

# Symbolic Meanings in Mosques and Churches: Fusion of the Padma Flower Ornament into the Worship Structures in Java, Indonesia

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## Abstract

The Padma flower ornament, inspired by plants, was commonly found on religious buildings of Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant faiths. The Padma flower was popular during the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Indonesia, particularly on Java, where cultural, religious, and social diversity converge. The diversity of ornament visibly shown on the buildings represented expressions of life in various eras. This research explores the diversity of forms, functions and meanings conveyed in the physical structures of Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant religious heritage buildings during the pre-colonial and colonial periods on the island of Java.

It employed qualitative research methods. A literature survey was used together with an examination of documents to identify the outcomes of previous research. Data was also collected through observations, and interviews. Findings show the integration of local culture with the new religion in those places of worship.

It concludes that the Padma flower ornament originated from the influence of Hindu and Buddhist teachings in earlier times. Ornaments show that Indonesia, particularly the island of Java, is a region where cultural, religious, and social diversity intersect. However, the monolithic nature of culture does not affect the cultural life of the region.

**Keywords:** Padma Flower Ornament, Houses of Worship Buildings, Java Island, Symbols

## Introduction

Javanese culture is characterized by a philosophy and worldview focused on divine values, representing a well-established product. According to Haryanto (2013) and Santosa (2006), this system had reached the pinnacle of the formation process. Javanese culture is also the convergence point for various religions, cultures, and migrations, leading to acculturation. Bell (2023) stated that migration is the main driver of acculturation. The effects led to cultural, religion, and social transformations, influencing the local cultural heritage.

Islam was embraced through a dissemination method that respects local culture and traditions, while the initial introduction of Christianity adopted a Christianization process synonymous with colonialism. The process applied a dissemination strategy that accommodated local cultures. In the early period, Catholic theology underwent pribumisasi, or indigenization with Javanese culture (Maulana, 2020). Places of worship also played a role in religious propagation, which is evident in hybrid forms, including the architecture and ornament found in these buildings. For example, the Padma flower ornament possesses a philosophical meaning implying goodness, based on the religious perspective, as depicted in the way of life.

In the past, the Padma flower ornament adorned the architecture of worship buildings among Islamic, Catholic, and Christian communities. Despite the significant use of these symbols, there has been a lack of comparative exploration across religious buildings. Therefore, this research aims to examine the presence and significance of the Padma flower ornament in mosques and churches on the island of Java. Its objective is to identify the various forms, functions, and meanings influencing these ornaments in the existing buildings.

### Theoretical Framework

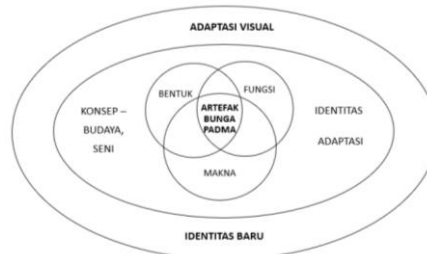
Incorporation of ornament into architecture arises from the need of people for symbolism. These decorative elements, categorized as design hold profound significance in the research of visual culture, representing formal figures. The creative process is complex and is influenced by several factors, including government policies, societal mindset, political ideology, visual education systems, evolving aesthetic philosophies, and the collective worldviews (Sachari, 2007). Ornaments and symbols are closely interconnected, often representing life or reflecting specific historical periods (Mangunwijaya, 2013). The rich meaning and historical values are valuable sources of learning in human life (Rosyid, 2022; Schiffer, 2022). Therefore, even inanimate objects such as buildings are considered the embodiments of humanity, reflecting the ideologies and visions of the architects.

The consistent openness of Indonesia to embrace diverse cultures and civilizations worldwide is evident in previous research analyzing the use of the Padma flower ornament in different places of worship, particularly on the island of Java. Laurens (2014) stated that inculturation in the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus blended traditional Javanese architectural styles with the Padma flower ornament on the central pillars made of andesite pedestals. However, Rosyid (2021) stated that acculturation in the Langgar Dalem Mosque preserved Hindu and Buddhist traditions by cultivating the Padma flower ornament in the mihrab. The influence of using the Padma flower ornament is not solely derived from the pre-Novandri (2016) stated that the Immanuel Church, influenced by European style due to colonialism, adored the ceiling with Waterlily flower ornament, symbolizing the goddess of light influenced by Ancient Egypt. The widespread use of the Padma flower ornament across different religious sites reflects the philosophical significance of conveying messages of goodness in various places of worship.

Artifacts reflect cultures, comprising symbols, characters, and languages spoken by the nation (Damayanti, 2019). Preliminary research focused on the interplay between the form and symbols of artifacts and the integration within the social system and governmental organization. In addition, expressions change along with new ideas embraced from outside the community (Sucitra, 2018; Sunarya, 2018). Monroe theory, described three fundamental characteristics of the aesthetic nature of an artifact, namely complexity, unity, and intensity. According to the Monroe theory, complexity holds particular significance, proven in diverse forms and functions such as the Padma flower ornament adorning Islamic, Catholic, and Christian religious buildings during the pre-colonial and colonial periods on Java Island.

The Padma flower ornament found in these places of worship show distinctiveness in form and function. Despite drawing inspiration from ornamental plant, each adaptation shows unique visual characteristics. In addition, the placement within the architectural context determines the diverse functions. Variations in application methods and materials further contributed to the individuality. The unity referred to in the theory focused on the dual nature of the Padma flower ornament, both aesthetic embellishment and structural integration within

the building. Therefore, any alteration to these characteristic risks compromises the essence of the structure. The intensity of the Padma flower ornament on the buildings manifest through repetitive patterns or as focal points, portraying the desired visual message. Sumardjo (2014) says that meaning, value, and influence of using the Padma flower ornament is deeply rooted in philosophy and cultural art. Symbols exceed mere representation, instead conveying fundamental concepts. Therefore, the expression of symbols is important for the intended meaning to be showed. This conceptual framework is shown in the Figure 1.



**Fig. 1:** Adaptation Concept Analysis Model

Source: Modification from Haldani, 2013

Irrespective of the previous research on ornaments and symbolism, there is a significant gap in exploring the use of the Padma flower ornament in three houses of worship with different beliefs. In addition, there is a lack of investigation into the similarities in the messages of goodness conveyed through the various forms and functions of these ornament.

## Research Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative method using a literature review. This method was presumed appropriate due to the multifaceted nature of the cultural aspects under investigation, comprising tangible and intangible elements. It included the exploration of concepts related to form and function, as well as the interpretation of meanings inherent in the design.

The research method is divided into two components (1) qualitative and (2) literature review. This division was based on the complex relationship between ornament and symbolism, comprising tangible and intangible elements concerning form, function, and meaning. Therefore, it is essential to integrate concepts related to form and function while interpreting meanings inherent in the design.

The qualitative method adopted the following techniques (1) Inspection, (2) interviews, and (3) documentation discussions. The research focused on examining the form and function of the Padma flower ornament within three places of worship in the Java Island, including the physical phenomena of these buildings. The places of worship examined are the Gedhe Kauman Mosque, Yogyakarta, Sunan Giri Mosque, Immanuel Protestant Church, Jakarta, and Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, Ganjuran. Documentation was carried out using cameras and video equipment to capture visual details. Explorations were conducted to assess the existence, condition, and physical phenomena of the Padma flower ornament in the three places of worship. Interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024 with relevant parties, such as archaeologists and architects, to ensure comprehensive insights and accurate conclusions. In addition, the documentation discussion was enriched through literature review methods.

Literature review method was systematically carried out by (1) identifying, (2) evaluating, and (3) integrating previous research outcomes. It started with systematic mapping to gather data from reputable journals, followed by a logical review, including the search for relevant information in proceedings and books to synthesize the research findings. In-depth literature searches were conducted using search filters. During this stage, observations focused on three specific buildings, namely the Demak Great Mosque, Sang Cipta Rasa Mosque of Cirebon, Langgar Dalem Mosque Kudus, and Masjid Agung Surakarta. Literature discussion started with a preliminary review to gain general knowledge, followed by a detailed examination of the main review.

Places of worship in the island of Java during the Pre-Colonial and Colonial eras hold insightful historical significance and educational values. Integration of local culture into new religious practices was observed in ornament embellishing these structures, even though the forms and functions may differ.

## Findings and the Discussion

Migration facilitates cultural acculturation in new environments, impacting architectural forms and religious practices (Bell, 2023; Armansyah, 2022). Driven by the pursuit of quality life, migration prompts individuals to adapt to new surroundings. This adaptation process is crucial to cultural evolution, enabling migrants to integrate into the new environment effectively. Moreover, migration plays a significant role in introducing new religions, as proven by the construction of worship places, which served as a testament to the dynamic spread of religious beliefs in specific regions.

Places of worship significantly influence the urban landscape of Java, portraying deep historical significance and imparting valuable insights into human life (Rosyid, 2022). It comprised both conceptual and physical meanings related to social functions, representing the interaction between humans and the environment, leading to the creation of meaningful symbols.

Symbols serve as agreed-upon representations, depicting horizontal-immanent and transcendent meanings, including horizontal-vertical relationships (Haris, 2019; Wardani, 2010). Design, perceived as a transcendental medium, introduces spiritual values by incorporating elements rooted in rationality, beliefs, myths, and customary norms through symbols. In addition, the representation of identity within the form constitutes the codes of design style. Integration harmoniously occurs with time, preserving the unique identity of the local culture (Hidayat, 2007). Acculturation influences places of worship from new religions, blending cultures to convey symbolic meanings of ornament.

The human inclination toward symbolism is manifested in artifacts such as ornament, and a typical example is the Padma flower. Inspired by nature, this flower carries profound significance in Indonesian religious contexts, symbolizing purity and goodness despite the origins in muddy waters. The Waterlily flower in Sanskrit, symbolizing inspiration for life and purity, reflecting the Indonesian cultural philosophy of goodness. Paramadhyaksa (2016) conducted research focusing on the philosophy of the Padma flower and the connection with Balinese architecture. Meanwhile, Wijayanti (2020) explored the significance of batik motifs, symbolizing beauty, fertility, and prosperity for the physical and spiritual well-being of the users.







The use of the Padma ornament was first found as a statue depicting Dhyani Buddha Amitabha meditating on an oval-shaped padma ganda (Astawa, 2018). Furthermore, this classical artifact dates around the 4th to 5th century AD. In Indonesian religious contexts, the Padma flower symbolizes goodness, leading to the widespread presence in places of worship during the Pre-Colonial and Colonial periods. Carved into sacred buildings to fulfill religious needs, the concept of the Padma ornament drew inspiration from nature, representing human aspirations. Over time, the specific style of the Padma ornament materialized through long-term formalization, becoming a characteristic of its era (Nizam, 2019; Haldani, 2013). The application in buildings was adapted to spatial requirements, serving both functional and aesthetic purposes. The visual form of the Padma ornament varies, conveying diverse messages.

The use of the Padma flower ornament in three Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant places of worship on Java Island during the Pre-Colonial and Colonial periods was explored. Previous research conducted a comprehensive investigation into the application of the Padma flower ornament, systematically gathering and reviewing existing articles. The findings were compared and linked to the topic of discussion, aiming to conclude the form, function, and significance of ornament within the architectural context of the buildings.

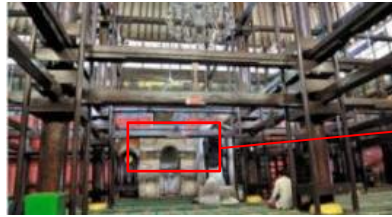
A combination of (1) qualitative and (2) literature review methods were used. Considering the complex relationship between ornament and symbolism concerning form, function, and meaning, these methods enabled a comprehensive exploration of both tangible

and intangible elements. By incorporating concepts related to form and function, the research aims to interpret the inherent meanings embedded in the design.

The research discussion is divided into two distinct parts. Initially, a classification chart outlining the usage of the Padma flower ornament in the three places of worship was presented to provide a structured framework for the discussion. The first part of the discussion examined the form and function of the Padma flower ornament in places of worship. The second part focused on meaning of the Padma flower ornament in the context of the religious settings. While these two aspects are combined to address tangible design elements, meanings of ornament are elaborated on in a separate discussion, given the significance as integral components of the intangible design aspect.

Source		Discussion		
Author	Source, Year	Function	Form	Meaning
Islam - THE DEMAK GREAT MOSQUE, DEMAK				
				
Source: Harian Kompas, 2003		Source: Rachman Pratama, 2023	Source: Slamet Supriyadi, 2023	
Slamet Supriyadi	ISVS e-journal, 2023	Arabic letter stylization	Applied to: umpak Function: functional component	Symbol of Muhammad's lafadz. Meaning: The Prophet Muhammad is a messenger of Allah who always accompanies Him, specifically in mosque buildings
Islam - SANG CIPTA RASA MOSQUE OF CIREBON, CIREBON				
				
		Source: Global Hukum Indonesia, 2023		
				
		Source: Media, 2023	Source: Lia Rosmala Schiffer, 2022	





Source: Times Malang Cirebon, 2019



Source: Lia Rosmala Schiffer, 2022

Lia Rosmala Schiffer	ISVS e-journal, 2022	Stylization	Applied to foundations for pillars supporting teachers in buildings and mihrab	Knowledge and spiritual power, purity, strength that does not waver with everything disaster that befell him  Purity, purity symbolized  Wealth, fertility, prosperity, luck, beauty, justice, and wisdom
Yanuar Mandiri	Seminar Ikatan Peneliti Lingkungan Binaan Indonesia, 2017			
			Function: aesthetic	

## Islam – LANGGAR DALEM MOSQUE, KUDUS


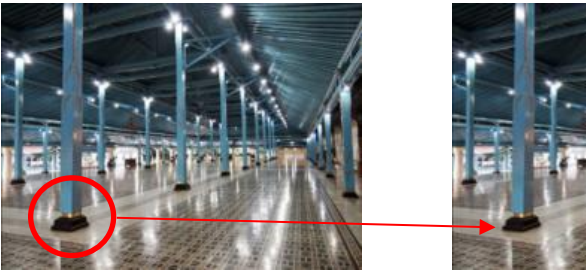








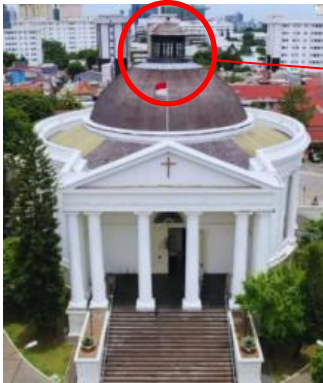




Source: Dian Utoro, 2020



Source: Moh. Rosyid, 2022

Moh. Rosyid	Journal of Islamic Architecture, 2022	Tendril carvings	Function: aesthetic	Hindu influence: symbolizes purity, peace,
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				prosperity, happiness  Buddhist Influence:  Symbolizes beauty and purity
Islam – MASJID AGUNG SURAKARTA, SURAKARTA and MASJID GEDHE KAUMAN, YOGYAKARTA				
MASJID AGUNG SURAKARTA, SURAKARTA	 Source: Pemerintah Surakarta, 2019   Source: Solodam J., 2022			
MASJID GEDHE KAUMAN, YOGYAKARTA	   Source: Erina Wiyono, 2022 dan 2023			
Nur Rahmawati	Sinektika Jurnal Arsitektur, 2028	Stylization	Applied to: central pillar  Function: aesthetic	Purity, firm and strong
Islam – MASJID SUNAN GIRI, GRESIK				

   <p>Source: Erina Wiyono, 2022</p>				
Rizal Bagas Wahyu Pradana	Space, 2020	shaped like a blooming waterlily	Function: aesthetic	Purity, firm and strong.  Not shaken by all kinds of disasters
Protestant– GEREJA PROTESTANT IMMANUEL JAKARTA				
   <p>Source: GPIB Immanuel DKI Jakarta      Source: Erina Wiyono, 2022</p>				
Muhammad Gardian Noviantri, Antarksa, Noviani Suryasari	Arsitektur e-Journal, 2017	The 6-leaf waterlily is bone white	Function: functional and aesthetic	Egyptian symbol for the goddess of light
<a href="https://arsitekturindis.wordpress.com/2003/12/17/gereja-immanuel-bangunan-bersejarah-yang-mulai-kusam/">https://arsitekturindis.wordpress.com/2003/12/17/gereja-immanuel-bangunan-bersejarah-yang-mulai-kusam/</a>				
Catholic– GEREJA HATI KUDUS YESUS, GANJURAN				
  <p>Source: Andrew, 2016      Source: Erina Wiyono, 2022 dan 2023</p>				
Joyce M. Laurens	Seminar, 2014	Stylization	Applied to central pillar	



				Symbolizes immortality and eternity
			Function: aesthetic	

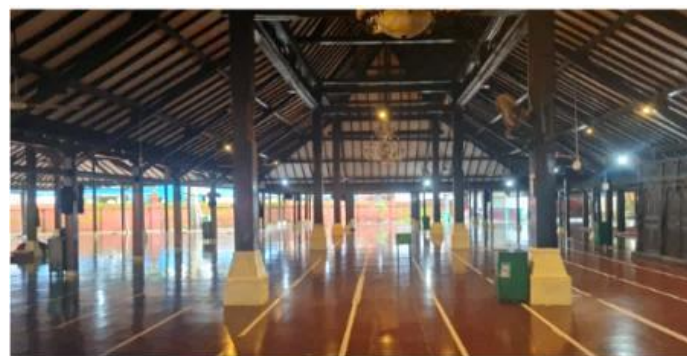
**Fig. 2:** Classification of the Padma Flower Ornament in Mosques and Churches

### Form and function of the Padma flower ornament in houses of worship

The presentation of the Padma flower ornament in places of worship in Java during the Pre-Colonial and Colonial periods showcases beauty through a composition that focused on the unique characteristics. Typically, these ornaments adorned stylized forms on pedestals in building columns, with content analysis showing a consistent pattern of repetition. The design is observed in Muslim and Catholic worship places across Java, such as The Demak Great Mosque, Sang Cipta Rasa Mosque of Cirebon, Masjid Agung Surakarta, and the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Despite variations in visual aspects, materials, and colors, ornament consistently maintained an aesthetic appeal. For example, the Demak Great Mosque, shown in Figure 1, used a combination of black and white natural stones and dark wooden pillars at the top. The combination created a harmonious Javanese ambiance within the interior space. However, the Sang Cipta Rasa Mosque of Cirebon, shown in Figure 2, featured Padma flower ornament made of white natural stone, standing out against a dark-colored space, imparting a bright impression to the room. Similarly, Masjid Agung Surakarta, shown in Figure 3, incorporated Padma flower ornament on smaller pedestals compared to the pillars, and it still captured attention due to the contrasting black color against the blue pillars and cream-colored floor. The composition created harmony, and the Javanese atmosphere was strongly felt in this space.



**Fig. 3:** The Demak Great Mosque, Demak  
Source: Author



**Fig. 4:** The Demak Great Mosque, Demak  
Source: Author



**Fig. 5:** Masjid Agung Surakarta, Surakarta  
Source: Author

Both the Masjid Gedhe Kauman, a Muslim place of worship, and the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Catholic church, shown in figures 4 and 5, located in Yogyakarta, share similarities in the application of the Padma flower ornament on the central pillars, designed in a *Pendopo* form. The architectural feature, known as the *umpak* foundational principle, is essential for supporting or maintaining the stability of the buildings, reflecting Javanese cultural influences. Both structures used black natural stone for the central pillars, showing a consistent choice of materials and colors. However, the differences arise in the combination used for the pillars above the central pedestals and the construction periods. The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, initially built in 1927 following the architectural style of Western European churches, underwent reconstruction in 2009 after an earthquake in 2006, leading to a different appearance that reflects the spirit of inculturation. The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, initially built in 1927, based on the architectural style of Western European churches, underwent reconstruction in 2009 after an earthquake in 2006, leading to a different appearance, that reflected the spirit of inculturation. In addition, Masjid Gedhe Kauman was constructed in 1773.



**Fig. 6:** Masjid Gedhe Kauman, Yogyakarta  
Source: Author



**Fig. 7:** Gereja Hati Kudus Yesus, Ganjuran, Yogyakarta  
Source: Author

The Padma flower ornament has been prominently featured in the architectural design of the Protestant Church Immanuel Jakarta, as showed by the content analysis, thereby contrasting the Muslim places of worship such as the Masjid Sunan Giri. In both the Protestant Church Immanuel in Jakarta and the Masjid Sunan Giri, as shown in figures 6 and 7, the Padma flower ornament adorned the ceilings, serving as a central decorative element. However, the appearances differ significantly due to the diverse cultural influences shaping the designs. Ornament in Masjid Sunan Giri are influenced by Javanese, Hindu, and Islamic cultures, while the Protestant Church Immanuel Jakarta depicted the Colonial style. Although both ornaments are crafted from wood, the differ in form and color, reflecting distinct cultural contexts. Although both ornaments were made from wood, it differed in forms and colors, reflecting distinct cultural influences. Ornament had harmonious finishing forms and colors that complemented the respective interior design themes, showcasing a blend of cultural influences in both spaces.



**Fig 8:** Protestant Church Immanuel Jakarta  
Source: Author



**Fig 9:** Masjid Sunan Giri, Gresik  
Source: Author

In the Langgar Dalem Mosque, the Padma flower ornament were in the form of tendrils placed on the walls as accents, complementing the conical roof and serving as mediators for the space. The color composition of these ornament in Langgar Dalem Mosque as shown in figure 8, harmonized effortlessly with the interior colors of the space, depicting unity in both form and color.



**Fig. 10:** Langgar Dalem Mosque, Kudus  
Source: Author

The function of the Padma flower ornament in places of worship varies. For example, structures such as the Sang Cipta Rasa Mosque of Cirebon, Masjid Agung Surakarta, Masjid Gedhe Kauman, the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Masjid Sunan Giri, and Langgar Dalem Mosque shown in figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8, respectively, it mainly contributed to the aesthetics. In the Demak Great Mosque and the Protestant Church Immanuel, shown in figures 1 and 6, this ornament fulfilled both aesthetic and functional roles. However, the two places of worship for Islam and Protestantism differ. The Demak Great Mosque provided structural support, while the Protestant Church Immanuel facilitated natural light entry, serving a functional purpose in illuminating the interior space.

### Meaning of the Padma flower ornament in houses of worship

Symbols represent physical objects as well as convey deeper concepts and meanings. Therefore, it is important to express symbols to show the true significance. The Waterlily flower, known as Waterlily, exemplifies this philosophy, conveying the message of goodness, as reflected in the way of life. The symbolism was observed in meaning conveyed by places of worship during the Pre-Colonial and Colonial periods. The Sanskrit term Padma refers to the Waterlily flower, which thrives in murky waters yet produces pristine and beautiful blooms, symbolizing resilience and purity. In Indonesia, the Padma flower is revered for its philosophical depth, embodying qualities of goodness and purity in the symbolism and lifestyle.

The Demak Great Mosque, shown in Figure 1, applied the Padma flower ornament at the base, symbolizing the proclamation that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. It signified that the presence of Prophet Muhammad would always accompany worshippers inside mosque. However, Sang Cipta Rasa Mosque of Cirebon, shown in Figure 2, conveyed various meanings, including purity, unwavering strength, wealth, prosperity, good fortune, beauty, justice, and wisdom. The Langgar Dalem Mosque, as shown in Figure 8, shared similar symbolic meanings, with the uniqueness lying in the dual influences from two previous teachings. Influenced by Hindu teachings, the Padma flower ornament symbolized purity, peace, prosperity, and happiness, while the Buddhist influence conveyed meanings of beauty and purity. The common meanings conveyed by Masjid Agung Surakarta, Masjid Gedhe Kauman, and Masjid Sunan Giri, shown in figures 3, 4, and 7, were purity, solidity, and strength. In a different context, the Protestant Church Immanuel Jakarta, shown in Figure 6, interpreted the Padma flower ornament as symbols of Egypt for the goddess of light, representing associations with light, vision, and wisdom. However, the Catholic Church Hati Kudus Yesus, shown in figure 5, interpreted it as symbols of eternity and fullness.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, during the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Java, places of worship representing Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism incorporated the Padma flower ornament into the respective architectural designs. Eight worship places used ornament in various forms and functions, influenced by differences in construction periods and reference countries. However, the conveyed meaning was the same, a message of goodness, reflecting shared values despite religious differences.

As a country opened to diverse customs and civilizations, Indonesia has a rich cultural heritage. In addition, these cultures reflected the existing diversity. Java, in particular, was one region where culture, religion, and social customs converged, making it an area not influenced by a cultural monolith. Diversity was observed in the buildings that represented life in each era, and interestingly, the local culture was not abandoned.

The acceptance of Islam in society was closely associated with the dissemination method, which consistently respected local culture and traditions. Similarly, the early introduction of Christianity, a process known as Christianization, was often associated with colonialism. The spreading strategy adopted accommodated local culture to ensure the acceptance of the new faith.

As a meeting place for various religions and cultures, the showcased places of worship were rich in diverse customs harmoniously combined in the respective design. These symbols



carried profound meanings that offered valuable lessons in life. Based on the view of religions in Indonesia, the Padma or Waterlily flower, known by the botanical term, embodied a philosophy that conveyed messages of goodness, reflecting the way of life. The influences observed in the religious buildings were derived from Hindu, Buddhist, and Egyptian teachings from the period preceding the arrival of Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Despite the diversity in forms and functions, the application of the symbols remained intriguing, and did not alter the essence of the conveyed message of goodness.

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