dynamic and omnipresent. These are often translated into Islamic architectural tradition to allegorize the divine attributes as we have discussed. Similarly, Burckhardt claimed that “there is no more perfect symbol of divine unity than Light”. He linked the vibration of light to the process of alchemy where “body must be made spirit, for spirit to become body”.<sup>177</sup>

*Nur* as an exercise on visual culture involves new forms of seeing not only as a physical phenomenon but also a perceptive representation. Al-Ghazali in his categorization of light drew upon the sense of sight as both the “sensual” and “intelligential” eye in his seminal *Mishkat al-anwar* (‘The Niche of Lights’).<sup>178</sup> As art

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<sup>175</sup> Sayyid Rami Al Rifai, *The Light Of Allah In The Heavens and The Earth: The Creation Of The Atom (24:35) and The Physics Of Spirituality* (Michigan: Sunnah Muakadah, 2016), 17.

<sup>176</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 50.

<sup>177</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 84.

<sup>178</sup> Shalem, "What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’?", 54.

allows for the union between vision, emotion and reason in discussing the sacred, many art exhibitions and discourses rooted from the Islamic tradition revolve around and evolve from the concept of *Nur*. One notable endeavour is the exhibition curated by Dr Sabiha El Khemir entitled “Nur: Light in Art and Science from the Islamic World” in 2013 at Seville. She noted that her curatorial approaches in finding objects with an intrinsic connection with light is with ease.<sup>179</sup>

It is also virtually impossible to dispense the innate yearning of *Nur* in primordial soul, craving for this “symbol of Divine Presence, the Light which shines upon the whole cosmos from the central axis mundi that is neither of the East nor the West.”<sup>180</sup> In *East-West Poetry: A Western Poet Responds to Islamic Tradition in Sonnets*, Martin Bidney posited how Rumi conceived the same thought that “even within the emptiness of the Void, the non—being or *'adam* from which the universe arose, the death from which life originally came, *Rumi* can find a potential for creativity...a surprisingly active, generative power.” This idea coincides with Rumi’s quote introduced as the epigraph of the previous chapter, “the wound is the place where the light enters you”. This version is actually a widely used but severely condensed version from a poem off the *Mathnawi* entitled “Childhood Friends” which was translated by Coleman Barks, developed from a translation of Reynold Nicholson. In the last stanza of the poem it derived from, reads: *Let a teacher wave away the flies /*

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<sup>179</sup> Judith H. Dobrzynski, “Shedding a Light on Islamic Art’s Great Treasure,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/arts/artsspecial/shedding-a-light-on-islamic-arts-great-treasure.html> (accessed February 2, 2017)

<sup>180</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 50.

*and put a plaster on the wound / Don't turn your head / Keep looking at the bandaged place / That's where the light enters you / And don't believe for a moment that you're healing yourself*<sup>181</sup>. Light here transcends material substance towards an allusion to the sacrality of God's omnipresence on the verse discussed above. The poem, too, repeatedly delves on a sense of teacherhood, or spiritual guidance echoing the ending lines of the *Nur* verse wherein God is All-Knowing.

This supports our looking at *Nur* as a symbol of wisdom and knowledge, something vital to our understanding of loss as an epiphany to alternative ways of seeing and feeling. It is serendipitous then that if we look at loss, the bigger the wound, the more *Nur* enters. The process of wombing the wound we discussed previously points to arriving at a more spiritual center in this case, *Nur*- the Divine essence and message. As the main aim is to negate all the *isms* and schisms that exist with the losing of the mosque image, *Nur* plays the most transcendental role in dispersing the boundaries, filling the interior and then binding the core of Islamic spirituality.

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<sup>181</sup> *Mathnawī*. Vol.I, line 3150-3175, as cited from Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi, New Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 142.

### ***Nur* as Art: Light as Embodiment of Losing**

Towards our aim of spiritual interiority, losing allows the mosque image to collapse inward and as a result, wombs *Nur* unto that void. To embody *Nur* means to be one with God and gain a way to wisdom that only His Light remains supreme. While the mosque becomes a vessel of void, the void in turn, becomes a vessel of light. A quintessence of *Nur* is the ability to sear the forms of mosque apart after which to bind it all back together. This very symbiosis is a process towards beauty.

Firstly, *Nur* becomes a catalyst to eliminate the tensions riddling the mosque image, in line with the Sufistic death discussed previously. Nasr suggested the “identification of light with the spiritual principle that at once creates, orders, and liberates is a determining factor in the sacralization of architecture in Islam”<sup>182</sup>, obliterating the geometric intricacies of mosque into a body porous and permeable, almost latent-like. He cited the arabesque forms in Islamic art function precisely to enable void to take center stage, letting the impermanent nature of material surface reduce opacity to gain transparency before the Divine Light. He augmented that this aids in “lifting from material objects their suffocating heaviness and enabling the spirit to breathe and expand. Likewise, the arabesque through its extension and repetition of forms interlaced with the void, removes from the eyes the possibility of fixing itself in one place and from the mind the possibility of becoming imprisoned in any particular solidification and crystallisation of matter”<sup>183</sup>.

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<sup>182</sup> Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 51.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, 186-88.

Observably, it is culturally ingrained for artists who engage in Islamic art to disperse light instead of emulating it in their non-desire to imitate God's hands in creation. Hans Belting proposed an intriguing study on deciphering the nature of objects in which he deemed it necessary for contemplation to take place beyond the sense of the gaze alone. His study draws upon the concept of light in Islamic visual theory revolving around Alhazen<sup>184</sup>'s *Theory of Optics*. He asserted foremostly on the claim that "the sun, the moon, and the stars look beautiful without there being in them a cause on account of which their form looks beautiful and appealing other than their radiant light. Therefore, light by itself produces beauty." Belting cited several features in Islamic art and architecture tradition from the *girrih* style of Abbasid culture to the *muqarnas* in supporting his theory of purposeful light dispersal. He substantiated that the beams of light as well as patterns of lines on walls serve as an organizing principle to prove the dominion of light and pattern over all material substance, later concluding that all these perspectives demand us to ignore the surface and "see through" it<sup>185</sup>, reminiscent of Western Impressionism. I argue on the same spirit that *Nur* being the derivative of mosque image is essential the same way Belting reasoned this tendency wherein it "purifies the eyes, removing impressions of bodily world". While Belting's arguments derive from observations of physical matter of light such as visual rays, it is beneficial to see this befitting to advance our argument on the objective of such theories always leading back to the irrevocability of *Nur* as an intermediary to Divine Truth.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibn al-Haytham, known as Alhazen, a polymath during the during the Fatimid Caliphate who invented the camera obscura. For a comprehensive account on his oeuvre, see Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad*, 90.

<sup>185</sup> Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad*, 115-210.

That all the processes of lifting the veil is only to make clarity the Divine Light as Nasr suggested earlier. This is in line with Burckhardt's understanding on "light, is in fact, itself invisible; its nature is not altered by its refraction into colors nor diminished by its gradation into clarity and darkness. And in the same way as nothingness does not itself exist except by its illusory opposition to Being, so also darkness is visible only by contrast with light, to the extent that light make shadows appear...from the divine light which brings things out from the darkness of nothing"<sup>186</sup>. This parallels our mediation of loss, where it may be argued that only with losing can *Nur* be actualised. This wisdom is necessary to facilitate our trajectory from None to *Nur*.

Akel Ismail Kahera who was mentioned previously in his discussions on the constructs of American mosques offered a great convergence between the theories of form and space in relations to cubism. This was conducted through his interview with Professor Latif Khalid Abdulmalik, a New York-born Muslim architect who situated the *Kaaba* as a prime locust in his discourse:

Interpretation of cubic order conveys discipline and strength, within its pure form, he sees the cube as fluid when broken down; it must be fluid, since everything is created from water. The breakdown or the deconstruction is a means of bringing the state of the pure form to its destination; design in this sense is an innovative effort that captures both image and beauty. Here the notable dichotomies of sections, planes, compression, tension, torsion and shear are structures that may represent an alternate view of the cubic space...The cube is destroyed without destruction, eliminated without elimination.<sup>187</sup>

Cementing his argument, Abdulmalik regarded the value of scriptural relevance as vital eschatological truth, which may be understood in mosque architecture as well.

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<sup>186</sup> Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 79-80.

<sup>187</sup> Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, 142.

This is symbolic to time, form, and space as well as the value of four realms of existence when linked to living on earth—transparent, translucent, reflective and opaque. These are similar tropes applied to the qualities of *Nur*. The death of the mosque image in Singapore can be perceived as a potential to deplete the shifting dichotomies present, towards an organic embodiment of *Nur*.

Another quality of *Nur* within our discourse is the centrality of the heart, as we recall the supplication of *Nur* beckoning light to be filled firstly, into the heart. Majdi Faleh in his research of light and architecture of the sublime in the Mediterranean expressed the inter-relativity of light, belief and sincerity in illustrating the sacrality of light.<sup>188</sup> Similarly, Jale Nejdet Erzen's in her attempt to propagate an alternative way to knowledge through Islamic aesthetics, espoused on one aspect of "Principle of Love: Understanding with the Heart". Here, Erzen suggested that the role of art facilitates the mimetic reflection of God in His creations.<sup>189</sup> This quintessence of *Nur* echoes Martin Lings' imaginative expositions on how the "roundly recessed hollow" of the prayer niche symbolises a force that beckons the soul to not only position but pour itself out in lieu of an orientation, a "turning towards" God in the "melting of the heart in the heat of the Divine, its opening to Mercy". The niche, he added, has "a dynamic quality not only in virtue of its spiritual magnetism but also because it is the domain of the movements of the ritual prayer which signify a *gradual melting* until, in the prostration, the body and with it the soul; finally *pours itself out*, as it were, in the direction of

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<sup>188</sup> Majdi Faleh, "The Mediterranean Region: "Islamic" light in the architecture of the sublime" in *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art in Comparative Perspective*, ed. C. A. Brebbia and A. Martínez Boquera (Southampton: WIT Press, 2016), 173.

<sup>189</sup> Jale Nedjet Erzen, "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (2007): 72.

Mecca.” The dissipation of the body towards the inner self during worship embodies *Nur*, alluding to the parable in the verse of *Nur* that “different degrees of brightness increases in proportion of its interiorisation, first the niche, then the glass, then the oil, then the flame itself—the inwarder the brighter.” This supports our proposition that *Nur* is most illuminating when the mosque is in the heart. In quoting Frithjof Schuon, under the spirit of “the sky is the great symbol of God’s Kingdom; but the Kingdom of God is within you”, Lings concluded that:

light not only unifies the different parts of the building , but it also acts as as magnet, to draw the soul of man into the unity which he beholds, and this brings us back to the worshipper as an integral part of the mosque or the cathedral: that is, its living centre. The purpose of all sacred art is to confront man with a symbolic representation of his own perfection which he is seeking to bring from virtuality to actuality, making him conscious of the dimensions of holiness which he carries in himself, it offers him its own various aspects as prolongations of those dimensions.<sup>190</sup>

Losing brings us to the understanding that the performativity of the worshipping body is an epitome of *Nur* embodied. Hence, the act of submitting goes beyond the physicality of the mosque. While the function of a mosque theologically is important, the circumstance of seeking beauty shows that it goes beyond the architectural design and representation of mosque archetypes today. If Man’s microcosmic plenitude is willed in the “image of God”, the body during prayer is macrocosm of permeating light.

<sup>191</sup> If we were to elaborate on this idea in the placelessness of worship and the *hadith* that the whole world is to be a mosque, “an antebellum mosque may have been a rudimentary building, quite temporary and unrefined; and in some instances, a simple

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<sup>190</sup> Martin Lings, *Symbol & Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2006), 105-115.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

demarcated space on the ground under the domes of the sky- facing Makkah would have sufficed without an enclosed structure”<sup>192</sup> and would it not signify that the body in prayer itself is the mosque? With the global assembly all turning towards the Kaaba, the construction of an “ongoing installation” in which the “meta-mosque of bricks and bodies appears in the clear light of the desert sun” is suggested by Masud Taj.<sup>193</sup> He added that the congregation space is to facilitate the performative ritual like a disassembled stage for the observance of God while the man, “an actor to be watched.”

The contemplation of mosques as transitory spaces supports our idea of placelessness. An interesting perspective is to see the body in motion as a spiritually artful performance. Where we deem man’s body being the most central to worship, the feeling of loss suggests only but the reflection of the man. Consequently, this denotes that man has an introspective hand in governing his own meditation towards the void, the nothingness and if he sees enlightenment in these shifts, beauty too will be derived upon within.

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<sup>192</sup> Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque*, 147.

<sup>193</sup> H. Masud Taj, "Mosque: Cube and Circle," *Journal of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art and Architecture* 48, no. 3 (n.d), <http://faithandform.com/feature/mosque-cube-and-circle/>

## ***Nur in Art: Using Art Practice to Manifest Enlightenment***

Drawing from the analytical tangent of seeing the *Nur* in None, the research then, employed these new-found enlightenment within the confluence of an art exploration. Still playing with the symbolic nature of light, I choose to explore and develop more the perimeters of image-making through image-making and photography which alludes to “drawing with light” in Greek. These art processes will extract the collective spirit of the aforementioned discussions, on losing, on reclaiming light, on mosques and de-mosquing, in the aim to breathe Art as *Nur*. The bulk of the creative component takes place in the genesis of the body of work entitled **Nur** itself; comprising three phases; photo-documentation of mosques in Singapore, the abstraction through dye process and consequently, a photographic exploration on wombing the mosques. Ultimately, Nur along with my other experiential recordings and reflections are compiled into an intimate prayer-poem book entitled **Journur**.

### *1) Visualizing Mosqueness: Documentation of Mosque Spaces in Singapore*

The first part of Nur is the recording of visual data to serve as both archival imprints as well as raw data for the extended artwork, **Nur**. Based on the official list from the Muis mosque directory, I embarked on an experiential cartography across all 70 mosques standing in mainland Singapore as of the span of the research from 2016 to 2017. The approach was not as methodical but instead, instinctual as a native observer of the prayer space. These images taken in daylight include mainly of the interior spaces where prayers are offered both in the male and female areas. The objective is not

to classify mosque imageries in terms of architectural styles. For example, through figures 4a to 4c, one can note that the images remain as a general gaze of spaces, extracted as latent images in line with the prospective artwork where the stylistic and spiritual tensions of the mosque from the minute patternworks, the grand exteriors to the overarching symbolism all dissipate into nothingness. The experiencing of all mosques visually allows a two-pronged approach; as substantive visual evidences influencing the thesis and also as an employment of a unique subjective lens in experiencing mosques when coupled with the theoretical underpinnings prior to this exercise.

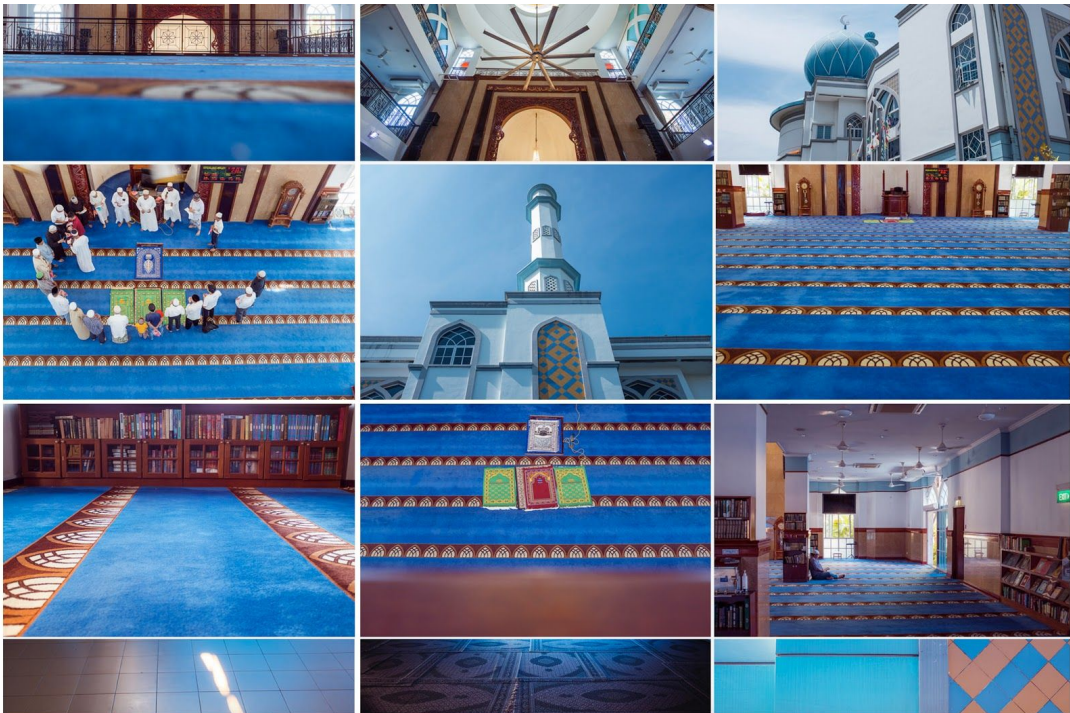


Figure 4a A snapshot of images taken at Al-Istighfar Mosque.

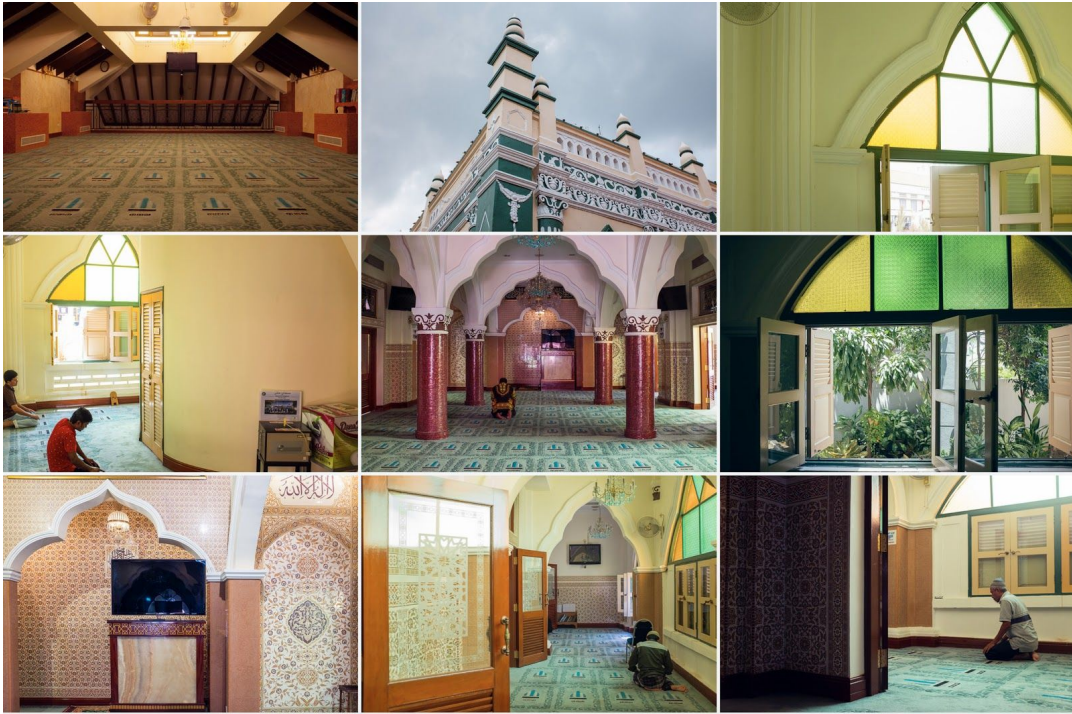


Figure 4b A snapshot of images taken at Khadijah Mosque.

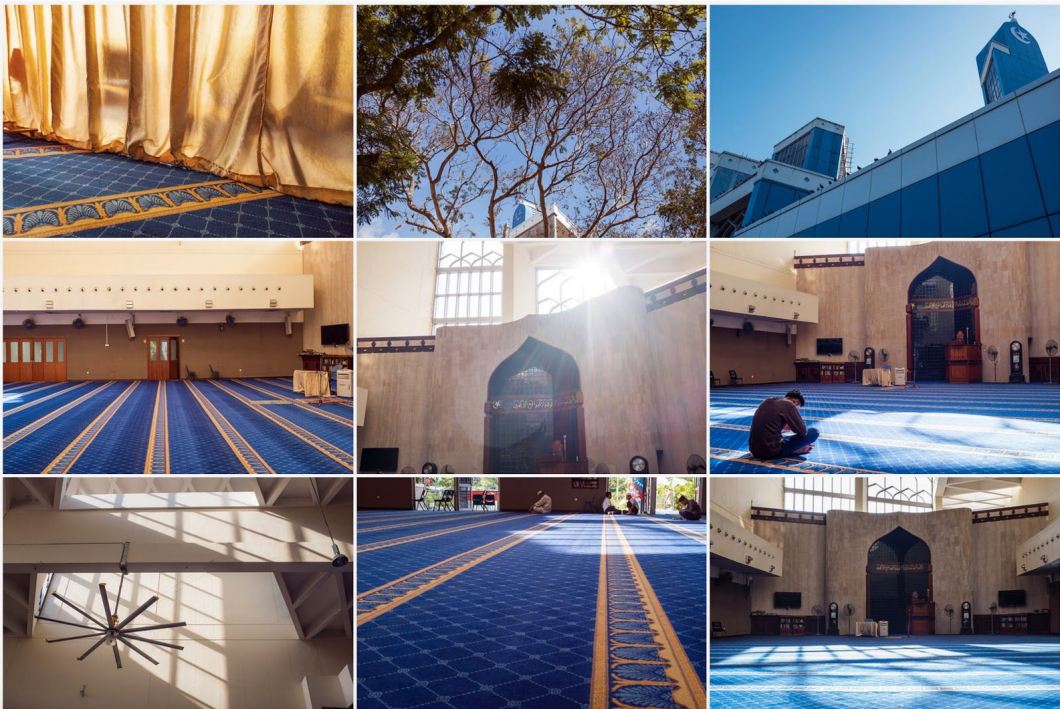


Figure 4c A snapshot of images taken at Darul Ghufuran Mosque.

## 2) *Death of an Image : De-mosquing through Dye Intervention*

Translating the nuance of “dying of the mosque image” in the analytical parts of the thesis, I began to intervene by experimenting on the printing process of the above mosques documentation. I chose to focus on the images of *mihrab* across all the mosques, in lieu of the interiority framework. This central niche alludes to the wombing of all lateral direction of Mecca. Since the beginning, the idea of losing has connote a death of visuality for me, in the mosque demolition itself, in the displacement of decorative icons of its features as well as the salient spiritual solace within it, in contemporary times in Singapore. Printing the images of *mihrabs* through inkjet process onto a non-coated side of the semigloss photo paper prevents the dye pigment from settling permanently into the emulsion of the paper. Consequently, the printed image goes through a dance of abstraction over time, losing clarity in forms and definition parallel to our discussions of losing.

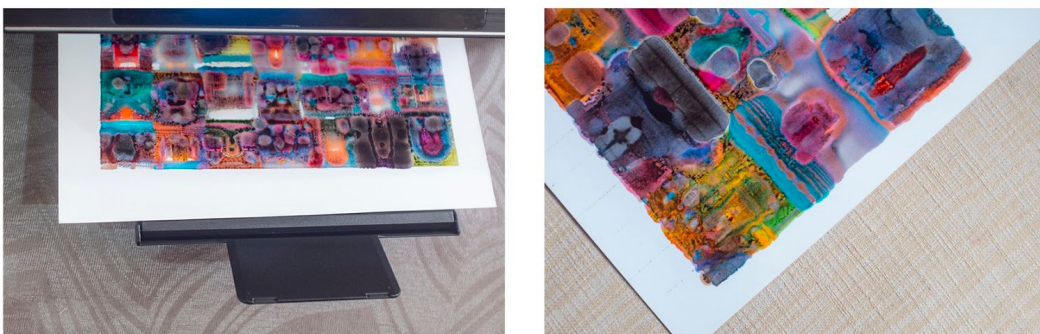


Figure 4d A snapshot of images taken at Darul Ghufuran Mosque.

The pigment on the A4 printout will not be dried up as it undergoes a literal abstraction in line with our notion of “melting in” towards the Divine. These “wet” prints were aired for several days before being scanned onto a flatbed scanner atop an acrylic sheet. The beauty in this is that each scan would be a unique edition due to the varying ink movements and destruction, once scanned. The following figures illustrate some of the end results of the process. Several of these results were especially interesting in the way the losing of the mosque image still provide glimpses on what underwent losing; for instance, hints of calligraphic illuminations on walls (Fig. 4f), radiating shades of colours as well as light patterns, dancing organically, leaking the frame. (Fig. 4g)



Figure 4e A before and after image of the experimental process,with the mihrab as focal

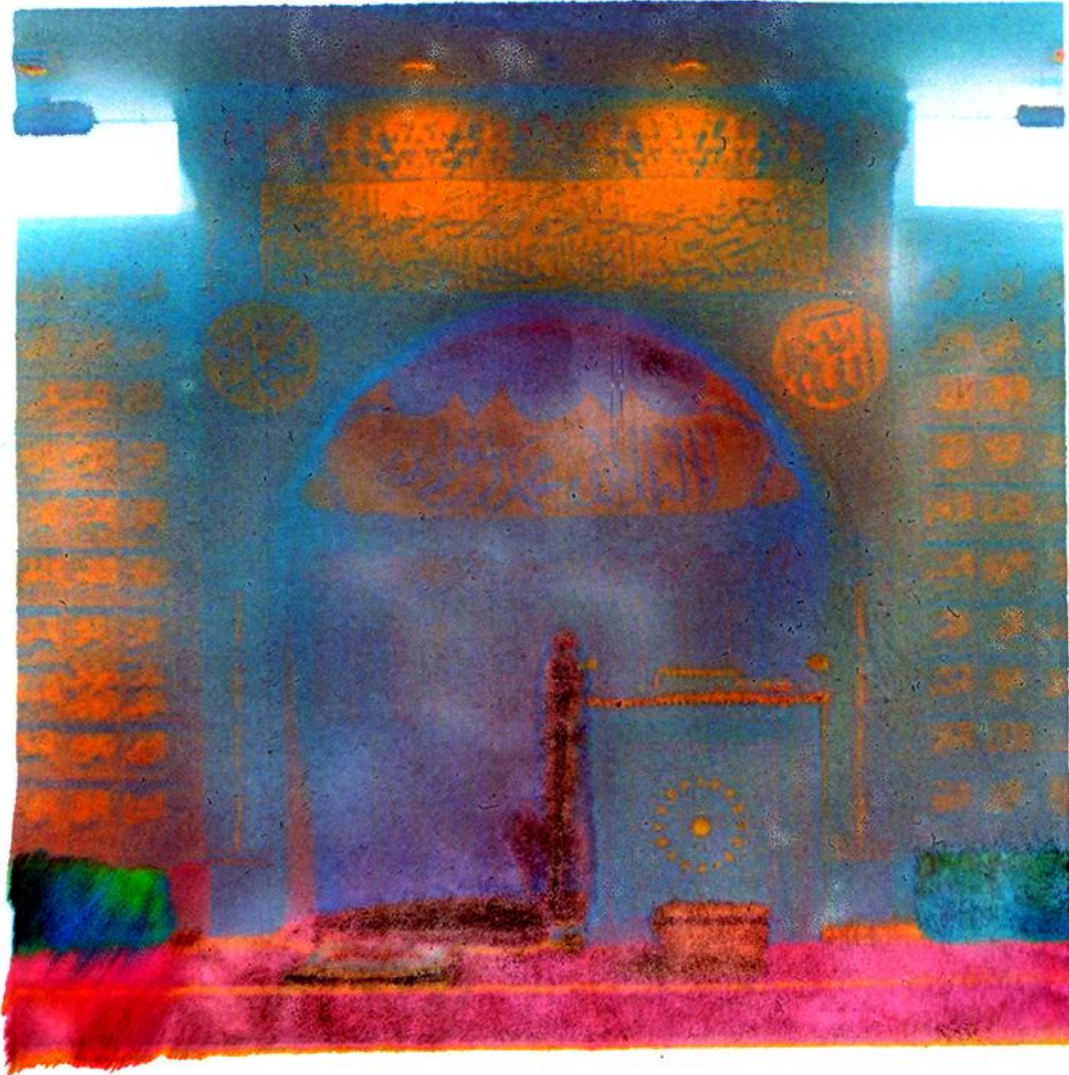


Figure 4f A detail of experimental image technique



Figure 4g Details of experimental image technique

### 3) *Wombing the Mosques : Applying Sufistic Interiority Framework*

Finally, the work comes full circle in reflecting the worshipping body as an embodiment of *Nur*. To translate the wombing of the mosque within the Self, coupled with the rumination of *Nur* reclaiming beauty in losing inward the heart, I began to physically transfer a mosaic of all the 70 mosques *mihrab*, which have underwent the dyeing process unto the female prayer chador (Fig. 4h), at the region near the heart

(Fig. 4i). This prayer chador is subsequently donned by a female subject as she performed the act of prayer amidst a landscape of Singapore, bared as a spectacle of losing before God (Fig. 4j). In the act of submission, the visual landscapes provide a reconciliation of sorts, an inner contemplation of beauty we sought at the beginning of the thesis.



Figure 4h A mosaic comprising the mihrab images undergoing dye process

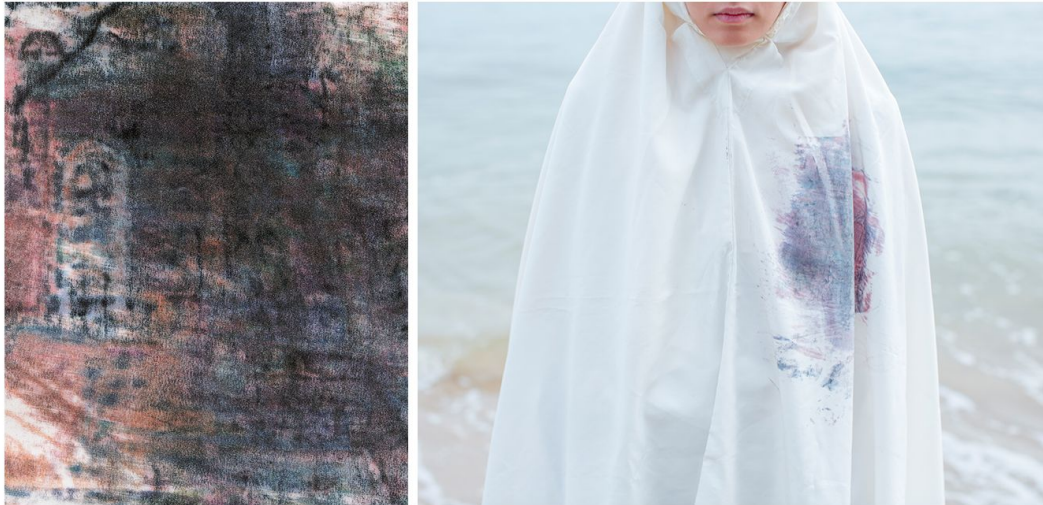


Figure 4i A close up of the overall mosaic, then transferred to prayer chador



Figure 4j Images of the body performing the act of prayer

The performative image-based series end with images of the prayer chador stranded by the shore, with the corporeal Self completely dissipated. This is beneficial in exemplifying the Sufistic ideals of nothingness like *Fanaa* where only God remains that we have uncovered through the analytical forechapters. It provides a significant visual culmination in our trajectory of reclaiming beauty. Alongside this symbolic representation, the series is complemented by a short poem:

*If you told me that the House of God  
exists in the heart of the lover,  
then let me rearrange my veil  
like petals for your feet to kiss  
and let me stand  
before this shore  
like a minaret,  
Manara, lost at sea  
lighthouse to the  
sunken mihrab, let me  
womb these tombs and  
remain the forgotten calls  
and silenced walls,  
all of wounds  
so all I could ever be  
is all of Nur within you.*

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Figure 4k Image of the prayer chador as the remaining material

The complete visual manifestation of **Nur** alongside anecdotal and visual findings throughout the span of the research are compiled into an intimate book form entitled **Journur**; seen more as a prayer-travel journal of sorts. Journur is meant to manifest the research tracks into a more artistic deliverable in order to make the modes of enlightenment more diverse and varied. Alas, it serves to provide a cumulative rendition of both the hermeneutic and heuristic excavations the thesis has embarked on sincere the cradling inquiry. Examples of the physical book, existing in this juncture are seen in Fig. 4l.



Figure 4k Documentation of **Journur**

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of the research, the perpetual search for beauty amidst the lamentation of losing unfurls itself in the convergence between Islamic aesthetics and spirituality, as the contemporary mosques in Singapore becomes the site of observation. The encounters with new wisdom is shaped closely and explored within the parameters of Islamic visual culture and experiences of the Self. The shifts of mosques over time and space today is addressed through the uncovering of *Nur* at stages; historical understanding, analytical processes as well as practical explorations to mirror these allusions.

We learnt that what we are being confronted by is not a cul-de-sacs of contemporary crisis but instead a crossroad— to see change as an impediment for heritage or change as a natural order of identity and it is up to the human psyche to deliberate within this despair. The need to use research as a discovery of wisdom behind losing means we can feel responsibly and rationally; to decipher what we are losing, what led us here to the status quo, how much more of something we can live with and how less we can live without. The thesis is not to prescribe or resolve or even command any which way of seeing—instead it proposes a re-search into the meanings and inner faculties of the soul (*jiwa*) and spirit (*ruh*). While this thesis is but only an extract of paradigm on understanding change, it underscores modes of losing from the physical to the spiritual loss, from the abstraction to the void, from the fluidity to the dying of images— all the while trying to reclaim beauty through Divine Light(*Nur*).

The research offers not an architectural history but on the sentient derivations of being, seeing and feeling hence the autoethnographic approach. Although imbued by subjectivity and a very personal lens at a study, the exploration of the Self and its experiences is seen to be a prime criticality in understanding a notion already subjective in the first place. The research was streamed into two parts as concurrent dialogue between the politics and poetics of sacred space in relation to losing. In the first part, while acknowledging stylistics changes from the time of the prophet mosque, a closer gaze at how Islam is being represented and reflected through the Singapore's current mosques is imparted. Detecting a condition of loss, the second part weaved through Islamic spirituality especially the Sufism framework to reconcile this sentiment as a way towards beauty. This rumination ranges from the centrality of mosque space shifting from its physical sense to being nested into the heart of Man as its Home. In mapping out the feelings philosophically, we understand loss as not just about physical loss but a diving of depths into letting only God remain, in this search for spiritual equilibrium. Ultimately, the mediation occurs with the embodiment of *Nur* through the use of art methods. This is portrayed and translated in my conceptual artwork entitled **Nur**, followed by **Journur** where I embarked on four stages of experiencing the sacred spaces; *seeing, reading, feeling and being* the mosque, in tandem with the theoretical analysis. The research has managed to reveal that there is a beauty in losing through the lens of Islamic spirituality and visual culture and this can be responded with contemporary mosques in Singapore as *situ*, using art approaches and processes.

One way in propagating the enlightenment in losing is by art education as employed through my own experiential research. While we identify light as a symbol of knowledge, in “both the objective or subjective due to its all-pervasiveness, penetrative and unifying power”<sup>194</sup>, I put forth the function of art within this discourse to be of such weight. In sculpting the face of Islam in Singapore today, it is unfortunate that the expression of the Self including the liberation of different perspectives, complexion and definitions have been eclipsed. This is for the argument that that has resulted in the dissolution of Art from the heart of spiritual reach in the Singapore Muslim community. Ideally, expression, exploration and research on Islamic art history, the aesthetics and its correlation to spirituality could be a positive tool to reconcile with contemporary crises like losing and heritage appreciation. On how our visual culture is built by historicity of shifts and changes, on what we chose to let go and keep, all the more representing and chronicling the community of that time.

A degree of cultural amnesia seems to have been invoked over the years towards the 21st century. Ironically, during the early years of the MBF by Muis, it was the use of visual arts that build a veneer of confidence for Muis to garner support for the new generation mosques in the manifestation of the publication, *Muslims in Singapore: A Photographic Portrait* in 1984. It was then used to convince stirring reservations from towards the new way of representing mosques in favour of social

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<sup>194</sup> Martin Lings, *Symbol & Archetype*, 117

transitions.<sup>195</sup> It is hoped that in the urban facades of mosques that have been advanced to represent the Muslims in Singapore today, art notably Islamic art and aesthetics can also be a part of this new lingua franca. The flourishing of art in Southeast Asia in her response to globalisation needs to be taken with much regard in its potential and prowess. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat has surmised how the arts and religion are two of a few encompassing the monumental exigencies in Singapore's expansion of civil society in the cultural sphere.<sup>196</sup> Henceforth, a hibernation on these vein of dialogues would desaturate the vibrancy of the culture merriment here.

It is misguided to claim that art is inconsequential in dealing with matters intimate to Islamic spirituality. While conversations of art within the premise of Islam or even other religious societies in Singapore is bound to be sensitive, it is not a radical concept. In 1992, some 150 artworks from artists across the *Nusantara* submitted their art to the first "Islamic Contemporary Works of Art Exhibition" held in Singapore organised by the Sultan Mosque in collaboration with *Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya* (APAD) in their effort to raise funds for the Sultan Mosque Extension Building Fund.<sup>197</sup> This is a clear example of how it is not as incongruent an idea for such an intermingling. In fact, it allowed for greater conversations within the Muslim community who might have been conditioned against the arts now that it speaks of the

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<sup>195</sup> Green, *Continuing the Legacy*, 10.

<sup>196</sup> Chua Beng Huat, "Liberalization without Democratization: Singapore in the Next Decade" in *Southeast Asian Response to Globalization: Southeast Asian Responses to Globalization: Restructuring Governance and Deepening Democracy*, ed. Francis Loh Kok Wah and Joakim Ojendal (Singapore : ISEAS, 2005), 173.

<sup>197</sup> A. Ghani Hamid, *The Mosque The Art*, 12.

beauty and ideals of the Islamic spirit. In 2001, there is a photographic exhibition entitled “Spirit of the Community: Mosques in Singapore” at the Asian Civilisation Museum<sup>198</sup>. In 2006, the Pakistani artist, Imran Qureshi created a site-specific installation at the Sultan Mosque for the Singapore Biennale edition where visual art intermingles in the mosque domain directly.<sup>199</sup> Few and far between these efforts are publications that serve to give a collective insight into the religious house of worship in its bid towards multicultural living like Lee Geok Boi's *The Religious Monuments of Singapore: Faiths of Our Forefathers* published in 2002. Artistic impressions of mosques serving as archives exist in the form of sketches of places of worship by artist, Dr. Ho Chee Lick, which is also part of a recent publication entitled *Faith in Architecture*, a volume edited by Dr. Gul Inanc containing surveys on multiple religious monuments in Singapore stemming from an undergraduate module at Nanyang Technological University. The stakes of artists in art writing or participation within this margin can be understood through the seminal *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art* edited by Jeffrey Say and Seng Yu Jin.<sup>200</sup> While such gaze nodes into the consciousness of the community, the involvement of art from an introspective angle proves to be lacking from the roleplayers within the mosque ecosystem. Conversations on mosques aesthetics, the

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<sup>198</sup> See article by Yumiko Kamada, “Islamic Art at the Asian Civilisations Museum”, (n.d) at <http://studyres.com/doc/16185682/islamic-art-at-the-asian-civilisations-museum--singapore> on other related exhibitions based at ACM.

<sup>199</sup> Deutsche Bank ArtMag, “In Difficult Situations Art Can Be Really Powerful”, (n.d), <http://db-artmag.de/en/75/feature/the-artist-of-the-year-imran-qureshi-in-an-interview/>

<sup>200</sup> TK Sabapathy, foreword to *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art*, ed. Jeffrey Say and Seng Yu Jin (Singapore: Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2016), viii.

agency of poetics in understanding key challenges as well as vocality of the Self within these tracks are still much an anomaly. Such can be attributed to the lack of regard of art education in the knowledge capacity of the community members. A cursory search of *madrasah* (religious schools) syllabus has shown the absence of art as a subject on its own merit or the introduction of Islamic aesthetics and architecture as well as their roles in Islamic civilisation. The dearth in such exposure institutionalised a negation of art as an irrelevant subject in understanding Islam. Especially in the time of voracious spiritual stigma today, having this perception limits one's rekindling into the poetics of religious consciousness.

Sree Kumar and Sharon Siddique in their critical look at religious diversity honed into the reality that “in this 21st century debate, an important question which has yet to be settled is who has the right to speak for Islam? Religious functionaries, such as mosque officials, religious teachers, and state and federal religious bureaucrats would like to fill this role. But civil society, journalists, academics, students. And even non-Muslim citizens who feel they have a right to express their opinions as stakeholders in the nation, all also feel that they have a right to express their opinions concerning the evolution of the relationship between religion and state in Southeast Asia. Each country's debate is unique.”<sup>201</sup> The meanders of this research has grounded much depths to my inquiry, a thirst to “feel in” more facets of experience and a contribution towards conversations for the future present. From an undergraduate reading an Islamic art and design module to a graduate candidate who elevated practice

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<sup>201</sup> Sree Kumar and Sharon Siddique, *Southeast Asia: The Diversity Dilemma* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2008), 218.

into value-added research, I contemplate the active voice of the artist-researcher within the axis of this discourse. The lack of art exposure in formative years of learning suppresses the innate tendency for most within the epistemology. The urgency and agency to contemplate on such convergence of faith and art cease to exist. It is beneficial to use art practices as the software to the harder religious sciences, as illuminating rays of *Nur*.

### *Unvoiding : Deepening of Universal Experience*

Another vital finding of this research is perceiving loss as mediating agent in erasing engendered divisions and segmentations. Can we then use art practice and humanities research as a tool of public knowledge to promote peace and neutrality in the aftermath of catastrophic events plaguing the world? With the ongoing iconoclastic mission of the Islamic State that logs head with cultural artefacts, UNESCO's bid to conserve and the large-scale displacement of human population in the refugee crisis, perhaps the fluidity of the center can be re-assessed with regard to visual culture and ways of re-coding meanings.

One can also yearn that the margins of Islamic experience can position itself as valuable in the understanding of heritage / conservation studies. One definite way is to see the aesthetics and sensations of the mosque ecosystem as Intangible Cultural Heritage as purported by the National Heritage Board, where new focus in policy-making and tailoring can be modelled after these new ways of seeing and feeling. This can hopefully encourage concerning bodies like Muis to augment the

aesthetic experience, awareness and knowability for the future generation of worshipper.

I was in Edirne as I weaved through the remnants of this thesis, overwhelmed by Mimar Sinan's greatest marvel the Selimiye Mosque but by evening, even more intrigued by the placidity of the Complex of Sultan Bayezid II Health Museum where scent, water and music as healing agents in traditional Ottoman medicine. Perhaps, there is more to be explored when dealing with the soul's response towards aesthetics— that above the visual, there is also the sonal, material and aural facets; tracks that can be expanded in future for instance, the role of the *adhan* as sound aesthetics or the sensorial culture of material; say from wood, to concrete, to fabric in fathoming attitudes of losing. This led me back to my experience back home in Al-Islah mosque at Punggol where the prayer space was bordered by a pond, you can hear the *Imam* reciting the verses of the *Quran* while the water trickles. I could not help being reminded of the Gardens of Paradise described in the *Quran*. This relation, though coincidental as it may be, offers hope that convergence between Islamic aesthetic and modern State rhetoric, say as a garden city, may find congruence. The idea of void in attaining the interiorization of mosque spaces and Singapore's synonymity with void decks in communal living is hard to ignore.

Commencing the introductory chapter with the quandary of unity and multiplicity in Islamic art, it is opportune to close with an appeal for diversity within the fray of inter / intra religious conversations using the very essence in the art of losing. Losing allows more room for different ideologies to mesh harmoniously,

without stringent placemakers. In fact, there is much parallel between the ideas conceived through the research and other esoteric ideologies like Buddhism. In Hesse's *Siddhartha*<sup>202</sup>, *Nirvana* is attained as blown-out smear of light, where nothing else exists, except the *Om* in meditation. This can be likened to the act of closing your eyes in deep prayer in the mosque, that as visibility recedes, you connect with the most unseen. That when we see nothing, we see everything. Like how mandalas are said to be built by monks, but upon completion and prayers, destroyed<sup>203</sup>. The profundity lies in the transitory where only the intangibility of prayer remains. The universality of *Nur* runs deep. It reminds me too, of the meditation room across few international airport halls, where no one of the religion stands out but carved out are spaces of neutrality in diversity, immersed in syncretization. The irony is not lost here as the airport is a place of departures and also arrivals— in line with the thesis arc.

Allow me to conclude this thesis with a reiteration of the final scene from the Sufi film *Bab'Aziz —The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul* directed by Nacer Khemir in 2005.<sup>204</sup> As the scene unfurls, all the individuals were seen in their own spaces; in between mud-houses, in alleyways, intricate webs of journeys; they each had carried or

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<sup>202</sup> Hermann Hesse and Stanley Appelbaum, *Siddhartha* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999).

<sup>203</sup> Sister Joan Chittister, “The Mandala: Why Do Monks Destroy It?,” *Huffpost (blog)*, November 20, 2011 (3:28 p.m.), [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sister-joan-chittister-osb/mandala-why-destroy-it\\_b\\_970479.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sister-joan-chittister-osb/mandala-why-destroy-it_b_970479.html)

<sup>204</sup> Set in Persian language, this film is about a journey of a blind man, Bab Aziz who traversed in the desert with his granddaughter to be at the gathering of dervishes. In his journey they met many similar passengers of this world as the narrative weaved in the poetic essence of many Sufi mystics like Rumi. In the penultimate scene, the search for a lady called Nour by one of the characters came to fruition at the gathering of Sufis.

were surrounded by candle, flame, lamp. Them and their *Nur*. As the scene transited to the last one where the main protagonist, Bab Aziz reached his destination which in reality, is the meeting with God, he described the fate of death as his “marriage with eternity”. It ended with the exchange of dialogue about death between Bab Aziz and Hasan, the companion witnessing this “wedding”:

*“But there can’t be light in death  
because it is the end of everything.”*

***“How can death be the end of something  
that does not have a beginning?”***

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