

The Relationship Between The Socio-culture of Royalty and the Architecture of Istana Sepahchendera

The Socio-culture of Royalty

Socio-culture is a basic and common law of a society which influenced, governed and dictated the life of individuals and society. The socio-culture of the royalties, who are the rulers as positioned on the highest social standing in a given society is more refined than the commoners and strongly influenced by the royal customs and traditions. Then the socio-culture of the royalties influenced the architecture of the palaces particularly the space organisation, consistent with the suggestion that socio-culture influenced the built environment.

Traditionally, the Malays believed that the ruler has the supreme power or *daulat*. *Daulat* is a special power of the ruler. No one can disobey the ruler as the person would be cursed due to the *daulat* of the ruler. The belief in *daulat* indirectly creates a sense of loyalty to the ruler and signifies the status or class between the commoners and the rulers (*Ensiklopedia Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, 1994). The difference in status was reflected in the refined culture of the royals which with a different language (*bahasa dalam*), the royal regalia, royal decrees and ceremonies.

The Malay rulers who are called *Sultan* or *Raja* are the constitutional rulers of nine of 13 states in Malaysia. The ruler rules the state assisted by the royal family. At present, the Malay rulers do not rule the country but have ceremonial responsibilities and are considered the defenders of Islam and the ethnic Malay Muslim majority. The

commoners gave their loyalty to the rulers and royal family in return for protection and economical right (Mohd Taib and Wan Kadir, 1986).

There are number of decrees pertaining to the palace architecture. Traditionally the decrees where meant only for the royalty. The commoners or ordinary people were forbidden by the Malay royal decrees from duplicating or constructing the following structures found in palaces (Syed Alwi, 1980). The decrees are no longer practiced and can be used by the ordinary people.

- i- *Balairong* (The main hall where the King receive the people/ guests)
- ii- *Sayap-layang* (the elongated area located to the right or left part of the palace)
- iii- *Pintu Gerbang* (main entrance or gate)
- iv- *Tingkap Panjang* locate above *pintu salak* (special entrance)
- v- *Perbalaian, Rembah, Geta* (a platform for the King to sit or rest or sleep)
- vi- *Penanggah* (a special kitchen located inside the palace which is used to prepare and cook food for the royal only)
- vii- *Perselasaran* (A covered veranda positioned lower from the main palace)

The Role and Position of Woman

Women play an important role in a household and their position influenced the house form. There are different roles of the women in the palace as compare to the house. The women in the palace include the mother queen, queen, concubines, attendants, officials, maids and drudges (Walthall, 2008). Similarly in the Malay palaces, the role and position of Sultan's mother, his consorts and maids play respective roles in the running of daily activities of the palace. The sultan's mother normally is the most important

woman in the palace, followed by his consort. Historical review indicated that most Malay rulers in the old days practiced polygamy and had more than one wife. Therefore in this case, the first consort has the highest position among all the consorts and was accorded the title of *Sultanah* if she is from the royal blood and the title *Tengku Ampuan* if she is not from royal blood (Noor Aini, 1991). The female royalties were not involved in the administration of the state but were confined to the royal household.

The position of the *Sultanah* and princesses was reflected in the provision of spaces in the palace and seating order in formal ceremony. The seats for the *Sultanah* are positioned higher than other female royalties as reflected by the decrees for the Chief of Palace (*Penghulu Istana*) which specifically outlines the arrangement of the seating for the royalties and others (Syed Alwi, 1980):

- i) The consort of the Sultan must be seated at the highest position and be given *jurung* made of gold or silver
- ii) The concubines and the princesses must be positioned at the left and right at *tela* (a special area for women royalties) and seated according to the same position as the princes
- iii) The wives of aristocrats must be positioned at the left of *tela* with the same arrangement and the position of the princes and princesses.
- iv) The royal slaves must be positioned at the centre of *tela* beside of *Bugis* women (royal maids)
- v) The civilians and good slaves must be positioned at the palace's veranda

Background of Istana Sepahchendera

The palace was named the Istana Sepahchendera, the name of the first consort of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Syah. The palace was constructed in 1882 after the enthronement of the Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Syah as the King of Kedah. The architecture of this palace resembles the Siamese mansion. It is a three storey mansion made of bricks with a roof deck, similar to several buildings in Siam during that era. The architecture of mansions in Siam at that time was influenced by Western architecture. The Istana Sepahchendera is also known as Istana Kampung Baru due to its location in Jalan Kampung Baru, Alor Setar. Che Sepahchendera gave birth to two princes and two princesses, Tunku Ibrahim the eldest prince, Tunku Rokiah, Tunku Fatimah and Tunku Kassim in this palace (State of Kedah Archive & Heritage Study, 2008).



Figure 1 Istana Sepahchendera

Che Sepahchendera did not live in the main palace, the Istana Kota Setar which was resided by the Sultan's mother, Wan Hajar bt Wan Ismail or Mak Wan Besar (Tengku Zainol Rashid, personal interview, 2009). Che Sepahchendera lived in the palace until she died in February 1907. The palace was passed to her unmarried children.

The Istana Sepahchendera was turned into the Kampung Baru Girl School in 1922 by the late Tunku Ibrahim (Tunku Sulong) the eldest son of Che Sepahchendera. It was the first English Girl School in Kedah established in Mac 1922. The school was initiated by Tunku Ibrahim, Tuan Syed Muhammad Idid, Encik Ismail Puteh, and Mr. E.G Stuart (Kedah Education Officer). During this period of time, only the royal children and High Commissioners' children could learn at the school. Skill lessons like cooking, sewing and handy works were provided for the students who did not excel academically. During its early stage, the school only have 30 students. Eventually the number increased to 45 students in 1933 (Heritage Study, 2008).

During the World War II (1945), the palace was used as the Fire Fighter Office and Japanese Language Centre. After the war ended, this palace resumed its function as a school which was renamed as Sekolah Sultanah Asma. However it was closed in 1954 when a new all girls' school named Sekolah Menengah Sultanah Asma was opened at Derga (Heritage Study, 2008). In 1966, the palace was used as Sekolah Kebangsaan Sultan Abdul Halim, an all boys' school. At the same time, a few buildings and blocks were built around the palace, an additional blocks for classrooms. A canteen was also constructed at the rear of the palace. Some renovations were carried out inside the palace. The classrooms were divided by wall subdivisions. Sometimes, the classes were justified by shutting the doors between two areas or rooms (Heritage Study, 2008).

Later on, the building was changed into Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah Kota Star (Education Office of Kota Setar) in 1983 and the surrounded buildings operated as school as usual. The Istana Sepahchendera has been used for many purposes. The last time it was occupied was in 2000, as a prayer room (Mussolla) for the Insaniyyah University College students. Unfortunately, at present the palace has been abandoned

and becomes the storage area for the college (Heritage Study, 2008). Table 1 shows the chronology of events in the Istana Sepahchendera.

Table 1
Chronology of the Istana Sepahchendera

| Year | Event |
|-------------|---|
| 1882 | Construction of the Istana Che Sepahchendera completed |
| 1884 | The birth of the eldest prince, Tengku Ibrahim |
| 1907 | Che Sepahchendera passed away on Feb 10, 1907 |
| 1922 | The palace turned into the first English school, Kampung Baharu Girls' School |
| 1941 | Malaya invaded by Japanese army |
| 1945 | Became Japan Language Centre and Fire fighter Office |
| 1946 | Renamed to Sekolah Sultanah Asma until 1954 |
| 1966 | Became an all boy primary school known as Sekolah Rendah Sultan Abdul Halim |
| 1983 | The palace turned into the state of Kedah Education Department |
| 2000 | Functioned as a prayer hall for Insaniyah University College |

The Relationship between the Socio-culture of Royalty and the Architecture of Istana Sepahchendera

The spaces in Istana Sepahchendera are vertically divided into public and private domain whereby the most public domain is located on the ground floor and the private domain on the second and third level. The private domain is further divided whereby the most private domain for the sultan and his consort is located at the highest level. The clear division of spaces clearly reflects the hierarchy of the royal family whereby symbolically, the highest level represent the hierarchy of the sultan and his consort at the highest level as compare to their children and royal workers. The division of spaces was influenced by the need to provide comfort for the daily activity system, the need to

provide privacy and enhance the role and position of the sultan and his consort. For example, the public domain where most the maids, servant and guards performed their works is separated from the first and second levels designated for the royal family. Similarly the occasional activities held on the ground floor ensure their privacy at all times.

The provision of spaces in Istana Sepahchendera was based on the activity system of the royal family. The back area of the palace consists of spaces which are considered as wet and 'dirty area' where the preparation and cleaning took place. Kitchen and toilet are located at both sides of the symmetrical palace with entrances directly to outside for convenience. These areas are not visible from the public area or the 'front area' of the palace. The rear access of the palace faces the backyard where the royal canal was located. The royal canal was the source of water for Istana Sepahchendera. The location of the kitchen and toilet at the rear of the palace and close to the rear entrance was convenient for the maids and servants to carry water from the canal for cleaning, cooking, food preparation and toilette activities. The back spaces were screened to avoid views from the public area of the ground floor.

The front area of the ground floor is considered as the public area which was kept clean and in order as it is a public area and visible as one enters the palace. Two staircases from both sides at the front of the palace meet at the landing located in the middle of the covered porch leading to the first floor, giving a sense of grandeur to the palace. There are two entrances at the ground level accessed from the two covered terraces as shown in Figure 2. Guards were positioned at the main entrances for provide security. The hall at the centre of the ground floor is elongated divided by the staircase leading to the first level. Screened panels were used to partition the back area of the

ground floor. The location of the staircase facing the rear entrance provides easy access for the servants to carry water and serve food on the first level for the royal family. The hall is multi-functional as used for many activities including occasional activities when guests were invited. The foyer work as the resting place for the maids, servants and guards also work as storage (Heritage Study, 2008). Figure 2 illustrates the ground floor plan of Istana Sepahchendera.



Figure 2 Ground floor plan of Istana Sepahchendera

The second level of Istana Sepahchendera was a private domain as mentioned in the previous section designated for the royal family. The plan is similar to the ground floor except for the usage. The spaces provided are walk-in closet, toilet, living hall, foyer and waiting area. The walk-in closet is designed to keep Che Sepahchendera's costumes, dresses and belongings. The provision of this space reflects the different lifestyle of the royal family as compared to the commoners. The living hall is a multi-purpose space which accommodates many activities. Rooms were partitioned within the living hall to provide sleeping areas for the princes and princesses are partitioned.

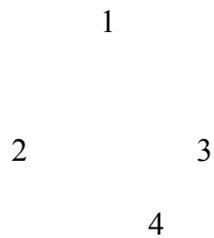


Figure 4 The second floor plan of Istana Sepahchendera

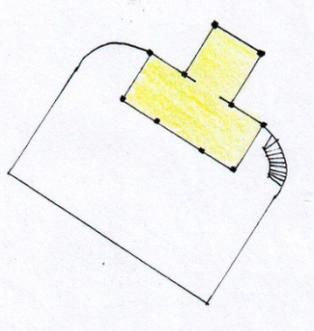
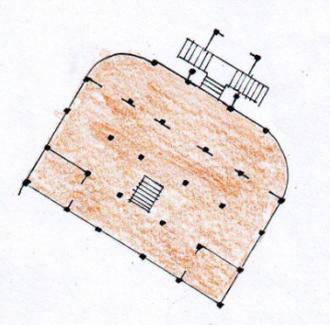
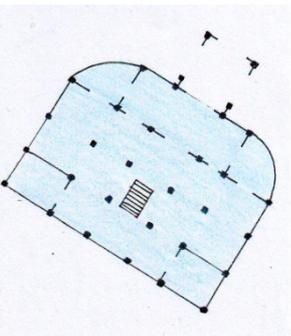
The deck at the roof top is never used by the other except the Sultan and consort as the access was only allowed for them. The room for the Sultan and the consort is also never been entered by others. The balcony projected from the first floor's staircase. Used by the Sultan and consort to view the surrounding.

i. Spatial Relationship

Based on the above discussion, this palace is a residence palace and built in three storey building. The spaces are arranged in one building. The spaces within a space occupied different activities from different provision, the private, semi-private and public. The provision is come out with three storey of palace. The interlocking space is created in the first floor. The open space at the living area occupied the multi activities of the royal family. The view towards the living area and the hall at the ground floor are screened by the foyer and waiting area. The middle staircase is the main link between the ground floor and first floor. The inner activities are through this access only. The spatial organisation of Istana Sepahchendera is summarised Table 2.

Table 2

The spatial organisation spaces inside Istana Sepahchendera

| Activity | Spaces | Description |
|--|---|--|
| Private - sleeping | Second floor  | A room at this level was forbidden to others except Sultan and CheSepahchendera |
| Semi-private - living area - eating - sleeping - relaxing - entertaining the invited guests | First floor  | The main family living area located here but used the concept of open-space |
| Public - entertaining guests - preparing the meals - guarding the palace | Ground Floor  | This is the place for the maids, servants and security guards do their duties. Where there any function, this area opened for the guests |

Summary

The socio-culture of the Kedah royalties based on its custom and traditions influenced the Kedah palaces. However, some aspects of the socio-culture of the royal family have been influenced by foreign culture of the consort. Based on the case studies of Istana Sepahchendera, there are four aspects of the Kedah royal family which influenced the

Kedah palaces namely activity system, privacy, family structure and the role and position of women.

References

- Abdul Halim Nasir & Wan Hashim Wan Teh. (1997). *Warisan Senibina Melayu*. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.
- Abdul Halim Nasir. (1993). *Kota-kota Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. (2000). (4thedn). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Gibbs, P. (1987). *Building A Malay House*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Hillier, B. (1996). *Space of the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Mohd Taib Osman. (1989). *Masyarakat Melayu: Struktur Organisasi dan Manifestasi*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Rapoport, A. (1969). *House Form and Culture*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Rapoport, A. (1976). *The Mutual Interaction of People and the Built Environment A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Netherlands: Mouton Publishers.
- Rapoport, A. (1990). *The Meaning of the Built Environment A nonverbal Communication Approach*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Syed Alwi Sheikh Al-Hadi. (1980). *Adat Resam Dan Adat Istiadat Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Tardjan Hadidjaya (1964). *Adat Raja-raja Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Pustaka Antara.
- The Encyclopaedia Americana International Edition*. (1991). (11th edn). vol. 7. USA: Grolier Incorporated.
- Tipple, A. G., & Willis, K. G. (1991). *Housing the Poor in the Developing World: Methods of Analysis, Case Studies and Policy*. Great Britain: Routledge.
- Zakiah Hanum. (1989). *Asal-usul Negeri-negeri di Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International.

Zeisel, J. (1995). *Inquiry by Design Tools for Environment-Behaviour Research*. USA: Cambridge University Press.