



The *Perahu Tambang* of Sarawak River: Establishing Architectural Identity

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Abstract

There is lack of information on the Sarawak's *perahu tambang* recorded before the arrival of James Brooke. An architectural study is an apt approach to go about preliminary theorizations of the *perahu tambang* identity, as the boats are the only surviving primary source that can be understood physically. This paper explored the similarities of the boat with its possible influences and distinguish differences in establishing what can be accepted as Sarawak's *perahu tambang* architectural identity. The hypothesis of the study considers the influence may come from the *perahu kajang* and *sampan penambang* in the Malay Archipelago. Ethnographic documentation was conducted through observation on 12 contemporary samples and a measured drawing documentation on one of the samples. The findings were partly analyzed based on pictorial techniques of repertory grid as a deductive approach towards establishing imageability of the boat, with support from secondary data. The identity of Sarawak's *perahu tambang* is expressed through its influence, components, imageability and human-spatial operation. This study is preliminary and advocates further studies to be conducted on Sarawak's *perahu tambang*.

Discipline: Architecture, Heritage Conservation.

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1 Introduction

When first arrived in Kuching, Sarawak, Margaret Brooke (the consort to the second Rajah, Charles Brooke), recalled seeing 'houseboats' belonging to the Malays which sheltered the inmates, propelled usually by old men sitting on the bow (Brooke, 1913). These were the *perahu tambang*,

traversing while carrying passengers crossing the picturesque Sarawak River. Despite still operating today, the concerns on whether the culture would eventually be forgotten have frequently been raised. From what have been a main mode of transportation centuries ago with hundreds were actively roaming along the river, are now reduced to a handful serving only a specific segment of local communities living in the kampong beside being a cultural attraction for touristic experience. There were efforts made to ‘face-lift’ the *perahu tambang* to make it relevant for modern Kuching, but these have been just cosmetic changes.



Figure 1: [A] The *perahu tambang*. [B] The redesigning proposals. Source: Mohd Yusoff (2013).

Combining inadequate understanding and underinformed yet noble efforts in ‘protecting’ the boat, it is sensible that a study on its identity should be considered as there are unprovenanced information on the boats itself. But establishing the origin of the boat’s identity alone could be hindersome as most available yet limited historical descriptions of the boat came from the post-Brooke era, while the *perahu tambang* were already in operation before the arrival of James Brooke as the Sarawak River was the trading spot between the local Malay, Dayak, and Chinese (Manan, 2014; Tan, 2009; Pawi, 2014). While it is preferable to study the boat’s identity from the angle of humanities, there are extremely limited primary sources available apart from the boats itself. Therefore, we would argue that it needs to be studied within the framework of architecture, because:

1. Architecture could be learned directly from the boats as a primary artefact.
2. Boats in the Malay archipelagic cultures are mostly analogous to architecture.
3. The *perahu tambang*’s unique physical form that could only be found in Kuching professes the *genius* of the place, rather than being understood as an object that is insular to some influence.
4. Architectural rationales think of design from multifaceted factors which may unmask other underlying aspects related to identity.

For context, the influence of *perahu* (boat) building skills from Malay architecture has already long been recognized, as the skills may have impacted Malay architectural development since *perahu* have been used as a shelter during the sea-faring activities. For example, the works of Idrus (1996), Masri et al., (2016) and Abdul Wahab & Bahaiddin (2017) associated terminologies used in Malay *perahu* with the Negeri Sembilan Malay houses, which were influenced by the *lentik* roof of Riau, which in turn derived from the *perahu lancing*. The work of Asfarilla (2019) connected