

Islamic Architecture and Cultural Identity: A Study of Mosques as Heritage Sites in Lanao Del Sur

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ABSTRACT

Mosques in Lanao del Sur are living sacred spaces that embody Islamic faith, Maranao cultural identity, collective memory, and community continuity. This study examined the architectural character and heritage significance of three selected mosques: the King Faisal Center Mosque, Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie, and Dansalan Bato Mosque. A qualitative descriptive-comparative design was employed. Data were gathered through field observation, photo documentation, semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively selected key informants, and document analysis. Thematic analysis and a comparative matrix were used to identify architectural patterns, cultural meanings, and preservation concerns across the sites. Findings revealed a continuum of mosque architecture: an academic-institutional hybrid that integrates okir ornamentation, a monumental urban

mosque shaped by international Islamic forms and post-conflict reconstruction, and a historic vernacular site marked by material loss and contested restoration. Across the cases, architecture functioned as an expression of identity, resilience, and belonging. The study concludes that conserving heritage mosques requires more than structural repair. It calls for culturally grounded conservation standards, community participation, institutional co-governance, documentation, and context-sensitive reconstruction policies that protect both material authenticity and living heritage.

Keywords: *Islamic architecture, cultural identity, heritage mosques, Lanao del Sur, Maranao identity, conservation policy*

INTRODUCTION

Mosques are central institutions in Muslim communities. Beyond their religious function, they serve as places of learning, social interaction, collective remembrance, and community organization. In Lanao del Sur, mosques occupy a particularly important place in the cultural landscape of the Maranao people. Their forms, materials, ornamentation, and locations communicate the relationship between Islamic belief, local artistic traditions, and the historical experience of communities surrounding Lake Lanao.

The architectural history of mosques in Lanao del Sur reflects adaptation rather than a single fixed style. Early prayer spaces drew from Southeast Asian vernacular forms and used locally available timber, bamboo, and thatch. Over time, these structures incorporated architectural features more commonly associated with Islamic buildings elsewhere, including domes, minarets, Arabic calligraphy, and geometric ornamentation. This process produced hybrid forms that connected Maranao communities to the wider Muslim ummah while preserving expressions of local identity through okir motifs and indigenous craftsmanship (Lopes & Hasnan, 2021; Othman & Zainal-Abidin, 2011).

The preservation of these sites has become increasingly urgent. Conflict, seismic risk, modernization, changing construction practices, and rapid post-conflict rebuilding can alter or erase historical fabric. The 2017 Marawi siege intensified this concern by damaging sacred spaces and reshaping the built environment. When historic materials and locally meaningful design elements are replaced without careful documentation and consultation, communities may lose not only physical structures but also tangible links to collective memory and inherited knowledge. The Nara Document on Authenticity emphasizes that authenticity must be understood in relation to cultural context, while the UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape calls for conservation to be integrated with social, economic, and urban development (ICOMOS, 1994; UNESCO, 2011).

Although Philippine heritage discourse has extensively examined colonial churches and civic buildings, scholarship on Islamic sacred architecture in the Bangsamoro region remains limited. This gap is significant because the mosque is both an architectural object and a living institution. Its heritage value is inseparable from prayer, religious education, community participation, and the transmission of local artistic knowledge. Republic Act No. 10066 provides a national legal basis for protecting cultural heritage, but effective implementation in local sacred sites requires conservation practices that respect religious authority, community ownership, and regional cultural contexts (Republic Act No. 10066, 2010).

This study examined the architectural features, cultural meanings, and conservation challenges of the King Faisal Center Mosque, Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie, and Dansalan Bato Mosque. It sought to identify how these mosques express Maranao identity, how their material transformations reflect historical and post-conflict conditions, and what policy directions may support sustainable heritage conservation in Lanao del Sur.

Literature Review

Islamic Architecture and Local Cultural Identity

Islamic architecture is not limited to a uniform visual vocabulary. While sacred spaces are guided by religious requirements such as qibla orientation and collective prayer, their forms often respond to local environments, available materials, construction traditions, and cultural meanings. Architecture therefore becomes a medium through which a Muslim community articulates both religious belonging and local identity. In Southeast Asia, mosque architecture has historically adapted vernacular technologies, including timber construction, tiered roofs, open verandas, and climate-responsive ventilation strategies.

Regional mosque traditions demonstrate that localization does not weaken religious meaning. Instead, the integration of indigenous art and building knowledge allows sacred spaces to remain legible and meaningful to the communities that use them. Lopes and Hasnan (2021) observed that mosque architecture may communicate cultural identity through locally grounded design choices. In the Maranao context, okir ornamentation connects Islamic sacred space with artistic traditions associated with ancestral craftsmanship and social memory.

The tension between local expression and global Islamic aesthetics is visible in the gradual shift from vernacular timber buildings to reinforced-concrete mosques with prominent domes and minarets. This transformation can represent aspiration, international connection, and institutional modernization. However, it may also reduce the visibility of regional building knowledge when local features are treated as decorative additions rather than integral architectural principles.

Authenticity, Sustainability, and Living Sacred Spaces

Heritage conservation in active religious sites requires a balance between continuity and change. Sacred buildings must remain functional for growing congregations while retaining the historical materials, spatial relationships, craftsmanship, and meanings that make them culturally significant. Matero (2011) argued that the loss of material fabric in historic sacred spaces also affects interpretation and spiritual value because craftsmanship and memory are embodied in physical form.

Authenticity is not confined to the preservation of old materials alone. The Nara Document on Authenticity recognizes that judgments about heritage value must be situated within cultural contexts and may involve form,

design, materials, use, traditions, setting, spirit, and feeling (ICOMOS, 1994). The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage likewise emphasizes the protection of practices, knowledge, and skills transmitted across generations (UNESCO, 2003). These principles are especially relevant to mosques where living religious practice, craft knowledge, and community participation remain essential.

Sustainability is also a heritage concern. Vernacular architecture often contains climate-responsive and resource-efficient features that are relevant to contemporary design. Sari et al. (2024) highlighted the environmental value of traditional mosque construction in disaster-prone Southeast Asian settings. In the context of Lanao del Sur, heritage conservation can support resilience by integrating appropriate local materials, passive cooling, structural reinforcement, and disaster-risk reduction without erasing the architectural character of sacred sites.

Mosques, Community Memory, and Post-Conflict Recovery

Mosques are closely linked to the social organization of communities. Baharudin and Ismail (2014) emphasized the contribution of communal mosques to social sustainability. In Lanao del Sur, sacred spaces have historically served religious, educational, and civic functions, reinforcing trust, belonging, and continuity. Their symbolic importance becomes more visible during periods of displacement and recovery.

Post-conflict reconstruction presents difficult choices. Communities need safe and functional structures, yet rapid rebuilding can result in standardized designs that overlook historical fabric and local meanings. Mohamed Som (2026) showed that mosque expansion and alteration can affect cultural significance when scale, fabric, and context are not carefully considered. The Historic Urban Landscape approach encourages heritage planning that considers the wider built environment, community values, and development pressures rather than treating a monument as an isolated object (UNESCO, 2011).

For Lanao del Sur, conservation must therefore recognize mosques as both structures and living institutions. Their preservation involves documentation, community consultation, skilled craftsmanship, appropriate engineering, and coordination among religious leaders, local communities, academic institutions, and cultural agencies.

Theoretical Framework for Heritage Conservation

This study adopted a living-heritage perspective that combines material conservation with the continuity of cultural practice. The framework recognizes that the significance of a mosque is located not only in its physical fabric but also in its use, religious meaning, craft traditions, community memory, and relationship to the surrounding landscape. This perspective is consistent with the Nara Document on Authenticity, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (ICOMOS, 1994; UNESCO, 2003, 2011).

The framework is organized around four interrelated pillars: material and structural authenticity, indigenous aesthetics and craftsmanship, institutional co-governance, and socio-ecological sustainability. Together, these pillars guide the analysis of existing conditions and the formulation of conservation priorities for the selected heritage mosques.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive-comparative research design. This approach was appropriate because the inquiry focused on architectural characteristics, material transformations, cultural symbolism, community interpretations, and conservation challenges. The comparative component allowed the researchers to identify similarities and differences across the selected sites while retaining the historical and cultural context of each mosque.

Study Sites

Three mosques in Lanao del Sur were purposively selected because they represent distinct architectural and historical conditions. The King Faisal Center Mosque, located at Mindanao State University in Marawi City, reflects an academic-institutional hybrid that combines prominent Islamic architectural forms with Maranao okir ornamentation. Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie serves as a major urban congregational mosque and reflects monumental Islamic architecture shaped by post-conflict recovery. Dansalan Bato Mosque, located near Lake Lanao, represents a historically significant vernacular site marked by material loss and contested restoration.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study involved 12 purposively selected key informants. These included Grand Imams, traditional leaders, titled elders, local historians, and community members with extensive knowledge of the selected sites. Purposive sampling was used to obtain information from individuals whose experiences and roles were directly relevant to the historical, religious, and cultural interpretation of the mosques.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through field observation, photo documentation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Structured observation logs were used to record the physical condition, spatial layout, orientation, materials, ornamentation, and daily use of each mosque. Photo documentation captured architectural details, signs of deterioration, and modifications. Semi-structured interviews explored historical memories, architectural symbolism, community experiences, and views on reconstruction and preservation. Document analysis covered available historical photographs, local archival materials, planning documents, and related records.

Data Analysis

The researchers used qualitative thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and field notes were reviewed and coded line by line to identify recurring ideas. Codes were organized into broader categories concerning architectural typology, material transformation, cultural symbolism, post-conflict reconstruction, and conservation needs. A comparative matrix was then used to examine similarities and differences across the three selected sites.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent before the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in the handling of interview data. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored securely. The research process also respected the religious and cultural protocols of the selected communities through coordination with relevant local and religious leaders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Architectural Typologies and Material Transformations

The selected mosques represent different phases in the architectural development of Islamic sacred spaces in Lanao del Sur. The King Faisal Center Mosque demonstrates an academic-institutional hybrid form. Its reinforced-concrete structure and prominent dome reflect modern Islamic architectural vocabulary, while its use of local hardwood, okir patterns, and Arabic calligraphic bands expresses a deliberate integration of Maranao artistic identity. The mosque illustrates how institutional modernization can retain a visible relationship with regional culture.

Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie reflects a monumental urban typology. Its large dome, multiple minarets, reinforced-concrete construction, imported finishes, and strong visual presence establish it as a central landmark in Marawi City. Its significance is not limited to scale. The mosque also functions as a symbol of continuity and recovery after the 2017 siege. Its reconstruction demonstrates the capacity of architecture to communicate resilience, although the use of standardized materials raises questions about the preservation of local design vocabulary.

Dansalan Bato Mosque presents the most visible tension between historical continuity and material loss. Its earlier timber form represented vernacular construction knowledge and ancestral memory. Conflict-related destruction severed much of this tangible connection. Continuing discussions on reconstruction reveal the difficulty of balancing safety, durability, historical authenticity, and community expectations. The site demonstrates that rebuilding a heritage mosque is not solely an engineering task; it is also a negotiation of identity and memory.

Table 1. *Comparative Architectural and Heritage Profiles of the Selected Mosques*

Architectural Feature	King Faisal Center Mosque	Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie	Dansalan Bato Mosque
Primary typology	Academic-institutional hybrid	Monumental urban mosque	Historic vernacular site under reconstruction
Dominant materials	Reinforced concrete, stone, and local hardwood	Reinforced concrete, marble, tile, and synthetic finishes	Historical timber fabric; concrete reconstruction materials
Distinctive visual elements	Okir ornamentation and Arabic calligraphic bands	Large central dome, multiple minarets, and geometric ornamentation	Historical carved timber elements and surviving site remains
Primary heritage meaning	Integration of Islamic identity and Maranao artistic heritage	Urban religious landmark and post-conflict symbol of resilience	Ancestral memory, vernacular knowledge, and contested restoration
Major conservation concern	Moisture, timber deterioration, and institutional maintenance	Post-conflict reconstruction and contextual compatibility	Material loss, documentation gaps, and restoration direction

Cultural Symbolism and Local Interpretations

Across the selected sites, architectural meaning extended beyond physical appearance. At the King Faisal Center Mosque, okir patterns linked sacred architecture to Maranao craftsmanship. Their presence allowed local artistic identity to remain visible within a building that also used modern Islamic forms. This combination expressed belonging to both a regional cultural tradition and a global religious community.

At Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie, the monumental dome and minarets carried strong symbolic meaning after conflict. The mosque's continued presence communicated endurance and the restoration of communal life. It functioned as a visual and spiritual point of reference for residents affected by displacement and urban destruction.

Dansalan Bato Mosque carried a different but equally powerful meaning. Its historical value was rooted in ancestry, vernacular craftsmanship, and the memory of earlier religious communities surrounding Lake Lanao. The loss of historic material generated concern because reconstruction could not automatically replace the meanings embedded in timber craftsmanship, site history, and community memory.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Preservation Challenges

The study identified interconnected technical, institutional, and cultural challenges. The King Faisal Center Mosque requires regular maintenance and specialized restoration attention, particularly for moisture-related deterioration and wooden decorative elements. Its location within a public university provides institutional support but also creates administrative procedures that can delay conservation action.

The preservation of Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie and Dansalan Bato Mosque is closely tied to the complexity of post-conflict reconstruction. Rapid rebuilding often prioritizes immediate structural functionality. While this is necessary, the process may introduce materials, forms, and finishes that weaken contextual continuity. Heritage impact assessment, documentation, and community consultation are therefore essential before major interventions are implemented.

The policy environment also requires clearer coordination. Republic Act No. 10066 provides a national framework for heritage protection, but local implementation requires collaboration among cultural agencies, religious authorities, local government institutions, academic specialists, and community representatives.

Conservation policies must recognize that living mosques cannot be managed solely as static monuments. They require flexible standards that support worship, safety, growth, and cultural continuity.

Proposed Heritage Conservation Framework

The findings support a culturally integrated conservation framework for heritage mosques in Lanao del Sur. The framework is designed to guide documentation, restoration, expansion, and post-conflict reconstruction while protecting both tangible and intangible heritage. It recognizes that technical decisions must be aligned with religious practice, local knowledge, and community participation.

Table 2. *Proposed Conservation Pillars and Priority Actions*

Conservation Pillar	Core Principle	Priority Actions
Material and structural authenticity	Retain historically meaningful fabric while improving safety and resilience.	Prepare condition assessments; document original materials; use compatible repair methods; integrate disaster-risk reduction.
Indigenous aesthetics and craftsmanship	Protect Maranao design knowledge as a living heritage practice.	Engage local woodcarvers and artisans; document okir motifs; support apprenticeship and skills transfer.
Institutional co-governance	Coordinate decisions across religious, cultural, academic, and government institutions.	Establish site-based conservation committees; clarify responsibilities; require consultation before major interventions.
Socio-ecological sustainability	Align conservation with environmental performance and community use.	Apply climate-responsive design; preserve open spaces; assess expansion impacts; integrate emergency shelter functions where appropriate.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the selected mosques of Lanao del Sur are not merely religious buildings. They are living heritage sites that embody Islamic faith, Maranao identity, social memory, and resilience. Their architectural forms reveal a continuing negotiation between indigenous craftsmanship, regional environmental knowledge, global Islamic influences, institutional modernization, and post-conflict recovery.

The King Faisal Center Mosque illustrates a conscious integration of modern Islamic architecture and Maranao ornamentation. Jameo Mindanao Al-Islamie functions as a monumental urban landmark and a symbol of recovery. Dansalan Bato Mosque reveals the depth of loss that occurs when vernacular heritage is destroyed and reconstruction becomes contested. Together, the cases show that conservation must protect both material fabric and the living cultural meanings attached to sacred spaces.

A sustainable conservation approach requires community participation, documentation, compatible materials, skilled craftsmanship, heritage impact assessment, disaster resilience, and coordinated governance. Protecting these mosques contributes not only to the preservation of architecture but also to the continuity of Maranao cultural identity for future generations.

Recommendations

1. Develop localized conservation guidelines for Islamic sacred architecture in Lanao del Sur. These guidelines should be aligned with Republic Act No. 10066 while reflecting Maranao cultural practices, Islamic religious requirements, and the operational needs of active mosques.

2. Create comprehensive heritage inventories for significant mosques. Documentation should include measured drawings, photographs, oral histories, material assessments, maps, and digital archives before major repairs, expansion, or reconstruction activities are undertaken.
3. Establish site-based conservation committees composed of religious leaders, community representatives, local government officials, cultural agencies, architects, engineers, historians, and academic institutions to support transparent and context-sensitive decision-making.
4. Strengthen training and apprenticeship programs for local artisans, especially practitioners of okir carving and traditional building techniques. Conservation should contribute to the transmission of indigenous knowledge rather than depend solely on standardized construction methods.
5. Require heritage impact assessments for major interventions. Expansion and reconstruction projects should evaluate effects on historical fabric, spatial relationships, environmental performance, community access, and cultural meaning.
6. Support further research on Islamic architectural heritage in the Bangsamoro region, including comparative studies of additional mosques, documentation of traditional materials and construction methods, and the development of disaster-resilient conservation strategies.

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