



The Melanau Cultural Influence in the Melanau Tall Longhouse Space Planning of Sarawak Political Buildings as Symbol of Political Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Melanau tall longhouse in Sarawak is one of Malaysia's unique vernacular architecture. Unlike other traditional longhouses in Sarawak, Melanau tall longhouse is assembled at 40 feet above the ground and could house up to 50 families. The structure of this unique longhouse is influenced by the community's traditional culture as it plays a role in their daily life. The house is important to the community as it provides security from the pirates and other tribes, especially from the headhunters, the Iban ethnic. The aim of this paper is to unearth the information about this valuable architecture, focusing on the Melanau cultural influence in the space planning of the house. The research employed qualitative method involving observation, architectural documentation, and interviews with the Melanau experts. The findings point towards the spatial layout of the house based on the cultural influence that created a unique architectural language for the construction.

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1. Introduction

Sarawak is Malaysia's largest state, and it is home to more than 20 indigenous groups. Among the main ethnic people are Malays, Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu, and Melanau. The Melanau ethnic group is viewed as the earliest settler in Sarawak and is believed to share common origins with the Orang Ulu. The Melanau people live alongside the lower reaches of the Rajang River, the famous river in Sarawak, and spread alongside the coastal from the mouth of the Rajang to Bintulu.

Culture influences people in their ways of living, including where they decide to stay, what they do, and their behaviour. Also, culture brings an impact on their tradition as well as their architecture. However, lack of exploratory research has been done on understanding the cultural influence in the space planning of the Melanau Tall Longhouse (MTL). This study delves further

into the Melanau culture to understand the overall spatial layout of the house. The research aim is to unearth the information about this valuable architecture, focusing on the Melanau cultural influence in the space planning of the house.

Even though the Melanau community has played a role in the history of Sarawak for centuries, there has been constrained fieldwork undertaken about their background. There is no current research has been conducted on the Melanau community that can be used as a reference. Moreover, none architectural study has been carried out on their unique traditional house tall longhouse. The height of this house is 40 feet high from the ground level. However, there is no research performed to explain the reason behind the history of the Melanau tall longhouse and why it was built in such way. Therefore, the research will analyse the architectural values and spatial layout associated with the longhouse.

2. Methodology

The research utilised qualitative method, relying on ethnography and phenomenology documentation supported by an in-depth examination of Melanau traditional culture in Sarawak. It was supported by architectural detail studies on the longhouse, visual data collection, and non-structured interviews with the Melanau cultural experts. Finally, the outcomes include the comprehension of the spatial layout and cultural aspects of the MTL.

However, the absence of additional current information requires the analyst to rely on primary sources. The longhouses chosen are the houses that have the most original form of MTL. Pilot studies on a few recognised longhouses will be done before further work can take place. However, for this paper, there is only one case study investigated. It will be based on the MTL in Kuching, Sarawak; located in the Sarawak Cultural Village. This research method also involved some non-structured interview with the Melanau cultural experts. The expected outcomes will unearth the information about this valuable architecture, focusing on the Melanau cultural influence in the space planning of the house. The findings point towards the spatial layout of the house based on the cultural impact that created a unique architectural language for the construction.

3. The Melanau Community

3.1 Origin

The Melanau community is the second influential coastal group in Sarawak. They occupy a coastal belt of land extending from the mouth of the Rajang river (figure 1) to the mouth of the Baram river and extending inland (where is the river on the map). There are varied perspectives about the origin of Melanau. According to Dzulfawati (1995), in 1375, Robert Nicholl identify some places recorded in the map of Borneo that was drawn by Abraham Cresques for King Charles the fifth of France. Among the places recorded were Teluk Brunei and Malao, Nicholl refers to the place as "Malao"; a Portuguese term, "Malano"; English pronunciation, and "Melanau" according to today's term.

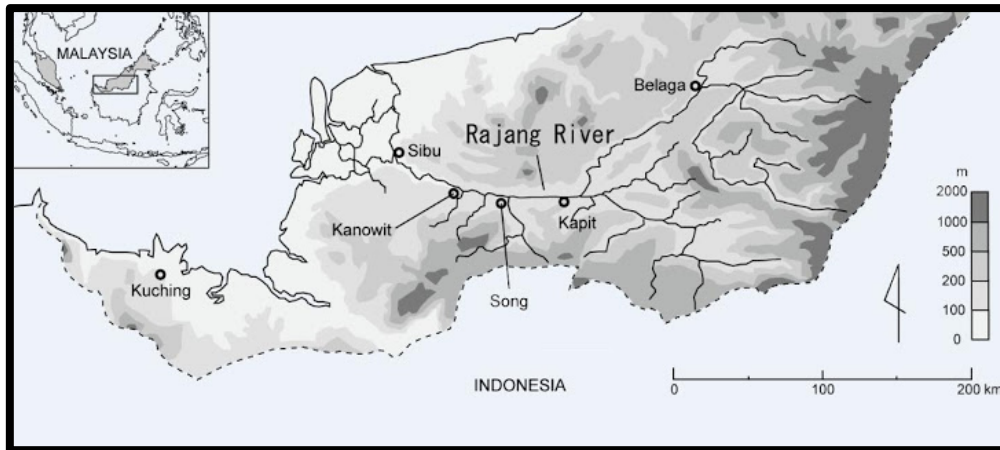


Figure 1: The Rajang River (Courtesy of Google Map)

There is also an assumption that says the Melanau are from the Philippines. According to Pringle (1970), this has something to do with the name "Meranau" (Meranao) or "Mindanao" which sounds very similar to Melanau, but unfortunately, there are no studies that could demonstrate the relationship. According to Asmah (1983), Meranau or Merinaw is the name of the tribe in Mindanao Tengah, the pirates who frequently attacked areas that are occupied by the Melanau.

3.2 Beliefs

As a group of people who was never exposed to modernity and the outside world, the traditional Melanau community faces the daily challenges of life-based on beliefs inherited from their ancestors for generations. They believe that every natural form of nature and objects in the universe are considered to have an extraordinary spirit and power. Therefore, worshipping those creatures were considered as their traditional belief. According to Yasir (1987), the Melanau tribe believes that the important questions in life are associated with the supernatural. In any case, they have to show compliance to the being by giving it gifts such as food, prayer recitation, and certain spells.

However, not all Melanau ethnic communities believe about the influence of animism. Melanau was divided into three groups based on the view of conviction or religion from claiming every last one of kin who takes after Islam, Christianity, and likewise the individuals who still stick to old views. For those who still cling to old thoughts, mostly they have a strong belief in the supernatural. Therefore, a lot of activities, customs, rituals, and taboos can be understood properly when their traditional culture is understood.

3.3 Social Organisation

Regarding social organisation, there is a hierarchy that reflects a person's position in Melanau society. Before the reign of the Sultanate of Brunei, each was grouped into several classes, and they are *sembilan pikul*, *tujuh pikul*, *lima pikul* and *dipen* (slave). According to Jeniri Amir (2015), a person's position is granted based on the individual strengths. The position shows that a person's physical strength is important than intelligence.

After the rule of the Brunei Sultanate, another class was introduced by the Sultanate which is Pangiran. The title Pangiran immediately be the highest rank in the hierarchy of the Melanau social organisation. There was no resistance from the local after the title was introduced because they uphold the loyalty and obedience to the leader. However, only Muslim Melanau is entitled to be granted the title Pangiran, meanwhile, the highest class for the Christian Melanau and Pagan Melanau is the class of *sembilan pikul*. Position in the social organisation brings big impact towards their tradition, especially relating to betrothal, marriage, and death.

4. Study Finding and Result

4.1 Architectural Model of the Melanau Tall Longhouse



Figure 2: The Melanau Tall Longhouse, Sarawak Cultural Village

Pilot studies on a few recognise longhouses were conducted before further work can take place. However, throughout observing each house, numerous tall longhouses identified are no longer genuine. Few houses experience a lot of changes, and some even are left to rot. The only MTL that still maintains the authenticity is located in Sarawak Cultural Village (figure 2) near the foothills of Mount Santubong. Even though it was built for tourism purposes, through first observation, the overall architectural language of the model will be considered authentic since it features all the components found in the authentic house form.

The Melanau tall longhouse is one of Sarawak's unique vernacular architecture. Unlike other traditional longhouses in Sarawak, Melanau tall longhouse is assembled at times at 40 feet above the ground and could house up to 50 families. The structure of this unique longhouse is influenced by the community's traditional culture as it plays a crucial role in their daily life. The house is important to the community as it provides security from the pirates and other tribes, especially from the headhunters, the Iban. The materials used to construct the house are known to be hardy and water resistance. Every material are readily available from the surroundings such as the as *belian* tree trunks (Borneon ironwood), *nibong* tree trunks, and sago tree trunks.

4.2 Cultural Influences on the Space Planning

In the past, a hamlet of Melanau usually consisted of one to three tall longhouses, located in a strategic position; at the river mouth by taking into consideration the security and economic

activities (Tommy, 2017). The Melanau built huge tall longhouses to protect themselves from the reach of pirates and from the enemies, especially from the onslaught of the Iban people. Each tall longhouses consists of 20 to 30 living spaces for each family staying at that tall longhouse (Chen, 1998) and could house up to 50 families.

According to Christopher (2017), the floor of the tall longhouse is built using *nibong* tree trunks. However, only the *serambi* (foyer) flooring was assembled using *belian* tree trunks. According to the Melanau traditional beliefs, *belian* tree trunks wood is used specifically for the foyer area as it was believed to bring in prosperity to every household. The flooring of other areas on the main level of the tall longhouse is built using *nibong* tree trunks that are arranged in a crisscross pattern (Figure 3) with tiny gaps in between. The trunks were arranged in such ways to act as security, making sharp weapons such as arrows to hardly pass through. When the Melanau was attacked from below, the household will pour hot boiling water onto the floor. The enemy below will get skin injuries due to the hot boiling water.

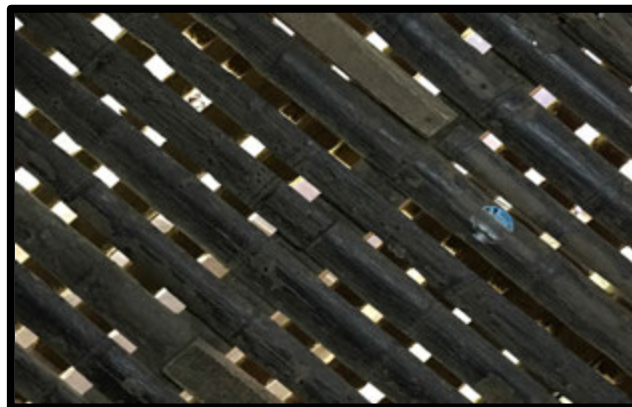


Figure 3: *Nibong* Flooring arranged in crisscross pattern



Figure 4: Appliances for *Bebayoh* ritual

Located in the foyer is a section for *bebayoh*. *Bebayoh* is a ritual when the shaman acts as an intermediary with the supernatural, *ipok*, a reflection of the spirit, to cure diseases or to send off

deceased members of the family. The common belief among the Melanau ethnic is, if an illness that was not cured by any form of medication, then it is highly caused by spirits or supernatural powers. As indicated by their tradition, this ritual is called *bebayoh* and will be performed when other methods have failed. If this final attempt fails, the chance for recovery is considered impossible. The *bebayoh* ritual (Figure 4) is done at the foyer because the foyer is a public area where guests will be seated without having to walk passed the *ngayan tudui* (bedroom) area, an area specifically for the residents.

4.3 Spatial Layout

The tall longhouse usually consists of few levels (Figures 5 and 6). According to Christopher (2017), every tall longhouse was built with few levels. It was believed that every household will lose their fortune if the tall longhouse was constructed with only one level. Every level of the longhouse incorporates multiple bedrooms. Gender and marital status affect the organisation of space in this tall longhouse as there is a separation between unmarried men and women within the sleeping arrangements. Only unmarried men occupy bedrooms located at the first level. Meanwhile, the married couple and unmarried women will occupied the bedroom located on the upper level. The upper floor also includes an attic where the household keeps their ceremonial artefact and family's assets. Every rung on every staircase in the house is in odd numbers. Similar to *belian* tree trunks for flooring on the foyer area, they believe that by having odd numbers steps, could bring success, wealth and good health to each resident.

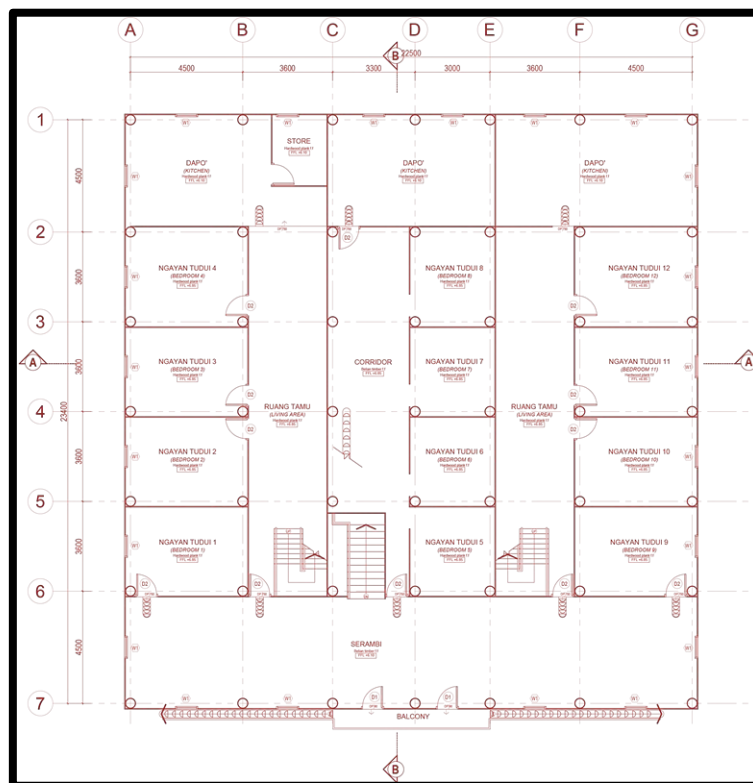


Figure 5: The Melanau Tall Longhouse, Main Level Floor Plan

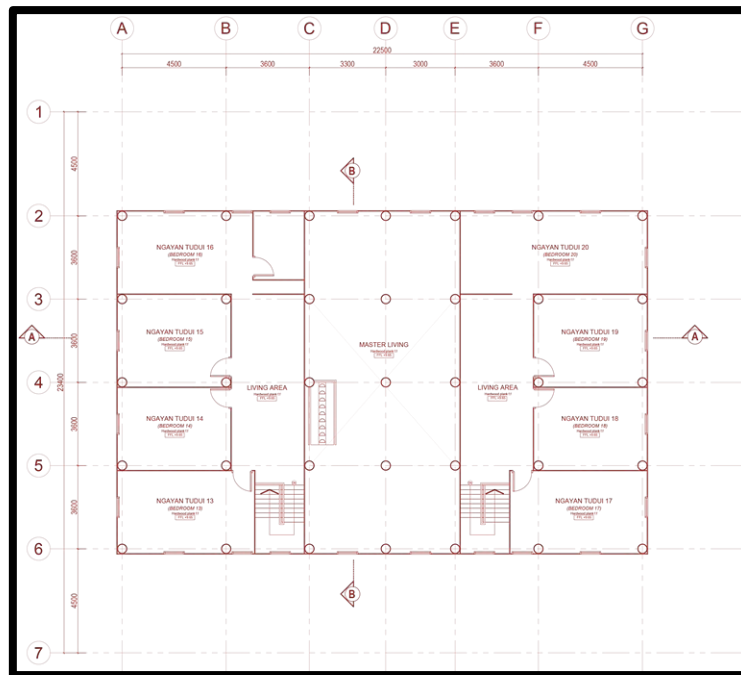


Figure 6: The Melanau Tall Longhouse, Upper Level Floor Plan.

Melanau ethnic group has an interesting history although it is hard to discover their true origin. Nowadays, similar to another ethnic in Sarawak, the Melanau community experience changes in the daily life. Modernization has led to the change of ways of living, and they now live in individual houses instead of the traditional tall longhouses. Further, more methodological work is highly needed on how to capture the information about the Melanau culture and tradition that bring an impact towards their traditional architecture.

5. Conclusion

The research looks into the spatial layout of the house based on the cultural influence that created a unique architectural language for the construction and the understanding of their unique longhouse which differs to other longhouses in Sarawak. The objectives geared towards analysing the architectural values and investigating cultural understanding associated with the longhouses. The research looks into the understanding of their unique traditional customs that play important roles in the Melanau daily life.

It was imperative to consider that culture is a key in influencing the architectural language of the tall longhouse. The architecture of the tall longhouse was designed to provide protection from other tribal attacks and to survive the harsh environment. To respect the nature surround, traditional beliefs will be taken into account. In-depth exploration of layout arrangement is encouraged for future research. Further research might highlight the differences on the arrangement of the MTL in comparison to other longhouses in Sarawak. Regardless of its extinction, the interpretation received from the overall view of its architectural language has demonstrated the overall meaning of this tall longhouse and the importance of having a sheltered for this ethnic family.

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