

The Nattukottai Chettiar Temple: An architectural manifestation of chettier cultural identity

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> Received July 04, 2024 Received in revised form Sept. 10, 2024 Accepted November 18, 2024 Available online April 01, 2025</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Architectural analysis Architectural influence Chettiar community Cultural heritage preservation Trade</p> <p>*Corresponding author: Azizi Bahauddin Interior Architecture Programme School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang Email: azizi@usm.my ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0050-7499</p>	<p><i>The Chettiar moneylenders from Chettinad, Tamil Nadu, India, thrived in local and international commerce, especially in the Malay States. Their architecture, influenced by finances, banking, and trade, is simultaneously unique and culturally significant. The Chettiar community in Penang is facing a population decline. Thus, the community's cultural neglect leads to its demise. Despite the Chettiar community's longstanding involvement in commerce, banking, and financial management, more comprehensive research needs to be conducted to explore the influence of these factors on their architectural designs, particularly their temples. The potential demise of Chettiar culture raises significant concerns about the need for more experts in this field, highlighting the urgent need to preserve their architectural heritage. The primary aim of this qualitative method is research to study the architectural features of the Chettiar temple. It delves into the temple's architectural design, exploring the distinctive features that represent a fusion of multiple cultures. The study assesses their impact on enhancing the temple's visual appeal and cultural significance. The temple, a representation of the magnificence and intricacy of architectural craftsmanship, stands as evidence of the Chettiars' economic prosperity. Furthermore, the research examines the functional characteristics of the temple space, offering a deeper understanding of its design and usage. The study also analyses the historical development of trade associated with the Chettiar temple in the Malay states. This study seeks to explain the complex interconnections of culture, architecture, and commerce, with the ultimate goal of preserving the Chettiar community's unique cultural and architectural heritage.</i></p>

Introduction

People from the Chettiar family who own large mansions in rural Chettinad are called Nattukottai Chettiars. The term "Chettiar" is derived from "Chetty," which is the Tamil version of "Shrishti," the Sanskrit term for "merchant" (Damodaran 2021; Ng 2017). The Chettiar community, known for its expertise in banking and commerce, became important Indian traders in Malaya throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries

(Damodaran 2021). Their economic activities, mainly centered in Chettinad, Tamil Nadu (figure 1), in southern India, significantly impacted the Indian diaspora (Punitha 2016). Although known for charging high interest rates, the Chettiars had a considerable influence on the economic landscape by bringing attention to the complex interplay of trade, migration, and cultural interchange (Lekah 2023).





Figure 1. Map of Tamil Nadu (South India)
Source: (Damodaran 2021)

Apart from their reputation for structured banking and ethical business conduct, the Chettiar family is known for its rich cultural practices, exquisite cuisine, and massive palatial residence (Lakshmanan, Anbu, and Noguchi 2023). However, the economic influence of this population in Malaysia has gradually decreased, resulting in a decline in their cultural impact (Ng 2017). This decline threatens their exceptional cultural legacy, including their distinct architectural style. Because of the risk of permanently losing this culturally and architecturally significant heritage, this paper examines the importance of a particular asset. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive study of the influence of trade, banking, and financial management on architectural style, specifically in the setting of temple architecture. Thus, this paper focuses on the architecture of Chettiar temples.

There are two objectives for this research paper: a) To study the temple's architectural design, particularly emphasizing the impact of various economic sectors, providing context for the architectural style and cultural expression shaped by trade and commerce. b) To analyze the historical development of trade linked to the Chettiar temple in the Malay states, revealing the complex connection between the temple and the surrounding trade operations, thereby providing insights into its socio-economic importance throughout history.

The research is based on the theoretical framework (TF) of Indian architectural heritage to explore the Chettiar temples' cultural and symbolic significance (Natarajan 2015). The TF encompasses three key components: historic

value, economic implications, and social relevance. Economic history explores the impact of commerce and trade on cultural and societal structures for the Chettiar community. This study recognizes its limitations, including potential constraints in data availability and the limited area of research due to the scarcity of information on Chettiar architecture in Malaysia. The architecture of Chettiar temples in Malaysia and India could show minor variations. Despite several limitations, the results of this study are expected to offer useful insights into the intricate relationship between culture, architecture, and trade.

Literature review

Economic influence on architectural design

The Chettiar community, known for its money-lending activities, significantly influenced 19th-century architecture (Jaffar 2022). Although their headquarters remained in Madras, their operations extended to South Africa, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma, and Malaya (figure 2) (Mohamed Dali 2009). Despite periodic business travels abroad, they rarely permanently resided in foreign countries (Punitha 2016). Their architectural legacy reflects a blend of aesthetics, combining Eastern and Western influences (Jaffar 2022). Chettiar architecture, characterized by opulent proportions, vibrant hues, and intricate wood carvings, also shows an impact from the Art Deco style (UNESCO 2010; Patwardhan 2018).



Figure 2. Chettiar's trade route map
Source: (Gopal 2021)

The architectural elements of Chettiar

The Chettiar community, renowned for its contributions to business, banking, and finance, has developed a versatile architectural style. Their

unique roofscape, resulting from organized rectangular house plots, facilitates rainwater collection and natural cooling (figure 3) (Dragon and Adment 2010). Valuable courtyards, often used for business meetings, reflect their commercial focus (Temple Architecture in India 2023). Another key element of Chettiar architecture is the use of arches and porches (Figure 4), with each house featuring an imposing entrance porch at the level of the compound wall, showcasing the wealth and social status of the owner (Dragon and Adment 2010). The community's heritage identity is embodied by its richly decorated porches, which are influenced by various architectural styles. Columns are integral to Chettiar architecture, with two main types: wooden columns for interior areas and stone pillars for courtyards (main or kitchen) (figure 5) (Dragon and Adment 2010). The intricately carved entrances of Chettiar temples further demonstrate the architectural prowess of the artists (Natarajan 2015).

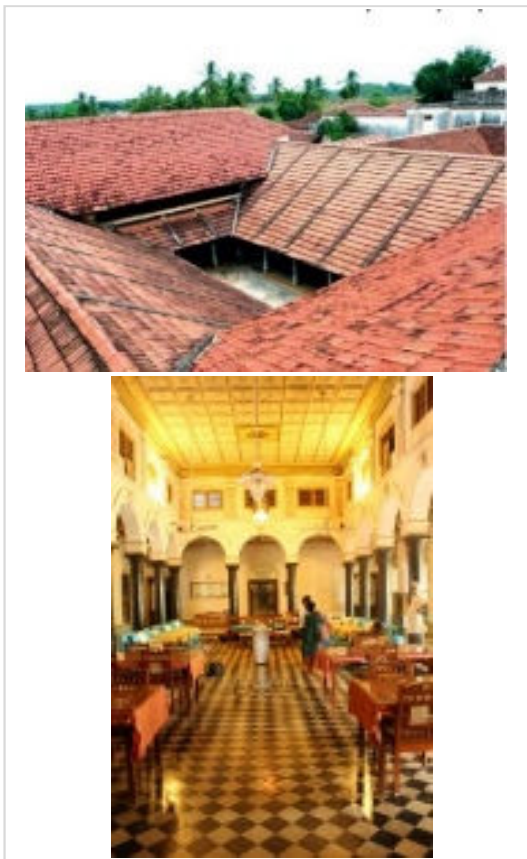


Figure 3 and 4. Chettinad house roofscape and reception room arches
 Source: Dragon and Adment 2010

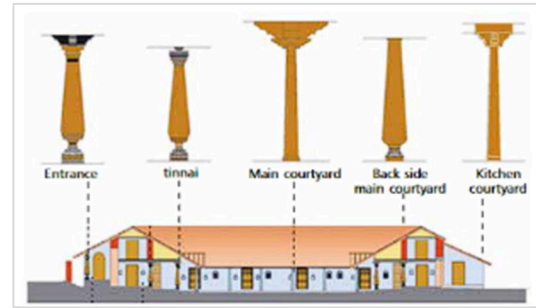


Figure 5. Column typologies and placement
 Source: Dragon and Adment 2010

Chettiar architecture: Symbolism and imported materials

The front façade of Chettiar temples, designed to resemble concrete, showcases a concrete sculpture depicting Gajalaxmi, Shiva, Krishna, monarchs, queens, kings, British soldiers, hunters, and symbolic flora and fauna (figure 6) (UNESCO 2010). These intricate designs reflect religious, cultural, and economic progress, requiring substantial resources. Balustrades, parapets, and cornices contribute to the regional character, with stucco cornices and multiple balustrades and parapets adding majesty to the temples (figure 7) (UNESCO 2010).

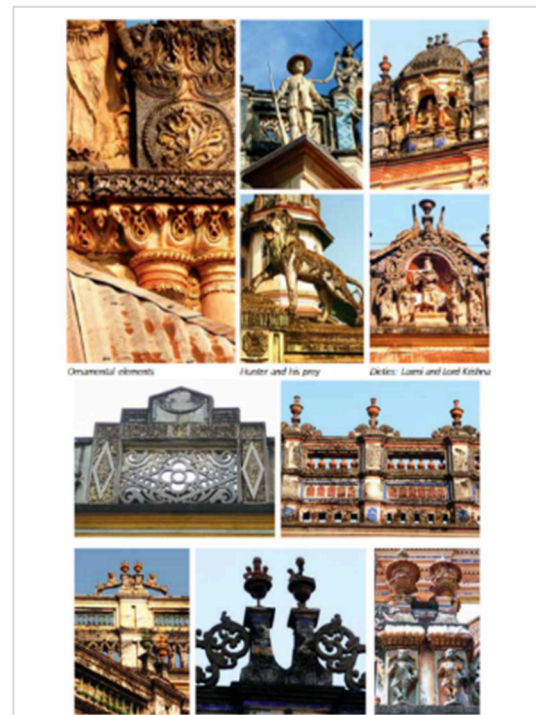


Figure 6 and 7. Concrete sculptures and architectural details: balustrades, parapets, and cornices
 Source: Dragon and Adment 2010

The natural colors of plaster temples are striking. Carved wooden pillars, door frames, window imposts, and ceilings display Goddesses, Yallis, animals, and geometric motifs (figure 8) (Natarajan 2015), showcasing the community's economic strength. Stuccos and murals utilize seashell lime and egg-based white lime mortars and plaster (figure 9), benefiting the local economy. Additionally, Chettiar architecture, influenced by global trade, incorporates Western-inspired elements like colonnades, cornices, and balustrades (UNESCO 2010). Imported materials such as Burmese teak, Ceylon satinwood, Italian and Belgian marble, and British metal plates highlight their affluence and international connections (M 2021). Distinctive Chettiar craftsmanship includes Indian woodcarving, frescoes, and egg-plastering, fostering cultural exchange (UNESCO 2014).

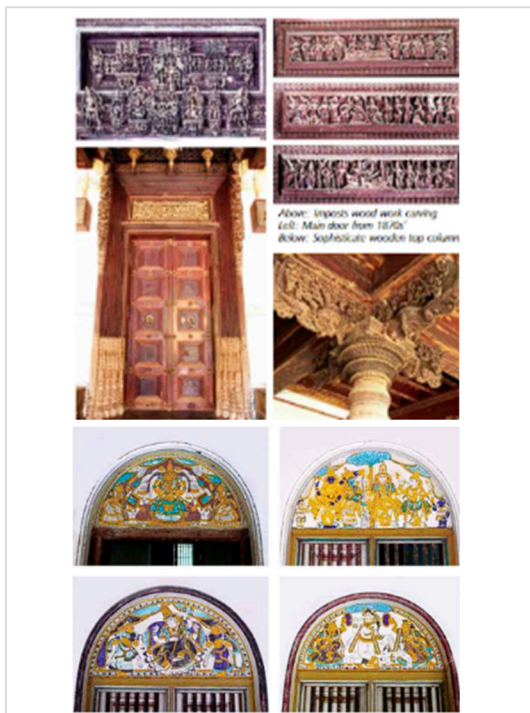


Figure 8 and 9. Wooden carvings and stuccos: cultural features in wall paintings
Source: [Dragon and Adment 2010](#)

Hindu architecture influence on Kapitan Keling Mosque

The Kapitan Keling Mosque (figure 10), a blend of Hindu and Islamic influences, showcases inverted Buddhist lotus designs on its domes and features the Hindu Kalasa finial (Hassan and Ali 2019). Inside the mosque, horseshoe-shaped

arches adorned with plaques reminiscent of King Edward's reign create a vivid representation of cultural fusion (Abdullah 2019). These arches, known as Kudu or Chaitya, resemble features found in Hindu temples, symbolically serving as apertures through which deities view the temples (Evans 2021). Adhering to Islamic guidelines that prohibit figurative imagery, the Kapitan Keling Mosque is adorned with geometric motifs both inside and out. In contrast, the Chettiar Temple (figure 11) boasts elaborate carvings depicting gods, goddesses, mythical creatures, plants, animals, and geometric designs, capturing the rich Hindu mythology and cultural diversity of the region (UNESCO 2010).



Figure 10. Plan of Kapitan Keling Mosque and facilities
Source: [Nasution 2015](#)



Figure 11. Plan of Chettiar ancestral home
Source: [\(Lakshmanan, Anbu, and Noguchi 2023\)](#)

Methods

This study employs simple ethnographic research methods, which are commonly utilized in the fields of social and behavioral sciences, to gather

qualitative data (Creswell 2007). Observations and interviews are conducted to gather data on the architectural elements and symbolism of the Chettiar temple in Penang. The primary ethnographic methodologies are observation of the chosen temple, interviews, and archive research. The field study was undertaken for observation at the Nattukottai Chettiar Temple at Pulau Tikus, Penang. An interview is conducted with the local people to obtain vital information and deepen understanding of the cultural importance of the temples. Archival research involves doing case studies to analyze and examine research articles to find unique architectural temple features of the Chettiar community and understand their cultural significance. Field investigation, interviews, and archival research data are meticulously analyzed. This task entails identifying architectural elements, symbolism, and the connections with their trade history within the data. Subsequently, the results are analyzed, and the study's objectives and current knowledge of Chettiar architecture are explained. This research methodology offers a thorough way of comprehending the architectural elements of the Chettiar temple in Penang and their cultural importance. It employs many qualitative techniques to collect comprehensive and intricate data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the temple's architectural features and cultural significance.

Case study

Kapitan Keling Mosque: history and architectural connections with Chettiar temples

The Kapitan Keling Mosque (figure 12), a historic marvel in the George Town World Heritage Site, was founded in 1801 by the East India Company. Led by the 'Kapitan Keling,' it served the South Indian community in Penang (Nasution 2015). Despite its central role in Penang's Muslim community, it also symbolizes the Tamil Muslim community's cultural legacy and unity (Nasution 2015). Interestingly, trade connections influenced both the Kapitan Keling Mosque and the Chettiar Temples. South Indians, including Tamil Muslims ('Chulia'), brought Islam to Southeast Asia, while Hindu Chettiars engaged in trade (Mohamed Dali 2009). Despite their distinct religions, shared history, and architectural styles bind these communities, shaping the mosque's design.



Figure 12. The Kapitan Keling Mosque

Architectural synthesis: Indo-Saracenic, Neoclassical and Mughal influences




The Kapitan Keling Mosque blends Mughal and Neoclassical architectural styles, resulting in a unique Indo-Saracenic design. Chettiar Architecture, influenced by British colonial neoclassical features, also contributes to this fusion. Opulent proportions, vibrant hues, and intricate wood carvings characterize Chettiar architecture, which also shows hints of Art Deco (UNESCO 2010). The neoclassical elements in these structures enhance their uniqueness without overpowering them. Balustrades, columns, architraves, and other features dominate British colonial architecture, symbolizing success and prestige (table 1). Chettiar balustrades and arches influenced the British. Tamil Nadu's Chettiar architecture reflects affluence and social standing (Patwardhan 2018). The Kapitan Keling Mosque, with its onion-shaped domes, arches, and turrets, showcases Mughal influences (table 2). The interplay of styles and cultural fusion enriches the region's architectural history (Hassan and Ali 2019).

Table 1. Neoclassical elements present in Kapitan Keling Mosque

Elements	Photo
Balustrades	
Arcades	
Columns	

Elements	Photo
Pilasters	

Table 2. Mughal architectural features present in Kapitan Keling Mosque

Features	Photo
Onion-Shaped Domes	
Pointed Arches	
Turrets	

Results and discussion

This section is an analysis of the data gathered from the case study from Nattukottai Chettiar Temple and Kapitan Keling Mosque. In this section, comparatives of architectural components will be discussed (table 3). Since both of the origins of ancestors are from Tamil Nadu, their architecture has a similar influence despite having different religions which are Hindu and Islam. Having similarities means having some differences as well because some amendment is required to fit the religion.

Background of Nattukottai Chettiar Temple



The Nattukottai Chettiar Temple (figure 13), located on Jalan Kebun Bunga (formerly











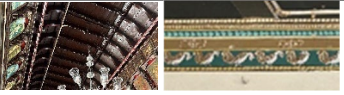

Waterfall Road), is a spiritual sanctuary for the Chettiar community. Officially known as the Nattukkottai Chettiar Thendayuthapani Temple, it is dedicated to Lord Thendayuthapani (also revered as Lord Murugan). Established in 1854, it holds deep significance in the history of the Chettiar community in Penang (HARMONICO 2023).







Figure 13. Nattukottai Chettiar Temple in Georgetown, Pulau Pinang

Table 3. Comparative architecture components of the Nattukottai Chettiar Temple and The Kapitan Keling Mosque

Nattukottai Chettiar Temple	Components	Kapitan Keling Mosque
	Courtyard: Inner courtyard	
The courtyard of the Nattukottai Chettiar Temple functioned as a pivotal location for social engagements, encompassing the hosting of guests and the exchange of business matters (Natarajan 2015).		The courtyard of the Kapitan Keling Mosque functions as both an ablution fountain and a gathering place for tourists (Weisbin 2019).

Nattukkottai Chettiar Temple	Components	Kapitan Keling Mosque
 <p>The domes feature sculptures of the deity to whom they are dedicated, including Lord (Murugan Murganmuthu 2024). These sculptures and their accompanying iconography symbolically represent the concepts of dharma, kama, artha, moksha, and karma (Singh et al. 2022).</p>	<p>Onion-shaped domes</p>	 <p>The domes, clad in copper, present a clean surface (iSSUU 2018). They serve a dual purpose: amplifying the Imam's voice to resonate throughout the prayer hall, ensuring audibility for all, and marking the building's identity as a mosque.</p>
 <p>Column 1 Column 2 Column 3</p> <p>Column 1 is adorned with intricate molding. Column 2 is constructed from steel. Column 3, crafted from Burmese teak, is painted for a finished look (Murganmuthu 2024).</p>	<p>Columns</p>	 <p>All the column is coated with lime plaster. The columns feature simple geometric stucco and molding designs in natural shades of white and grey. (iSSUU 2018).</p>
 <p>The pilaster also features intricate molding and painting, similar to that of the column.</p>	<p>Pilasters</p>	 <p>Similar to the columns, the pilasters also feature simple and repetitive geometric designs in natural shades.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Round Arch  <p>The round arch is adorned with intricate patterns and vibrant hues (Evans 2021).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flat Arch  <p>The main entrance uses a flat arch covered with elaborate carvings and sculptures, symbolizing the rich artistic legacy of Hinduism (Jaffar 2022).</p>	<p>Arches</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Round Arch  <p>The round arch features clean lines, and simple molding, and is painted in a pristine white shade.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three-Pointed Arch  <p>The Kapitan Keling Mosque's main entrance and most arches are three-pointed. This design originated in medieval Islamic architecture.</p>
 <p>Lord Murugan and other gods and goddesses are depicted on the cornices. Indian experts' handcraft all of the paintings. Due to its scarcity, several cornices feature peacocks (Murganmuthu 2024).</p>	<p>Cornices</p>	 <p>Simple geometric motifs decorate mosque cornices. These decorative elements visually connect the vertical walls and horizontal roof. Their simplicity enhances the mosque's architecture and cultural value.</p>

Nattukkottai Chettiar Temple	Components	Kapitan Keling Mosque
 <p>The door is adorned with intricate carvings and is painted in gold. Gold, often associated with divinity, symbolizes the divine nature of the deity residing within the temple when used on temple doors.</p>	<p>Door</p>	 <p>The Kapitan Keling Mosque does not have a door. This is done to keep the mosque open as a symbol of accessibility for prayer. However, they do have a gate to secure the mosque when needed. (Weisbin 2019)</p>
 <p>Sculptures of gods and goddesses on the temple domes enhance the spiritual atmosphere and connect earthly realms to the divine (Bhat and Jayachandra 2022). Its round shape symbolizes eternity and peace.</p>	<p>Sculpture/ Molding</p>	 <p>Geometric molding and Al-Quranic inscriptions decorate the mosque dome. The dome symbolizes heaven and God's unity, while the round design promotes wholeness and harmony. It stabilizes the roof and distributes weight.</p>

Conclusions

The research sheds light on the architectural design of the Nattukkottai Chettiar Temple, emphasizing the influence of various economic sectors. The Chettians' economic endeavors significantly shaped the temple's architecture, making it a vital symbol of their cultural heritage. The study reveals how trade, migration, and cultural exchange interacted to impact the temple's design. The decline of the Chettians' economic power in Malaysia, and the resulting loss of their cultural influence, highlights the importance of preserving this distinctive architectural heritage. By examining the historical trade connections associated with the Chettiar temple in the Malay states, the research uncovers a complex relationship between the temple and surrounding trade operations. Insights gained from this analysis highlight the temple's socio-economic importance throughout history. The study strongly supports the involvement of Penang's well-known Chettiar groups, whose community expertise and connections may greatly assist in the restoration and conservation of the Chettiar community's valuable heritage and distinctive architecture.

The research determines that architectural heritage is crucial not just for its historical and aesthetic value but also for its significant influence on socio-economic processes. This study underscores the complex connection between architecture, culture, and commerce, enhancing our comprehension of architectural

history and cultural studies. It also emphasizes the shared obligation of historians, preservationists, cultural heritage organizations, government officials, and respected Chettiar organizations in conserving heritage sites. These efforts not only enhance our understanding of history and culture but also impose upon us the duty of preserving our cultural inheritance. Ultimately, this study serves as a reminder of the significance of architectural heritage in influencing socioeconomic processes and the shared responsibility we have to preserve it for future generations.

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Author(s) contribution

Nurul Izzati Masrom contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revision.

Azizi Bahauddin contribute to the research concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.

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