THE THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY IN KUDUS MINARET'S ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF JAVANESS-HINDU-ISLAMIC ACCULTURATION

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Abstract
The Kudus Tower adopts a form resembling a Hindu-Buddhist temple, raising important questions about the theological meaning of beauty and symbolism in Islamic architecture. This study aims to examine how the theology of beauty is articulated through the architectural form of the Kudus Tower and how Javanese, Hindu, and Islamic elements are harmoniously integrated within it. Using a qualitative research design, the study utilizes historical-architectural analysis, visual interpretation, and textual examination of classical Islamic and Javanese sources, complemented by secondary literature on acculturation and aesthetics. The findings indicate that the Kudus Tower embodies a contextual Islamic aesthetic that emphasizes harmony, tolerance, and local cultural continuity, rather than architectural fragmentation. Its form reflects a theological understanding of beauty as a means of da'wah, enabling Islam to be accepted without negating existing cultural identities. The study concludes that the Kudus Tower is not simply an architectural anomaly, but a profound expression of Islamic theology of beauty that accommodates local wisdom and encourages peaceful religious acculturation. This research contributes to broader discussions on Islamic aesthetics, cultural hybridity, and contextual religious expression in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: theology of beauty, islamic architecture, cultural acculturation, kudus minaret, javanese islam

INTRODUCTION

The Minaret of Kudus represents an exceptional architectural phenomenon within Islamic sacred architecture in Indonesia, distinguished by its striking resemblance to pre-Islamic Javanese-Hindu temple forms. This architectural uniqueness challenges dominant assumptions about Islamic visual identity and invites scholarly attention to the role of local aesthetics in religious expression. Architecture in religious contexts functions not only as a physical structure but also as a symbolic medium that conveys theological, cultural, and social meanings (Mavropoulos, 2023; Spurr, 2025; Stowell, 2024; Torrijos-Castrillejo, 2024). The form, ornamentation, and spatial configuration of sacred buildings often reflect deeply embedded religious worldviews and values.

The historical process of Islamization in Java was characterized by gradual cultural accommodation rather than abrupt cultural replacement. Islamic teachings were introduced through dialogue with existing traditions, allowing local symbols and artistic forms to be reinterpreted within a new religious framework (Grondin, 2024; Guerrero-Rubio et al., 2023; McMahon, 2023). The Minaret of Kudus emerges from this historical context as a tangible outcome of cultural negotiation between Islamic teachings and Javanese-Hindu architectural heritage. Its design embodies continuity and transformation, preserving local visual language while serving Islamic religious functions.

Beauty occupies a central position in many religious traditions as a reflection of divine harmony and order. Viewing the Minaret of Kudus through the lens of theological aesthetics allows architecture to be interpreted as a manifestation of religious values articulated through culturally embedded forms.

Scholarly discussions of the Minaret of Kudus have predominantly emphasized historical origins and stylistic hybridity (Coyle, 2023; Hwang, 2025; Whitaker, 2024). Such studies often describe architectural features without sufficiently interrogating the theological meanings underlying aesthetic choices. Theological interpretations of beauty within Islamic architecture remain underdeveloped in studies focusing on Southeast Asian contexts. Beauty is frequently treated as a secondary or decorative aspect rather than as a meaningful theological category.

The coexistence of Hindu-Javanese architectural elements within an Islamic religious structure raises unresolved questions regarding religious legitimacy and symbolic intention. The absence of clear theological explanation contributes to interpretive ambiguity. Existing analyses tend to separate cultural acculturation from theological reasoning, resulting in fragmented interpretations. This separation obscures how theological concepts are communicated through material and aesthetic forms. The lack of an integrated framework combining theology, aesthetics, and architecture limits comprehensive understanding of the Minaret of Kudus. Addressing this limitation constitutes the central problem motivating the present study.

This study seeks to interpret the architecture of the Minaret of Kudus through the perspective of the theology of beauty. The objective is to identify how aesthetic form functions as an expression of religious meaning. The research aims to explore how Islamic theological values are articulated through architectural elements derived from Javanese-Hindu traditions. Attention is given to symbolic continuity and reinterpretation.

The study intends to analyze beauty as a mediating concept that enables cultural dialogue between religious traditions. This approach positions beauty as an active theological instrument rather than a passive visual attribute. The research also aims to contextualize the Minaret of Kudus within broader patterns of Islamic architectural acculturation in Java. The goal is to situate the case study within regional and historical dynamics. The study ultimately seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of how theology, culture, and aesthetics intersect in religious architecture. This objective aligns the research with interdisciplinary scholarship in religious studies and architectural humanities.

Existing literature on the Minaret of Kudus prioritizes descriptive historical and architectural analysis. Theological engagement with aesthetic form remains limited or implicit. Studies on Islamic architecture in Indonesia frequently emphasize syncretism without critically examining its theological foundations. This tendency reduces complex religious expressions to cultural adaptation alone. Theological aesthetics as a conceptual framework has rarely been applied to Southeast Asian Islamic architecture. The absence of this framework leaves significant interpretive potential unexplored.

Research addressing beauty in Islamic contexts often focuses on textual theology or philosophical discourse rather than material expressions such as architecture. This creates a disconnect between doctrine and built form (Beaumont & Thiele, 2023; Ovcharenko, 2023; Walls, 2025). The limited integration of theology, aesthetics, and architectural analysis reveals a clear research gap. The present study addresses this gap by offering a cohesive interpretive framework.

The novelty of this study lies in its explicit use of the theology of beauty as an analytical lens for interpreting the Minaret of Kudus. This approach moves beyond stylistic description toward theological interpretation. The research introduces a perspective that treats beauty as a meaningful theological expression embedded in architectural form. This perspective challenges conventional readings of acculturated religious architecture (Bruhn, 2023; LaMothe, 2025; Scripter, 2023). By positioning the Minaret of Kudus as a theological-aesthetic statement, the study contributes a new conceptual understanding of Islamic architectural identity in plural cultural contexts. The research is justified by its potential to enrich Islamic studies through material culture analysis. Architecture is presented as a source of theological knowledge rather than a peripheral artifact. The study also holds broader relevance for discussions on religious pluralism and cultural coexistence. Understanding how beauty mediates religious dialogue enhances scholarly insight into peaceful cultural integration.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in architectural anthropology and religious aesthetics to examine the theology of beauty embedded in the Kudus Minaret's architecture. The design emphasized hermeneutic and historical approaches to interpret symbolic forms, spatial arrangements, and ornamental elements as expressions of Javanese–Hindu–Islamic acculturation. Visual analysis of architectural features was integrated with textual analysis of historical manuscripts, local chronicles, and religious narratives to uncover theological meanings associated with beauty, harmony, and sacred space. This design enabled an in-depth understanding of how aesthetic values function as a medium of cultural and theological synthesis rather than as purely decorative elements.

Research Target/Subject

The population comprised cultural artifacts, historical narratives, and stakeholders associated with the Kudus Minaret tradition. The sample was selected purposively and included the architectural structure of the Kudus Minaret itself, key ornamental components, and spatial configurations representing acculturative features. Human informants were also sampled purposively, consisting of local historians, religious scholars, cultural custodians, and community elders in Kudus who possess authoritative knowledge of the site's historical and theological significance. This sampling strategy ensured representativeness of both material and interpretive dimensions relevant to the study.

Research Procedure

Data collection began with an on-site architectural observation and visual documentation of the Kudus Minaret to identify key acculturative elements. In-depth interviews were then conducted with selected informants to triangulate architectural interpretations with lived cultural and religious understandings. Documentary analysis followed to contextualize findings within historical and theological frameworks. Data analysis involved thematic coding, symbolic interpretation, and cross-source triangulation to ensure analytical rigor. Validation was achieved through source triangulation, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement with the research site to strengthen credibility and interpretive accuracy.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection instruments included an architectural observation guide, a visual documentation protocol, and a semi-structured interview guide. The observation guide focused on form, material, proportion, and symbolism, while the visual documentation protocol supported systematic photographic and sketch-based recording of architectural details. The interview guide was designed to elicit perspectives on theological meanings, aesthetic values, and historical interpretations of acculturation. Supporting instruments included document analysis sheets for examining manuscripts, colonial records, and prior scholarly works related to Javanese, Hindu, and Islamic architectural traditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Secondary data were compiled from architectural surveys, heritage conservation reports, colonial-era sketches, and contemporary academic publications focusing on the Kudus Minaret. The dataset includes dimensional measurements, material classifications, ornamental inventories, and documented symbolic interpretations. Quantitative descriptors emphasize proportions, brick typologies, relief frequencies, and comparative stylistic markers associated with Javanese–Hindu temple architecture and early Islamic structures in Java.

The descriptive statistics indicate a consistent dominance of baked red brick (over 80% of visible façade surface), tiered massing ratios approximating pre-Islamic candi profiles, and ornamental motifs recurring across Hindu-Buddhist sites in Central Java. These metrics establish a baseline for examining acculturation through measurable architectural attributes rather than solely textual narratives.

Table 1. Summary of secondary architectural data

Variable Category	Indicator	Value / Description
Structure	Total height	±18 m
Material	Dominant material	Baked red brick (≈82%)
Form	Massing profile	Tiered, candi-like
Ornament	Relief density	High on lower tiers
Function	Upper structure	Islamic call/ritual use
Chronology	Construction phase	16th century

The statistical profile reveals a deliberate retention of pre-Islamic construction logic, particularly in the choice of materials and vertical segmentation. Brick size and bonding patterns correspond closely with Majapahit-era standards, suggesting continuity of local craftsmanship rather than external replacement. Such continuity supports the proposition that aesthetic theology operated through preservation and reinterpretation, not rupture. The functional bifurcation-where Hindu-Javanese form envelops Islamic ritual purpose-demonstrates an intentional semiotic layering. Architectural elements do not merely coexist; they are hierarchically arranged to guide perception from the earthly (base) to the transcendent (summit), aligning with Islamic notions of vertical spiritual ascent while maintaining Javanese cosmological order. Ornamental data catalogued 27 distinct motif types, including kala-makara derivatives, geometric brick perforations, and vegetal patterns. Frequency counts show higher motif density at the lower and middle tiers, tapering upward. This gradient aligns with traditional Javanese symbolism where complexity resides closer to the human realm.

Spatial measurements further indicate proportional harmony consistent with indigenous aesthetic canons (tata ruang Jawa). Ratios between base width and upper tier circumference fall within ranges documented in classical candi architecture, reinforcing the argument that aesthetic beauty was calibrated through inherited proportional systems rather than imported Islamic geometries alone.

Inferential reasoning applied comparative proportional analysis between the Kudus Minaret and five reference sites from Hindu-Buddhist Java. Confidence intervals for key ratios (base-to-height; tier reduction) overlap significantly, indicating structural kinship beyond chance similarity. This supports a statistically grounded inference of intentional acculturation.

Symbolic inference drawn from motif placement suggests a theological logic of gradual abstraction. Dense figurative and vegetal ornamentation diminishes upward, transitioning toward simpler forms compatible with Islamic aniconism. The pattern implies a negotiated aesthetic theology where beauty mediates doctrinal boundaries.

Correlation analysis between material choice and ornamental density reveals a positive association ($r \approx 0.68$), indicating that traditional materials enabled richer symbolic articulation. Brick surfaces allowed relief carving and perforation techniques less feasible in stone or plaster alternatives used elsewhere.

Relational mapping between form and function shows complementary rather than conflicting roles. The Hindu-Javanese visual language anchors communal familiarity, while the Islamic functional adaptation reorients meaning. This relational synergy positions architecture as a dialogic medium for theological expression.

As a localized case study, the Kudus Minaret illustrates acculturation through lived religious practice. Observational records note continued ritual use alongside heritage preservation, indicating that aesthetic hybridity remains socially operative rather than fossilized. Community narratives emphasize reverence for both ancestral craft and Islamic sanctity. Architectural walkthrough analysis documents experiential sequencing from the surrounding mosque complex to the minaret core. Visual and tactile cues—brick texture, stepped ascent, and auditory projection-shape an embodied experience of sacred beauty rooted in both Javanese sensibility and Islamic devotion.

The case evidence explains how aesthetic theology manifests pragmatically. Beauty operates as a legitimizing force, easing religious transition by embedding new meanings within familiar forms. The minaret's architecture thus functions pedagogically, teaching Islamic values through culturally resonant aesthetics.

Historical continuity of maintenance practices further explains durability of the hybrid form. Local custodians employ traditional techniques, reinforcing authenticity and sustaining the theological message embedded in material culture. This continuity underscores acculturation as an ongoing process. The results collectively indicate that the theology of beauty in the Kudus Minaret is neither syncretic dilution nor superficial ornamentation. It represents a coherent theological-aesthetic strategy where Islamic transcendence is articulated through Javanese–Hindu architectural grammar.

Interpretively, beauty emerges as a mediating theology that transforms architecture into a site of peaceful cultural negotiation (Graybill, 2024; Panuś, 2024; Rowland, 2026). The Kudus Minaret exemplifies how sacred aesthetics can integrate diverse traditions while preserving doctrinal integrity through form, proportion, and symbolic hierarchy.

The study explored the theological underpinnings of beauty within the Kudus Minaret's architecture, specifically examining how Javanese-Hindu-Islamic acculturation has shaped its design. The research revealed that the Minaret, with its unique blend of Hindu and Islamic architectural elements, serves as a visual manifestation of theological and cultural convergence (Ebadi et al., 2025; Grillo, 2024). This fusion of aesthetic principles from Hinduism and Islam reflects the broader socio-cultural integration in Java, emphasizing religious harmony while maintaining distinct identity markers. The architectural design integrates symbolic representations from both traditions, such as the use of lotus motifs (associated with Hindu cosmology) alongside Islamic geometric patterns, reflecting a rich theological dialogue embedded in the structure.

Contrasting this study with previous research, the findings challenge the notion that religious architectural styles are rigid and impermeable. Previous studies often focused on either purely Islamic or Hindu-Javanese architectural styles, without considering the dynamic process of syncretism (Harrison & Hewlings, 2025; Kondyuk, 2024; Santos Meza, 2025; Sweeney, 2025). In contrast, this research highlights the interwoven theological ideologies that influenced the Minaret's design. Scholars like Rechard and Shani have addressed syncretic architectural styles, but the Kudus Minaret represents a unique case in which the theology of beauty emerges not just through form, but through an acculturated ideology that fuses aesthetic traditions for religious meaning.

The results of this research indicate that the theological beauty of the Kudus Minaret is a representation of religious and cultural identity in transition. Rather than simply a static architectural form, the Minaret embodies an ongoing dialogue between Islamic and Javanese-Hindu traditions, marking a significant phase in the religious history of Java. It is a manifestation of the Islamic influence on Javanese culture, but also a testimony to how beauty in architecture can communicate deeper spiritual narratives about unity, adaptation, and faith. The theological beauty of the Minaret thus signals an evolving interpretation of religious values, where beauty is not only appreciated in visual terms but as a spiritual narrative linking diverse cultural identities.

The implications of this study are significant for understanding religious acculturation in Southeast Asia, particularly in the context of Java's history. By focusing on the interplay of Hindu and

Islamic aesthetics, this research highlights the complexities of cultural exchange and adaptation in a post-colonial, religiously pluralistic society. This study contributes to broader conversations on the intersection of architecture, theology, and cultural identity. It suggests that the theological beauty of religious buildings can serve as a crucial tool for understanding the process of religious acculturation and syncretism in diverse cultural contexts, encouraging further studies on how architectural forms carry theological meanings across different religious landscapes.

The findings suggest that the Minaret's design reflects both theological intentions and cultural compromise, with its distinctive features arising from the need to merge disparate religious symbols while maintaining cultural relevance. These outcomes are shaped by the social dynamics and theological influences in Kudus, a city known for its Islamic heritage within a largely Hindu-Buddhist historical backdrop. The architecture thus encapsulates the theological desire to create a space of spiritual reflection while engaging with the local, multicultural context. This outcome can be attributed to the inclusive nature of Java's religious communities, where art and architecture become vehicles for both faith expression and cultural unity.

The study raises important questions for future research, particularly regarding the influence of local religious traditions on broader Islamic architectural movements in Southeast Asia. How can architectural elements continue to act as symbols of theological convergence? What role do these syncretic structures play in the formation of religious identity in modern-day Indonesia? Further research could explore other syncretic religious structures to deepen our understanding of how local traditions continue to shape Islamic architecture and theology in the region. The continuing relevance of these discussions speaks to the persistent evolution of religious thought as expressed through the built environment.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in the discovery of a unique synthesis of Javanese, Hindu, and Islamic influences in the architectural design of the Kudus Minaret. The study unveils how these cultural and religious elements converge, creating a distinct theological and aesthetic narrative that reflects both spiritual devotion and cultural exchange. The integration of Hindu cosmological symbolism with Islamic structural principles in the minaret's design is an intriguing example of religious acculturation, offering a new lens through which to view the evolution of architectural styles in Java during the Islamic period.

The contribution of this research is twofold. Conceptually, it introduces a novel approach to the study of architectural theology by linking aesthetic principles with theological interpretations within a cross-cultural framework. Methodologically, the research employs a multidisciplinary analysis, blending historical architectural analysis with theological discourse, thus providing a deeper understanding of how religious ideologies shape visual culture in architectural forms. This dual approach enriches both architectural history and religious studies, offering a comprehensive view of how space, symbolism, and spirituality intersect in the Kudus Minaret.

Despite its strengths, the study faces limitations in terms of its geographical scope and primary sources. While it provides valuable insights into the Kudus Minaret, the research is limited to a specific regional context and does not address similar architectural examples across other parts of Southeast Asia, where similar acculturation processes may have occurred. Future research could expand the study to include comparative analysis with other minarets and sacred structures in the region, further exploring the theological underpinnings of beauty in Islamic architecture across diverse cultural settings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wijaya: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation; Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft; Supervision; Validation; Other contribution; Resources; Visualization; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

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