

THE MELANAU TALL LONGHOUSE (MTL), SARAWAK, MALAYSIAN BORNEO

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Abstract

Situated in the remote area of Mukah in the state of Sarawak, the Melanau tall longhouse (MTL) is one of Malaysia's least exposed examples of vernacular architecture, found only in the interior of the island of Borneo. It has its own unique historical background, different from other known traditional longhouses of other tribes in Sarawak. The building length and height can be named as parts that made the differences in the construction of this architecture, coupled with the local materials utilized for erecting these houses. A lack of architectural documentation even by its own people called for this investigation to be undertaken. This phenomenon is made worse by the demolition of these houses in place of new buildings and application of contemporary construction materials. Moreover, many were left to rot with no proper steps taken to preserve them. In the past, a Melanau hamlet usually consisted of one to three tall longhouses. These houses were always located in strategic positions; at the river mouth within the tidal zone. Such locations were taking into consideration the protection and security from pirates and other headhunter warring tribes. These settings provided resources for their economic activities of fishing and farming the sago plants. The structure of this house utilised natural materials, which are promptly accessible from the jungle. These materials are known to be solid and water resistant, such as the *belian* tree trunks (Bornean ironwood), *nibong* (palm) tree trunks and sago tree trunks, mainly for the major structural components of the houses. True to the name, this house can stand tall up to 40 feet high (over 12 meters). Even though the Melanau community has played a role in the history of Sarawak for centuries, there has been constrained fieldwork performed on their backgrounds. This paper evaluates this vernacular architecture, focusing on the cultural influences towards the sustainable architecture of the traditional tall longhouse. The research employed a qualitative method involving observation, architectural documentation of measured drawings, and interviews with the Melanau elders looking in depth at the Melanau culture in the aspect of ethnography and design experience through phenomenology methods. The findings of the investigation point towards the sustainable architectural aspect of the MTL based on the cultural influence of this unique tribe. These influences further established a set of architectural languages of the house as an outcome of this investigation that is based on the cultural and environmental factors.

Introduction

Sarawak (figure 1) is Malaysia's biggest state and known by its various indigenous groups. Among ethnic groups in Sarawak are Malay, Iban, Bidayuh, and Melanau. There are various theories about where the Melanau community came from. Some believe they are a part of the Javanese ethnic group from Indonesia, due to the similarities in their traditional costumes. According to Clayre (1970), some believe that the Melanau community originally from Mindanao, Philippines, which sounds very similar to the Melanau ethnic. It is told that the spelling of the word Melanau has been changed frequently from Milanowes, Milanos, to Melano. However, the spelling Melanau is vigorous and has been accepted by the community until today.

The Melanau settle alongside the Rajang River (figure 2), the famous river in Sarawak, and because of that, they call themselves *a-likow*, meaning 'people of the river'. Culture plays an important role in this ethnic's way of living, involving where they choose to stay, and what they do daily. Additionally, culture brings an impact on their tradition as well as their architecture. Be that as it may, an absence of exploratory research in understanding the cultural impact on the overall design of the Melanau Tall Longhouse (MTL) by its own people called for this investigation to be undertaken. Therefore, this paper will uncover the information about this valuable architecture, concentrating

on the Melanau cultural influence on this least exposed vernacular architecture.



Figure 1. Map of Malaysia and Sarawak (Source: Google Map)

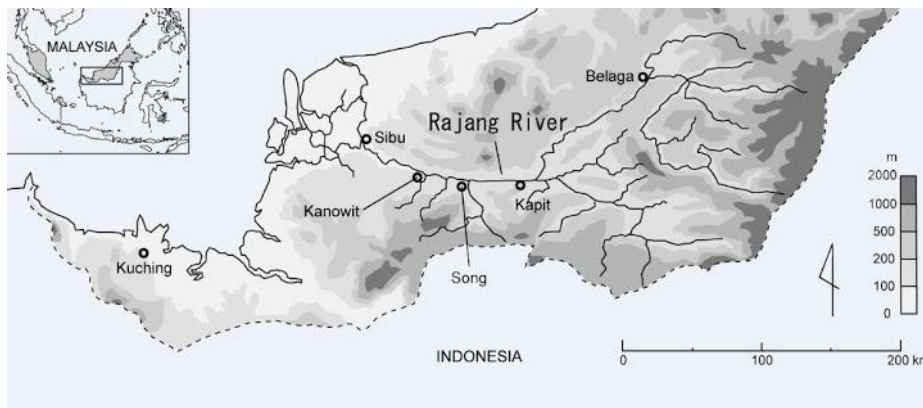


Figure 2. The Rajang River (Source: Google Map)

Problem Statement

Even though the Melanau community has played a role in the history of Sarawak for centuries, there has been constrained fieldwork performed about their background. The absence of MTL architectural documentation required this examination to be embraced. This phenomenon is made worse by the demolition of these houses in place of new buildings and application of contemporary construction materials. Moreover, there were no appropriate steps taken by neither the Melanau community nor the government to safeguard them, with many left to rot. This paper sets out to investigate the cultural influence that created the unique architectural language of the MTL and the understanding of their unique longhouse, which differs to other longhouses in Sarawak.

Methodology

The research employed the qualitative method, by looking in depth at the Melanau culture in the aspect of ethnography and design experience through phenomenology methods. The data was obtained through architectural detail studies of their traditional tall longhouse, and visual data collection. Finally, the outcomes include the comprehension of the cultural influences towards the sustainable architecture of the traditional tall longhouse.

Due to the absence of secondary sources, the analyst requires to rely on primary sources. Therefore, pilot studies on few recognised longhouses were conducted before further work could occur. The longhouses chosen are the MTL that have the most original form and are well preserved. However, throughout observing each house, various tall longhouses recognized are no longer genuine. Few houses encounter a lot of changes, and some even are left to rot. The only MTL that still maintains the authenticity is the MTL in Sarawak Cultural Village, located in Kuching, Sarawak's state capital.

This research includes non-structured interviews with the Melanau cultural experts. The findings of the investigation point towards the sustainable architectural aspect of the MTL based on the environmental and cultural influence of this unique tribe.

The Melanau Ethnic

There are different theories concerning the origin of the Melanau community. Leach (1950) categorised the Melanau a part of the “Para-Malay”. He divided the group into two groups, specifically those Segan (Melanau-Bintulu) and the Likow (Melanau Mukah-Oya). Indicated by Morris (1978), “Melanau” has existed in the maps of Europe since 1595. As well-known explorers and sailors in the last century, both Portuguese and French were willing to travel to this region. They explored and conquered the new colonies to diffuse both influences and religions. According to De Crespigny (1876), Melanau originated from the islands of Java and Sumatera. Dress was based on their traditional costumes that they normally wore in official ceremonies of the era and resembled Javanese garments. However, there was also a possibility that the dress resembled the influence of Javanese Malay community.

Before the coming of foreign religious influences, the Melanau were animists before Islam and Christian were spread throughout Sarawak. They believed that every natural form of nature and objects in the universe were being considered to have an unprecedented soul and power. Yasir (1987) said that the Melanau tribe believed that their daily life was associated with the supernatural. In any case, they had to show compliance to the beings by offering them gifts such as food, prayer recitation, and certain spells.

The Islam religion spread throughout the Melanau district, namely in Oya, Dalat, Mukah, Matu, Igan, Bintulu, and Balingian; by the Sultanate of Brunei (figure 3). According to Sweeney (1968), besides falling in love with the teachings of Islam, the community embraced Islam because it was part of the respect to the ruling power of the Sultanate of Brunei. Similar to Islam, Christianity was spread through the expansion of the British power. Dzulfawati (2006) said that the British built churches in each region of Sarawak. Catholic schools were built and monitored by priests and nuns. The British then introduced the tax system as a way to disseminate Christianity to the Melanau people.



Figure 3. Melanau District in Sarawak (Source: Recoda)

There is a hierarchy that reflects a man’s position in the Melanau society. Prior to the rule of the Sultanate of Brunei, everyone was grouped into a few different classes; the *sembilan pikul* (the ninth level of heavy responsibilities and the heaviest), the *tujuh pikul* (the seventh level, one lower than the *sembilan pikul*) the *lima pikul* (the fifth level) and the *dipen* (slave). As indicated by Jeniri (2015), a man’s position is conceded in view of the individual strengths. The position demonstrates that a man’s physical quality is more critical than intelligence. During the government of the Brunei Sultanate, another class was introduced by the Sultanate, which was *Pangiran*. The title *Pangiran* quickly became the most noteworthy rank in the hierarchy of the Melanau social organisation. However, only the Melanau Muslims were granted the title *Pangiran*. Meanwhile, the highest class for the Melanau Christians and Melanau Pagans remained of the *sembilan pikul* class. Positions in the social organisation bring enormous effect towards their custom, particularly on marriages, and deaths.

Melanau Tall Longhouse (MTL)

Pilot studies on a few recognised longhouses were directed before additional work could occur. Due to the fact that these traditional houses no longer exist within the Melanau districts perimeter, with a few being abandoned, the MTL model in Sarawak Cultural Village (figure 4); a living museum; was chosen as the main site for this case study. Despite the fact that it was built for tourism purposes and is located in the city of Kuching; far away from the Melanau districts; through first viewing, the overall architectural language of the model was viewed as the most genuine and it features all the components found in the original MTL.



Figure 4. The Melanau Tall Longhouse, Sarawak Cultural Village

The MTL is one of Sarawak's unique examples of vernacular architecture and can be assembled as high as at 40 feet above the ground (figures 5 and 6). Each tall longhouse consists of 20 to 30 living spaces (Sims, 2010) and could occupy up to 50 households at one time. The structure of this unique longhouse is influenced by the community traditional culture as it plays an important role in their daily life since the beginning of time. These houses were located in strategic positions; at river mouths. Such locations were taken into consideration as they provided security from the pirates and other tribes, especially from the headhunters, the Iban (Tommy, 2017).

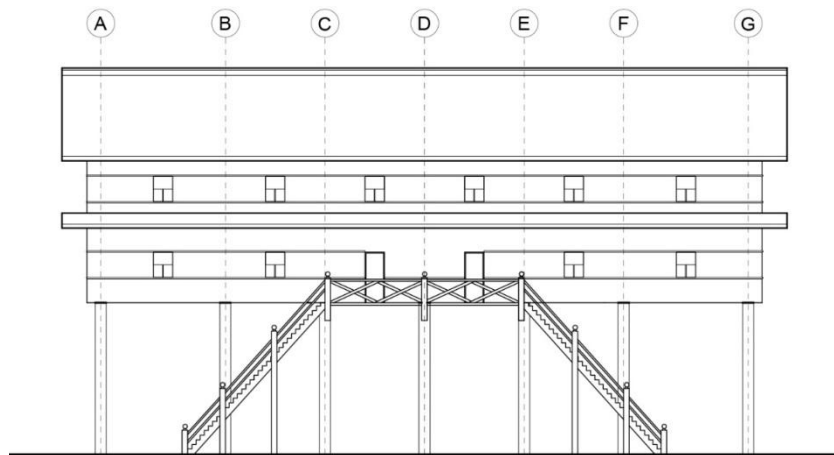


Figure 5. Melanau Tall Longhouse Front Elevation

Natural materials that are known to be hardy and water resistant are used to construct the structure of this house, such as the *belian* tree trunks (Bornean ironwood), *nibong* (palm) tree trunks and sago tree trunks. These materials are readily available from the surroundings and used mainly for the major structural components of the houses. Melanau traditional house has a sturdy and high structure. It is constructed with folded roof awning. The roof is built in the shape of elevated and elongated forms to allow an attic to be built. This attic is usually used to store a variety of ornaments. According to Samsudin (2002), such a roof could sustain strong winds and heavy rain throughout the year.

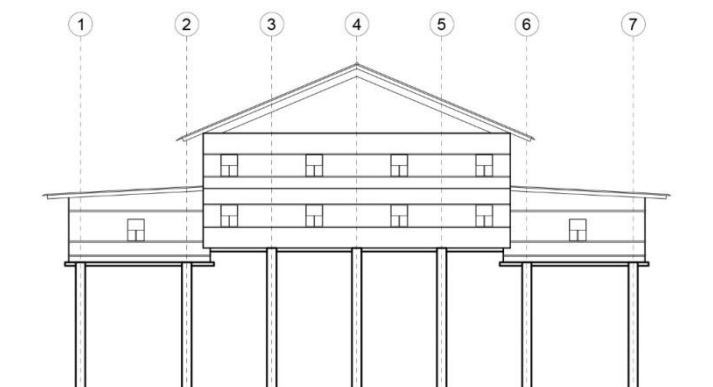


Figure 6. Melanau Tall Longhouse Rear Elevation

Indicated by Christopher (2017), the floor of the MTL is constructed using *nibong* tree trunks. However, the flooring for the *serambi* (veranda) area was built using *belian* tree trunks. According to the Melanau customary convictions, *belian* tree trunk wood is used particularly for the *serambi* area because it could bring in prosperity to the family members. The flooring of other areas on the main level of the tall longhouse is assembled using *nibong* tree trunks that are arranged in a crisscross pattern with small holes in the middle (figure 7). According to Tommy (2017), the trunks were arranged in such ways to ensure that sharp weapons such as arrows could barely pass through the small openings. At the point when the Melanau are attacked from below, the household will pour hot bubbling water through the holes in the floor to cause injuries or death to the enemies by scalding.

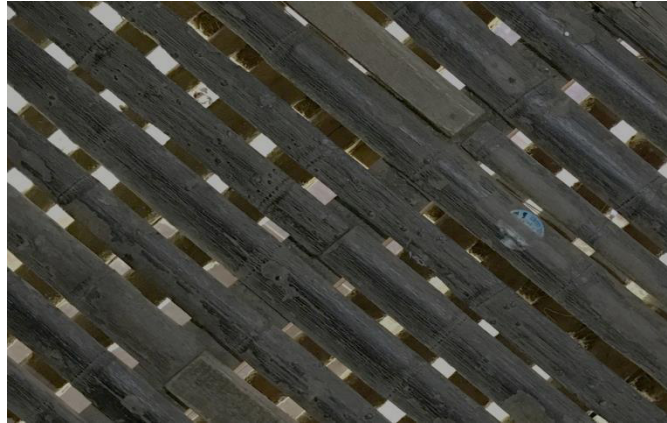


Figure 7. Nibong Flooring arranged in crisscross pattern

Situated in the *serambi* (veranda) is an area for the *bebayoh* ritual (figure 8). *Bebayoh* is a ritual where a powerful shaman will be called to act as an intermediary with the supernatural, *ipok*, known as the reflection of the spirit in order to cure illnesses. The Melanau believed that if an illness could not be cured by any form of medication, it is most likely was caused by spirits or supernatural powers. The *bebayoh* can only be performed when other methods have failed. However, if this ritual fails, the chance for recovery is considered impossible. The *bebayoh* ritual is done at the *serambi* because it is a public area where guests will be seated without having to walk past through the *ngayan tudui* (bedroom) area, an area particularly meant for the residents.

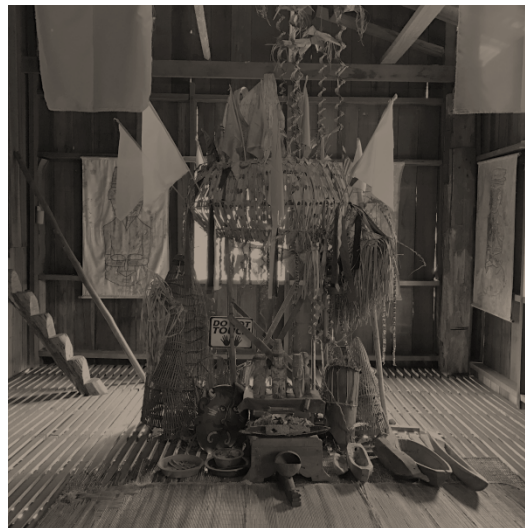


Figure 8. Appliances for Bebayoh ritual

The MTL is usually built with multi-story levels. It was believed that every household would lose their fortune if the house were constructed with just a single level. Every level of the longhouse incorporates multiple *ngayan tudui*. The sleeping arrangements of the households are mainly affected by the gender and marital status because there is a separation between unmarried men and women. Unmarried men will occupy *ngayan tudui* located at the first level (figure 9). However, the wedded couple and unmarried ladies will occupy the *ngayan tudui* located on the upper level (figure 10). This also reflects the social hierarchy of an individual in the family. The upper floor incorporates a storage room where the family keeps their ceremonial artefacts and family's assets. Empty spaces underneath the house are used for various purposes, to store rice paddy, sago, boats, and a chicken coop. In addition, the area is also used for entertaining houseguests and also to hold important ceremonies related to

religious and everyday life such as marriages and ceremonies related to deaths and funerals.

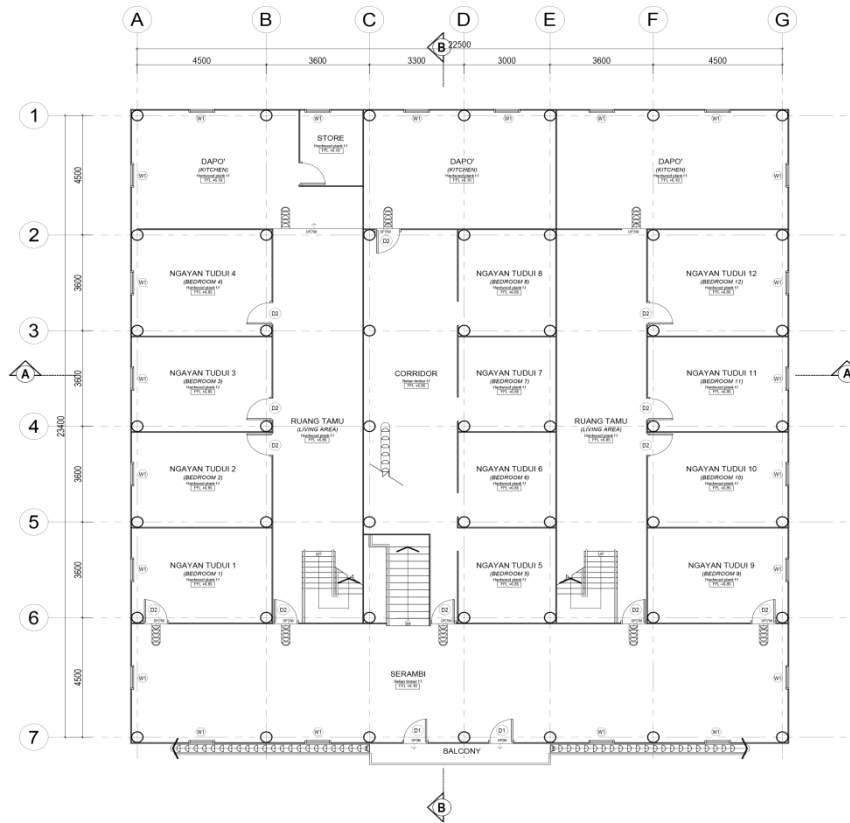


Figure 9. The Melanau Tall Longhouse, First Level Floor Plan

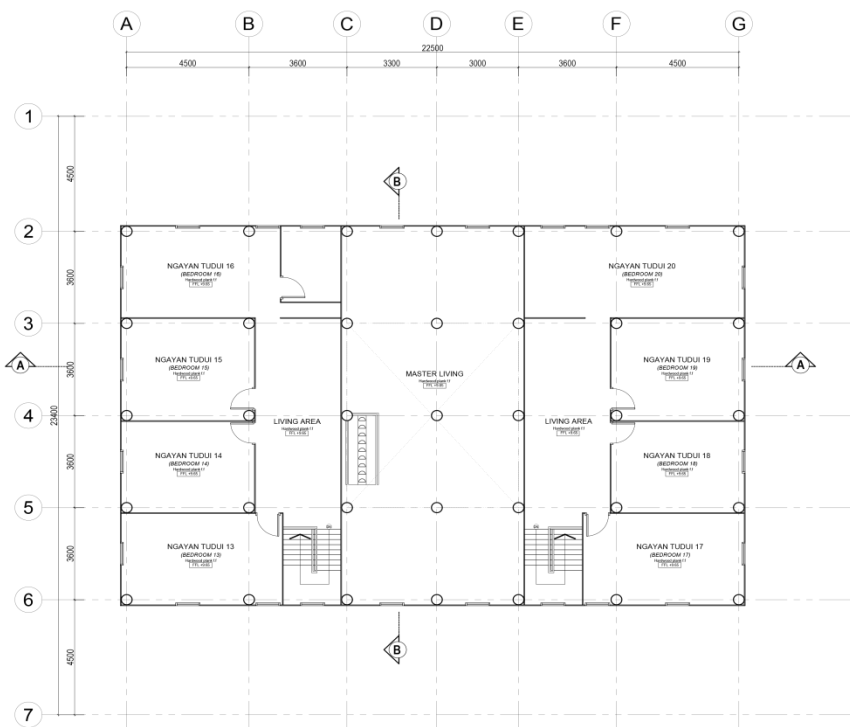


Figure 10. The Melanau Tall Longhouse, Upper Level Floor Plan

For the Melanau, every rung on every staircase in the house must be in odd numbers (figure 11). Similar to *belian* tree trunks for flooring at the *serambi* area, they believe that by having odd numbers of steps, it could bring blessings, good fortunes and benefits to its residents, including wealth and good health. Stairs in even numbers are believed to bring troubles to the occupants, including difficulties in life, by often falling sick and other tragedies.



Figure 11. The Melanau Tall Longhouse main staircase

Conclusion

This paper sets out to investigate the cultural influence that created the unique architectural language of the MTL and understanding their unique longhouse, which differs to other longhouses in Sarawak. Findings suggest that culture plays a role, not only in their daily life but also towards the sustainable architecture of their traditional tall longhouse. It was imperative to consider that culture is a key in affecting the overall design of the MTL. The construction of the tall longhouse was intended to provide security from other tribal attacks and to survive the harsh environment. The spaces were designed according to the architectural functions and cultural requirements. The architectural language of the MTL has been determined by the Melanau cultural attributes influenced by the environment and the people's survivability in these rural and remote surroundings.

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 shelter for this ethnic family. This study demonstrates that the Melanau take culture and natural surroundings into consideration before settling down at the chosen area.

With regards to the dwindling numbers of the MTL in the Melanau districts perimeter, it is safe to say that finance is the main factor contributing to this problem. In ancient times, the Melanau used to stay in tall and elongated houses, but nowadays, they live in Malaysian village styled individual properties. This is due to the vast differences in prices of building the traditional MTL and the current scenario house construction. The price to build and to conserve the traditional MTL was hiked due to the price of timber in the global market, which caused the locals to opt for a different and cheaper type of houses. Besides, modernisation has led to the change of ways of living, and they now prefer to stay in individual houses rather than the traditional tall communal longhouses.

Acknowledgements

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