

Influence of ‘*Bergendang*’ Culture in the Spaces of Traditional Sarawak Malay House

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Abstract

Bergendang is a uniquely Sarawak Malay traditional entertainment frequently held during social gatherings at home. This paper investigates the spatial use of *bergendang* activity in traditional Malay houses along the Sarawak River in Kuching. The research employed a qualitative case study design approach through field study observation and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed different spatial use of *bergendang* for the early and later models of Sarawak Malay houses, which is associated with house owners' social status. Spatial studies on traditional Malay houses in other parts of Sarawak are recommended for constructing northern Borneo's vernacular Malay house framework.

Keywords: Malay Borneo; Spatial use; Traditional entertainment; Vernacular architecture

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1.0 Introduction

The Federation of Malaysia is divided into two regions: the Malay Peninsula in the west and Sarawak and Sabah in the east- on Borneo Island. The Malay is the ethnic majority of the country, living among other ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Indians, and various other indigenous people. Sarawak, located in northwest Borneo, comprises a heterogeneous population with 27 ethnic groups living under its umbrella. The Malays encompassed 25% of the state population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020), making them the second largest ethnic group in Sarawak after the Dayak.

A common misconception, and often the main reason for the neglect of Sarawak Malay studies, is that Malays in Malaysia are 'the same everywhere' (Abang Yusuf Puteh, 2005). Collins (2002) posits that '*Bureaucratism, orientalism and exoticism made the study of the Malay language and culture a low priority in the hierarchy of colonial endeavours*'. He further stressed that the population of Borneo, as understood by nineteenth-century British and Dutch colonial officials, were either Malays or non-Malays. The non-Malay groups of Borneo were considered more 'exotic' and thus worth further investigation. Their earlier encounters with the Malay race throughout the archipelago, on the other hand, made the study of this ethnicity less fruitful. It is therefore not surprising that the architectural research of the Sarawak Malays still receives little attention even in present times.

The discourse of Malay architecture in Malaysia, particularly on the traditional Malay houses, often excludes that of the Sarawak Malay. Variations of architectural style in the Malay Peninsula, based on roof form and the number of columns (Kassim et al., 2017), represent the unique identity of the Malay sub-ethnic in each region. However, the identity of traditional Sarawak Malay houses remains unclear. According to Rapoport (1969), the form and organization of a house are greatly influenced by socio-cultural aspects, though physical aspects- which he considered as secondary or modifying forces- also play a part. Although similarly professing to the religion of Islam, differences in historical origin, social relations with other indigenous ethnic, and colonial influences could have altered the sociocultural values of the Malay in Sarawak. Therefore, it is unlikely that Sarawak Malay houses share similar architectural styles with their western counterpart. There must be a key to distinguish Sarawak Malay from other Malay sub-ethnic, and it is deduced that socio-culture could be the primary component.

This research employs a qualitative case study design approach through field study observation and semi-structured interviews. The research begins with an archival analysis illuminating a unique and commonly practised Sarawak Malay culture distinct to this Malay sub-ethnic. Every social gathering of the Malay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Sarawak had a recurring activity called '*bergendang*', a traditional musical performance conducted at home. Much has been written about the uniqueness of *bergendang* to the Sarawak Malays, but only about the entertainment itself rather than the place or space where the performance occurs. Hence, since *bergendang* is considered a domestic practice embedded into the traditional Sarawak Malay lifestyle, how the spaces in the home accommodate this should be explored.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the use of space during *bergendang* in the houses of traditional Sarawak Malay society before the 1960s. Rapoport's 'dismantling of culture' theory formed the basis for examining how the form of traditional Sarawak Malay houses could be distinguished from their western counterparts by using culture as a mechanism between environment and behaviour. The research questions whether *bergendang* activity could be one of the reasons for the diversity in house form, especially on the roof height variation, which is a striking attribute of traditional Sarawak Malay houses.

The findings reveal peculiar spatial attributes inside selected house samples that accommodate the need for *bergendang* spatial use. Separating the male and female guests in such social gatherings is imperative for the traditional Sarawak Malay society, even though *bergendang* itself is an avenue for the male-female distant encounter. The research focuses on the traditional houses of the Malay community living along the Sarawak River settlement in Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Importance of culture in Environment-Behaviour Studies (EBS)

There are three fundamental questions in EBS, according to Rapoport (2005). The first is, what human attributes influence the characteristics of the built environment? Secondly, the question of how the environment affects groups of people in a specified context. Lastly, what mechanisms link the two-way interaction between people and the environment? These three questions are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

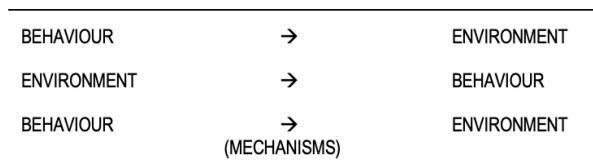


Figure 1: The three basic questions of EBS.
(Source: Rapoport, 2005)

Based on the above figure, the knowledge of how people and environments interact is fundamental, particularly in design and architecture. Rapoport (Ibid.) further noted that there is distinct variability in the formation of space in his studies of numerous vernacular dwellings of indigenous groups. He queried, "Why should there be such an extraordinary variety of built environments, especially houses and dwellings, and settlement forms?". Othman et al. (2015) suggested an emphasis on a macro-level factor which makes up a home, which is the role of cultural traditions in influencing spatial usage and domestic activities.