

The Meaning Of Symbols In The Acculturation Of Malay Islamic And Chinese Cultures In The Architecture Of The Old Mosque In Gang Bengkok Medan City

(Analysis From The Perspective Of Roland Barthes' Semiotics Theory)

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Abstract

This study aims to reveal the meaning of symbols in the process of acculturation between Malay and Chinese Islamic cultures in the architecture of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok Street in Medan, as well as to understand how these symbols are interpreted by the community and Generation Z. The main issue examined is how architectural elements resulting from the encounter between these two cultures function as signs and form meaning at the denotative, connotative, and mythical levels according to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation, which are then analyzed using Barthes' semiotic framework. The results show that architectural elements such as temple style roofs, hanging bee ornaments, green and yellow colors, main pillars, and circular motifs form a system of signs that reflect harmony, egalitarianism, and the collective identity of the Malay and Chinese community. The discussion also found that the local community responded positively to this acculturation and turned it into a social myth about cross-ethnic harmony, while Generation Z interpreted these symbols as part of a relevant cultural heritage that needs to be preserved. This research confirms that the architecture of the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok not only functions as a place of worship but also as a representation of a living multicultural narrative that is passed down from generation to generation.

Keywords : Cultural acculturation; Mosque architecture; Malay; Chinese; Roland Barthes' semiotics.

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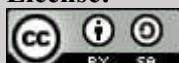
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Introduction

The Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok is one of the historical buildings that has significant value in the cultural development of the city of Medan, particularly in the context of the encounter between the Malay Muslim community and the Chinese community (Ardiansyah, 2024). Its existence not only serves as a place of worship, but also as authentic evidence of the harmonious cultural acculturation process that took place in the Kesawan area, a region that has been a point of interaction between the two ethnic groups since colonial times. This mosque was founded in the 19th century, specifically in 1873 M, and is recorded as the second oldest mosque in Medan

after the Osmaniyyah Mosque (Zein, 1999). Historically, this mosque stands on land donated by Datok Haji Mohammad Ali or Datok Kesawan, while its construction was funded by Tjong A Fie, a Chinese philanthropist who was very influential in Medan at that time. This historical fact alone shows the strong social relationship between the two communities (Muas Tanjung, Persona Communication, 30 January 2025).

Cultural acculturation in this mosque is particularly evident in its architectural form. Malay and Chinese elements are displayed in a balanced manner, resulting in a distinctive visual blend. The roof, for example, displays characteristics resembling a Chinese temple, a symbol of Chinese culture, but is still combined with a simple and proportional Malay building structure. In addition, ornaments such as carvings, color choices, and decorative elements such as the typical Malay hanging bees illustrate the cultural integration that takes place in religious spaces. Thus, this mosque presents cultural symbols that not only serve an aesthetic function, but also carry social, spiritual, and collective identity meanings for the community that supports it (Achyad, 2022).

In the context of cultural studies, acculturation is understood as the process of two or more cultural groups coming together and producing a new form without eliminating the original identities of each group. This process takes place through social interaction, religious traditions, and even material forms such as buildings and art (Zalina, 2019). At the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok, cultural acculturation can be observed through visual symbols that were born from the interaction

between the predominantly Muslim Malay ethnic group and the Chinese community, which has long been part of the dynamics of the city of Medan. These architectural symbols are not only functional, but also contain cultural messages that represent the harmony between the two communities.

The symbols in the mosque's architecture carry complex layers of meaning. The temple-style roof, for example, denotatively refers to the shape of the roofs of Chinese places of worship, but connotatively represents the harmony of social relations in the Kesawan community. Similarly, Malay ornaments that emphasize simplicity and balance reflect the aesthetic and ethical values of the Malay community that also color the character of the mosque. The existence of these two cultural elements is not merely decorative, but serves as a marker of identity as well as a cultural narrative that has grown from the historical interaction between the two groups.

This study uses Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to interpret the meanings of these symbols. Barthes divides signs into two levels of meaning: denotation, which refers to literal meaning, and connotation, which relates to cultural meaning, values, and specific ideologies. When these two levels of meaning develop into a social narrative that is accepted as universal truth, a myth is formed. This approach is relevant to reveal how the architectural symbols of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok function not only as elements of

the building but also as cultural myths about harmony, tolerance, and ethnic unity in Medan (Kurniawan, 2001).

This mosque was chosen as the object of research for three main reasons. First, this mosque is a tangible representation of the acculturation of Malay and Chinese cultures, particularly in the context of urban society in North Sumatra. Second, its unique architectural structure offers great opportunities for semiotic analysis to understand how symbols are used in cultural practices. Third, research on the semiotics of architecture in historic mosques in Medan is relatively rare, so this study is expected to fill an academic gap and enrich the literature on cultural diversity in Indonesia.

This study covers three main aspects. First, an analysis of the meaning of architectural symbols that represent the fusion of Malay and Chinese Islamic cultures. Second, an examination of the social response of the community around the mosque as a form of acceptance or transformation of values due to acculturation. Third, an exploration of Generation Z's views on the cultural symbols found in mosques, especially as a generation that has grown up amid technological developments and broader cultural interactions. These three aspects are analyzed to see the extent to which architectural symbols can function as markers of cross-generational social identity.

Field evidence shows that this mosque is located in an area that has long been a

meeting point for various ethnic groups in Medan. Social interaction between the Malay and Chinese communities takes place in various economic, social, and religious activities, so it is not surprising that religious buildings such as mosques become a place for cultural exchange. Tjong A Fie's involvement in the construction of the mosque is early evidence of this social relationship. In addition, observations at the site show that the surrounding community still perceives this mosque as a symbol of tolerance and cultural harmony, mainly because of the ornamentation that is easily recognizable as a blend of two traditions.

This study focuses on uncovering the meaning behind the mosque's architectural symbols by analyzing their denotation, connotation, and myths. This focus is expanded by looking at how the community interprets this acculturation in social life, as well as how the younger generation interprets cultural symbols in a modern context. Thus, this study not only describes the physical aspects of architecture but also examines how symbols function as a system of signs in social life.

This research is important because it can provide a deeper understanding of how cultural acculturation is represented through architecture and visual symbols. In addition, the results of this research are expected to contribute to the study of cultural anthropology, particularly in relation to the function of symbols as markers of social identity formed from the process of intercultural interaction.

Through Barthes' semiotic approach, this study attempts to provide a holistic picture of the construction of cultural meaning contained in the architecture of the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok as a manifestation of the harmonization of Malay and Chinese Islam.

Studies on symbols, mosque architecture, and the dynamics of cultural acculturation have been conducted by a number of researchers using various approaches and objects. Miftakhuddin (2019), through a study entitled "Symbolic Meanings in the Architecture of the Nur Sulaiman Mosque in Banyumas," examined the structure of the building and the symbolic meanings of the mosque using qualitative methods. He found that the symbols on elements such as the mihrab, mimbar, mustaka, and overlapping roofs contained a blend of Javanese, Islamic, and Western architectural elements. The similarity with this study lies in the focus on analyzing architectural symbolism, while the difference lies in the object and cultural context, as this study focuses on the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok and Malay-Chinese acculturation.

Another study was conducted by Abdul Gani Jamora Nasution et al. (2022) entitled "Masjid Bengkok: A Social History Study and Contribution to the Community of Medan City." Using a descriptive approach through observation and interviews, the study revealed the history of the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok and its contribution to a multi-ethnic

community. The similarity with this study lies in the object and field methods, but the difference lies in the focus, because the study emphasizes history and social contributions, not symbols and semiotics. Raini Tanjung et al. (2019), through their study "Masjid Lama Gang Bengkok as a Multiethnic Symbol in the City of Medan," used Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics theory to view the mosque as a representation of ethnic harmony. The similarities lie in the analysis of symbols and the use of qualitative methods, but the differences lie in the semiotic theory used.

Furthermore, Polin D. R. Naiboho et al. (2024), in their study "Visual Characteristics of the Architecture of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok Street in Cultural Acculturation," emphasize the visual characteristics of the architecture that show the harmony between Malay and Chinese cultures. This study is similar in terms of object and method, but differs in focus because it emphasizes visual aspects rather than semiotic symbolic meaning. Eri Santika Adirasa's (2024) research on "Semiotics of Symbols in the Architecture of the Jamik Mosque in Malang City" uses F. W. Dillistone's theory of The Power of Symbols to understand architectural symbols connected to spiritual values and Javanese-Islamic cultural acculturation. The similarity lies in the interest in symbols and the use of qualitative methods, but the theories and research objects are different.

Overall, previous studies have made important contributions to the study of symbols, mosque architecture, and semiotics. However, no research has been found that specifically examines the meaning of symbols in the acculturation of Malay and Chinese Islamic cultures in the architecture of the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok using Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective. Therefore, this research occupies a strategic position in filling the gap in studies, while enriching the academic discourse on cultural interaction through architectural symbols.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach through field research to examine the symbols and meanings in the architecture of the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok. Data was collected through interviews, observations, documentation, and field notes. This approach allows for the acquisition of factual descriptions and in-depth analysis of the acculturation of Malay Islamic and Chinese cultures, which are then analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective (Fiantika, 2022). The object of this study is the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok in Medan City.

The data sources in this study are divided into two categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews with informants who have authority and direct involvement with the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok, including religious leaders, cultural

experts, mosque administrators, Malay-Chinese figures, local residents, and representatives of Generation Z (Sugiyono, 2018). The interviews focused on the meaning of cultural symbols in the architecture, ornaments, and visual elements of the mosque, as well as the social dynamics that arose as a result of acculturation, including public reception, cultural acceptance, and changes in local values. All information was analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to reveal layers of denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from various written sources such as books, scientific journals, historical archives, research reports, media articles, and documentation related to the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok (Moleong, 2014). These sources served to complement the primary data by providing a theoretical and historical basis for analyzing cultural symbols, post-acculturation social dynamics, and the views of the younger generation. Architectural literature, local history, ethnic relations studies, and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory were used to strengthen the interpretation of symbolic meaning, understand the formation of social myths, and contrast the perceptions of traditional figures with those of Generation Z regarding the acculturation of Malay Islam and Chinese.

Data collection in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation as a form of triangulation to obtain comprehensive qualitative data (Sugiyono, 2018). Semi-

structured interviews were conducted with community leaders, local residents, and Generation Z to explore the meaning of Malay Islamic and Chinese cultural symbols, social responses after acculturation, and the views of the younger generation. Observations were conducted at the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok to identify architectural symbols and observe the social dynamics of the community and the involvement of Generation Z, which were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. Documentation in the form of written archives and photographs was used to complement and reinforce the findings from the interviews and observations.

The data analysis technique used in this study employed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Abdussamad, 2021). Data reduction was carried out by summarizing and selecting important information related to the architecture and symbols of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok to obtain a clear focus for analysis. The reduced data was then presented in the form of narratives from interviews, observations, and documentation to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships between findings. Next, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the research findings as a whole, testing their consistency with field data and supporting sources, thereby obtaining credible conclusions regarding the meaning of symbols and social dynamics in the context of

Malay Islamic and Chinese cultural acculturation.

RESULTS

A. The Meaning of Malay and Chinese Islamic Cultural Symbols in Mosque Architecture from Roland Barthes' Semiotic Perspective

The Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok is a tangible manifestation of cultural acculturation in the city of Medan, showcasing a blend of Islamic, Malay, and Chinese elements. The mosque's architectural form, ornamentation, colors, and layout not only serve a structural function, but also contain rich cultural symbols. This section discusses the results of research on the meaning of these symbols based on interviews with informants and Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth.

1. Mosque Roof: Symbol of Malay Power and Chinese Harmony

The roof of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok Street features a combination of a Chinese temple roof and a Malay umbrella element, which is usually a symbol of nobility and protection. The source explained that the temple shape of the roof also affirms the historical traces of harmonious relations between the Malay and Chinese communities,

especially through Tjong A Fie's contribution to the construction of the mosque (Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). Visually, the multi-level roof provides air circulation and structural balance, while symbolically, Malay and Chinese elements are combined as a representation of cultural tolerance.

Figure 1 (Roof of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 1 (Roof Analysis Roland Barthes' Semiotics)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | Denotation | Multi-level roof, temple shape, Malay umbrella |
| 2. | Connotation | Inter-ethnic harmony, protection, balance |
| 3. | Myth | Narrative of Malay-Chinese unity in Medan's history |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

2. Hanging Bees: An Icon of Malay Beauty and Local Wisdom

Hanging bee motifs are found on the edges of buildings, displaying repeating patterns like bee hives. The source explains that this ornament is a feature of Malay architecture and symbolizes cooperation, order, and perseverance(Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). In the context of mosques, hanging bees are understood as a symbol of harmony and sincerity in worship. The large size of the ornament on the mosque is considered a form of affirmation of Malay cultural identity in the house of worship(Dwi, 2019).

Figure 2 (Hanging Bees)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 2 (Hanging Bee Analysis)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | Denotation | Ornaments resembling honeycombs |
| 2. | Connotation | Cooperation, harmony, order |
| 3. | Myth | The ethos of togetherness in the Malay Muslim community |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

3. Mosque Colors: Representation of Malay-Islamic Identity

Green and yellow (gold) dominate the building. Green is interpreted as a symbol of fertility, tranquility, and the color of Islamic identity. Meanwhile, yellow is the color of Malay greatness, synonymous with the authority of kings(Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). The choice of these colors represents the fusion of Islamic values with Malay cultural authority, complemented by the historical image of Tjong A Fie's house, which also uses a similar color palette, thus emphasizing cross-cultural continuity(Setiawati, 2020).

Figure 3 (Mosque Colors)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 3 (Color Analysis of Mosques)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | Denotation | Green and yellow colors |
| 2. | Connotation | The sanctity of Islam, the glory of Malay |

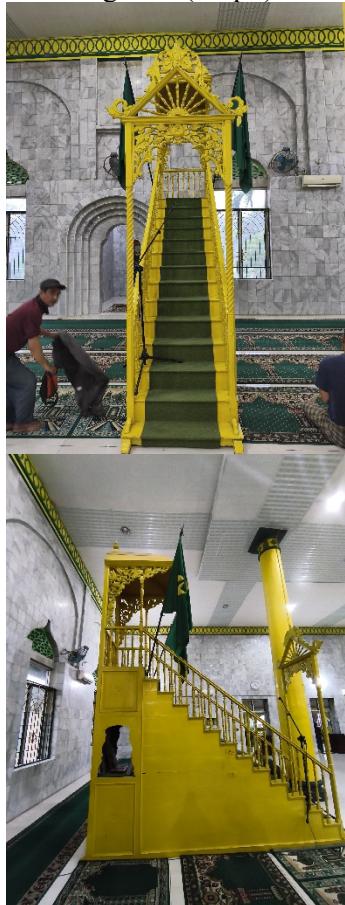
| | | |
|----|------|--|
| 3. | Myth | Religious-cultural identity as a collective heritage |
|----|------|--|

Source: Primary data compilate by author, 2025.

4. Pulpit: Symbol of Multicultural Spiritual Leadership

The pulpit has thirteen steps, referring to the pillars of prayer. At the top are sun and crown ornaments, symbolizing the light of guidance and the authority of the preacher. Floral ornaments and motifs mark the aesthetic influence of Chinese culture(Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). This combination reflects spiritual leadership that is rooted in Islamic teachings but expressed through a visual fusion of two cultures(Hamzah, 2019).

Figure 4 (Pulpit)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 4 (Pulpit Analysis)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | Denotation | Stairs, crown, sun, floral ornaments |
| 2. | Connotation | Guidance for life, authority, cultural harmony |
| 3. | Myth | The position of the khatib as the moral leader of society |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

5. Supporting Pillars: Symbols of Stability and Unity

The mosque has 4 right pillars, 4 left pillars, and 8 outer pillars. The source mentioned that the number eight represents the eight cardinal directions(Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). This is understood as a symbol of the mosque's openness to all people from all directions, ethnicities, and social

classes. Physically supporting the building, but symbolically representing the unity and strength of the Muslim community amid ethnic diversity(Halim, 2015).

Figure 5 (Supporting Pillars)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 5 (Support Pillar Analysis)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|--|
| 1. | Denotation | 4-4-8 pillars |
| 2. | Connotation | The direction of universalism, unity of the people |
| 3. | Myth | The mosque as the center of social cohesion in Medan society |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

6. Four Main Pillars: Icons of the Four Companions of the Prophet

The four main pillars in the central hall of the mosque are understood by the community as representing the four companions of the Prophet Muhammad: Abu Bakar, Umar, Utsman, and Ali. These pillars affirm the moral foundation of Muslims(Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). In Malay tradition, the number four symbolizes balance and order in nature. This combination of meanings demonstrates the syncretism of Islamic values with Malay cosmology(Yusuf, 2012).

Figure 6 (Four Main Pillars)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 6 (Four Pillars Analysis)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | Denotation | Four major pillars |
| 2. | Connotation | Exemplary behavior, balance |
| 3. | Myth | Moral pillars of the Malay-Chinese Muslim community |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

7. Floral Ornaments: Traces of Chinese Aesthetics in Worship Spaces

Lotus, flower, and leaf motifs are characteristic of Chinese aesthetics. In mosques, flora symbolizes purity, fragrance, and nobility(Liang, 2018). These ornaments are understood as a form of respect for Chinese contributions to the construction of mosques and a sign of harmony between cultural identities (Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025).

Figure 7 (Floral Ornaments)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 7 (Floral Ornaments Analysis)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|--|
| 1. | Denotation | Lotus flowers, leaves |
| 2. | Connotation | Purity, fragrance, aesthetic value |
| 3. | Myth | Symbol of cultural openness in places of worship |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

8. The Unbroken Bracelet: A Symbol of Equality and Unity

The unbroken bracelet motif depicts the unity of the people regardless of social status, economic status, race, or ethnicity. The source emphasized that anyone who enters the mosque becomes part of the congregation. This ornament symbolizes Islamic egalitarianism and a narrative of togetherness that eliminates social identity boundaries (Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025).

Figure 8 (The Unbroken Bracelet)



Source: Author documentation 2025

Table 8 (The Unbroken Bracelet Analysis)

| No | Level | Meaning |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1. | Denotation | Continuous circular pattern |
| 2. | Connotation | Equality, togetherness, unity |
| 3. | Myth | The mosque as an inclusive space for all people |

Source: Primary data compilat by author, 2025.

B. Social Response of the Community to the Acculturation of Malay Islam and Chinese: The Perspective of Roland Barthes

The results of the study show that the Malay Muslim and Chinese communities around the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok respond positively and harmoniously to the cultural acculturation reflected in the mosque's architecture. Both Muslim and Chinese informants see this acculturation as part of their living history. Muslim informants emphasized that the mosque was "the beginning of Islamic civilization in Medan," (Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025) while Chinese informants felt comfortable and familiar with the mosque, even stating that they often sat and rested on the mosque terrace. The mosque is perceived as a safe and inclusive social space, reflecting long-standing cross ethnic acceptance.

Culturally, acculturation is understood as a historical legacy that fosters a sense of pride. Muslim informants feel proud because the construction of the mosque was supported by Tjong A Fie, a Chinese figure who is highly respected by the community. Chinese informants also express pride because their community is part of the mosque's history. This narrative shows that acculturation has been accepted as the shared identity of the Kesawan area.

The Malay and Chinese communities demonstrate close social relations, evident in various forms of social concern. Muslim informants said that Chinese residents often provide support, ranging from helping with electricity costs to providing food during worship activities even often refusing payment as a sign of social closeness. Chinese informants stated that they "live peacefully" (Ihsan Ujung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025) and have no obstacles with Muslim community activities. In the context of Barthes' semiotics, these interactions form a connotative meaning of social solidarity, and at the mythical level, they become a narrative of natural intercultural bonds in the region.

The results of the study also show a high level of religious tolerance. Muslim

informants emphasized that the call to prayer and religious lectures were never considered disturbing by the Chinese community. Chinese informants stated that the religious activities of Muslims "were never a problem" (Ihsan Ujung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). This situation illustrates that mosques are not only places of worship, but also symbols of religious harmony. At the level of Barthes' myth, this tolerance becomes a "social truth" that is, the belief that interfaith coexistence has been natural since ancient times.

The Chinese community also plays a role in social activities in the mosque environment, such as social services organized by Chinese associations (TeoHa, the Tjong A Fie family, and others) (Wahid, 2006). Muslim informants emphasized that these activities strengthen social relationships and reinforce a sense of "belonging" to the mosque (Silmi Tanjung, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). This participation reinforces the social significance of the mosque as a shared space, not exclusively belonging to Muslims.

The existence of mosques as cultural sites also boosts economic activity in the surrounding area (Rahayu, 2020). Muslim informants mentioned that many visitors come to worship, engage in historical tourism, or conduct business, thereby benefiting local merchants. Chinese informants added that mosques "help the community's businesses" because they attract many tourists to the area. Mythologically, according to Barthes, acculturation produces a narrative that cultural diversity brings shared prosperity.

Table 9 (Cultural, Religious and Economic Analysis of Society)

| No | Aspect | Malay Islamic Response | Chinese Response | Context of Acculturation |
|----|----------|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. | Cultural | Proud of the mosque built by the Chinese | Proud to be part of the mosque | Multicultural identity |

| | | | | | |
|----|----------|---|---|----------------------|--|
| | | e; a symbol of tolerance since 1890 | 's history | | rather strengthens its historical character. This shows that the younger generation views cultural symbols as part of the identity of worship spaces, not as foreign elements. |
| 2. | Religion | Worship activities accepted without complaint | The call to prayer and religious lectures are considered normal | Interfaith tolerance | Informants provided symbolic interpretations of various architectural ornaments. Hanging bee ornaments were understood as "symbols of goodness and benefit," (Muhammad Abdur, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025) while circular bracelet ornaments were considered symbols of unity and security. Meanwhile, lotus flowers, which are common in Chinese aesthetics, were interpreted as purity and tranquility. This independent interpretation demonstrates Generation Z's ability to understand cultural symbols not only from their form but also from their moral values. From a semiotic perspective, the informant is able to identify signs and give them connotative meanings in accordance with the local cultural framework. |
| 3. | Economic | Tourists boost local businesses | The mosque helps the economy | Inclusive economy | Generation Z views cultural acculturation in mosques as "positive and strengthening social relations" (Muhammad Abdur, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). Informants are aware that this mosque was built by a Chinese figure (Tjong A Fie), but its administrators are predominantly Malay and Mandailing. This situation is understood as a symbol of long-standing social harmony. Generation Z does not see ethnic boundaries as barriers, but rather as part of a shared history (Berry, 1997). Thus, acculturation is accepted not only as a phenomenon of the past, but also as a value that is still relevant and can serve as a bridge for interethnic relations in the present. |

Source: Primary data compilations by author, 2025.

C. Generation Z's View of Malay Islamic and Chinese Acculturation Symbols in the Architecture of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok

The interview results show that Generation Z recognizes the uniqueness of the architecture of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok as a form that is different from mosques in general. Informants described this mosque as "similar to a Chinese temple," (Muhammad Abdur, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025) characterized by the absence of a dome and the presence of a curved roof, hanging bee ornaments, bright Malay colors, and four main pillars in the interior. This strong architectural visual shows that Generation Z is able to intuitively read symbols of acculturation because they are directly exposed to the Kesawan cultural environment.

This understanding shows an awareness that mosques are both religious and cultural spaces (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Informants believe that the fusion of Malay and Chinese styles does not diminish the sanctity of the mosque, but

Generation Z views cultural acculturation in mosques as "positive and strengthening social relations" (Muhammad Abdur, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). Informants are aware that this mosque was built by a Chinese figure (Tjong A Fie), but its administrators are predominantly Malay and Mandailing. This situation is understood as a symbol of long-standing social harmony. Generation Z does not see ethnic boundaries as barriers, but rather as part of a shared history (Berry, 1997). Thus, acculturation is accepted not only as a phenomenon of the past, but also as a value that is still relevant and can serve as a bridge for interethnic relations in the present.

The informant stated that his generation still understands the history of the mosque because they live nearby. However, he acknowledged that younger generations may have less knowledge about it. Nevertheless, there are still efforts by the community "to inform the next generation so that they do not forget about this mosque" (Muhammad Abdur, Persona Communication, 23 August 2025). This shows a gap in cultural transmission between generations a condition that is

common in the digital age, when visual culture is more dominant than historical narratives(Herskovits, 1955).

Generation Z views mosques not only as places of worship, but also as symbols of multiculturalism that must be preserved. Informants suggested that social and community activities in mosques could be a means of introducing history to the wider community, especially the younger generation. They see the potential of mosques as spaces for cultural education that can be developed through creative approaches and digital technology. Mosques are understood as places where Islamic values, Malay identity, and Chinese heritage converge, thus representing the values of openness and tolerance(Barthes, 1977).

Analysis

A semiotic reading of the architecture of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok shows that each element of the building not only has a structural function, but also acts as a sign system that represents the process of acculturation between Malay and Chinese cultures. Using Roland Barthes' framework, symbolic meaning can be mapped into three layers: denotation, connotation, and myth(Barthes, 1964). The results of the analysis show that these symbols form a broader cultural narrative about harmony and social integration amid ethnic diversity.

At the denotative level, symbols such as temple roofs, hanging bees, green and yellow colors, and floral ornaments are present as visual elements that can be observed directly. These elements reveal the physical character of the mosque as a historic building with distinctive Malay features and Chinese aesthetic touches. However, on a connotative level, these symbols express social values such as cooperation, openness, balance, and cross cultural respect. These values are reflected in the social practices of the community, which to this day continues to view the mosque as a space for multi ethnic encounters.

At the mythical level, these symbols construct a cultural narrative that is considered part of “natural truth,” for example, the meaning of an unbroken bracelet as a symbol of equality or the meaning of a supporting pillar as a symbol of the gathering place for the

congregation. The myths that are formed not only serve to legitimize the identity of the mosque, but also reinforce the image of cultural tolerance that has existed in Kesawan society since the colonial period.

This discussion confirms that mosque architecture is a means of expressing collective identity formed through Malay and Chinese interaction. Architectural symbols are not mere decorations, but representations of historical memory, social values, and religious messages that continue to be reproduced across generations. In the context of Barthes' semiotics, cultural acculturation in this mosque is reflected through a process of signification that combines Chinese aesthetic values with Malay religious ethics, which is then understood as a narrative of cultural unity that has now become part of the identity of the city of Medan.

The results of the study show that the acculturation of Malay and Chinese Islamic cultures at the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok is not only reflected in the architecture of the building, but also flows through the social life of the surrounding community. The consistently positive response from the community indicates that acculturation has become an integral part of the collective identity of the Kesawan area. Within the framework of Roland Barthes' semiotics, this social meaning can be understood through three levels of significance: denotation, connotation, and myth.

At the denotative level, the community views the mosque as a building with unique architecture that combines Malay and Chinese styles. However, the meaning increases at the connotation level when the architecture is interpreted as a symbol of historical closeness, cross-ethnic pride, and cultural awareness that the mosque was built through the contributions of two different communities. Physical elements such as color, ornamentation, and roof shape are not only visual signs but also triggers of collective memory about warm social relations since the colonial era.

At the mythical level, society believes that harmony between ethnic groups is a “natural” state that has existed for a long time. This narrative arises from various social practices: religious tolerance, economic assistance, the involvement of the Chinese community in mosque activities, and daily

interactions full of familiarity. In Barthes' framework, this myth serves to erase potential intercultural tensions and replace them with the belief that multiculturalism is an essential characteristic of the region.

This discussion shows that acculturation at the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok functions as a social mechanism that reinforces community cohesion. Existing cultural symbols, both physical and non-physical, work as signs that are interpreted collectively becoming instruments for building a shared identity that transcends religious and ethnic boundaries. The positive response of the Muslim and Chinese communities shows that the mosque is not only understood as a place of worship, but also a center for social interaction, a space for cultural dialogue, and a living historical marker.

Thus, the acculturation reflected in this mosque is not merely an architectural phenomenon, but also a socio cultural process that produces harmonious relations between communities. Through Barthes' perspective, it can be understood that this meaning continues to be reproduced, inherited, and maintained through daily social practices, making the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok a powerful symbol of multiculturalism in the city of Medan.

The discussion shows that Generation Z has a fairly strong understanding of the symbols of acculturation at the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the meaning of symbols can be understood on three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings of the study show that Generation Z not only recognizes architectural forms but is also able to connect these symbols with historical, moral, and spiritual values.

At the denotative level, Generation Z sees visual elements of the mosque such as the temple roof, Malay ornaments, hanging bees, circular bracelets, and large pillars. These elements are easily recognizable physically, thus becoming a gateway for the younger generation to understand the visual identity of the mosque.

At the connotative level, these symbols take on new meanings through the interpretations of the younger generation. The temple roof is interpreted as representing the harmonious relationship between the Malay and Chinese communities; the hanging bees as

a symbol of cooperation; the circular bracelets as a symbol of unity; and the lotus as a symbol of purity. These interpretations show that the younger generation is giving a "new soul" to cultural symbols through moral and social meanings.

At the mythical level, acculturation is understood as something natural in Kesawan society. The narrative that the mosque was built by the Chinese but maintained by the Malay yet remains a place of Islamic worship shapes the collective belief that cultural differences are not a source of conflict, but a foundation for harmony. Generation Z views this as a value that needs to be nurtured and passed on.

However, the discussion also revealed challenges. Cultural knowledge among the next generation has the potential to decline due to a lack of education and the strong trend of digitalization. This emphasizes the importance of cultural preservation strategies through digital media, community programs, and informal education.

Overall, Generation Z's semiotic reading of the Old Mosque on Gang Bengkok shows that symbols of acculturation remain relevant in the modern era. The mosque is understood not only as a religious building, but as a representation of multicultural identity that is still alive in the consciousness of the younger generation. These findings reinforce the importance of the role of the younger generation as agents of adaptive and creative cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to reveal the meaning of the symbols of Malay Islamic and Chinese cultural acculturation in the architecture of the Old Mosque of Gang Bengkok through the semiotic perspective of Roland Barthes, as well as to see how the community and Generation Z interpret this acculturation. Based on the research results, it can be concluded that each architectural element such as the temple shaped roof, green-yellow colors, hanging bees, pillars, and floral ornaments contains three layers of meaning: denotation as a physical form, connotation as a socio cultural value, and myth as a collective narrative about harmony, openness, and the multiethnic identity of the Kesawan community. This acculturation is not only present in the building, but also reflected in the social life of the Malay and Chinese

communities, which demonstrate tolerance, solidarity, and a shared pride in the mosque's history. Generation Z also understands these symbols as a cultural heritage that reflects unity and diversity, even though they face challenges in preserving cultural knowledge in the digital age. This study suggests the need for educational preservation through the digitization of mosque history, the strengthening of cultural tourism programs, and the active involvement of Generation Z as agents of preservation of symbols of acculturation. In addition, further research could expand the scope to other acculturative mosques in Sumatra to enrich the study of the semiotics of Nusantara architecture.

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