



Culture of the Traditional Malays: Usage of Sustainable Furniture in Internal Spaces of Traditional Malay Houses

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the culture of Traditional Malays, in particular the use of sustainable furniture inside a Traditional Malay House (TMH). The sample houses for this study were retrieved from archived reports, from the Centre for Built Environment in the Malay World (KALAM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Data collected were analysed using Componential Analysis for the presence of components (based on drawings of archival reports as well as photographic evidence from site visits). The findings showed that the Malays used a variety of sustainable furniture in their houses. Additionally, their homes had built-in furniture, which indicated the houses were pre-designed based on its user.

Keywords: Malay culture, sustainable furniture, traditional Malay furniture, traditional Malay house, traditional Malays

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to identify the different types of sustainable furniture that were used by the Traditional Malays. The objectives of this paper includes redefining the term ‘furniture’ as understood by Traditional Malays, which in turn helps to identify the various types of sustainable furniture available in a Traditional Malay House (TMH). The scope of this study was limited to samples selected from TMH of Melaka and from archived reports retrieved from KALAM, UTM.

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Traditional Malays and Their Houses

Traditional Malay Houses (TMH) commonly includes Islamic elements. Additionally, Malay homes are purely functional, reflecting

the family's needs while also expressing a deep symbolic meaning (Rodriguez & Siret, 2009). Almost all (TMH were built and designed by the occupants themselves reflecting the family lifestyles, while also portraying the builders' creativity and aesthetic skills. Ozaki (2002) and Hashim et al. (2009) reported that because of this mind-set, Malays have specific spaces that are for specific activities, hence, influencing the selection of furniture. Thus, houses become a home ground of cultural practices and traditions.

The TMH are commonly made of wood and are raised from the ground level on stilts. This is to protect the inhabitants from wild animals while also reducing the temperature of the interior of the house, providing sufficient and effective air ventilation for a comfortable environment in a humid climate (Yuan, 1987). Since this paper focuses on TMH in Melaka, the following table (Table 1) shows the main spaces as well as the furniture inside them.

Table 1
Main spaces of TMH Melaka and its functions

Space	Functions
Tiled Staircase	Located at the front of the house, where guests are greeted and welcomed
<i>Anjung</i> (veranda)	Where unfamiliar guests are entertained. A relaxing area where the owner sits and watches the goings-on in the village.
<i>Serambi</i> (living area)	Male guests are entertained here. Equipped with low windows which allows for ventilation and effective cooling.
<i>Rumah Ibu</i> (private area)	The main female domain and core structure of the whole house. To express its importance, it has the highest head room and is the largest space in the house. Where most activities are conducted and includes the bedrooms.
<i>Selang</i> (passageway)	A closed passageway that acts as a link from the rumah ibu to the dapur.
<i>Dapur</i> (kitchen)	Situated at the very back of the house. Where meals are prepared and cooked.
Internal courtyard	An open area where clothes are washed and hung out to dry. Also considered as the children's play area.
<i>Loteng</i> (attic)	Located above the <i>rumah ibu</i> and acts as a storage of stuffs not in use.

Based on Table 1 above, it is evident that spaces available inside a TMH are very versatile and can be used for multiple functions or events, including special occasions (Tajuddin et al., 2005). Figures 1 shows how each space interact with one another (Hashim & Nasir, 2011) and the side elevation as well as the floor plan of a Melaka TMH.



Figure 1. Side elevation and floor plan of a Melaka TMH

It can be seen in Figure 1 that each space seems effortlessly from one to the next, starting from the front entrance right up to the kitchen at the back. Each space is also equipped with multiple windows and openings providing sufficient lighting and air flow.

Sustainable Furniture of the Traditional Malays

Furniture is an important aspect of life and is considered part and parcel of any civilisation whether in the past, present, or future. Since the beginning of time, man has lived a nomadic life and rely on various equipment to store and carry their properties (Lucie-Smith, 1993). With advances in human civilisations, new raw minerals and materials gradually became the source of trading and barter. This eventually paved way for furniture to reflect symbol of social status, wealth and power (Joy, 1972).

We know that furniture is above all, functional and is considered an essential part of any home. Gibbs (1987) and Winstedt (1961) have stated that the Malays had a ‘floor-culture’, which means that they sleep, sit, eat, pray, etc. on the floor. They also observed that Traditional Malays had no furniture, because of this ‘floor-culture’. This is one of the main misconceptions, which in reality is absolutely absurd, as reported by Lucie-Smith (1993) that furniture is part and parcel of any civilisation.

To understand this further, a deep understanding of what the Traditional Malays considered as furniture had to be identified, which means redefining the term ‘furniture’ as understood by them. We know for a fact that there are two types of furniture: built-in (permanent) furniture,

and loose furniture (Beard, 1985). Wahab et al. (2012) provided the following definition: “Furniture can be identified in two different types, which are built-in and loose. These two can then be categorized into two categories; usage and function. Usage of furniture includes body-supporting, storage or utility, and tools. Whereas the functions of the furniture would include sitting, sleeping and leaning, storing and keeping, and working.” Table 2 provides definition of furniture and its purpose.

Table 2
Definition of furniture

Categories Usage	Function	Type
Body-supporting	Sitting, sleeping, leaning	Built-in & Loose
Storage/Utility	Storing/Keeping	
Tool	Working	

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The samples for this research were selected houses in the Melaka region of Malaysia, retrieved from archival reports from the Centre for Built Environment of the Malay World (KALAM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The Centre is considered as one of the most credible sources of data on architectural and built environment heritage of the Malay world which is done through continuous documentations and research. The reports contained detailed drawings of the selected houses, which in turn provided the author with enough evidence to locate and identify furniture available in each given space. Photographic evidence were also evaluated. Data was analysed using Componential Analysis, which used various variables to help the author identify Traditional Malay furniture, by indicating the presence of certain components.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed sustainable furniture were used by Traditional Malays. These furniture were environmentally friendly and made from materials that were not harmful to the environment as well as being durable; hence, reducing the need for the owner to throw it away, buy or make a new one. These furniture are also considered sustainable because of their multi-purpose or multi-function properties. One example of the said furniture is the coconut scraper, which is a seat and at the same time doubled as a working tool. Table 3 below states the various types of sustainable furniture that can be found inside a Melaka TMH in the category of built-in. Table 4 lists the various types of loose sustainable furniture inside a TMH.

Table 3
Built-in sustainable furniture

Space	Activity	Furniture	Function	Material
<i>Anjung</i>	Sitting / Leaning	<i>Bendul</i> (Sill)	Body-supporting unit	Wood
		Seats	Body-supporting unit	Wood
	Tools	Light Fixture	Utility	Wood
Staircase	Sitting / Leaning	<i>Bendul</i> (Sill)	Body-supporting unit	Wood
		Stairs	Body-supporting unit	Tile / Concrete
	Daily Preparation	Well	Storage/Utility	Concrete
<i>Serambi</i>	Storing / Utensils / Tools / Equipment	Light Fixture	Utility	Wood
		Clothes Hanger	Utility	Wood / Antlers
		Partition	Utility / Furnishing	Wood
	Sitting / Leaning	<i>Bendul</i> (Sill)	Body-supporting unit	Wood
		Window Rail	Body-supporting unit	Wood

Based on Table 3, Traditional Malay furniture in the *Anjung* comprised of *Bendul* (beams) that were used by the inhabitants as seats. Light fixtures were also available and were used by the Traditional Malays as a place to hang their lanterns and lights during the time before electricity. The main tiled staircase of TMH of Melaka were seldom sat on, but Melaka TMH had wooden staircases at the side of the house together with a wooden bench. These staircases were considered as furniture because of the presence of a roof covering both the staircase and the bench, which indicated that the inhabitants used these stairs as a seat while chatting to guests or other inhabitants in the opposite bench. Wells were also located next to the stairs which were useful for drawing water to clean the feet of people before going into the house. The *Serambi* had the most built-in furniture as it is the main space where guests were entertained. These included light fixtures, fixed wooden clothes hangers carved from the main beam of the house, and also partitions that were used when extra separated rooms were needed. The *Bendul* were used as seats, while window railings were used for leaning while sitting near the window.

Table 4
Loose sustainable furniture

Space	Activity	Furniture	Function	Material
Staircase	Daily Preparation	Flower Pots	Storage/Utility	Clay
		Wash Basin	Storage/Utility	Clay/Metal
		Shoe Rack	Storage/Utility	Wood
<i>Serambi</i>	Storing / Utensils / Tools / Equipment	Wardrobe	Storage/Utility	Wood
		Cupboard	Storage/Utility	Wood
		Clothes Hanger	Utility	Wood / Antlers
		Door Panel	Utility/Furnishing	Textile
	Sitting/Leaning	Mats	Body-supporting unit	Pandanus leaves / bamboo strips
	Daily Preparation	<i>Tikar mengkuang</i> (Mat)	Body-supporting unit	<i>Mengkuang</i> leaves
	Praying	<i>Sejadah</i> (Praying mat)	Body-supporting unit	Textile

Loose furniture of the Traditional Malays that were located at the staircases included flower pots, wash basins and shoe racks. They were used as storage or utility. Furniture in the *Serambi* consisted of wardrobes, cupboards and deer antlers that were used to hang clothes and headgears. These antlers also indicated that the occupant of the house was a hunter. Other than that loose furniture found in the *Serambi*, included door panels that were used for decoration, mats made from *mengkuang* or Pandanus leaves as well as praying mats. These mats come in various sizes and used for different occasions as well as different locations. For example, three layered squared seating mats were woven intricately with Pandanus leaves and were used by brides and grooms. Larger mats were used to cover the entire floor inside the TMH.

CONCLUSION

By using Componential Analysis to identify the presence of certain components to determine the end product, the author was able to identify numerous furniture used by the Traditional Malays inside their houses. The furniture was significantly influenced by the culture and traditions of the traditional Malays. Therefore, certain spaces had certain types of furniture based on the activity that were carried out inside that specific space. Although this is true, the findings also indicated that because spaces functioned smoothly for multiple activities and events, the furniture were multi-functional as well. Thus, it is clear furniture in TMH homes was sustainable and environmentally friendly.

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