

## Exploring Kelantanese syncretism: The Siamese influences in traditional Kelantanese interior design style

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i>            Received July 05, 2024            Received in revised form Sept. 08, 2024            Accepted March 12, 2025            Available online December 01, 2025</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i>            Cultural heritage            Interior design            Kelantanese            Siamese influences            Syncretism</p> <p>*Corresponding author: Azizi Bahauddin            BSc Hons of Interior Architecture, School of Housing, Building and Planning, University Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia            Email: <a href="mailto:azizi@usm.my">azizi@usm.my</a>            ORCID: <a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0050-7499">https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0050-7499</a></p>	<p><i>Architecture syncretism involves the fusion of architectural elements from distinct cultures, combination between Siamese and Kelantanese stands out prominently. This research investigates Siamese influences, analysing their cultural meanings and implications on Kelantanese interior design. Siamese cultures managed to become the dominant influences in Kelantanese's life, although Siamese accounting only 1.18 per cent of the population. The arrival of Chinese traders intermarried with the Siamese led to the Peranakan Chinese community's development, resulting in more Chinese Siamese in Malaysia. Siamese culture assimilated with Malay culture creates unique, artistic, and architectural elements. However, modernization is causing these influences to fade, highlights the importance of studying Siamese elements in traditional Kelantanese interior design to preserve this culture and foster cross-cultural appreciation. The conceptual framework established focuses on the acculturated interior, aims to bridge the research gap in the field. This research utilised qualitative methods, comprising grounded theory, case studies, and simple ethnographic analysis. The findings reveal Istana Jahar in Kota Bharu has the most conspicuous syncretism between Siam and Kelantan in terms of architectural style in interior design, shaped by historical events between the Kelantanese and the rulers, including the kingdom of Siam and the colonial forces with the literature supports.</i></p>

### Introduction

This research paper explores the fascinating intersection of Siamese influences within traditional Kelantanese interior design, focusing on how cultural syncretism has shaped the unique architectural identity of Kelantan (figure 1). This study began with a profound interest in the rich cultural tapestry of Kelantan and the historical influences that have contributed to its distinctive interior design styles.

The journey of this research has been deeply enriching, involving extensive ethnographic observations, interviews, and case studies, provide an invaluable insight into the symbiotic

relationship between Siamese and Kelantanese architectural traditions.



Figure 1. Location plan of Kelantan, Malaysia.

Source: [Kelantan Center 2020](#)

Throughout this research, the focus has been on identifying key elements of Siamese influence and analyzing their cultural and symbolic meanings within the Kelantanese context. The findings highlight the importance of preserving these unique cultural elements amidst the rapid modernization that threaten to erode this rich heritage.

Kelantan, known for its rich culture is known as "The Cradle of Malay Culture", and provides a unique context for investigating how Siamese influences have shaped traditional Kelantanese interior design (Hamzah 2008; Mohamad 2025; Nasir 2011). This study improves a better understanding of Kelantanese cultural identity and heritage preservation practices in the face of changing cultural dynamics.

#### Background syncretism of Kelantanese and Siamese

The historical ties between Kelantan and Siam (Thailand) fostered a rich cultural exchange. Despite the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, a strong cultural connection remained. Siamese settled in Kelantan before other immigrant groups arrived, allowing them to integrate Siamese cultures into Kelantanese society (Alias and Ahamat 2023; Sari 2024). Kelantan embraces religious diversity, with Kelantanese Malays practising Islam and the Siamese practising Theravada Buddhism. Inter-marriage between Siamese and other ethnic groups, particularly Chinese traders, enriched the cultural landscape, and formed the Peranakan Chinese communities (Dow, Reed, and Woodcock 2016; Fatah and Ashaari 2020; Mamat et al. 2019). This cultural fusion is visible in many aspects of Kelantanese culture, such as architecture, cuisine, and traditional customs.

#### Problem statement

The unstoppable progress of modernisation has worn away the heritage embraced by the Siamese Malay communities in Kelantan. Kelantan was declared as "Islamic City" on 1st October 2005 by the state government and holds Islamic values in life. The Siamese population

accounted for 1.18 per cent of the overall Kelantan population (Bernama 2023), making them the minority in Kelantan. Moreover, the development of Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan, resulting more Chinese Siamese in Malaysia today. However, the Siamese cultures had already assimilated with the culture of Islam before them, forming various unique cultures, arts, architectural elements, and design styles.

#### Research questions

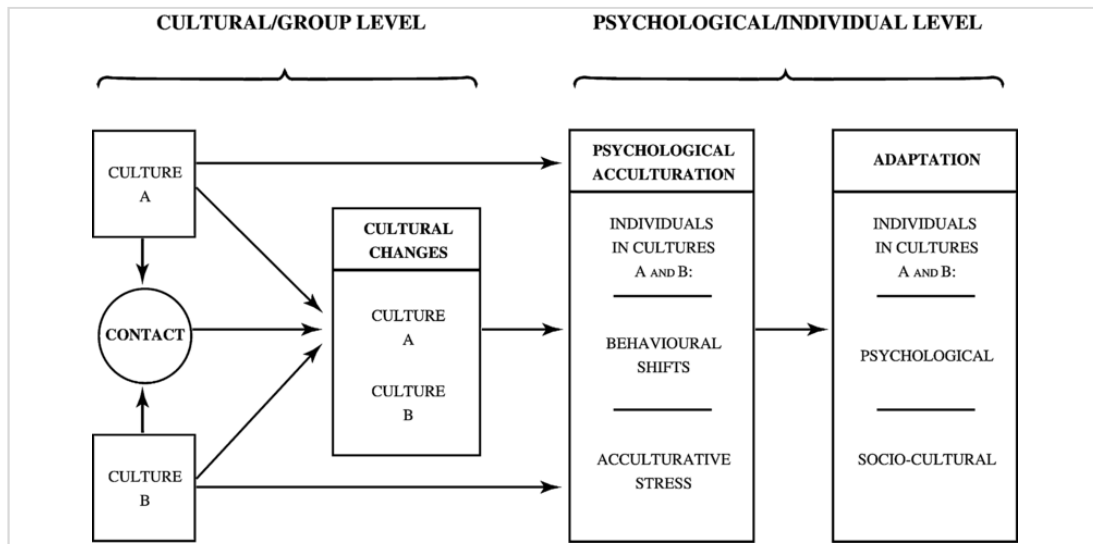
- i. What are the critical elements of Siamese influence in traditional Kelantanese interior design styles?
- ii. How do historical and cultural factors contribute to combining Siamese and Kelantanese architectural traditions in interior design?
- iii. To improve the acculturation theory in explaining architectural and interior design syncretism between Siam and Kelantan.

#### Objectives

- i. To explore the elements of Siamese influence in traditional Kelantanese interior design.
- ii. To analyse the cultural and symbolic meanings of these elements and their implications for Kelantanese interior design.

#### Theoretical framework

Architecture acculturation theory investigates how architectural forms and styles adapt and evolve as a result of cultural exchange (Khamdevi and Sudradjat 2024; Iossifova and Bernath 2024; Xiang et al. 2025; Abumere and Ahianba 2025; Alnaim 2024). The study uses the Architecture Acculturation Theory to better understand the processes of cultural assimilation and the built environments of Kelantan. According to Berry (2009), general acculturation components are divided into cultural-level and psychological-level (figure 2). Cultural changes happen when two different cultures are contacted, the changes then cause behavioural shifts and acculturative stress, which leads to psychological and socio-cultural adaptation.



**Figure 2.** General acculturation framework  
 Source: [Berry 2009](#)

#### Literature review

Both Buddhism and Islam have distinct sets of values and dedicated places for their believers. The literature review of this research study the architecture acculturation process and syncretism between the Kelantanese and Siamese from cultural and interior architecture aspects.

#### Architectural acculturation in Kelantan

Acculturation gathers individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, creating a new culture while preserving their original identity and characteristics ([Rachmayanti, Rusli, and Wulandari 2017](#)). The architecture of Kelantan is evidence of the history of cultural interaction among diverse ethnicities, shaped by its strategic location at the crossroads of trade routes. Kelantan's architectural identity is predominantly Islamic, with many buildings expressed motifs that reflect Islamic spiritual significance in the built environment.

#### Kelantanese cultures

Kelantan possessed 1.71 million (92%) of Malay, formed the majority of the overall Kelantan population. For a long time, Kelantan known as the cradle of Malay cultures like shadow play ([figure 3](#)) and MakYong ([figure 4](#)). Traditional Malay values and beliefs are deeply cherished in Kelantan, often blending native elements with Islamic influences to create these cultural traditions.



**Figure 3.** Puppeteer action while playing shadow puppet  
 Source: [Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia 2003](#)



**Figure 4.** MakYong performance  
 Source: [Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia 2003](#)

#### Kelantanese traditional architectural

Traditional Kelantanese Malay houses ([figure 5](#)) are designed and built by the local Malay to showcase Malays' creativity and aesthetic skills.



**Figure 5.** Kelantanese traditional architecture  
Source: [Maryam Qays 2023](#)

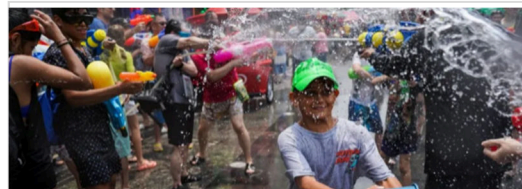
The research of [Aqilah and Rohaslinda \(2022\)](#) discovered the unique architectural qualities, construction systems, and building forms. Due to the religious factor, the locals tend to include Islamic elements in the architecture and interior design.

#### Siamese cultures

The cultures of the Siamese are mostly formed by Buddhist teaching; people believe in the way of life that leads to eternal happiness. The Siamese emphasise appreciation and filial piety towards the parents, mentioned by (Yavaprabhas 2018). Siamese in Kelantan are still free to perform their cultural activities and religious practices even though they are the very minority. For example, celebrate “*Loy Krathong*” Festival of Lights ([figure 6](#)), and “*Songkran*” Water-splashing Festival ([figure 7](#)).



**Figure 6.** Siamese in Malaysia celebrating Loy Krathong  
Source: [Gana Prrakash 2022](#)



**Figure 7.** Songkran festival celebration  
Source: [BBC 2023](#)

#### The Siamese architecture

“Wat” is the place for the Siamese to worship their God and conduct prayers, reflects the Buddhist cultural identity and their daily lifestyle through the architectural elements ([figure 8](#)). A study by [Hengrasmee \(1972\)](#) detailed research that highlights the factors that influence Thai architecture, environment, design elements, and philosophy that reflect the living style and cultural beliefs.



**Figure 8.** Wat Siamese architecture  
Source: [Bangkok Post 2024](#)

#### Research gap

The research gap lies in the absence of comprehensive exploration into the syncretic integration of Siamese influences within traditional Kelantanese interior design ([figure 9](#)). While studies exist on external architectural features, the interior spaces remain largely unexamined. This research aims to bridge this gap by delving into the intricacies of interior design syncretism, focusing on overlooked aspects of Kelantan's cultural heritage.

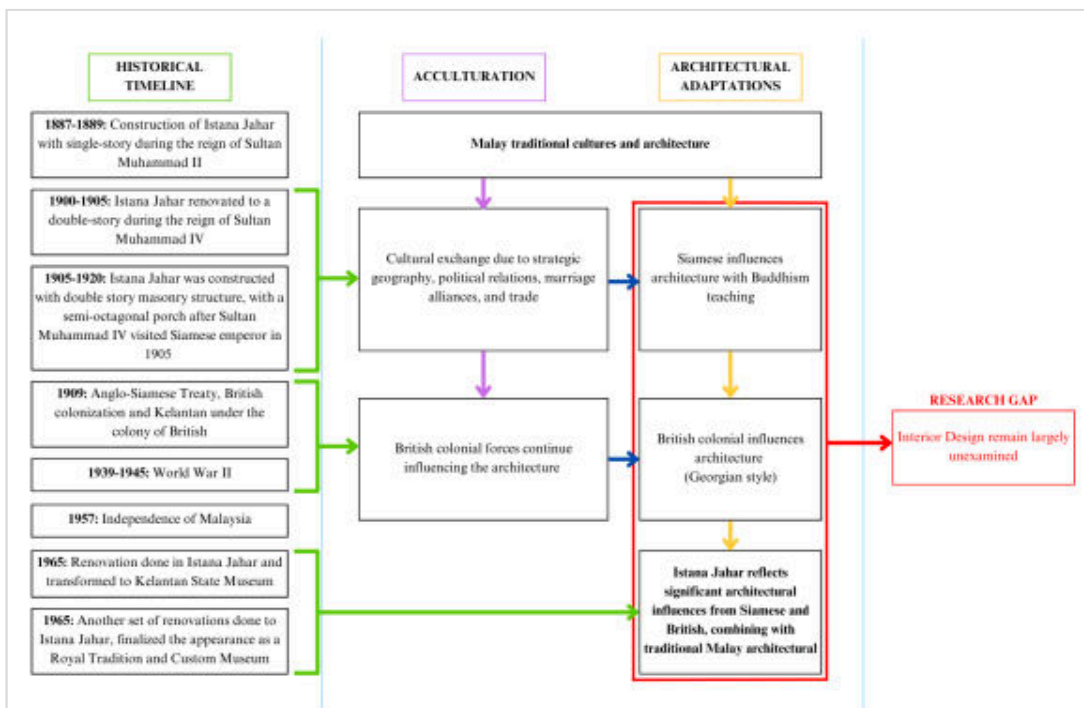


Figure 9. Framework of the research gap

Cultural and architectural syncretism

This research focuses on syncretism, the merging of religions, cultures, and ideas, particularly between Siamese and Kelantanese cultures. Siam, Malaysia's neighbour, has a significant impact on Kelantan due to its close location. The study by Nasir and Aziz (2015) provides insights into the design elements of Siamese "wat" found in the Kelantanese mosques.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework (figure 10) focuses on "The Acculturated Interior: Syncretism of Siamese in Kelantan". This framework integrates architecture acculturation theory with the research gap. The conceptual framework improved the version of the general acculturation framework (figure 2) with additional of architectural and interior design.

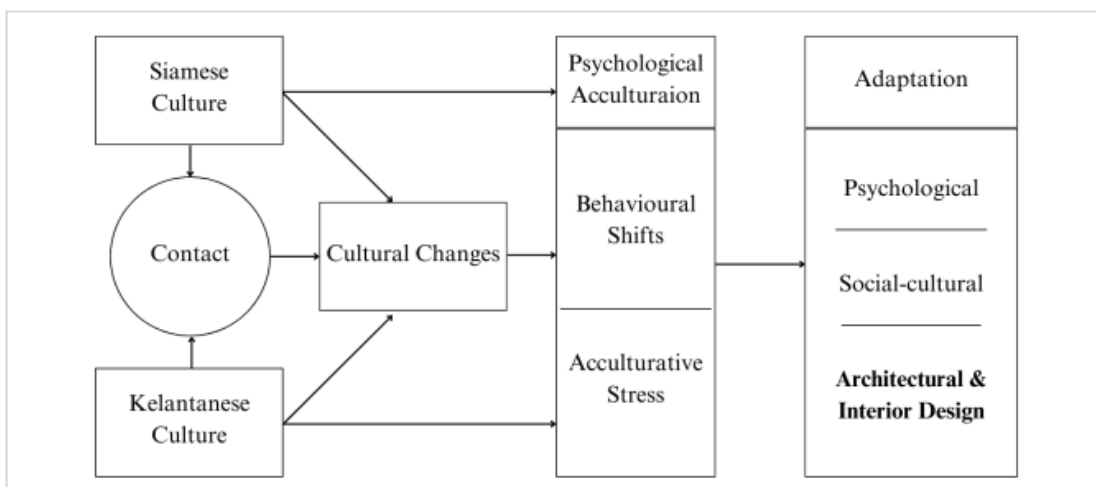


Figure 10. Conceptual framework of Siamese and Kelantanese syncretism

## Methods

This study's methodology is qualitative, including grounded theory, case studies, and simple ethnographic analysis. Grounded theory enables the systematic generation of theory from collected data; case study provides an in-depth examination of Siamese influence buildings in Kelantan. While, the simple ethnographic analysis observes the cultural context surrounding the architectural elements being investigated.

Case study: Sri Getam Guri, Rumah Tiang Dua Belas, Kota Bharu, Kelantan

The first case study is Sri Getam Guri, *Rumah Tiang Dua Belas* located in Kota Bharu, Kelantan (figure 11) with its floor plan (figure 12). It is an ideal case study for this research because of its architectural significance and ethnic symbolism that reflects the traditional architectural design style of the local Malay ethnic and influence of Siam.



Figure 11. Location plan of Sri Getam Guri, Rumah Tiang Dua Belas in Kota Bharu Kelantan  
Source: Google earth 2024

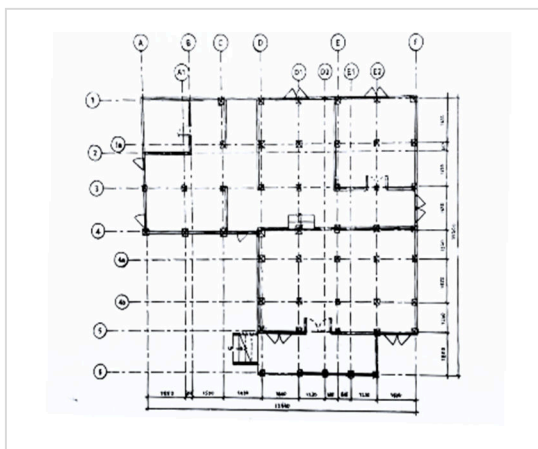


Figure 12. Floor plan of *Rumah Tiang Dua Belas*  
Source: Noor Fatehah 2020

*Rumah Tiang Dua Belas* features architectural elements like *Atap Singgora* (figure 13), *Papan Meleh* (figure 14), *Janda Berhias* (figure 15), and *Papan Cantik* (figure 16).

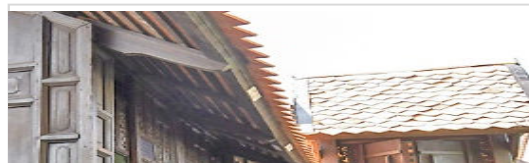


Figure 13. *Atap singgora* of Sri Getam Guri  
Source: Media Permata 2024

*Singgora* tiles (figure 13) from Thailand are intricately woven palm leaves providing both protection against the tropical climate and unique aesthetic appeal. Their use in traditional Malay houses highlights the region's diverse architectural heritage.



Figure 14. *Papan Meleh* of Sri Getam Guri  
Source: Media Permata 2024

*Papan Meleh* (figure 14) often shaped like the Arabic letter *Lam-Alif*, adds both functional and decorative value to the roof. Doors, windows, and screens provide lighting, ventilation, and views, while showcasing intricate designs.

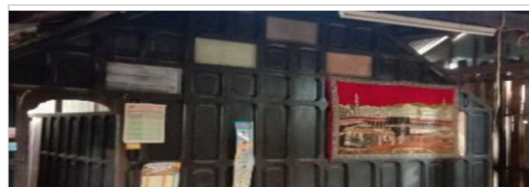
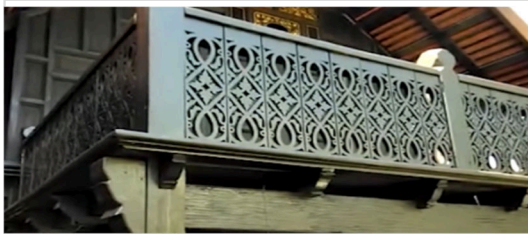


Figure 15. *Janda Berhias* in *Rumah Tiang Dua Belas*  
Source: Azli Abdullah 2021

Carved *Janda Berhias* (figure 15) motifs on walls symbolize cultural identity and add charm. These elements blend functionality, aesthetics, and cultural symbolism, showcasing Malay artistic craftsmanship influenced by Siamese styles.

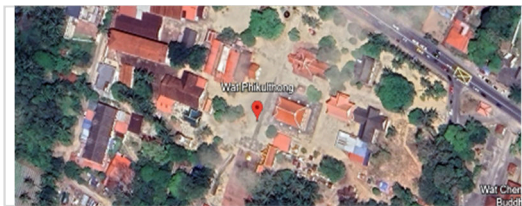


**Figure 16.** Papan Cantik and Bendul of Sri Getam Guri  
Source: [Media Permata 2024](#)

*Papan Cantik* (figure 16) enhance floor joints with carvings and semi-circular wood elements, known as *Bendul*, covering floor-to-wall connections.

Case study: Wat Pikulthong, Tumpat, Kelantan

The second case study is Wat Pikulthong located at Tumpat, Kelantan (figure 17). The significant Siamese architectural and religious design elements provide an insight of Siamese influences on the Kelantanese design elements that aligned with the research purpose.



**Figure 17.** Location plan of Wat Pikulthong in Tumpat, Kelantan  
Source: [Google earth 2024](#)

A “Wat” is a Buddhist temple for religious activities and prayers, derived from the Sanskrit word “vata” meaning “enclosure.” Wat Pikulthong embraces a 36-meter golden standing Buddha. The design elements reflect significant Siamese cultural and religious beliefs, with noticeable Chinese influences in the architecture.



**Figure 18.** the Ubosot at Wat Pikulthong  
Source: [Low Koun Hoe 2024](#)



**Figure 19.** the Stupa at Wat Pikulthong  
Source: [Alfred Molon 2024](#)



**Figure 20.** Cho Fa at Wat Pikulthong  
Source: [Alfred Molon 2024](#)

The *Ubosot* (figure 18) is where the monks perform religious ceremonies, it is also a place for the monks to meditate, and increase their spirituality. It is usually being far from noise and other distractions so that the monks can concentrate. The *Ubosot* is also is place for the monks to sermonise, it faces the east direction and houses the image of the Buddha.

The *Stupa* (figure 19) is a domed structure housing relics of Buddha or revered teachers. It has six parts: the base representing *Traiphum* (the three worlds), a bell-shaped chamber, and a spire symbolizing heaven. The *chattrra* at the top represents royalty and protection.

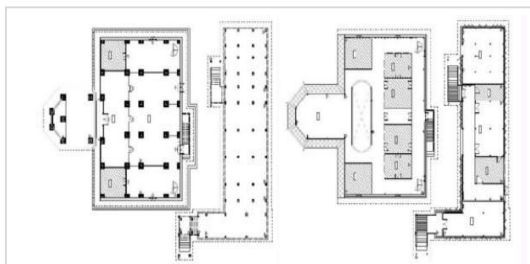
*Cho Fa* (figure 20) is a finial at the end of roof ridges pointing skyward, designed in the style of the *garuda* - a mystical bird in Siamese beliefs and enemy of the *naga*. The *garuda* at the gable's top appears to grab the *naga's* tail, which flows down the *Pan Lom* (bargeboard) to prevent roof tiles from falling off.

Case study: Istana Jahar, Kota Bharu, Kelantan

The last case study chosen is the Istana Jahar located at Kota Bharu (figure 21). Due to the historical context of Siam-Kelantan relationships, Istana Jahar stands out as a representation of cultural syncretism between Kelantanese and Siamese. Figure 22 showcases the current floor plan of Istana Jahar after several renovations since 1887.



**Figure 21.** Location plan of Istana Jahar, Kota Bharu, Kelantan  
Source: [Google earth 2024](#)



**Figure 22.** Current floor plan of Istana Jahar, Kota Bharu  
Source: [KAED Heritage Studies 2013](#)

The architectural evolution of Istana Jahar epitomizes syncretism, blending diverse influences. Initially a single-story timber structure during Sultan Muhammad II's reign (1887-1889), it was transformed into a double-story timber building under Sultan Muhammad IV (1900-1905). Between 1905 and 1920, inspired by a visit from the Siamese emperor, it became a double-story masonry structure with Siamese-inspired elements. Subsequent renovations in 1965 and 1990 adapted to functional needs while preserving architectural integrity. These changes, aligned with political shifts, suggest the influence of ruling Sultans on architectural expression.



**Figure 23.** Ekor Itik and "Sirip Naga"  
Source: [Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Din 2014](#)



**Figure 24.** Singgora Tiles  
Source: [Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Din 2014](#)



**Figure 25.** Janda Berhias  
Source: [Nik Din, Rashid, and Salleh 2014](#)

Local craftsmen added cultural elements like 'Ekor Itik and Sirip Naga' (figure 23), 'Singgora tiles' (figure 24), and Janda Berhias (figure 25) wall panels, blending Kelantanese and Siamese aesthetics. Istana Jahar thus represents cultural exchange and hybridization, illustrating the interplay between diverse architectural traditions.

## Results and discussion










The research, using grounded theory, case study, and simple ethnography, offers insights into Kelantanese syncretism and Siamese influence on interior design. Grounded theory identifies emergent themes in Kelantanese architecture. Case studies provide diverse perspectives on Siamese-local design fusion. Simple ethnography offers visual and experiential data through local interaction and observation.

The theoretical framework finds that acculturation between cultural groups leads to psychological and sociocultural adaptation. This research extends this framework, focusing on architectural and interior design as adaptations of cultural integration. It aims to explore syncretism between Siam and Kelantan in architecture and interior design to contribute to research objectives.

*Rumah Tiang Dua Belas* possess a strong Malay elements and Islamic influence, more like a traditional culture of local showcasing regional and religious architecture rather than Siamese influence. Wat Pikulthong shown heavy religious identity of Buddhism and the building was designed to provide specific needs of worship and

community activities, make it less ideal to reflect the syncretism of Siamese influence to Kelantanese interior design. Therefore, this research has selected Istana Jahar, Kota Bharu as the most representative case study to conduct simple ethnographic analysis due to the case study reveal that there are several Siamese elements can be found in Istana Jahar architecture. The meticulous observation and deep conversation carried out with the local people nearby has verified the existence of Siamese influenced architecture element in the building of Istana Jahar Kota Bharu.

**Table 1.** Acculturation components of Istana Jahar, Kelantan

Malay design elements in Istana Jahar		
Components	Image	Description
Wall		<i>Janda Berhias</i> , wooden paneling with patterned frosted glass
Partition		Repeated floral element (leaves) wood carvings
Fascia		Motif of <i>Ande-ande</i> inspired from floral
Siamese design elements in Istana Jahar		
Components	Image	Description
Roof		<i>Singgora</i> tile (named after <i>Songkhla</i> ) with unique curved shape interlock
Furniture		Lotus wood carving (Siamese motif) on the furniture
Arc		Round arc associated with Buddhism spirituality and harmony
Georgian design elements in Istana Jahar		
Components	Image	Description
Railing		Iron railing decoration reflect Georgian style
Column		Georgian styled concrete columns
Staircase		The Georgian wrought iron spiral staircase in Istana Jahar

Malay design elements in Istana Jahar		
Components	Image	Description
Flooring		Marble tiles flooring

What supports the result of this research is, a study by [Nik Din, Rashid, and Salleh \(2014\)](#) has mentioned that, Kelantan's traditional architecture in Kota Bharu influenced by its historical rulers including the Siamese Kingdom and colonial, blending with Malay traditional style crafted by local artisans and carpenters. Overall ornamentation and structures comes from the Siamese suzerainty with the retention of traditional Malay motifs and methods.

The political shifts over the centuries have influenced Istana Jahar's interior architecture, starting with traditional Malay elements like *Janda Berhias* wall panels and floral wood carvings. Siamese influences introduced *Singgora* roof tiles and Lotus motifs, followed by British colonial additions of Georgian-style iron spiral staircases, iron railings, concrete columns, and marble flooring. This historical timeline presents a detailed syncretism of Kelantan, Siamese, and British influences.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this study comprehensively examines the synthesis of Siamese and Kelantanese Malay architectural influences, filling a research gap in understanding Siamese impacts on Kelantanese interior design. The developed conceptual framework strongly supports this research. Through case studies, simple ethnographic analysis, and historical research, the study successfully achieves its objectives. Findings highlight Istana Jahar's significant syncretism of Siamese, British, and Kelantanese influences in interior design.

## Acknowledgments

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#### **Author(s) contribution**

**Wan Noramira Shahidatul Ain Saharul** contributed to the research concepts, preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.

**Azizi Bahauddin** contributed to research concepts, literature reviews, methodology, data analysis, supervision, and validation.

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