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ARCHITECTURAL INFLUENCES OF ISTANA LAMA SERI MENANTI, NEGERI SEMBILAN

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Abstract

Traditional Malay Royal Palaces in Malaysia are monumental buildings representing the rich architecture, heritage, traditions and expertise of the Malays. The architecture of these palaces differs from one another to demonstrate the identities of the vernacular architecture as timber palaces were representations of Traditional Malay Houses on an exaggerated scale. One example of this is Istana Lama Seri Menanti in Kuala Pilah which is a four-storey timber palace built in the 20th century by Malay carving experts. Another factor to consider is the rich cultural acceptance of the Minangkabau as they have been around in Negeri Sembilan since the 15th Century. Hence, this paper aims to determine the architectural identity of Istana Lama Seri Menanti through the influences on the palace architecture and the factors affecting these influences. The research methods undertaken include case studies, interviews with experts, and document and historical analysis of subjects about palaces. The findings conclude that the key element of 'atap bergonjong' cannot be found in Istana Lama Seri Menanti which has the more common modest curve of the roof ridges found in houses of Negeri Sembilan. Furthermore, Chinese influences on the woodcarvings of the palace can be seen on the columns and beams of the exterior of the palace. In conclusion, there are many influences on the architectural identity of Istana Lama Seri Menanti such as Chinese influences and British's political influences on the design of the palace.

Keyword: Architecture, heritage, traditional Malay royal palaces

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INTRODUCTION

Palaces belonging to royalties were built as representations of the power, wealth and influence the royal families had over their subjects and ruling states (Abdul Rahman, 1999). Considerable thoughts and ideas were put into the design of a palace. Hence, palaces are architectural identities of the royal families and the culture of the area it is located in (Fuh et al., 1993). Therefore, it can be said that palaces represent the symbol of the Malay rulers because palaces act as buildings of residence, administration and venue of royal functions (Fuh et al., 1993). Traditional Malay royal palaces can be considered as a replica of a traditional Malay house on a larger and grander scale (Gibbs, 1987). Due to the nature of the Malay culture as a very nature-associated society, the architecture of the Royals was also a reflection of the ideologies and beliefs of the traditional Malays (Megat Latif & Abdullah, 2008). Hence, the architectural elements of traditional Malay royal palaces which included design allowance for environmental factors, privacy and safety of residents and also gender segregations of male and female members of the families (Haja Bava Mohidin, Ismail & Megat Abdullah, 2012).

Gender segregation is important in *Adat Perpatih* as it relates back to the Islamic teachings it is rooted in. Therefore, it is an important design element in traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan as many of the houses include gender segregated spaces to allow for female family members to have their areas within the house. This design can be found in the abundant number of houses in Negeri Sembilan which includes attic designs and have houses which are more than one storey high (Haja Bava Mohidin, Mohd Razif & Kadikon, 2012). Figure 1 below illustrates a key design element of Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan which includes an attic.





Figure 1 A Traditional Malay House in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan with an Attic Space






It is important to understand the vernacular architecture of Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan because the architecture relates back to the palace architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti which will be discussed in this paper. The same design element can also be found in the palace which communicates the local building practices and culture of *Adat Perpatih* practised by the locals. As much as *Adat Perpatih* influences the daily activities and customs of Negeri Sembilan residents, it is important to identify the influences on the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti and determine the architecture of the vertically designed timber palace.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The research methodologies undertaken in this research are case studies and precedent studies of timber palaces in Malaysia and interviews of experts on the knowledge of architectural heritage. Seven case studies were used as subjects for this research about the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti. Table 1 illustrates the case studies used in this research to identify the similarities and differences of timber palaces around the years that Istana Lama Seri Menanti was built.

Table 1 Traditional Malay Royal Palaces in Late 1800s-early 1900s.

NO	PALACE	YEAR	LOCATION
1	Istana Balai Besar 	1842	Kelantan
2	Istana Ampang Tinggi 	1864	Negeri Sembilan

3	Istana Sultan Ismail		1870	Perak
4	Istana Tengku Nik		1881	Terengganu
5	Istana Jahar		1887	Kelantan
6	Istana Lama Seri Menanti		1908	Negeri Sembilan
7	Istana Sri Terentang		1908	Pahang

Istana Kenangan



1926

Perak

The case studies were selected based on the construction materials used which were timber and the year they were built in which was during the late 1800s-early 1900s. These factors will adequately determine the factors behind the construction of Istana Lama Seri Menanti and the architecture seen in the palace. However, not all of the palaces can still be found today as the palaces have either been demolished or have deteriorated.

TRADITIONAL MALAY ROYAL PALACES

Timber was commonly used by the traditional Malays for the construction of buildings such as houses, mosques and even palaces (Massart, Meuter & Van Begin, 2008). The availability of timber was a major factor in determining timber as the choice of construction materials. The durability and robustness of timber also made it the prime material for construction. Hence, the expertise of the locals in using timber increased with the construction of bigger buildings such as mosques and palaces. These experts known locally as *Tukang* were not only carpenters but were also woodcarvers. *Tukang* of palaces were appointed by the Sultan or Raja, and in the case of Negeri Sembilan the Yang Dipertuan Besar and were known as *Tukang Raja* (Md. Nazuan, 2005). The *Tukang* also acts as a *Pawang* or Shaman as beliefs in the mystics were still prevalent during the olden days and as a *Pawang*, it is important that the future site of the palace is selected carefully and any negative energy were cast out (Md. Nazuan, 2005).

Palaces in the olden Malay towns were surrounded by villages as the commoners lived surrounding the royal families and influential leaders (Daud, Arbi & Faisal, 2012). Some palaces were located on top of hills for the advantage of the view and safety factors whereas the villages surrounded the lower hillside (Daud, Arbi & Faisal, 2012). Only palaces were allowed to be gated or fenced in as they were considered important buildings of the society (Massart, Meuter & Van Begin, 2008). The most common layout of a traditional Malay town must include a palace, an open field for the community and a market (Noor & Khoo, 2003; Harun & Said, 2009). This layout allowed the state generates income for itself and becomes a self-sustaining city, and the power of the royals will be stable.

Architecturally, traditional Malay royal palaces can be divided into two typologies which are single-type building and multiple-type building (Md. Nazuan, 2005). These typologies mean that palaces can be built as a free-standing building on its own and gated within an area or as a part of a complex of multiple different buildings within an enclosed area. Figure 2 below illustrates an image of Istana Ampang Tinggi as a single-type palace building in Negeri Sembilan. The Palace is a residential building as is a stand-alone building.



Figure 2 Single-type Palace Building of Istana Ampang Tinggi in Negeri Sembilan

A multiple-type building is a complex of buildings which include the main Rumah Ibu, separate halls and bedrooms for the royalties (Md. Nazuan, 2005). For example, Figure 3 below is an example of a multiple-type palace which was once part of a complex of palace buildings in Terengganu. Istana Satu was the Rumah Ibu and acts as the main building within the complex.

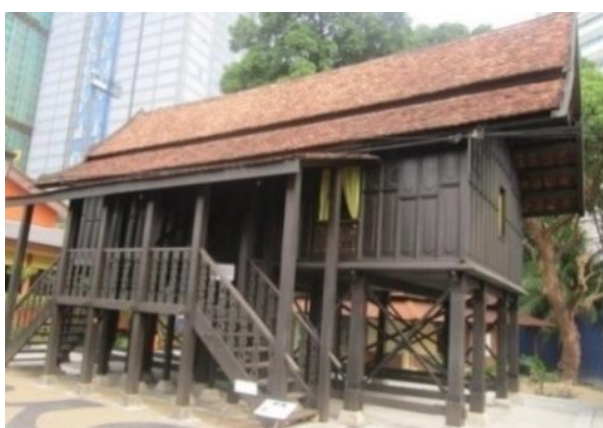


Figure 3 Istana Satu was part of a Multiple-Type Palace Complex in Terengganu

Another important element found in the design of traditional Malay royal palaces were the spatial layout of the palace. The most common layout would be

the sporadic design layout where the palace building spread out over a large area of Palace reserves. However, there is the less common spatial design of building vertically with palaces that are more than one storey high (Abdul Aziz, Remaz Ossen & Idid, 2010). These types of spatial layout vary from one state to another, but none has been built more than two storeys high using timber except for Istana Lama Seri Menanti.

ISTANA LAMA SERI MENANTI

In Negeri Sembilan, the earliest known traditional Malay royal palace was Istana Barong-Barong which was located in Ampang Tinggi (Raja Shahminan, 2010). Istana Pulih was then built during the reign of Yamtuan Antah (1875-1888) but was burnt down by British troops during the Bukit Putus War in 1875 (Sheppard, 1969). Istana Baroh was later built to replace the burnt-down palace and was used as a residential palace for the royal family (Raja Shahminan, 2010; Saw & Raja Barizan, 1991). In 1902, Tuanku Muhammad who was the 7th Yang Dipertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan instructed the building of a new palace in Seri Menanti as the new residential palace (Muhammad, 2011).

The construction of Istana Lama Seri Menanti was completed through the expert skills of *Tukang Kahar* and *Tukang Taib* who were local carvers in Seri Menanti. *Tukang Kahar* was appointed the *Tukang Raja* as he was commissioned to design and construct a timber palace for Tuanku Muhammad. The palace was completed in 1908 with the help of *Tham Yoong*, who was a Chinese contractor, and the drawings were prepared by Mr Woodford, who was a British Draftsman from the Public Works Department (Muhammad, 2011). As timber palaces were not found to be more than two storeys high in other states in Malaysia, there might be a sharing of skills and technology for *Tukang Kahar* and *Tukang Taib* to be able to construct such a vertically planned timber palace. Even so, it is very common to find traditional Malay houses especially that of the aristocrats and wealthy leaders to have houses that were two and even three storeys high. Thus, it is plausible that the technology and skills were available in Negeri Sembilan with the *Tukang* but were further developed with the Chinese influences. The British draftsman was only providing technical drawings expertise, but the British influences could be found in the space allocations within the palace as specifically dedicated spaces were provided such as the dining/reception area and separate bedrooms for family members. Figure 4 below illustrates the image of an abandoned Istana Lama Seri Menanti before being turned into a museum.

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Architectural Influences of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan



Figure 4 Istana Lama Seri Menanti before Being Turned into a Royal Museum

The timber used for the construction of the palace were locally known as Penak or Cengal, and were taken from nearby forests in Negeri Sembilan. A study by Saw & Raja Barizan (1991) plots the Cengal forest distribution in Peninsular Malaysia including Cengal forests in Negeri Sembilan. Figure 5 below illustrates the Cengal forests found in Peninsular Malaysia while specifically highlighting those in Negeri Sembilan.

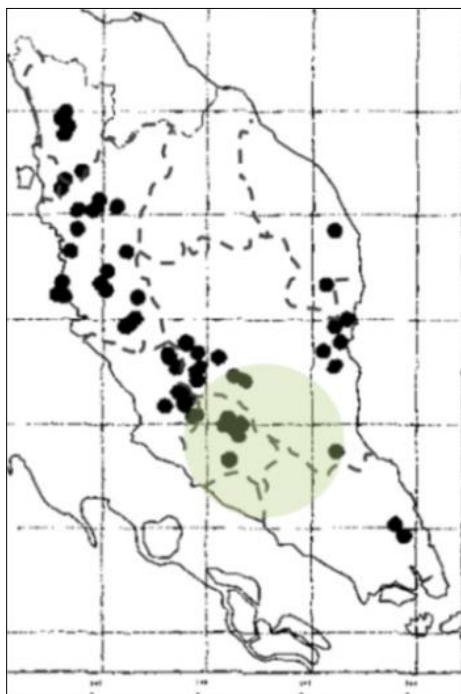


Figure 5 The Distribution of *Neobalanocarpus heimii* (Cengal) in Peninsular Malaysia

The spatial layout of Istana Lama Seri Menanti is vertically planned throughout the four storeys where the spaces are segregated according to functions. The ground floor of the palace is dedicated to the palace staff and is a public domain (Abdul Aziz, Remaz Ossen & Idid, 2010). The first floor of the palace is a semi-public area where royal functions such as *Majlis Menghadap* are held at the *serambi* where a special raised platform is built for the Yamtuan. The first floor is also a place for meeting delegates and making public summonses. The floor also includes four bedrooms and a dining/reception area for the royal families. The second floor of the palace is dedicated to only the royal families as three bedrooms are located on this floor. The third and fourth floor are private spaces for the Yamtuan and hold his room and a storage area on the highest floor for family heirlooms. Figure 6 below illustrates the vertical planning of Istana Lama Seri Menanti.



Figure 6 The Vertical Plan of Istana Lama Seri Menanti

The function of Istana Lama Seri Menanti remained as a residential palace during 1908 until 1931 when a new palace was built nearby. The Istana Besar Seri Menanti was a masonry construction of double storey high and became the new palace the royal families resided in. After the Yamtuan had moved into the new palace, Istana Lama Seri Menanti became a place of residence for other royalties of visiting families of the Royals. In 1959-1964 however, the palace was used by the local state as a religious school for the local children. It was during this time that the ground floor and first floor of the palace became a place for religious classes and helped spread the knowledge of Islam. Later in the years, the palace was restored and converted into a Royal Museum in 1992. Figure 7 below illustrates the palace photo taken in 2015 during which further restorations were being undertaken.



Figure 7 Istana Lama Seri Menanti in Negeri Sembilan

FINDINGS

Findings of the research demonstrated that Istana Lama Seri Menanti was built with the skills and expertise of the local *Tukang* as vernacular architecture in Negeri Sembilan were commonly found to be more than one storey high. Hence, the construction of a vertical timber palace was plausible with their expertise and skills in Negeri Sembilan and not found elsewhere in Malaysia. Furthermore, Chinese contractors were hired to help with the construction. Thus some Chinese influences could be found in the design of the palace particularly some of the woodcarvings found on the beams of the palace. Figure 8 below illustrates the images of a mythical creature carved on the beams of the palace's entrance.



Figure 8 Woodcarvings of Mythical Creatures on the Beams of the Palace

The design of the palace which was symmetrical on plan and the elevations could prove the existence of a British influence on the spaces of the palace because, traditionally, Malay vernacular architecture was not symmetrical and did not provide specific spaces for specific activities. Malay vernacular architecture usually provides multi-functional spaces in their buildings which

could be used in different functions and for different purposes according to the needs of the users. Hence, the segregation of spaces and dedicated rooms to specific activities is very Western-like and could prove the existence of British influences on the palace.

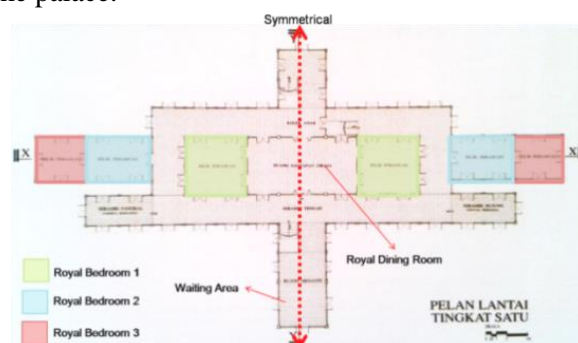


Figure 9 The First-Floor Plan Shows Symmetry and Balance

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Istana Lama Seri Menanti which was constructed using only timber without the reinforcements of nails is a unique 20th century traditional Malay royal palace. While other timber palaces were built earlier in the 1800s, Istana Lama Seri Menanti was built as a permanent palace of residence for the royalties during which masonry palaces were already being built extensively around Malaysia.

The palace which was designed to be symmetrical throughout is another unique factor which separates it from other timber palaces in Malaysia. The verticality of the palace's image provides a grandeur architecture which can be seen from afar and differentiates itself from any other traditional Malay royal palaces. More information is needed in determining the influences on the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti. This research is still ongoing, and further findings will be developed into more discussions in the future.

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