



# ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE: Redefining Malay Settlement on the east coast of Sumatera

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## Abstract

In general speaking, Malay settlement is mostly found in traditional compound which is known as *kampung* that is arranged in a particular pattern. The pattern was documented by Sir Thomas Raffles who noted that Malay's *kampung* must have been on or near coast, and not in the interior of a land. Indeed, on the east coast of Sumatera, there can be also found a *koto*, which is identified as a small compound where the oldest settlement and traditional houses are preserved by a community.

This paper is written based on qualitative approach by collecting and structuring field data through several methods such as observation, fieldwork study, interviews, and group discussion. Through this paper, it is used to show Malay's life is not only built in the sea life and trading community, but also is constructed in riverine life that has brought the culture deep into the interior of Sumatra. In this regard, this research has found the changing the way of Malay life has affected on Malay settlement. Therefore, research in this theme becomes significant in order to find out the life of today's Malay.

**Keywords:** Settlement, *Kampung*, *Koto*, Malay house

## I. Introduction

'Malay settlements must have been on or near coasts, and not in the interior of a land'  
(Raffles, 1835: 21)

A *kampung* built form has tended towards evolutionary rather than revolutionary change, and its identity has remained stable within its environment. In terms of spatial arrangement, *kampung* is different one to another, and determined by local tradition, social relations, and the life styles of inhabitants (Milner, 2009: 29). This composition is seen to support its social life in order to define social space and ecological response (Watson and Bentley, 2007: 181).

Despite there is no particular geometric arrangement of the *kampung* (Yuan, 1987: 91), however, the way inhabitants live can provide a reference to how the *kampung* is arranged in a particular pattern: linear or cluster. *Kampung* within a linear pattern is commonly found at the estuary of a river and coastline, where inhabitants depend on fishing and harbour life, whereas the cluster pattern can be found in the hinterland along a river or stream, where mostly farm life and agricultural activities take place.

This paper shows that Malay settlement is not only formed by sea-life tradition, but also through riverine tradition which is might be placed into the interior of a land. As conducted this research in Riau region, the riverine tradition has been constructed by four main rivers. This becomes the way to figure out character of socio-cultural life, settlements, and its architectural forms of the region. Selected characters of Malay settlement are shown through this paper.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1. Home of Malay in Indonesia

To understand Malay, it is necessary to know what it is and how it has been constructed. *Orang Melayu* (Malay people) cannot be identified based on one nationality or one place of origin. As part of the Malayo-Polynesian family group of languages, also known as the Austronesian family, *orang Melayu* have dispersed from southern China through the islands of



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Southeast Asia and much of the Pacific, and westward to Madagascar (Poesponegoro and Notosusanto, 1975a; Tryon, 1995; Reid, 2001; Nunis and Ragman, 2006; Milner, 2009). Although West Kalimantan (Borneo) has been assumed to be the place of origin (Adelaar, 2004), several researchers have argued that the origin of the *Melayu* can be found on the east coast of Sumatra (Indonesia) and the Peninsula of Malaya (Malaysia) (Raffles, 1835; Reid, 2001; Milner, 2009).

Historically, the region of the east coast of Sumatra is the place where the *Bahase Melayu* (Malay language) and its civilisation were constructed. From this place, the *Melayu* colonised the archipelago and Strait of Malacca for not less than seven centuries (Bowrey, 1701; Blagden, 1917: 98; Mahathir, 1970: 34). According to Malay Annals (Leyden and Raffles, 1821), the ancient Hindu ruler crossed from *Andalis* (Sumatera) to build a fortified town at *Temasek* (Singapore) and then established a kingdom at *Sungai Bentan* (Melaka River). Thus, it can be argued that the *Melayu* and their way of life have an important connection to the region of the east coast of Sumatra. As Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1835a: 21) noted:

‘The Malays I have met affirm, without hesitation, that they all come originally from “Pulo Percha” (Sumatra) ... I am more than ever confident that those in the Peninsula derive their origin from the country of that name in Sumatera’.

## 2.2. *Kampung*: A Cultural Ideology in Daily Life

Most cities in Riau flourished from a traditional Malay settlement. The Malay word, *kampung*, translated into English as *kampong*<sup>1</sup>, is defined as an ethnically homogenous community with socio-cultural and socio-political institutions (Wiryomartono, 2013). As well as being used in Malay-speaking lands, the word is also used in other places to mean a traditional village (Marsoyo, 2012: 106). For Funo et al. (2002: 193), *kampung* can be used to identify an urban settlement which continues to preserve the characteristics of a rural village as a bounded space with a particular appearance, social system, and traditionally based values that may be different to the general modern urban form.

*Kampung* is also known as a rural settlement which is sustained traditionally within a certain habitat or territory. Within this boundary, the *kampung* constructs a particular sense of belonging through homogeneity and social practices in everyday life. According to Abel (2000: 151), the *kampung* frames social relationships between people, built forms and cultural life in a range of single family units on a community scale. Thus, the *kampung*'s social life is well-integrated within the community, and less in premium individual privacy, in order to favour intimacy at the community level (Yuan, 1987: 88; Milner, 2009: 29). In this way, every *kampung* develops its own accent, custom, personality, and *adat* (Milner, 2009: 4). *Adat* is stabilised and socially maintained from early childhood and taken through a person's whole life. Therefore, the notion of habitus becomes significant in the *kampung*'s life. This can be identified by how social practices are constructed and learned as a way of knowing the world of people and things which are set to act as dispositions of space and time.

## 2.3. Malay House: Generating Culture and Cultural Values

The Malay house can be recognised from its appearance; it is raised up off the ground and placed on piles, with a low wooden wall and large saddle roof. Roof materials are traditionally made from the leaves of palm trees or from thatch, but have been mostly replaced with zinc today. Watson and Bentley (2007: 184) describe the Malay house as a post and lintel structure of wooden materials; its walls have plenty of windows to provide good ventilation and views. In general, in order to identify the Malay house, there are three shared physical features in the mode of construction: the fact that it is raised on piles, the roof form, and the gable-finials (Firzal, 2011). According to Waterson (1997: 1), being raised on piles - whether of wood, stone or brick - is the main characteristic of the Malay house. This construction is seen as suited to a tropical climate and environment that can be found in a wide range of regions such as Micronesia, Melanesia, South-East Asia, and Polynesia. By providing a gap between the ground

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<sup>1</sup> [www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)



and floor, being raised on piles is not only fitting for the environment, but also for the social life of the people (Waterson, 1997: 1). Abel (2000) supports this view and emphasises that the physical character of the Malay house is a good example of close relations between society, built forms, and traditional culture.

Another feature of the Malay house is the roof form and shape, which is identified as a saddle roof in a funnel or A-shape. The roof ends with a gable wall which can vary between regions (Watson and Bentley, 2007: 184). The saddle roof is equipped with an extended ridge-line, which often slopes outward of the gable-end. In certain places, there are also highly exaggerated points to the eaves which are known as gable-horns. The gable-horn, which is likened to that of an animal and is a decorative finial, is believed to hold a certain meaning such as protection, wealth, sacrifice, and can be used as a sign of rank or social status in society (Waterson, 1997: 8). The last shared characteristic of the Malay house is the decorative gable-finials, which can be described as a vertical surface situated at one or both ends of the roof, adjoining a pitched roof. Its shape depends on the type of roof and parapet but is mostly triangular.

### III. Methods

#### 3.1. Collecting Field Data

This research adopts a qualitative approach that is used to find the nature and source of social problems (Patton, 1990: 160) as its focus is on understanding meanings and processes through collecting a variety of empirical materials (Groat and Wang, 2002: 199). The research can combine multifarious methods to acquire research data, whether from peoples, artefacts, events, or interpretation (Groat and Wang, 2002: 176; Creswell, 2003: 19). By investigating connections between culture, architecture and socio-cultural change, the main data are obtained by fieldwork and are grouped into three types: physical evidence, people's interpretations, and written documents that have been collected through several different methods such as observation, semi-structured and photo elicitation interviews, archive data, field-notes, group discussion, and field documentation.

Despite having field data gathered by various methods, the interview proved to be the most reliable method for maximising opportunities to get information. Being a Malay person provided particular privileges in terms of accessing important sources and stakeholders. Indeed, the interview method was found to be the most useful means of recording the voice of Malay people who do not speak freely with 'outsider' people. In this case, being an insider with particular knowledge, such as familiarity with the local language and traditions was important for building social relations with those key sources in order to hear insider voices. This can also be seen as a way of achieving intimacy in relationships whether this is ethnic intimacy or friendship that can be used to break through sensitive topics (Whyte and Whyte, 1984: 69; Richards, 2009: 21).

#### 3.2. Riau, The Epicentre of Malay as Research Location

It is necessary to know about the Riau region which is identified as the home of the Malay in Indonesia (Long, 2013: 47). This region is known as the place where the culture, language and ideology of the Malay are developed (Poesponegoro and Notosusanto, 1975: 9). As part of Indonesia, the Riau region began as a province in 1957. It covered the area of the east coast of Sumatra and thousands of small islands around Sumatra, Singapore and Malaysia. Due to a military insurrection, the provincial capital was placed at Tanjung Pinang in Bintan Island, and then moved to Pekanbaru on the east coast of Sumatra in 1960. During the reformation period, Riau province was administratively split into two provinces in 2004: Riau province, and Riau Island province. In this paper, the location for the research is mainly focused on area of Riau province today.



## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1 Senapelan: From Kampung to Metropolitan

*Kampung* Senapelan was used not only to develop the centre of the Malay Sultanate, but also to accommodate trading activity and river-port life. Later, this place became known as *Pekan Baharu*, which literally means ‘new-weekly market’ (Pemko\_Pekanbaru, 2000; Suwardi et al., 2006). Founded by a riverine community, it can be understood why the *kampung* is centred near a river. Not only does it form part of the community identity, but the river is also used as the main transportation link to other places, particularly for delivering natural resources to places such as Malacca in sultanate times and Singapore in colonial periods. In this sense, *kampung Senapelan* has an important connection to the river and river port life. As it became more developed with complex activities, it was recognised as a *bandar* which can be equally described as a city; *Bandar Pekan Bahru* (Galib, 1980). Today, being part of Indonesia, it is described as a city and has been renamed in accordance with the national language pronunciation; ‘Kota’ Pekanbaru, while *kampung Senapelan* has become the name of a sub-district in the city.

Although little remains of its genesis (Mulyono and Sugiharta, 2012), there is still some physical evidence of *kampung* Senapelan’s history. Several traditional houses have been preserved by descendants of house owners and municipalities (Pemko\_Pekanbaru, 2013). River ports, which belong either to the government or particular families, still operate, as do traditional markets, old shop-houses and warehouses (Firzal, 2007). Furthermore, the cemetery of the sultans can still be found on the same site as the Sultan Mosque. This site has become not only a landmark of the *kampung*, but also an important place to observe urban cultural traditions (Pemko\_Pekanbaru, 2010). In this sense, *kampung* Senapelan today still fulfils an important role as a point of reference for the Malay community and also for the wider society of the city.



Figure 1. Maintaining Riverine Tradition in Metropolitan Life

### 4.2. Koto: A Repository of Socio-Cultural Life

Not only *kampung*, on the east coast of Sumatera, there can be found a ‘*koto*’. *Koto* can be identified as a small compound where the oldest settlement and traditional houses are preserved by communities. These communities have played important role in order to preserve and passing-down their traditions for generations through a ruler of the community. Each community has its own ruler who is called ‘*Penghulu*’. He becomes the informal centre of power that regulates the socio-cultural life. Today, the ruler is just a ruler who exists as an axial component in the life-world of the community and is conceived to have merely implemented sacred cultural law or traditional values, i.e. *adat* (Milner, 2009: 29).



Figure 2. Maintaining Socio-Cultural Life through Community's Traditions

Traditional houses in *koto* are preserved by the community. These houses also serve as a nucleus of the *kampung*. Each house in *koto* represents a particular *puak*, or cultural fragmentation, and becomes a fundament for the community and their descendants. Furthermore, nowadays, this architectural of the houses becomes a basic character for local, and enriches on Malay Architecture on the east coast Sumatra respectively.



Figure 3. Preserving Ancestral Houses at *koto*

#### 4.3 Traditional House: The Embryo of Malay Architecture

In this research context, it is necessary to know how traditional Malay houses are constructed on the east coast of Sumatra. The remarkable features of the house are very similar to those of other Malay regions, but are enriched with local uniqueness. Being raised on piles offers advantages for dealing with a hot and humid climate as the gap created between the ground and floor provides space for air circulation to cool down the house (Yuan, 1987: 75); it is also used as a temporary storage space and semi-private space for social activities.

In terms of roof forms, traditional houses are mostly rectangular in shape or, very rarely, square. They can be grouped into three: (1) *Belah Bubung* Roof or *bubung/rabung Melayu/lipat kajang/lipat pandan/atap labu/atap layar/atap bersayap/atap bertinggam*; (2) *Limas* Roof or *limas penuh/limas berabung*; and (3) *Lontik* Roof or *pencalang/lancang* (traditional boat)/*gorai* (Wahyuningsih and Abu, 1986). On the gable wall, there are two significant decorations: the gable-finial and gable-horn, which each carry their own meaning and variations. Today, the gable-horn is mostly called the '*selembayung*'. Another unique feature of the traditional house is the wood carving ornament, which is mostly inspired by interpretations of local flora and fauna. As well as being beautifully and skilfully hand-carved (Waterson, 1997: xv), each motif of the carving ornaments has its own symbolic meaning and values that have been handed down through the generations (Yuan, 1987: 46). These ornaments can be found on all parts of the house, such as on the stairs, cladding, ventilation and walls.





Figure 4. Malay House and Riverine Traditions

‘The house is a microcosm, reflecting in its layout, structure, and ornamentation the concept of an ideal nature and social order. Houses and settlements always offer themselves as a useful means of encoding such information’

(Waterson, 1997: xvii).

## V. CONCLUSION

Despite formed by sea-life and trading community, Malay settlement has been expanding by riverine tradition which becomes a base point as today’s city in the east coast Sumatra. This has changing pattern of the settlement and respectively the way of Malay life as well. Furthermore, traditional Malay house becomes most important architectural reference in order to built the settlement. It is not only serve as home, but also express the relationship between people, built forms, and the social world. In turn, redefining Malay settlement should be seen not only to accommodate real needs for practical and effective settlement, but also as a mark of social status and the possessions accumulated through a lifetime to pass as a respectable Malay.

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