A Preliminary Study on the Architectural Influences of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Malay Royal Palaces in Malaysia are significant architectural buildings which have been an important and iconic symbol of the rulers and royal families. Functioning as a place of residence and administration, Traditional Malay Royal Palaces are regarded as significant architectural heritage of historical importance. This can be said for all of the Traditional Malay Royal Palaces found in Malaysia including several palaces found in Negeri Sembilan. One of the more noteworthy palaces in Negeri Sembilan is the Istana Lama Seri Menanti which is unique in many ways especially architecturally. It is widely accepted that Negeri Sembilan has always been linked with the Minangkabau of Sumatera, Indonesia and thus it is important to define palace architecture in Negeri Sembilan such as that of Istana Lama Seri Menanti is of local indigenous architecture and not that of the Minangkabau architecture. Hence this paper is a preliminary study on the architectural influences of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan and aims at investigating the influences found in the architecture of this palace. The methodologies undertaken were of case studies and precedent studies of Traditional Malay Royal Palaces in nine states of Peninsular Malaysia, document analysis of Measured Drawings archived at Center for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and site visits to selected palace locations. Findings of this research will indicate the significance of Istana Lama Seri Menanti with regards to its architectural influences and importance within the community.

Keywords: Architecture, Influences, Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Traditional Malay Royal Palaces.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Malay Royal Palaces were important landmarks in traditional Malay towns and cities. These palaces were found to be architecturally designed to represent the royal families within the states that they resided in thus indicating significant identifying elements within the palaces belonging to said royalties (Sheppard, 1969). Traditional Malay Royal Palaces were also essential in defining the architectural and cultural identities of the local communities and are therefore tied to the royal families’ influences (Zulkifli, 2000). Palaces were not only built as a residential building but were designed to represent the power, wealth and status symbols of the royalties (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009). These palaces can be found located in traditional Malay cities as a central landmark or as a protected building within its own palace walls further from the city (Widodo, 1996).

It is common for segregation to develop between the royalties and commoners where the royalties and elite aristocrats lived on higher grounds whereas villagers lived around the palace compounds (Wiryomartono, 2011). Furthermore, the location of palaces built in traditional Malay cities involved the provision of public spaces such as open fields or padang and even market places for the community situated within or nearby the palace compounds (Dilshan, Zul & Syed, 2010; Nor & Ismail, 2009). The hierarchy of people’s status involves complex societal understanding of the importance of certain groups of people and the place they held in the community such as the ruler and the people being ruled. This common hierarchical layout of living quarters are identifiable to all of the states in Malaysia with some states allowing for further segregations such as fenced and gated palace compounds on top of hillsides such as those in Terengganu and Kelantan. In Negeri Sembilan, the same can be said for the segregations of the different statuses of people living surrounding the palace. However, the commoners lived closer to the palace compounds as the palaces were on the same ground level as the local cities and towns. Such is the case for Istana
Lama Seri Menanti where the palace is surrounded by a communal field or *padang* and the commoner’s living quarters surrounded the field and around the palace compounds (Sherwin, 1981). Figure 1 below illustrates the social hierarchy of living quarter’s layout in traditional Malay towns and cities.

![Figure 1: The hierarchy of social statuses in traditional Malay towns and cities](image)

### 1.1 Aim and Research Objectives

The aim of this research paper is to develop a preliminary investigation on the architectural influences of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan through several research objectives. The research objectives are:

i. To investigate the key factors influencing the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan

ii. To identify the architectural elements unique to that of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan which contributes to the importance of the palace

### 1.2 Research Issues and Problems

The issues pertaining to this paper is firstly based on the fact that not many timber palaces are still standing in Malaysia. Timber palaces are studied in order to make comparisons with Istana Lama Seri Menanti which is constructed using timber. Secondly, palaces built around the same time period as Istana Lama Seri Menanti were all built using masonry constructions which differs from the materials used in Istana Lama Seri Menanti. Thus these palaces cannot be used as comparisons with the subject selected. Thirdly, this paper was further based on the public’s generalisation that Istana Lama Seri Menanti in Negeri Sembilan is of Minangkabau origins whereas several researchers have identified the existence of local Negeri Sembilan indigenous architecture. These issues gave the baseline for the study in order to identify the unique identities of Istana Lama Seri Menanti in reference to palaces in other states within the same or earlier building period.

### 2. TRADITIONAL MALAY ROYAL PALACES

Traditional Malay Royal Palaces have been identified as a reproduction of Traditional Malay Houses architecturally and structurally and the similarities can be seen in the general image of palaces (Yaakub, 1996). However, Traditional Malay Royal Palaces differs in terms of their sizes, spatial layouts and locations they were built on (Dilshan, Zul & Syed, 2010). These palaces were also designed to be more ornate and intricate than that of Traditional Malay Houses and were decorated with ornamentations and woodcarvings (Noor & Khoo, 2003). This indicated the
importance of the building and the people living in them which ultimately differentiates the royalties from the commoners (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2009).

The materials used for the constructions of Traditional Malay Royal Palaces were timber as it was the most common resources of building materials and were found bountiful around Malaysia (Nila, Ezrin & Mohammad, 2012; Norazmawati, 2012). However, after many colonial invasions and colonializations in Malaysia, the architecture of palaces changed in terms of building materials being from timber to masonry constructions. Many royal families moved from their traditional timber palaces to newer modern concrete and brick palaces built nearby their old palaces (Gibbs, 1987). These changes can be seen in traditional palaces built during the British colonial era such as Istana Maziah built in 1897 in Terengganu and Istana Jugra built in 1875 in Selangor. Figure 2 and figure 3 below illustrate the architecture and building materials used for the constructions of these palaces respectively.

![Figure 2: Istana Maziah in Terengganu was built in 1897 using masonry construction (Source: Tun Ahmad Sarji, 2011)](image1)

![Figure 3: Istana Jugra in Selangor was built in 1875 using masonry construction (Source: Tun Ahmad Sarji, 2011)](image2)

There were many important roles that the Traditional Malay Royal Palaces had apart from being a residential quarters for the royal families and an administration center for the Sultans (Hazrina, Farhana & Sulaiman, 2012). The palaces were also used as a center to monitor and control peace in order to balance the responsibilities for the wellbeing of the community. Any disputes among noblemen or commoners will be brought upon the Sultan’s knowledge to be heard and any decision making done by the Sultan. It is also in the palace that any new decrees or existing laws were passed by the Sultans for the common good of his people and nation. Furthermore, with palaces also being a center of knowledge, Traditional Malay Royal Palaces also contributed to the spread of Islam and its teachings to the people (Hairuddin & Che Asiah, 2008; Syed Zulflida, 2006). Figure 4 below summarizes the importance of palaces and the responsibilities of the Sultans within these palaces.
2.1 Functions of Traditional Malay Royal Palaces

Traditionally, palaces functioned as residential buildings for royal families and Kings. However, in traditional Malay towns and cities, Traditional Malay Royal Palaces have multiple functions and purposes which served the Sultans and the people. First of all they functioned as living quarters for the Sultans and his royal families and entourage. The second function of Traditional Malay Royal Palaces which is unique and important was that they served as administration centers for his nation (Hazrina, Alice & Aminatuzuhariah, 2012; Dilshan, Zul & Syed, 2010). Many commoners were also called upon to the palace for summonses that were made to the community (Dilshan, Zul & Syed, 2010). The palace also functioned as formal places to accept and welcome foreign dignitaries sent from other countries. Royal functions were commonly held in palaces and were attended by many noblemen and aristocrats, commoners and people of all backgrounds (Mizanur, Nurul & Nik, 2013). Figure 5 summarizes the functions of Traditional Malay Royal Palaces in Malaysia.

3. ISTANA LAMA SERI MENANTI, NEGERI SEMBILAN

Negeri Sembilan is a democratic state in Peninsular Malaysia bordered by Selangor on the northern border, Pahang on the Eastern border, Malacca and Johor on the southern border and the Malacca Straits on the western border. Its monarchy system practices a systematic patriarchal ruling that is not hereditary monarchy and instead its Yang di-Pertuan Besar are selected based on a selective decision of four Undangs who rules the four main districts of Negeri Sembilan. This makes Negeri Sembilan a unique state in Malaysia with the only none-hereditary monarchy ruling which practices customs following the Adat Perpatih. Adat Perpatih of Negeri Sembilan is similar to that of Minangkabau customary laws and this is partly due to the mass migration of the Minangkabau people to Negeri Sembilan from West Sumatera, Indonesia (Sherwin, 1981; Gibbs,
1987). The Minangkabau established their territories in Negeri Sembilan and many of their architecture, customs and practices were adopted by the locals who had already established their own sets of customs and practices before the arrivals of the Minangkabau (Sheppard, 1969). Due to the similarities of the local customs with the Minangkabau, the locals could easily and seamlessly merge both of the different customs together and lived peacefully (Yaakub, 1996).

Istana Lama Seri Menanti was built in 1902 following the war of Bukit Putus in 1875 started by the British. Many buildings were set ablaze during this war by British troops including the burning of Istana Pulih which was the palace of the Yang di-Pertuan Besar during that time. The construction of Istana Lama Seri Menanti was completed in 1908 and became an important building in Seri Menanti. Designed by a master craftsman or tukang, Istana Lama Seri Menanti was built by Tukang Kahar and Tukang Taib who was appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Besar and was aided by a British Draftsman by the name of Woodford and a Chinese contractor whose name was inscribed on the timber by the name of Tham Yoong (Sheppard, 1969). Figure 6 below is an image of the front elevation of Istana Lama Seri Menanti.

![Figure 6: Front view of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan taken in 2015](image)

Istana Lama Seri Menanti is a four storey timber palace and is the tallest timber palace in Malaysia. Being over 100 years old, Istana Lama Seri Menanti is a unique timber building which still stands today in Negeri Sembilan and is currently as a royal museum which is opened to the public. The main structures of the palace consist of 65 ft. long pillars which run through the central tower of the palace from the ground to the topmost central tower (Sheppard, 1969; Yaakub, 1996). The palace is ornately carved with unique woodcarvings from the works of Tukang Kahar and they can be seen on the exterior and interior of the palace. Ornamentations and decorations in palaces represent the symbol of wealth and power of the rulers and the more ornate the woodcarvings are, the wealthier the Sultans are (Abdul, 1987; Zulayti, 2009). Figures 7 and 8 are images illustrating the palace in 1987 and 28 years later in 2015 where the architecture of the palace is still the same and are well preserved.

The spatial planning of traditional palaces is designed with vertical segregations of private and public domains of spaces within the palace (Siti, 2011). In the case of Istana Lama Seri Menanti, it consists of private and public domain that are segregated vertically. This is due to the height of the palace which consists of four storeys and thus spaces are largely separated according to floors. The ground floor and the first floors are the public domain where the palace staff and ground staff are allowed to enter and do their daily duties. The second, third and fourth floor however are the private domains where only the Sultan and his families are allowed to enter. The second floor has all of the bedrooms and private chambers of the Sultan whereas the third floor accommodates the Sultan’s private room. The fourth and highest floor is where the royal treasury and archives are stored and is only accessible by a narrow staircase from the third floor of the
tower. Another important factor in palace architecture is the layout of the palace which is symmetrical unlike the layouts of Traditional Malay Houses which are asymmetrical (Yaakub, 1996). This design element can be seen in the layout of Istana Lama Seri Menanti which is symmetrical when a line is split down the center of the entrance to the palace to the back of the palace. Figure 9 below illustrates the symmetry of the palace floor plan and the spaces within the palace.

Figure 7: View of Istana Lama Seri taken in 1987
(Source: Gibbs, 1987)

Figure 8: View of Istana Lama Seri Menanti taken in February 2015
(Source: Author)

Figure 9: First floor plan of Istana Lama Seri Menanti
(Source: KALAM, UTM)

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The preliminary research findings indicates that Istana Lama Seri Menanti is a unique timber palace built in the early 1900s during which other palaces were already built using masonry constructions. This palace is also the only palace built vertically high with more than two storeys which were not the case for other palaces during its time. Nearly all of the traditional palaces during
its time were built sprawled horizontally rather than built vertically. Furthermore, the people involved in the construction and design of the palace comprises of people from different backgrounds and specialties which made the palace architecture even more distinctive. Further research needs to be done in order to determine the influences on the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti is different from palaces in other Malaysian states specifically during its time period. This was due to the difference in construction materials used, spatial layout and vertical planning of the palace and the people involved in the palace design and construction stages. Further research will be done to indicate and identify the influences on the architecture of Istana Lama Seri Menanti.

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