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Aesthetic Acculturation of the Architectural Style of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque as a Key Identity of Acehese Culture

Nur Rusyda Hannah binti Ismaizam ^{*1} Abdul Hamid AbuSulayman ²

¹⁻² International Islamic University Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract

Baiturrahman Grand Mosque of Aceh is one of the mosques that existed in Southeast Asia. It is very old compared to other mosques which indicated that this mosque had been through a lot for a long time. Besides, the discussion can cover many areas even from its foundation until its utilization. As for the history, the mosque had adopted its designs from outside since the Dutch's intervention until the present. This then raises a problem of unfamiliarity for the locals in recognizing themselves to the particular mosque. Therefore, this study is aimed to investigate the benefit that Acehese gets in terms of the identity from the mixed architecture style of the mosque. Furthermore, to achieve this aim, this thesis applies historical methodology and in a descriptive way. Also library research that prioritizes the secondary sources such as journal articles, books, websites and others, are included. As a result, the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque still holds the identity of the locals in its architecture despite the practice of eclecticism. With that being said, this research can bring a new context about the mosque. The education about the mosque can be emphasized which makes people feel more obligated to take care of the building. It is then expected for this research to be one of the sources for any topics that are related with the mosque.

Keywords: Mosque, architecture, eclecticism, identity, locals, traditional and colonial

1. Introduction

Baiturrahman Grand Mosque of Aceh is one of the tourist attractions that must be visited if there are tourists coming to Aceh. Also it is considered as the main icon for Aceh. To begin with, this mosque is a symbol of Islamic influence. Pemerintah Aceh stated that Aceh was the first place to receive Islam in Indonesia until the first Islamic kingdoms in the state emerged.¹ However, the glory phase of Islam could be found during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda who also left the Baiturrahman Grand Mosques as one of heritages from his empire, Aceh Sultanate. At that time, Aceh was very famous with the name of *Serambi Mekkah* or porch of Mecca. Mi'raj News Agency added that the reason for the concept of the place was because the pilgrims would stop by Aceh before they continued their journey to the holy places to perform *haji*.²

Besides, the terms of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, Islam and Aceh are tied together. This is because this relation is what makes it different from other provinces in Indonesia. Having its peak from the Aceh Sultanate and encountering a conflict with the Dutch, the Government of Indonesia recognized the status of Aceh and declared it as a Special Province. As a result, according to Pemerintah Aceh, Aceh currently has its own autonomy to rule.³ Also this further

*Corresponding author: rusyda.ismaizam000@gmail.com

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helped the Acehnese to enforce the *hudud* law that became controversial to the world. Moreover, the Acehnese were more into fully practising Islam after they were hit by a massive tsunami in December 2004 which is said to be a lesson for the Muslims who were far from Islam.

On the other hand, in terms of the role of a mosque, Utaberta et al. took the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad which could be understood as every place that we pray is called the mosque.⁴ This shows that the mosque is primarily for the Muslims to do Islamic practices. Besides, the authors also concluded that the mosque was functioning to assist the life of the Muslims resulting from the evidence of the prophet and companions in building mosques for the welfare of the people.⁵ An example from Ali Yusuf's article of a mosque that serves for the Muslims was Tgk Di Anjong Mosque during Aceh Sultanate in which the pilgrims went there to learn *haji* laws when they transited at *Serambi Mekah*.⁶ Moreover, the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque performs the same role but there are some unique features that make it different from other mosques.

2. Literature Review

The first article that used for this study is “*Elemen Fisik Masjid Baiturrahman Banda Aceh sebagai Pembentuk Karakter Visual Bangunan* (Physical Elements of Baiturrahman Mosque Banda Aceh as Forming Visual Character of the Building)” by Rihan Rizaldy Wibowo in 2017. This paper highlights the essential part that constructed the building and it also provides a brief history of the mosque. For its history, the author only focused on the foundation of the mosque during Sultanate Aceh and also its burning by the Dutch in the colonial times.⁷ Moreover, the author also concluded that the mosque underwent a renovation of its important domes from the 1930s to 1990s. Meanwhile, since it is already mentioned in the title about the components becoming an appearance to the mosque, only basic elements of the mosque were described. Therefore, this study can explain the early development of the mosque alongside the necessary architecture that the mosque has. However, it can be argued that this article did not provide enough information in the architecture field as the mosque had also other prominent details to be explained to.

On the other hand, another article is entitled “Architectural Heritage in Post-Disaster Society: A Tool For Resilience in Banda Aceh After the 2004 Tsunami Disaster.” It was presented by Cut Dewi and Era Nopera Rauzi. This study used a method of interview to examine the roles of heritage buildings that could encourage the locals to recover quickly from the tragedy in 2004.⁸ The Baiturrahman Grand Mosque was also included in the institutions' part. Besides, the questions in the interview were basically based on two main ideas. Firstly, the survivors would find any heritage buildings that survived first as they were common for them. Lastly, the cultural buildings, mainly mosques that served protection, could encourage people to live after enduring the challenge. Thus, this research is essential to show that the Baiturrahman Mosque became important to the Acehnese after the tsunami hit.

One of the papers that is accessed online is “Eclecticism on the Masjid Building (Case Study: Baiturrahman Great Masjid, Banda Aceh City)” by R Maulida, N M Siahaan and I F Pane. This research is using a qualitative approach and more focused on the development of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque in the time of renovation that was done by the Dutch. To reconstruct the burned mosque, the imperial power adopted many architecture styles but prioritized the Mughal style more into the institution.⁹ Furthermore, it is possible to have other styles from outside as the concept of eclecticism was practiced. Based on B Loren's statement, eclecticism is an approach that accepts all knowledge in which later they will be put into one single structure only. In brief, this study provides detailed information about the design of the mosque.

Besides, Julaihi Wahid and Bambang Karsono wrote an article named “Alternative to Dome as a Symbol of Masjid and its Influence in Indonesian Masjid Design.” It is commonly known that the dome is what we identify as a mosque. To begin with, the authors explained how the domes were far from the Islamic aspect but finally became part of the Islam civilization.¹⁰ Furthermore, they also described how Indonesia's traditional roof got replaced by the domes under the rule of the Dutch. This then apparently became a significant decoration in building a mosque in which the government later continued this decoration. Some even combined the traditional one with the dome.¹¹ In addition, the researchers were very good in giving extensive examples of mosques that used domes in Indonesia. Therefore, this article is beneficial in describing the dome and its importance to Islam.

Furthermore, ““Kota Madani”: Islamism of Urban Planning in Banda Aceh” from Cut Dewi again. This is also another article that analyzes the changes that were made to the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. The concept of “Kota Madani” can be comprehended as an Islamic city with equality as the main goal.¹² Besides, the author claimed that it can give special status to the Acehnese compared to other Indonesians based on architecture and also Islam that the locals practice fully. This was then implemented in the No.4 year 2009 of Banda Aceh shortly after the tsunami in 2004 that highlighted the formation of Banda Aceh as an Islamic city which was the key to the recovery of calamity. Although this research is seen as not relevant much to the case of the mosque, somehow it brings the core influence of the current development of the mosque. This can be seen with the massive renovation of the mosque’s surroundings that were dominated by the Middle East style. In brief, the policy is worth to be explained in the research in terms of the development of the mosque until now.

Moreover, Khairudin Aljunied made a research called “Not Just a House to Honour God”: Mosques in the Malay World as Cosmopolitan Spaces”. In this paper, the researcher described how the mosques involved all people whether they are the Muslims or not by holding to the idea of tolerance.¹³ He also provided a detailed story on the early involvement of imperial powers directly and indirectly into the development of the mosques. Then, there was an emphasis on the concept that was mentioned before. It can be understood as the believers do not threaten the people from other religions when they protect their religious institutions.¹⁴ In the case of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, Aljunied did discuss the institution in the aspect of the non-Muslims. However, he did not give further explanation as his writing focused more on the general perspective of mosques and not specific ones. Despite that, Aljunied’s article still helped in contributing to this final project.

Finally, the last article for this literature review is “Stakeholder’s Perceptions about Sustainable Tourism in the Main Attraction of Banda Aceh Halal Tourism (Baiturrahman Great Mosque)” by Muhammad Baiquni and Heriani. First and foremost, it is stated that Aceh Province is one of the three places that promoted the Halal tourism in Indonesia.¹⁵ In terms of sustainable tourism, Jenkins then defines it as the sector that is more focused on environmental conservation for travel.¹⁶ Since the government decided to renovate the mosque, prominent changes can be seen from 2015 to 2017.¹⁷ This resulted in different views from the stakeholders especially when it comes to the sustainable mosque of idea in tourism. Meanwhile, the authors also mentioned the perspective of the economic, social as well as the non-Muslims about the mosque as one of the tourism places. Therefore, this article could be discussed more in this paper.

Based on this literature review, we can see how these articles relate to each other. Full information is found from them regarding the mosque which can be the main references to this research. Besides, a new problem can be identified from the relations. The mosque was developing over the years but the society’s status had still become a concern. Hence, this literature review can be a good starter for this paper.

3. Research Methods

This research is qualitative in nature since this study is using historical methodology in which the evidence can be found from the primary and secondary sources. However, in this case, it is based on the secondary sources only. Since this thesis also touched on the early development of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque in the 17th century and as early as in the 13th century, it is impossible to find the primary sources, especially about the mosque. The mosque’s design in the sultanate needs to be explained in order to give a comparison with the current architecture of the mosque. Hence, some images about the institution in the era also could not be found and only depended on the available references to know how the mosque was built.

On the other hand, considering that the mosque is highlighted in the title, a descriptive approach is the best way to explain the progress of the establishment of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. Furthermore, the chapters are also described in the same way as they are related to each other. Besides, library research is the most suitable method to find the data collection. A lot of journal articles, books, conference papers, magazines, online news and government websites that discussed this topic. These sources are quite recent as the mosque still exists and studied until now. Therefore, this is beneficial for the study to have strong justifications about the mosque.

Moreover, this study is not intended to explain about the history of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque only as many researches had already included about it, but to give another focus on the building itself in affecting all people. Thus, it is emphasized that this research is to investigate the impacts based on the history of the development of the mosque. Besides, the mosque is chosen to be the area of study since it is closely related to the locals. Also the period that covered it is literally from its sultanate era in the 17th century until its presence.

4. Discussion

4.1. Definition of Architecture & Islamic Architecture

Before explaining about the architecture style of a certain institution, the definition of the architecture should be understood first. According to Janetius, architecture is a discipline of a construction of a building and its area using a specific characteristic to achieve the aim of why the institution is built.¹⁸ On the other hand, Omer also gave a good explanation in terms of the Islamic architecture.¹⁹ The architecture must be related to Islam in which the Muslims could practice their religion through the buildings. Also it may give meaning of art in the Muslims' way of life. Since the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque already represented the religion, this chapter will disclose how the identity of Aceh is present in its style.

4.2. Transition from the Traditional to Colonial Mosque

Taking from Ahmad and Basri's statement in Md Saa'id and Hassan's article, there are two kinds of mosques in Malaysia which are the traditional and colonial mosques.²⁰ The first one was made by the native people while the last one was built during the reign of imperial powers in which the architecture style was taken from other places like the Middle East, Morocco and India. Despite their research only related to another country's mosque which is the Zahir Mosque, their explanation can still give another insight that the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque of Aceh, was the colonial mosque. This is due to the Dutch already rebuilding it from the tragic incident. As it underwent full transformation, it could be said that there was no trace of the originality anymore for the building. Moreover, in this subtopic, it is intended to explain how the mosque transformed from becoming a traditional building to a colonial one in the perspective of architecture.

As for the traditional time, Nasir stated that there were two illustrations of the mosque that were made by the Dutch before the mosque was renovated. The first one, which was in the 17th century, was not drawn properly and the artist became unknown. Meanwhile, the last one was more clear and was done by a painter named Francois Valentijn in the 18th century.²¹ Both drawings were important because it emphasized the actual building of the mosque. In the unidentified Dutch's sketch, the mosque had a five layered roof commonly known as *atap tumpang*. There were also two buildings built around the mosque. The first one was unknown but people constructed its roofs of two layers in the pyramid shape which is called as *perabung lima*. Also the other one was a madrasah that had the same roof like the previous one but its style adopted the design of Joglo house. In contrast to the Valentijn's work of art, he gave an accurate calculation of the mosque's floor. The area was estimated to be 42.70 metres x 42.70 metres which made the mosque a bit huge compared to other mosques since others were as big as half of the mosque.



Figure 1. The unknown Dutch's sketch on the mosque (Source: Nasir, 2004)

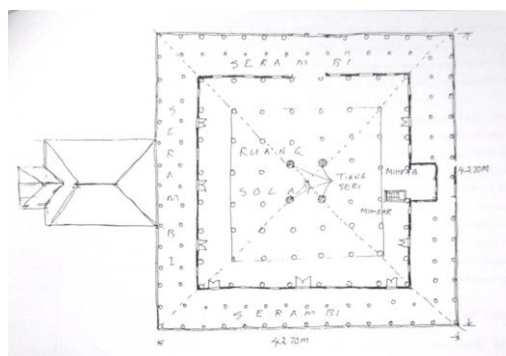


Figure 2. Valentjin's drawing on the mosque (Source: Nasir, 2004)

On the other hand, Wibowo's research indicated the new style of the mosque.²² In his article, he focused on four elements which are the roofs, doors, minarets and columns. Firstly, the seven Mughal-styled domes were black in colour to show the value of high spirituality. There were also gable roofs made to adapt with the weather in that region. Secondly, the doors consisted of three large wooden doors with ornaments. Furthermore, the ornaments that were carved to the doors, allowed light into and out of the mosque which brought a beautiful view. Thirdly, the main tower that became the main attraction as they were built in front of the mosque. Also it was built after other four towers whose design were from the Mughal Dynasty. Lastly, the art of the concrete columns that had Islamic special decoration. They were painted in white to highlight the cleanliness and purity. This showed that there was a high effort to put in these features.



Figure 3. Main doors of the mosque (Source: <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2021/04/29/masjid-raja-baiturrahman-jantung-dan-hatinya-orang-aceh>)



Figure 4. Main tower of the mosque (Source: <https://www.hasanusimuhammad.com/2022/11/biaya-naik-ke-menara-masjid-raja.html>)

Besides, Maulida, Siahaan and Pane added that the Acehnese at first did not accept the new Baiturrahman Grand Mosque by the Dutch because they viewed the floor shape of the mosque as like a cross.²³ However, it was reasoned by De Bruins who proposed the plan. In fact, he actually did it unintentionally and only followed the design that became popular at that time which was from the Indische Empire Style. Meanwhile, as for the windows, its upper part was decorated with flower art and finished with orthogonal geometry from Egypt at the bottom.²⁴ Also the geometric style in the mosque was part of Acehnese culture although there were no claims by De Bruins. In addition, the pilasters were derived from the Moorish design of Cordoba mosque. Actually it was not the same as the latter one which was shaped like a horseshoe but rather it was made like onions. Also the pilaster in the Aceh mosque was only performed as a decoration whereas the mosque in Cordoba was functional to form the building. In my opinion, the similarity is probably because of the existence of the pilasters itself that were built side by side which can also be found in other mosques.

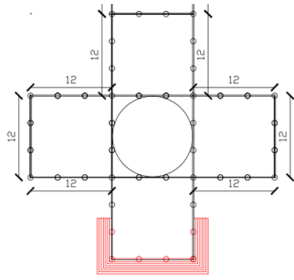


Figure 5. De Bruins' plan for the mosque is like a cross (Source: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/452/1/012006/pdf>)



Figure 6. Window of the mosque (Source: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/452/1/012006/pdf>)



Figure 7. Pilasters in the mosque as decoration (Source: https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g317109-d2068613-i164505652-Baiturrahman_Grand_Mosque-Banda_Aceh_Aceh_Sumatra.html)

Since the domes gave a big change to the mosque, Wahid and Karsono claimed this element had a big influence on the mosques in Indonesia.²⁵ Actually the domes came from Mesopotamia Civilization.²⁶ However, the Christians did not recognize the dome as the main feature for their religious institution and also the main sources of Islam did not state about the dome being a part of the mosque. Besides, the Indonesia traditional style of a storied roof (atap tumpang) started to change during the remodelling of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. This can be seen with the example from Figure 13. Moreover, according to Maulida, Siahaan and Pane, the domes from the Mughal Dynasty like the Taj Mahal and also this Aceh mosque were only a style.²⁷ It was not similar to the dome in the Roman Pantheon Temple that functioned to give a room in the building which is shown in figure 14 and figure 15.



Figure 8. Example of storied roof from Demak Great Mosque (Source: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/gaya-hidup/20210503162827-269-637985/legenda-pintu-penangkal-petir-di-masjid-agung-demak>)

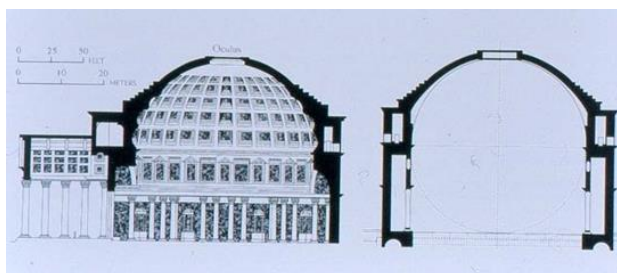


Figure 9. Dome in Temple Pantheon (Source: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/452/1/012006/pdf>)

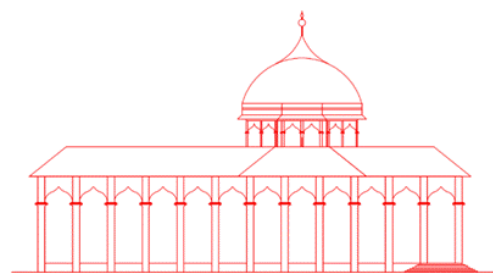


Figure 10. Dome in Baiturrahman Grand Mosque of Aceh (Source: <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/452/1/012006/pdf>)

Meanwhile, based on Dewi's article, the government of Aceh Province was very determined to make Aceh as Kota Madani or Islamic City.²⁸ This consequently made the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque as the representative in the city. Also it helped the plan as it became a main centre since there were no other attractions near it. By doing so, the elements from Middle East was prioritized to the mosque especially towards its surrounding. This can be seen with the specific feature of the umbrellas that were similar with the ones in the Nabawi Mosque of Medina. Moreover, a visitor in Masrol's paper said that the existence of the umbrellas could provide a feeling of familiarity of visiting the Prophet Mosque for those who already went there.²⁹ Also it may give a kind of preparation for the visitors who still did not have a chance to perform *Hajj* or *'Umrah*.

4.3. Trends of Architecture Style & Influence to the Other Mosques

Apart from the traditional and colonial mosque, there is also a modern mosque which is widely used around the world currently. In Aljunied' research, Ahmad concluded that this third type of the mosque imitated designs from Western Asia ranging from the 1950s until at this moment.³⁰ In my point of view, the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque was also considered as the contemporary mosque since it also adopted a similar approach based on a renovation policy by Governor Zaini Abdullah in 2015. However, the mosque should be overall acknowledged as the colonial mosque more due to still maintaining most of the elements from the colonial period. Speaking of acquiring mixed architecture style, it is then a bit impossible to determine how Acehese culture prevails in the architecture of the mosque considering its style is only slightly present there.

Based on Nasir's book, the Indonesians tended to mix the architecture style from the traditional and modern one.³¹ Therefore, in the perspective of identity, it could be said that having many designs from one's own and other places actually became the character of Acehese. Also the Dutch's intervention in the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque might have become the cause for their custom. Besides, Frazer's claim in Omer's paper proved the tendency in which the Islamic architecture is not about the representative of society and worldly affairs, but to represent the religion of Islam and worldview.³² So, that is why all available patterns are not given exclusive rights to a certain group. In addition, Omer further described that the architecture should bring benefit to the people based on why the building is built.³³ Hence, the identity of Acehese must depend on the value and history of the mosque itself considering their struggles and achievements could be seen from the institution.

On the other hand, the architecture of Baiturrahman Grand Mosque also influences other mosques in Aceh. Fakriah was focused more on the West of Aceh when she did the research about this matter. The scope was then based on the onion domes, round keel arch door and column, cylindrical minaret, and types of ornament in front of the mosque.³⁴ As a result, the majority of the mosques imitated almost all of the elements except the minaret. The reason is because the Indonesians did not prioritize the minaret in the construction of the mosque which can be seen in most of the mosques in West Aceh not having minarets. The mosque that followed closely with the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque was the Baitul Makmur Meulaboh Grand Mosque from 25 mosques that were subjected to the research. Although the study was only for a certain area of Aceh, it could be stated the mosque became a reference to the creation of new Islamic worship places.



Figure 16. Baitul Makmur Meulaboh Grand Mosque (Source: <https://www.alamy.com/baitul-makmur-meulaboh-grand-mosque-is-the-largest-mosque-in-the-western-coast-of-meulaboh-city-aceh-province-indonesia-image182476498.html>)

4.4. Concept of Islamic City only Limits the Natural Environment of the Mosque

Since “Kota Madani” focused more on the Islamic perspective and modern influence which is the architecture taken into the renovation plan of 2015 to the mosque, it could be a new problem in terms of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque's natural environment. In Baiquni and Heriani's article, although it is stated that Aceh Province is one of the three places that promoted the Halal tourism in Indonesia, still that cannot be said for sustainable tourism.³⁵ According to Jenkins, sustainable tourism is the sector that is more focused on environmental conservation when it comes to travel.³⁶ The authors also explained that the only greenery that could be seen was the green park in the middle of the mosque's surroundings while other land got replaced by white cement floors.³⁷ This showed that the mosque did not consider much about nature from being its part.



Figure 17. Greenery with a pond on the cement covered land (Source: <https://www.djkn.kemenkeu.go.id/kpknl-bandaaceh/baca-artikel/15601/Napak-Tilas-Masjid-Raya-Baiturrahman-Aceh-Simbol-Agama-Budaya-dan-Perjuangan-Rakyat-Aceh.html>)

Furthermore, the environmental issue resulted in new negative discussions and views by others, especially from the shareholders. One of them who was only known as WA mentioned that the trees must remain and not be cut during the renovation because they had their own importance to the history of Aceh.³⁸ He further described that there was once a tree named Kohler Tree or Geulumpang Tree due to the Acehnese successfully killing General Kohler under the tree. Besides, the umbrellas that replaced the garden were not attractive. Even the hot floors only brought inconvenience to the visitors and worshippers. Thus, it reflects that the improvements done by the government who intended to bring more benefit and beautification, also had their own flaws.

Besides, the Aceh Government did not seek consent from the citizens regarding the renovation plan.³⁹ This can create some dissatisfaction if the majority of the netizens disapprove of it. Moreover, Dewi and Rauzi also wrote that the remodelling of the cultural buildings should be taken carefully.⁴⁰ The reason is because these institutions are usually the main places for the people of Aceh to do their usual tasks. Therefore, the repairment must not contrast with the desire of the

people. Failing to do so might weaken the motivation of the victims to move on from the tsunami. This theory is important so that the government can make it as a reference for any unpredictable disaster that happens in the future. In addition, the environment also should be considered when it comes to the improvement of the building since it can bring calmness for those who see the greenery.

5. Conclusion

In brief, adopting many architectural styles does not necessarily mean that the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque can not bring a sense of familiarity to the people of Aceh. In fact, it added more of the feeling of belonging for the locals as its development also contributed to the existence of Acehnese and Islam until now. Besides, this special approach made the mosque a role model to the mosques in Aceh. Nonetheless, giving a high focus to the construction until ignoring the surroundings can invite a bad view from the environmental aspect. This is because some people might believe that the trees must be built along with the architectural building. Thus, in spite of the fact that there was an issue with the limit of greenery, the mosque still represents the identity of Aceh.

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