

An Architectural-Visual Validation of the Photograph of Kuching Mosque, Malaysia

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Abstract

A curious photograph of a building has surfaced in popular and academic discussions in recent decades. Some academic studies are known to have begun using this photograph as data. They imply it as depicting the first permanent mosque in Kuching, which itself is iterated from a museum exhibition in Sarawak, Malaysia.

This study makes the case that the narratives surrounding the purported photograph are inaccurate as no documents have provided any convincing link between the photograph and the early mosque. This study aims to conduct architectural-visual validation of the building in the photograph in reexamining an uncertain institutional representation of history. Executed within an anti-positivist framework, this study commits an architectural-visual validation process by examining the photograph's origin and the building in the photograph itself with contextual and architectural information as the basis.

The study finds that the building in the photograph was incorrectly misattributed as a fort. The analysis also made use of historical timeline chronology to posit the fort is not the alleged mosque. The study offers conjectures stating the plausible cause of the misattributions based on the normative architectural design forms of a mosque but cannot ascertain further whether the fort has been used as a mosque.




Keywords: Mosque architecture, Historical reexamination, Photographic evidence, Visual analysis, Vernacular architecture.

Introduction

A photograph could tell a lot about the historical and architectural information of a place. For a building that is gone with no architectural records to salvage, there could be no secondary evidence that is more substantial than a photograph. Photographic philosophers emphasize the value of photography as content that can be read and analyzed in a variety of situations, in addition to its use as a tool for documenting and archiving (Al Sheikh, 2023). But misleading narratives surrounding a photograph can eventually obscure facts, and this can be problematic especially when it has already been shared and canonized as common knowledge. There is a possibility that a desired vision of history is at play, where institutional



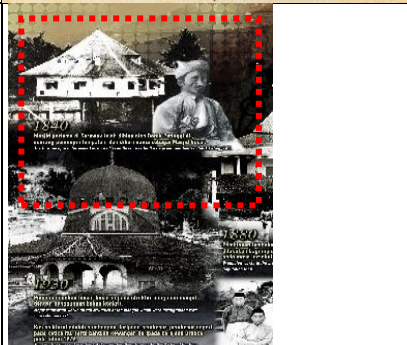
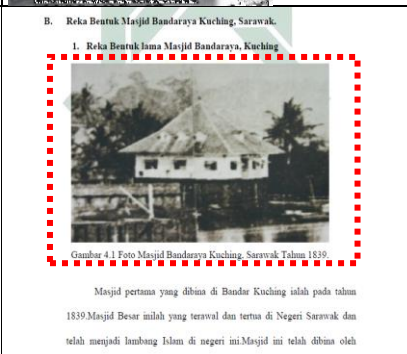
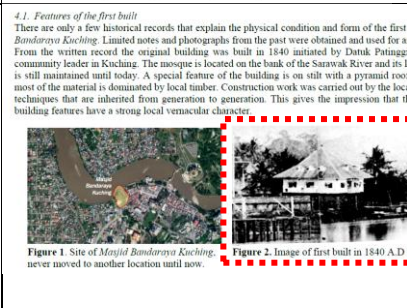
representations of this history are becoming personal memories without strong clarification of its source. This paper presents a case of a particular photograph depicting what is claimed to be the first permanent mosque in Kuching, Sarawak state of Malaysia, which has circulated in popular and academic outlets. The photograph has long been exhibited in the Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum with some of its accompanying iterations shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The photograph and its interpretations in the museum exhibit.
Source: Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum (Retrieved 2023).

No	Image	Type	Description
1		Photograph	Photographic source is not specified in the exhibit. This is the primary photograph. The caption states this photograph being the first mosque of Kuching. This photograph was first exhibited in the museum in 1992. The source of this photograph is investigated and discussed further in this paper.
2		Scaled model	The accompanying scaled model is based on the primary photograph.
3		Elevation drawing	The accompanying elevation drawing of the first mosque is based on the primary photograph.

This photograph piqued the interest of this study because not only the attributions of the original source are inadequate, but the information from these also constantly reappeared in other narratives. The preliminary documentary survey has not been very productive with the links between the mosque and the photograph are non-existent, instead exists only in the forms of secondary narratives which were derived from the original exhibit, as summarized in Table 2. To further crystallize the research problem, some historical backgrounds of the Malay Muslims and the early mosques in Kuching are presented thereafter.

Table 2: Some contemporary sources with photographic evidence of Kuching’s first mosque.
 Source: Mohammed Ekhwan Zolkipli (2019); Old Kuching Smart Heritage (2023); Sarawak State Mosque Charitable Trust (2023); Abd. Rahim (2019); & Karsono *et al.* (2021).

No	Image	Type	Description
1		Directory (Book)	Source: Mohammed Ekhwan Zolkipli (2019). The photo appears in the appendix section illustrating the first mosque built by the family of Datu Patinggi Ali. The caption reads: “ <i>First Masjid Kuching, c. 1700 – 1847</i> ”.
2		Social media promotional poster	Source: Old Kuching Smart Heritage Facebook (An official Sarawak state Government initiative) page (Retrieved in 2023). The caption reads: “ <i>In 1847, Datu Patinggi Ali, the Malay Chief of Sarawak built a small mosque on the banks of the Sarawak River.</i> ”
3		Website Page	Source: <i>Lembaga Amanah Kebajikan Masjid Negeri Sarawak/ LAKMNS</i> (Sarawak State Mosque Charitable Trust) official website (Retrieved in 2023). The page describes the growth history of mosques in Sarawak. The caption reads: “ <i>This first mosque in Sarawak known as Masjid Besar was built by a prominent leader, Datuk Patinggi Ali</i> ”.
4		Thesis	Source: Abd. Rahim (2019). The introduction chapter of the thesis describes the photo of the Kuching mosque, which was built in the form of a Malay house using wood that stood majestically near the banks of the Sarawak River. The caption reads: “ <i>The photo of Kuching City Mosque, Sarawak in the year 1839.</i> ”
5		Proceeding Paper	Source: Karsono <i>et al.</i> (2021) The photograph is used as a secondary source to verify the architectural style of the first mosque that corresponds with the local and indigenous technology and culture, such as on stilts typology, pyramid-shaped roof, used locally sourced timber and built by the local people – resembling strong vernacular feature.

Background

Early Malay Muslims of Kuching

For clarity, the terms Muslims and mosques are used in the context of Kuching's early Malay community, disregarding the narratives on the Indian-Muslim community who also lived in Kuching at the end of the 19th century. Many believe that Islam first gained a foothold in Sarawak centuries earlier between the 11th and the 14th centuries. Later in the early 1800s, the first Malay-Muslim community was founded in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak in northwest Borneo. Sanib Said (1998) names Pasir Kuning in Santubong, to be a much earlier Malay kingdom from accounts attributing the origins of the local Malay elite to the legendary Datu Merpati Jepang after the old age in Santubong. As this region was mostly inhabited by Malay elites, commoners lived between Lidah Tanah and Kuching, or at the mouth of the river in Santubong (Lockard, 1976). To ensure a settlement over which he would have complete control, the Pangeran Mahkota (an emissary to the Brunei Sultanate between 1824 to 1830) chose Kuching as the new administrative centre. Kuching has easy access to the river mouth and can provide more security due to its natural geographic location, preventing resentment from the elites of the nearby Lidah Tanah. The presence of hills, which allowed forts to be constructed, and the river's narrowness all contributed to Kuching's ease of defense.

The Architecture of Early Mosques in Kuching and Interpretations of Images

Understandably, early Kuching Malays constructed mosques close to where they lived. Early mosques in Kuching, however, were mostly of informal, temporary buildings as what Ting (2018) describes might take on any form. Marryat (1848) describes them as generally large empty buildings in every town that were dignified with the name of a mosque. When James Brooke was proclaimed to be the Rajah of Sarawak, Kuching was made his administrative region, which then attracted more Malays to move closer to him and in this way helped to grow the town of Kuching (Chater, 1969). The population of the town rose rapidly to 18,000 in 1865, with the bulk of the population being Malay, followed by the Chinese probably about 1000 and Indians about 500 (Sanib Said, 1998; Boyle, 1865).

Brought about by this growth of population, the Datu Patinggi Ali family started the construction of the permanent *Masjid Besar* (Grand Mosque) by beginning with a fund-raising campaign in 1848 and finally completed in 1852. This was erected on the top of the hill, which aimed to serve as a landmark and an outward symbol of Islam in Sarawak. Both McDougall (1854) and Baring-Gould and Bampfylde (1909) characterize this new mosque as a good-looking structure with some dignity that is topped with a brass ball that glitters in the sunlight which catches everyone's attention. It was entirely made of wood since bricks and other construction materials were difficult to come by in Kuching at the time. When bricks and cement were easier to get by around 1880, the mosque had its first renovation. A new roof was put on, and much of the woodwork on the sides was replaced with bricks. In 1932, a dome was added to the roof, and it stayed that way until 1967 when it was torn down to make room for the current state mosque, which was constructed on the same site. The early visual pieces of evidence of this *Masjid Besar* are plenty, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Among the early visual evidence of *Masjid Besar*, Kuching.
Source: McDougall (1854), Ho Ah Chon (1990) and Brooke (1922)

Image			
Year taken	1852	1852	c. 1922
Description	A watercolour painting by McDougall (1854) as recognized in Chater (1969), was viewed from the courthouse.	Early photograph as compiled by Ho Ah Chon (1990), viewed from the main street.	A sketch by Brooke (1922), was viewed from the opposite of the river.

Although this *Masjid Besar* is regarded to be the earliest permanent mosque in Kuching, Chater (1969) mentions that in 1839, there was already one small permanent mosque on the riverside at the foot of the hill on which the *Masjid Besar* stood. This ‘first permanent mosque’ (a term to be used regularly afterwards) is believed to have also been built by Datu Patinggi Ali before his *Masjid Besar* project (Karsono *et al.* 2021; Mohammed Ekhwan Zolkipli, 2019). This is also the one mentioned by McDougall (1854) as being too small and dilapidated to shelter devout followers of Islam who wished to pray as the population grew which eventually led to the erection of the *Masjid Besar* in the later decades. This study recognizes that this is the mosque that has been the subject of the primary photograph presented earlier in Table 1. For chronological clarity, Figure 1 below summarizes the periodic timeline for the early mosques in Kuching with accompanying photographs.

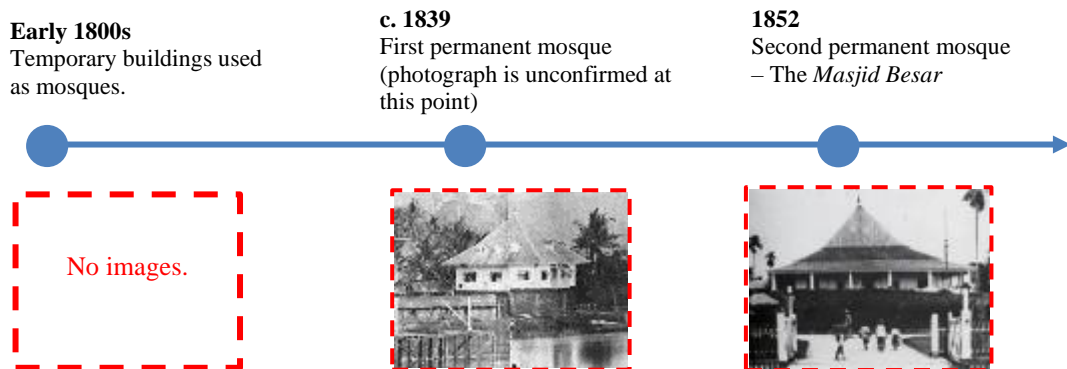


Fig. 1: The period of early mosques in Kuching.

Source: Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum (Retrieved 2023) & Ho Ah Chon (1990).

The early permanent mosque has also been the subject of some written literature, but apart from its location and size in relation to the *Masjid Besar*, little is learned about its architectural features. There is not enough information about what it looked like, and there is no other visual evidence to further compare the primary photograph with this first permanent mosque. Therefore, asserting that the primary photograph is directly related to the first permanent mosque is considerably weak.

Hypothesis, Aim and the Objectives

From this uncertainty, it is useful for this study to form a hypothesis stating that the information on the alleged photographic evidence of Kuching's first mosque is not accurate. This requires a form of reexamination. Therefore, this study aims to reexamine Kuching's architectural history through architectural-visual validation of the building in the photograph. It is achieved based on these objectives:

1. To examine the origin of the primary photograph and its contextual information.
2. To identify the building in the primary photograph and its contextual information.
3. To validate the building by interpreting arising information.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of 'historical reexamination' and 'architectural-visual validation' are central to this study. Visual evidence such as photographs cannot always avoid bias and be free from fabrications and distortions by the original author although there are some values to photographic evidence. Drawing a parallel from the scientific epistemes of visual evidence such as the forensic and the judicial sciences, all photographs have a status of fact and there are none which can be denied (Porter, 2011). This leads to an epistemic question of what visual validation is actually validating, as the semiotic and rhetoric of visual representations, let alone visual validation, continued to be debatable under various systems of enquiries. The characterization of the relationship between photography and anthropology although continues to be common, is less ideal for this study. Echoing what Edwards (2015) argues, with the types of studies being done on photographic practices and the dynamics created by the intersection of photographs with history, identity, and cultural heritage, photography can no longer be subscribed to convenient categorical theories.

Instead, this study must look at a higher epistemological hierarchy, which touches on recognizability itself as a concept and describes philosophical questions such as how architectural aspects through photographic representations are to be recognized. This could adhere to the Groat and Wang (2013) epistemological categorization of the positivist approach in architectural-visual research, in which analysis is carried out on the indexical and perceptive content of the images as they are and their capacity to represent things in the real world (Margolis and Zunjarwad, 2018). This concept of visual data as objective truth, however appropriate it is, would deny the narrative brought about the external influences outside of the border of the photograph itself as adopting positivism is exclusionary and leads to the suppression of multiple viewpoints, thoughts, and voices. In this respect, it might be subjected to the distortion of historical revisionism and would go against the interpretive nature of the study.

Instead, Salama (2019) presents an anti-positivist approach that is also promoted by Groat and Wang (2013) which predicates the notion that universal laws and principles do not exist outside of the researcher's mind. This embraces the idea that even though people and groups learn different things about the same thing, these differences are seen as valid and important means of mutual acknowledgement. A study on historical reexamination and architectural-visual validation is more justifiable from this position, as this study is inclined towards the idea that institutional representation of history must always be reexamined. Separating this anti-positivist apart from the positivist framework is that this study does not promote an objective truth, hence a desired vision of history is not set.

Review of Literature

The link between history and architectural studies has long been recognized since the time of the Renaissance. Archaeological and poetic relics of the Ancient Romans have inspired the classical revivalist architectural movement of that era, such as how Palladio and Scamozzi developed their doctrines on the orders of columns and how Italian landscape designers were inspired by the ancient Renaissance buildings (Morgan, 2016; Günther, 2012). Patnayaka (2015) highlights that architectural history offers insights into the development of design concepts, construction methods, and the balance between structure and aesthetics. Caldwell (2020) examines the integration of historical education with design studios, emphasizing the importance of history as a repertoire of applied knowledge and for analyzing the production of architecture. Architectural historical study in this sense, is exploring the past in forming a possible prospective image of the future, a domain that is closely linked to futurology (Pilsitz, 2017).

Historical reexamination, on the other hand, can be understood as a retrospective approach towards history that uses the knowledge of today to reconstruct what has happened in the past. This is particularly important as the potentially distorted information brought about by museums, which themselves should be regarded as the custodian of institutional representation of history, must not be misaligned with personal memories. This has long been recognized by a study by Crane (1997) which explores the tension between personal memory and institutional representation of history in museums, noting that discrepancies can lead to a distortion of the past. But a historical reexamination approach that is more abductive in nature also has the potential to further lead to deliberate distortion or manipulation of historical facts to fit a particular agenda or narrative, also known as 'historical revision'. Following the perspective of Marcinkowski (2010), there is a danger with revisionism as it can lead to the denial of historical facts. Hughes-Warrington (2007) states that revision in history can be achieved through the control of space and the use of imagery to shape the desired vision of history. García-Ramirez (2021) relates the same danger of historical revisionism in architecture which focuses on the purpose of rewriting, erasing and to the extent denying historical memories of the city by demolition and construction of buildings. Historical reexamination, as opposed to revision, must be free from biased analysis of past events to gain a deeper understanding and potentially uncover hidden truths.

Subsequently, the architectural-visual validation concept which has its origin in visual analysis, allows architectural aspects of contemporary buildings at that time can be used to foster a more accurate understanding of the past, essentially what historical reexamination is aiming for. The history of the partnership between architecture and photography has been captivating for a very long time, interrogating photography as an automatic drawing or a direct imprint of the constructed world (Pelizzari and Scrivano, 2011). This constantly changing foci between the medium and subject matter, in constructing a meaning for a historical reexamination, bonded the initially independent architectural and visual aspects of the research into a reciprocal 'architectural-visual' relationship.

This study therefore recognizes that artifactual memories which exist either in the form of primary evidence such as built structures, or secondary evidence such as photographs, are equally valued within this architectural-visual relationship. It is recognized that visual validation on architectural photographs can be effective. According to Asadpour (2013), the use of photography as a research tool in architectural education has shown that even observers with limited visual research skills can effectively analyze physical and social environments through photographs. This also follows the perspective of Di Masi (2013) who draws a parallel between theories of architectural restoration and the preservation of documentary collections, which recognizes the role of both in preserving memory and studying history.

Although they can be truthful, architectural-visual evidence must be able to avoid the consciousness of a preconceived outcome. They are susceptible to being discursive, conveying multiple meanings, and offering different perspectives on historical events, which can cause various interpretations of history (Zimmerman, 2017; Baigorri-Jalón, 2016). Baigorri-Jalón (2016) and Gunce (2005) consent that visual interpretations must therefore require active validation with additional sources and the role of visual interpretation must be accompanied by the skills of architects in conveying their visual narratives. Bickford (2015) explores this idea further by emphasizing the importance of analyzing photographs beyond their borders, considering the influence of the photographer on the viewer's understanding of the historical event captured. These findings therefore collectively support the use of visual validation on photographs to reexamine history but must be conducted together with additional sources validations and external influences considerations.

These also indicate that the research design for this study is not supposed to assess the photograph on its literal content, but rather on unmasking the meaning of it. In this case, it is about creating historical narratives with architectural consciousness. This study must consider that mosques of its time that share some normative design forms. Some common aspects of these mosques have been discussed by many, among them including having a square hall, a niche in the *qibla* wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, and a multi-tiered pyramidal roof (Lopes and Hasnan, 2022; Ahmad, 2013; Budi, 2006; Ruggles, 2000). Normative architectural design forms therefore are used as conceptual ideas in validating the photographic evidence.

Overall, this study maintains that the historical reexamination of Kuching is relevant and must be warranted immediately. This is to reduce the likelihood of historical distortion by the institutional representation of history that is not been properly established. But this must be followed by deliberate architectural-visual validation skill of the researcher upon the photograph corroborated with other supplementary evidence and with an educated awareness of the external factors. This must also need to be aware of the discursive nature of photographs and consider their limitations in capturing the full complexity of architectural phenomena.

Research Methodology

Architectural-visual validation in this study was exercised recurrently between the primary photograph, supporting sources, the researcher's interpretation, and external considerations. The central enquiry is on the origin of the building in the photograph, and for that matter, the origin of the photograph itself, as they could not be ascertained by its content alone. There were no clear indicators that the photograph depicts Kuching in the first place. Thus, the data gathering followed an anti-positivist roadmap that allows active interpretation of the researchers as an integral part of the reality construction. This led to cyclical data gathering, as opposed to linearity as the theoretical framework allows the idea of encountering the data in an 'accidental' manner. Although, it must be acknowledged that many points of the encounter were largely planned. For instance, examining the origin of the primary photograph itself cannot be accidental, as it must start with deliberate surveys on Kuching bibliographic subject as a possible origin. It then took a series of surveys on local libraries, museums, and digital resources, with contextual information linked together based on codes derived along the process.

The study categorized the data by gathering and arranging the chronological timeline of one primary photograph with several discovered images and historical literary texts related to buildings in Kuching of its contemporary, spanning from as early as the year 1800 until 1900. For context, access to cameras and photographs was not common at that time and in this part of the world. Due to the deficit of historical photographs available on this subject, this study

also recognizes non-photographic visual evidence such as sketches and lithographs. The criteria for these data rely on the narratives accompanying the photographs. This includes and is not necessarily limited to, the annotations, the reference secondary sources, and lastly the educated conjecture of the researchers. The conjectures are central to the discussion but done within limited liberty, logical enough to serve the study with a much expansive path towards historical reexamination. Combining temporal chronology and pictorial techniques allowed for visual comparisons of the alleged mosque's architectural and contextual elements. The architectural-visual validation comprises these combinative methodological works, almost similar to how grounded theorists coded and administered this cyclical data gathering until it reached a point where the findings are all well saturated enough to form a narrative.

Findings

Dating the Photograph

From the documentary survey, it is discovered that the original primary photograph is a cropped version of a panoramic view of Kuching that is reprinted in Lockard & Saunders (1972), as presented in Figure 2. In contrast to what is established in popular narratives, this photograph was taken in 1864, a few decades after the *Masjid Besar* was built.



Fig. 2: Panoramic view of Kuching in 1864 as appeared in Lockard & Saunders (1972) (Reproduced from the collection of Sarawak Museum; accessed from Pustaka Negeri Sarawak special collection).

At this point, no information about the original author is known, apart from it being a reproduced version. This panoramic view stitching of Kuching alone cannot be validated to be having biased intention. On the contrary, this panoramic photograph has reversed the biased implication created earlier by the cropped version. It is safe to deduce that this photograph cannot be more than just a form of photojournalism, a genre belonging to vernacular photography that is produced without any artistic, therefore biased intentions (Al Sheikh, 2023). This study therefore acknowledged this discovery and used it as a form of evidence for analysis. This study also learned that contextualizing the place and identifying the building were needed as these are the charted information from this photographic dating exercise.

Identifying the Building

The enquiry then moved to identifying the building by cross-examining the image with Kuching's earliest known, albeit reproduced map from 1870, which corresponds to the time the image was taken. It is here that this study follows its anti-positivist's interpretational decision to determine that what has been accepted as Kuching's earliest mosque, has been mislabeled as a fort. This was based on the visual reading of the assortment of shophouses and the profile of river curvature, as informed further by the map in Figure 3. For context, the mid-19th century Kuching proper was centralized along this part of the Sarawak River. The map also indicates that the *Masjid Besar* and the fort existed concurrently in the same year.

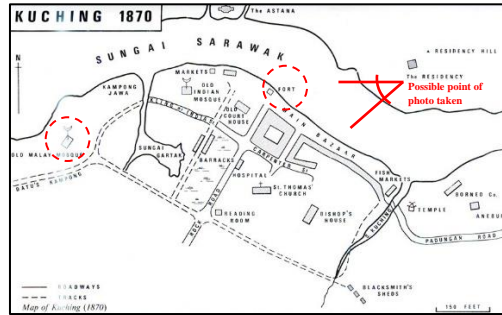


Fig. 3: The map of Kuching in 1870.

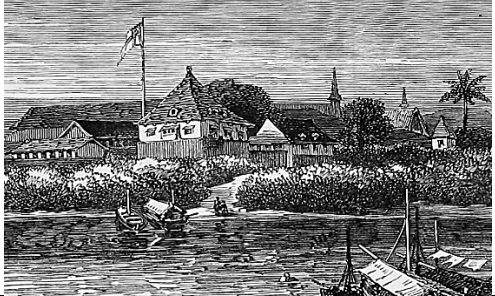

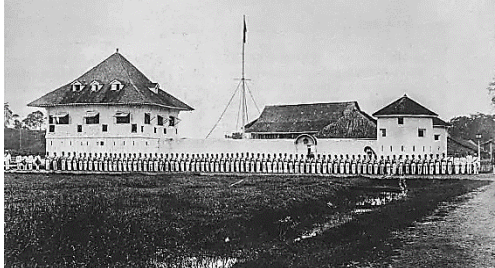
Source: Pollard, 1973

This commanded the study to go in another direction, with a turning point that can be inflective to the ‘mosque narrative’. However, removing this narrative from the photograph and in turn replacing it with the ‘fort narrative’ can be speculative at this point. In maintaining that the mosque narrative has some values that must continue to be discussed thereafter, further analysis of the fort must be warranted. A pictorial chronology of Kuching fort throughout different years from the earliest evidence recorded in 1860 is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: A pictorial chronology of Kuching Fort.

Source: As mentioned in the table.

No	Image	Image Taken	Description
1		c. 1860	<p>Source: Lithograph by Thomas Skipwith Chapman. Appeared in Ting (2012) as reproduced from Grant and Thomas, <i>Scenes in Borneo and the East Indian Archipelago</i> (1888).</p> <p>This image is of the original courthouse, which is the little building to the left of the flagpole (converted from an abandoned school), as reported by Ting (2012). The Kuching fort is on the right, while the massive two-story building in the backdrop is a group of shophouses in the Indian market.</p>
2		1860 (photo)	<p>Source: Hand-drawing by Ting (2016) traced from an 1860 photograph titled “Fort in Kuching” in Grant and Thomas, <i>Scenes in Borneo and the East Indian Archipelago</i> (1888).</p>
3		c. 1864	<p>Source: Photograph from Sarawak Museum collection as reproduced in Moore (2007).</p> <p>One of the earliest known photographs of Kuching Town, looking upriver from Bukit Mata. Note the barely recognizable Kuching fort at a distance.</p>


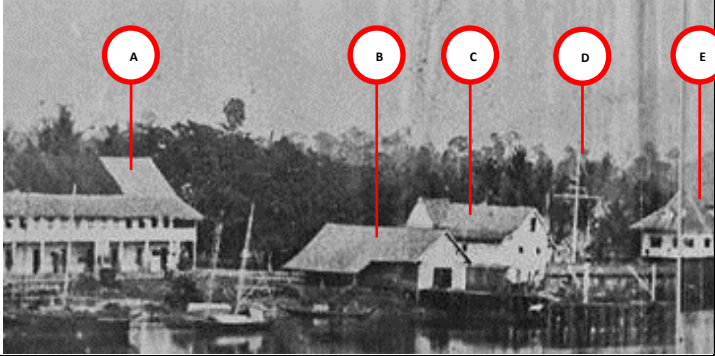
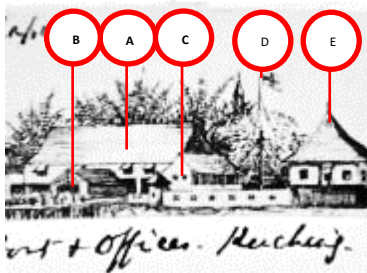
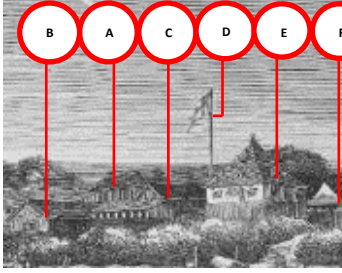
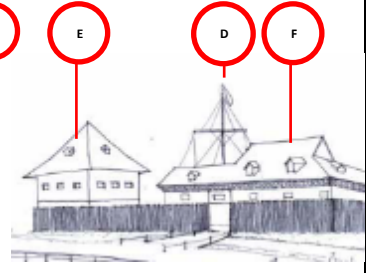
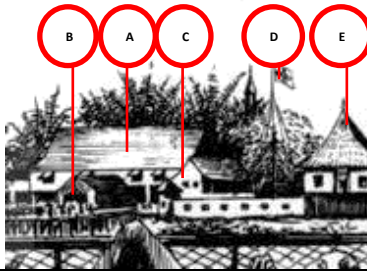
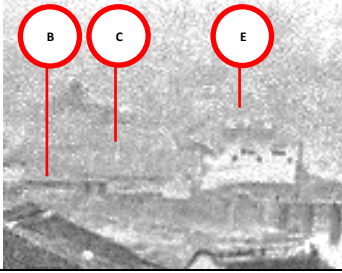
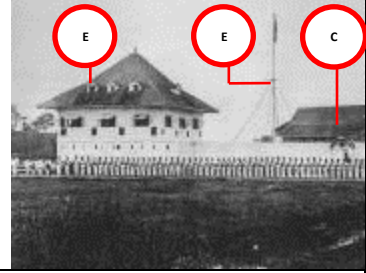
4		c. 1864	<p>Source: Lithograph as appeared in <i>The Illustrated London News</i> (1864).</p> <p>The news described the drawing as taken earlier than 1864, but most likely after the gold miners' insurgency in 1857.</p>
5		1870	<p>Source: Reused and improvised lithograph by Chapman (1870) as a fictional work.</p> <p>Although Chapman himself claimed this is not a caricature of a particular outstation or fort in Kuching, the likeness of the Kuching fort as compared to the previous lithograph (also made by Chapman) is not dismissible.</p>
6		1875	<p>Source: Photograph by Hill Gray as reproduced in Ting (2018).</p> <p>The clearest photo of the Kuching Fort also indicates that the building survived the 1857 attack and has gone through some renovations.</p>

This Kuching fort is characterized as a pretty, modern white edifice made of logwood that could defend itself against native forces. It was on the river's bank across from the Government House and ringed by a shallow moat (Boyle, 1865; *The Illustrated London News*, 1864). Marryat (1848) describes the fort as a robust structure made of huge timbers with iron guns mounted on it as an essential defense against the Rajah's foes. Keppel (1853) describes it to be formidable from its commanding position, which is visible when one arrives in Kuching with its six cannons poking out of the portholes and a soldier in front hailing every arriving boat (McDougall, 1854). The fort has also served as the first commanding gate of one's entry to Kuching using the river. Ting (2018) recognizes that it was built around 1844, although it is believed elsewhere that this fort was erected after the Belidah fort further upriver was captured and destroyed by a gallant resistance during the gold miners' insurgency in 1857. Despite the discrepancies, what is certain is that the fort did not suffer much from the 1857 attack. Boyle (1865) confirms that the attacks did leave some marks on the Kuching Fort's internal walls, where axe marks on the door of the closet where Sir James Brooke's plate was previously stored were still clearly discernible, and a new panel in the log wall had the spot where a round shot from the attacks was still perceptible to visitors. The building was then occupied by Mr Crookshank, the third officer of the Sarawak government. According to Ting (2012), during the Charles Brooke era, while the second rajah continued the first rajah's trajectory of the young state's survival and expansion, he began to polish Sarawak's institutional architecture as a representative tool. He went a step further by rebuilding the timber fort in whitewashed rendered brick in 1879 and named it the Square Tower while at the same time, he also built a new, larger whitewashed rendered brick fort on the north bank of the river, called the Fort Margherita, replacing the timber fort that at this point has already been demolished.

Architectural-Visual Comparisons

The photographs of the Kuching fort bear striking architectural resemblance to the building in the purported photograph of the first permanent mosque. An architectural-visual comparison was carried out to further ascertain the inferential claim that the photographic evidence is of the Kuching fort, as summarized below.

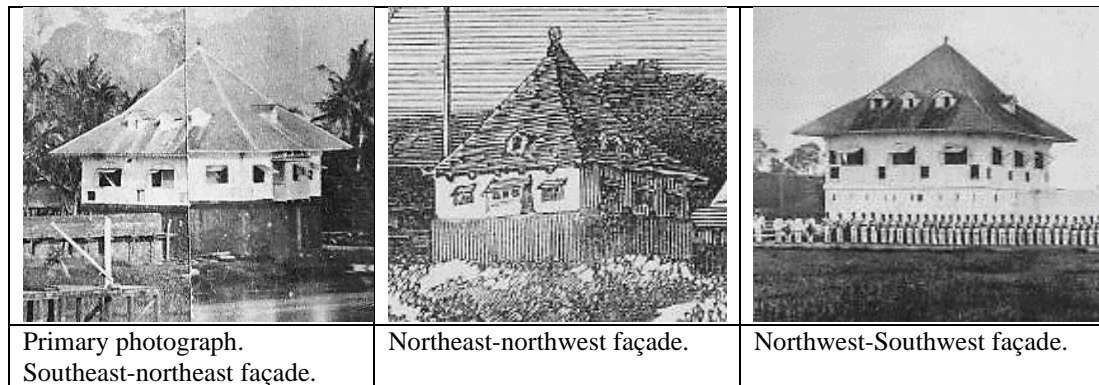
Table 5: Contextual and architectural elements comparisons. A = Indian bazaar; B = Possible godown; C = Courthouse/ Abandoned school; D = Flagpole mast; E = Kuching Fort, F = Unknown building

		
<p>The primary photograph.</p>	<p>Source: Lockard & Saunders (1972) from 1864 photograph.</p>	
		
<p>Source: Ting (2012) from Chapman (1860)</p>	<p>Source: The Illustrated London News (1864)</p>	<p>Source: Ting (2016) from Grant and Thomas (1888)</p>
		
<p>Source: Chapman (1870)</p>	<p>Source: Moore (2007) from Sarawak Museum (1864)</p>	<p>Source: Ting (2018) from Hill Gray (1875)</p>

Similar architectural and contextual elements of the primary building as compared with other images above suggest it was of the same building. Table 6 below follows up with a side-by-side visual comparison of the fort's architectural elements along with a few photographs that best depict the building's exterior walls from all perceivable sides. These images evidently show a high probability that they are of the same building. Apparent visual cues are directly inferred from the single-tier pyramid roof (with a steeper tip), accurate numbers of dormer windows on each side, similarly fashioned awnings, palisaded ground floor, and apparent chamber on the northeast façade.

Table 6: All sides of the exterior walls for visual comparison.

Source: Author



However, this marks the furthest this architectural-visual comparison could reach, as the visual basis for the comparison is only within the shared group of evidence depicting the same building. This does not imply the contention between the mosque and the fort narratives but only validates the fort being the building in the photograph. In other words, it can only be deduced that the building in the photograph is not the first permanent mosque. Based on this, the main hypothesis of this study is accepted.

Discussion

The discussion primarily presents the interpretation of the findings above. This ultimately is used to sustain the historical reexamination aspect of the study. This study can interpret this by using non-visual information that is notable, which is the temporal relationship between the fort and its context. During its decades-long history, apart from being a fort, the building was only used as a commanding gate and a residence for government officials. Conveniently, the timber fort was built about 1844, which coincides with the time predating the *Masjid Besar*. This implies that there are many possible ways and many points in time where this fort might have been used as a mosque. Self-evidently, creating a narrative based on the temporal relationship can involve too many coincidental and self-fulfilling discoveries, therefore it is less truthful and may lead to revisionist behaviour. Alternatively, this study proposes conjectures interpreted from the normative architectural design forms that have been established earlier on, as summarized in Table 7 below. Although these conjectures are discussed within limited liberty, they are logical enough and serve the study with a much expansive path towards historical reexamination. Similarly, they are not undisputable and can always be reserved for future discussions.

Table 7: Conjectures

Source: Ting, 2016 and Lim, 1987.

No	Normative Design Form	Primary Conjecture	Alternative Conjecture
1	Building use, orientation, and location.	The fort was not built but rather took over the function of what previously was a mosque.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This does not coincide with the location of the fort which was further down south from the location of the first mosque which was on the same hill of where <i>Masjid Besar</i> stood. • This is also architecturally unconvincing as mosques' main chambers are normally oriented towards the <i>qibla</i> (the direction towards Mecca).

2	Building use, orientation, and location.	The orientation of the fort which happened to conveniently face Mecca suggests that the building was appropriate to be used as a mosque.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The location of the chamber or <i>mihrab</i> which is associated with the position of the <i>imam</i> (lead prayer) in a mosque's floor plan, has been an Islamic vernacular tradition for many centuries. • Despite the convenient building's orientation, the chamber was facing northeast, as opposed to facing northwest (the <i>qibla</i>).
3	Built-form and elements.	Ting (2016) recognizes that the fort did resemble the familiar palisaded, fortified residences of the Malay leaders and the tradition of regional Southeast Asian houses at that time. It is easy to see that such architecture could be mistaken for something that is associated with the locals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fort itself could have been fashioned to resemble the first mosque architecture, or vice-versa, or both look exactly similar.
4	Built-form and elements.	The familiar built form also easily persuaded the untrained eyes to be mistaken for a mosque because of the pyramid roofs in the Malay world which are typically reserved for mosques and <i>surau</i> (Lim, 1987).	
5	Built-form and elements.	The primary photograph where the palisaded ground floor of the fort is darker, misread as having been on stilts, resembling vernacular architectural styles of regional Southeast Asian buildings at that time. It is possible the photograph was misinterpreted as depicting a local mosque.	

It can be inferred from the conjectures above that familiarity with the image of a certain architectural style has contributed to the confusion over the architectural built form and elements. It must be understood in the context of Kuching that at the end of the 19th century, the hybridized form of western bungalow architecture with characteristics of the Malay dwellings, such as rectangular plans, *belian* shingle roofs and decorative carpentry, were emulated throughout different types of buildings (Ting, 2018). Some of them were outside of the vernacular characters typically associated with Malay architecture, such as building details like the dormer windows on the roof were desirable elements for local leaders' houses, institutions, and merchants' shops, such is depicted in Fig. 4.



Fig. 4: A local leader's house in Kuching in the 19th century.
Source: Ting, 2018

The architectural built-form and elements of the fort could be associated with natural and reciprocal learning from the experiences of construction and designing through a vernacular process. As Benkari *et al.*, (2021) testifies, the vernacular architectural process could also be a

part of a common construction production process, which uses vernacular techniques and local materials as common practice that does not have to take trends and refined styles into account. The narrative of the fort resembling a vernacular mosque, or vice-versa, is rather plausible. This could be out of emulating from the preceding craftsmanship of the other building, thus creating its own architectural image that is confusing to the untrained eyes.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the photograph is of the Kuching fort and not of a mosque. In this regard, the aim of reexamining the history of Kuching through its primary photograph is achieved. This is drawn from the decisions below:

1. There is a misattribution to what the building in the photograph represents.
2. The inaccuracy of the information surrounding the photograph is disputed, but not the photograph itself.
3. In an architectural sense, this misinformation could be derived from factors related to normative design forms that can be ascribed to reasons related to stylistic choice and the vernacular architectural construction.
4. In a larger sense, these possible conjectures represent the concepts of receiving and transmitting architectural information in the vernacular process.

There are two main novelties of this study. First, this study fosters a new possibility of re-examining the institutional representation of history. However, it must be emphasized that while the aspect of reexamination can only stretch the narratives so far, it can only be fully canonized until more academic research can be done on the subject. Secondly, this study shows that initiating valuable narratives in reexamining history based on limited documentary information is possible. This is particularly achieved through architectural-visual validation as a method that benefited from an anti-positivist theoretical framework. One profound limitation is the mosque narrative versus the fort narrative cannot be concluded without further examinations being done and more information being found on the building itself.

There is no valid indication that the fort has ever been used as a mosque in the span of approximately 25 years of its existence. It is worth noting that although this is not part of the research objectives, it can be useful to be interpreted as it could yield more substantial information. In that regard, this study advocates more studies to be conducted using sources documenting the first permanent mosque itself. For instance, new studies can offer insights into the aspects of the building's internal space, which this study is currently lacking at the moment. Given the limitation, this study could not offer more substantial narratives on that subject. Overall, it is recommended that more studies that are interested in the subject to employ other methodologies, sources, and forms of evidence, such as incorporating testimonies and accounts acquired through interviews.

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