

Influence of ‘*Bergendang*’ Culture in the Spaces of Traditional Sarawak Malay House

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Abstract

Bergendang is a uniquely Sarawak Malay traditional entertainment frequently held during social gatherings at home. This paper investigates the spatial use of *bergendang* activity in traditional Malay houses along the Sarawak River in Kuching. The research employed a qualitative case study design approach through field study observation and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed different spatial use of *bergendang* for the early and later models of Sarawak Malay houses, which is associated with house owners' social status. Spatial studies on traditional Malay houses in other parts of Sarawak are recommended for constructing northern Borneo's vernacular Malay house framework.

Keywords: Malay Borneo; Spatial use; Traditional entertainment; Vernacular architecture

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1.0 Introduction

The Federation of Malaysia is divided into two regions: the Malay Peninsula in the west and Sarawak and Sabah in the east- on Borneo Island. The Malay is the ethnic majority of the country, living among other ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Indians, and various other indigenous people. Sarawak, located in northwest Borneo, comprises a heterogeneous population with 27 ethnic groups living under its umbrella. The Malays encompassed 25% of the state population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020), making them the second largest ethnic group in Sarawak after the Dayak.

A common misconception, and often the main reason for the neglect of Sarawak Malay studies, is that Malays in Malaysia are 'the same everywhere' (Abang Yusuf Puteh, 2005). Collins (2002) posits that '*Bureaucratism, orientalism and exoticism made the study of the Malay language and culture a low priority in the hierarchy of colonial endeavours*'. He further stressed that the population of Borneo, as understood by nineteenth-century British and Dutch colonial officials, were either Malays or non-Malays. The non-Malay groups of Borneo were considered more 'exotic' and thus worth further investigation. Their earlier encounters with the Malay race throughout the archipelago, on the other hand, made the study of this ethnicity less fruitful. It is therefore not surprising that the architectural research of the Sarawak Malays still receives little attention even in present times.

The discourse of Malay architecture in Malaysia, particularly on the traditional Malay houses, often excludes that of the Sarawak Malay. Variations of architectural style in the Malay Peninsula, based on roof form and the number of columns (Kassim et al., 2017), represent the unique identity of the Malay sub-ethnic in each region. However, the identity of traditional Sarawak Malay houses remains unclear. According to Rapoport (1969), the form and organization of a house are greatly influenced by socio-cultural aspects, though physical aspects- which he considered as secondary or modifying forces- also play a part. Although similarly professing to the religion of Islam, differences in historical origin, social relations with other indigenous ethnic, and colonial influences could have altered the sociocultural values of the Malay in Sarawak. Therefore, it is unlikely that Sarawak Malay houses share similar architectural styles with their western counterpart. There must be a key to distinguish Sarawak Malay from other Malay sub-ethnic, and it is deduced that socio-culture could be the primary component.

This research employs a qualitative case study design approach through field study observation and semi-structured interviews. The research begins with an archival analysis illuminating a unique and commonly practised Sarawak Malay culture distinct to this Malay sub-ethnic. Every social gathering of the Malay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Sarawak had a recurring activity called '*bergendang*', a traditional musical performance conducted at home. Much has been written about the uniqueness of *bergendang* to the Sarawak Malays, but only about the entertainment itself rather than the place or space where the performance occurs. Hence, since *bergendang* is considered a domestic practice embedded into the traditional Sarawak Malay lifestyle, how the spaces in the home accommodate this should be explored.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the use of space during *bergendang* in the houses of traditional Sarawak Malay society before the 1960s. Rapoport's 'dismantling of culture' theory formed the basis for examining how the form of traditional Sarawak Malay houses could be distinguished from their western counterparts by using culture as a mechanism between environment and behaviour. The research questions whether *bergendang* activity could be one of the reasons for the diversity in house form, especially on the roof height variation, which is a striking attribute of traditional Sarawak Malay houses.

The findings reveal peculiar spatial attributes inside selected house samples that accommodate the need for *bergendang* spatial use. Separating the male and female guests in such social gatherings is imperative for the traditional Sarawak Malay society, even though *bergendang* itself is an avenue for the male-female distant encounter. The research focuses on the traditional houses of the Malay community living along the Sarawak River settlement in Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Importance of culture in Environment-Behaviour Studies (EBS)

There are three fundamental questions in EBS, according to Rapoport (2005). The first is, what human attributes influence the characteristics of the built environment? Secondly, the question of how the environment affects groups of people in a specified context. Lastly, what mechanisms link the two-way interaction between people and the environment? These three questions are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

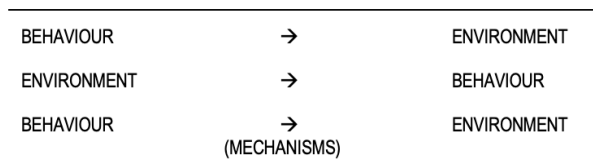


Figure 1: The three basic questions of EBS.
(Source: Rapoport, 2005)

Based on the above figure, the knowledge of how people and environments interact is fundamental, particularly in design and architecture. Rapoport (Ibid.) further noted that there is distinct variability in the formation of space in his studies of numerous vernacular dwellings of indigenous groups. He queried, "Why should there be such an extraordinary variety of built environments, especially houses and dwellings, and settlement forms?". Othman et al. (2015) suggested an emphasis on a macro-level factor which makes up a home, which is the role of cultural traditions in influencing spatial usage and domestic activities.

2.2 House as a subject of Investigation

The house is the most common and culturally impacted vernacular product in traditional societies. The variability in house form is remarkable, as seen in the Malay Peninsula, where many variations of Malay houses exist, even though they were all sourced from one ethnic group. The house is not only a status symbol but a cultural assertion of a society. Hillier & Hanson (1984) posit that an obvious reflection of culture and a measure of society diversities can be found in the way the space (of a dwelling) is organized. This is further supported by Lucas (2020), who argues that it is in the home that our identities are manifested and constructed, while cultural standards shape our lifestyles. What cultural aspect in society could have caused a variety of ways of doing things? This question invites the 'dismantling of culture' theory proposed by Rapoport (Ibid.), which dissects the abstractness of culture into observable forms.

As mentioned above, the 'way of doing things' suggests that activity may be the most conspicuous aspect of culture as it expresses lifestyle. As activity is often associated with other activities, they form an activity system when conducted in a particular space or setting. Collectively, they are imbued with meaning which is the most latent aspect of the activity. An extract of the culture-dismantling theory formed the conceptual framework for this paper, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. *Bergendang* and its associated activities will be examined as the activity system and the unit of analysis when comparing different houses' spatial organization.

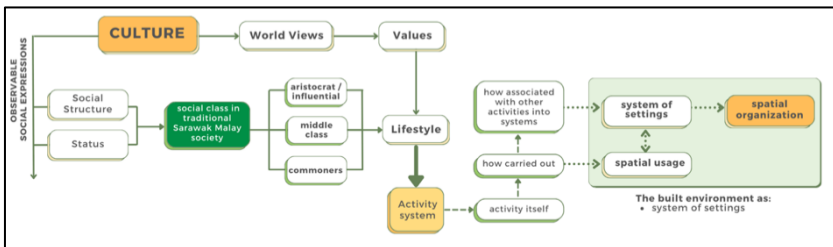


Figure 2: Conceptual framework on dismantling culture based on Rapoport (2005).

(Source: Author)

2.3 A brief review of traditional Sarawak Malay houses along the Sarawak River

The Malay house in Sarawak conforms to the principles of Malay houses established elsewhere in Southeast Asia. It follows the Austronesian architectural tradition- houses were raised on piles, forming a tripartite arrangement reflected in section, with an undercroft for animals, a living platform for humans, and a roof space for spirits (Waterson, 1990).

The earliest form of a Malay house in Sarawak was highlighted by Ong Liang Bin (1983). He identified three distinct architectural styles in the Kuching village: Class A- the rectangular form; Class B- the rectangular-with-appendage style; and Class C- Brooke or colonial-influenced style. Houses of the Class A type appeared to be the early model houses built around the 1860s until the 1920s, while the latter two are the later model

houses built around the 1930s until the 1960s. Yusuf (2015) then discovered that the appendage attached to Ong Liang Bin's Class B type house is locally called the *ruang teko*- a seating area for receiving guests. Figure 3 illustrates the architectural styles based on his findings.

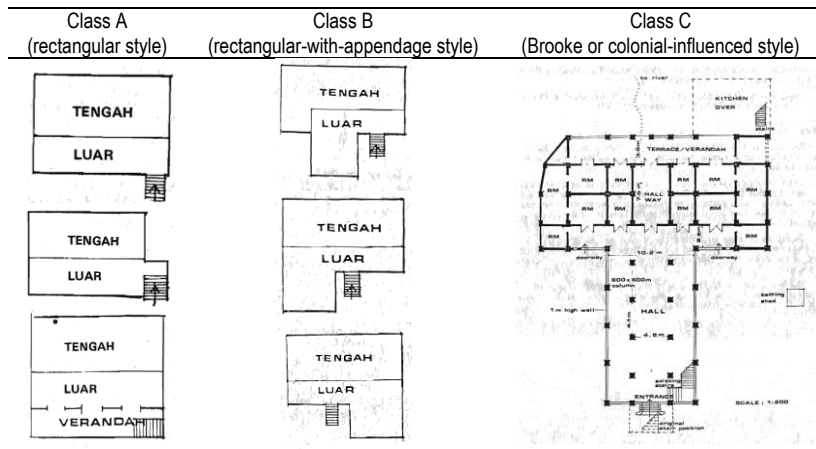


Figure 3: Architectural style of Malay house in Kuching.
(Source: Edric Ong Liang Bin, 1983)

Similar to the traditional dwellings of their western counterpart, the spaces of traditional Sarawak Malay houses are divided into three main areas- the *tengah*, the *luar* and the *dapor* (or *telok*). They are long rectangular spaces composed together, creating an almost square-form plan. *Luar* is a semi-open area with ample windows for ventilation, similar to the appearance and function of the *serambi* in Malay Peninsula's houses as the space to receive and entertain male guests. The *tengah* is the main house, synonymous with the *rumah ibu*. It functions as a multi-purpose area during the day and a sleeping space at night (Ong Liang Bin, 1983). The kitchen at the back of the house is called the *dapor*, connected to the *tengah* with a passageway or *rumah jalan* (Siti Delima, 2022). Unlike the Malay dwellings in the Peninsula, most of the *dapor* of Sarawak Malay houses along the Sarawak River were also built on stilts, like the rest of the *tengah* and *luar*. Some houses feature a verandah of varying sizes with lean-to roofs.

2.4 Bergendang party; an avenue for male and female encounter

The field of sociology describes traditional society as '*...a society characterized by an orientation to the past, not the future, with a predominant role for custom and habit*' (Langlois, 2001). Among the traditional Sarawak Malay society in the early twentieth century, socializing freely between girls and boys unrelated by blood was restricted. Meeting the opposite sex in public or private was impossible unless a family member was present as a chaperone (Daud, 1999). Therefore, the only chance for an encounter was

during sociocultural gatherings conducted at the houses of relatives, neighbours or acquaintances in the villages.

Abang Yusuf Puteh (2005) wrote in his book, '*The girls had no chance for socializing in the community, completely shut off from the boys, though they had the opportunity of looking at the boys from little chinks in their houses*'. This statement denotes the house as the place for a distant rendezvous between unmarried girls and boys- a clue for how a Sarawak Malay house permits this affair.

2.5 Bergendang, bermukun and bertandak; a domestic communal entertainment

Bergendang comes from the word "*gendang*", a musical instrument made from hardwood such as *merbau*, *meranti*, *belian* and *merdang* (Hassan, 2012, p. 132). *Gendang*, in the form of entertainment, is a performance frequently carried out to enliven the atmosphere of social events, formal or informal. The Sarawak Malay *gendang* is said to be originated from Sambas, Indonesia (Hassan, 2012), where it was brought by Islam clerics, merchants, and courtiers, along with other artistic activities such as the *hadrah*, *ratib zikir* and *al-burdah* (Kechot et al., 2017). There is still debate on how and when *bergendang* debuted in the Sarawak Malay entertainment scene. Regardless, it has been embedded into the lives of the traditional Malay society so firmly that whenever there is a social gathering, *bergendang* is a must (Hassan, 2012).

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a *bergendang* party as the most awaited event for the younger generation to gather and meet each other from afar (Daud, 1999; Abang Yusuf Puteh, 2008; Kechot et al., 2017). Apart from weddings, *bergendang* is also popular during *majlis khatam al-Quran* (a celebration of completing the recitation of the Quran), *cukur rambut* ceremony (a celebration for a newborn), and even during *majlis berkhatan* (a circumcision ceremony symbolizing the transition to manhood). Usually, the performance starts after the evening prayer and lasts till the break of dawn (Abdul Wahid, 2014). This musical performance uplifts the house's ambience while attracting neighbours and relatives to come and assist with the event preparation. However, according to Razali Haji Yu (2010), it is also an act of appreciation for those who offered their help in making the event a success. Interestingly, anyone could come to a *bergendang* party regardless of whether you were related to the host.

Bergendang would only be complete with its two essential elements; the *bermukun* and *bertandak*. The *seh gendang*, an experienced female drummer, beats the *gendang* while spontaneously creating and singing the *pantun*- a Malay verse poem. Usually, two *seh gendang* are seated inside a makeshift partition made of thin sheer cloth or *kain batik*, called the *tabir*. The first *tabir* covers the floor until the eye level of the *seh gendang*, while another piece covers above the eye level to the top (refer to Figure 7), leaving only 1 to 2 inches of space for the eyes to see (Ali, 1994).

Inside this partition are the maidens or *orang dara*, who sit at the back of *seh gendang*. From here, the *seh gendang* beat the drums while exchanging *pantun* with the male dancers or *penandak*, who dance (*bertandak*) to the beat of the *gendang* fronting the makeshift partition. This *pantun* exchange, called *bermukun*, is a communication medium

between the male *penandak* and the maidens, with *seh gendang* as the messenger (Razali Haji Yu, 2010). The *penandak* initiates the dance while singing a *pantun* containing a message to the maiden, while *seh gendang* delivers the maiden's response also in a *pantun* form. This two-way communication portrays how boys and girls get to know each other in an honourable manner, something that Malay families strongly uphold.

3.0 Methodology

The research was conducted in three groups of villages or *kampung* along the Sarawak River near the present-day Kuching Waterfront. The three groups of villages were named Zone 1- Kampung Seberang Hilir, Zone 2- Kampung Seberang Hulu, and Zone 3- Kampung Datu. The first two villages are located on the river's north bank, while the third is on the south. The research employed a qualitative case study design approach, where the data collection method involves fieldwork observation and semi-structured interviews.

3.1 Archival Research

Reviews of journal articles, conference papers, unpublished theses, government documents and webpages were conducted to acquire what constitutes the architectural style of a traditional Sarawak Malay house. Research conducted by Ong Liang Bin (1983), Walker (2010), Yusuf (2015), and Ting (2018) also provided secondary data with house photographs, background information and floor plans that are very useful for analysis, especially on the houses that no longer exist. The literature analysis establishes the study's limitations where the selection criteria of house samples and an observation form were prepared for fieldwork. The sample selection criteria established are as follows:

- (1) the minimum age of the house should be 60 years old or older
- (2) the façade and the main house (*tengah*) have not been modified
- (3) the first house owner is a Malay

Apart from the insights into the way of life before the 1960s, the newspaper clippings from the Sarawak Gazette also illuminate how prominent the culture of *bergendang* was among the traditional Kuching Malay society. Interview questions for the research's verbal data collection were constructed based on this literature.

3.2 Fieldwork

The following research phase involves acquiring primary data by observation and structured interviews through a series of fieldwork. Figure 4 depicts the location of the three zones where the fieldwork was undertaken. The data on house samples were collected using photography, video and voice recording, observation form and hand-drawn sketches. The form detailed the physical information of the house, such as spatial layout, side and front views, the orientation of the house, and modification history, to name a few. This tool provided a summary of key attributes of the house, such as the placement of doors, windows, and staircases; the house's location within its context and the ornamental details.

Meanwhile, brief history and background of the houses were obtained from structured interviews based on the checklist on the observation form.

From the observation, houses that fulfil the sample criteria were recorded. From 65 samples, three (3) houses from Class A (rectangular-form style) and another three (3) from Class B (rectangular-with-appendage style) were selected as case studies. The selected houses were then measured using digital measuring tools, while house occupants that fit the respondent selection criteria were interviewed.

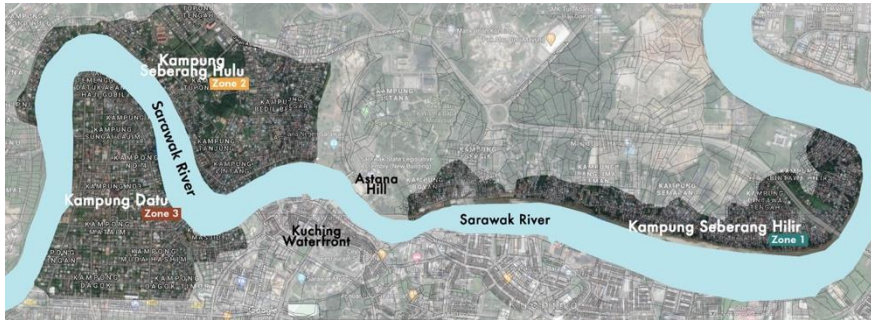


Figure 4 Map showing the location of the three groups of villages along the Sarawak River.
(Source: Author)

3.3 Verbal Data

For the case studies, a few house occupants' selection criteria were pre-determined before the interview. As the houses chosen were mostly 60 years and older, the respondents must also be at least 60 years old, and he or she must have experienced living in the house for at least 25 years. This is to allow for higher data validity, where their own experiences or the oral history of the house as told by their parents or older relatives can also be taken as data to construct a narrative of how the spaces in the house were used during *bergendang*. Two semi-structured interview sessions were conducted to ensure the reliability and correlation of verbal data between the first and second interview sessions. The study's credibility was heightened when verbal data during the interview were triangulated with the archival research and fieldwork observation in the previous phases.

3.4 Digital Reconstruction

Data collected during fieldwork in the observation form and measured drawings were utilized for digital reconstruction. The recorded measurement of the houses, in the form of floor plans and elevations, were redrawn into scaled drawings using AutoCAD software for comparison and analysis. Based on these drawings, three-dimensional (3D) models were produced using a 3D-modelling software, Sketchup, to demonstrate the spatial relationship more vividly.

3.5 Data Analysis




Verbal data obtained during the semi-structured interview sessions were transcribed manually as the language spoken during the interview was in Sarawak Malay. First, the researcher uploaded the voice recording in .mp4 format into a Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Atlas.ti. Next, only relevant parts of the conversation related to the interview questions were transcribed from Sarawak Malay to Malay. Finally, significant sections of the Malay language transcripts were translated into English and coded. The codes were tabulated into themes to identify any significant pattern indicating evidence of *bergendang* within the spatial configuration of the houses.

4.0 Findings

The research has yielded unexpected findings concerning *bergendang*, social structure, and spatial configuration within the house of Sarawak Malays (further discussed in Section **Error! Reference source not found.**). Out of the three zones, 60 houses were documented in the observation form. However, only 30 sample houses were further examined as the other half has undergone significant modification, particularly on the interior. The research only emphasized the main house onward and disregarded the *dapor* part due to significant modification of this rear section in most sample houses.

Challenges in selecting respondents were evident as not all house occupants were willing to be interviewed, especially those over 70 years old. Some houses shortlisted for case studies no longer have occupants of 50 years or older, while those available had minimal memory of how *bergendang* was conducted at the house. These limitations led to selecting of only three houses from each Class A and B for discussion of *bergendang* relationship with the spatial organization. Floor plans of sample houses were arranged into architectural style classifications using Ong Liang Bin's (1983) typology Table 1 below:

Table 1 Floor plans comparison between Class A and B.

Zone	Zone 3	Zone 3	Zone 2
Typology	Class A, Type 6 (A6)	Class A, Type 6 (A6)	Class A, Type 7 (A7)
Year of Built	1919	Around 1890	1889
Occupation of House Owner	Influential police officer guarding the fort (with the rank of Major)	Officer at Government Printing Office	Religious teacher (Tok Guru)
Photograph of Sample House	 House No. 1	 House No. 1	 House No. 3 (Source: Norliah Hji Arshad, 2022)

<p>Floor Plan of Class A Type</p>			
<p>Floor Plan of Class B Type</p>			
<p>Photograph of Sample House</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">House No. 4</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">House No. 2</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">House No. 3</p>
<p>Occupation of House Owner</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Forest Ranger</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Police officer</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Police officer</p>
<p>Year of Built</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1929</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1942</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1962</p>
<p>Typology</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Class B, Type 3 (B3)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Class B, Type 3 (B3)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Class B, Type 3 (B3)</p>
<p>Zone</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Zone 3</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Zone 1</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Zone 3</p>

(Source: Author)

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Distinctive feature concerning spatial use of *bergendang*

The verbal data obtained from occupants of Class A type houses highlights predominant features of the early model houses concerning *bergendang*. The floor plans of House No. 1, 2 and 3 in Table 1 indicate a 'passage to attic', a narrow step to the attic space above. Called *padong* in Sarawak Malay, this space is unexpectedly large, covering the length and width of the *tengah* and *luar* below. The floor-to-ceiling height of *padong* is equivalent to that of a common living area, ranging from 9 to 11 feet.

It is also uncovered that all three Class A houses have occupiable *padong*, which was used as sleeping space for the maidens in the household (Haji Abu Bakar Sebli, 2022; Haji Kiprawi Sahari, 2023; Hajah Norliah Arshad, 2023). These data supported Ong Liang Bin's finding on the multipurpose nature of *padong* in the household of Sarawak Malay aristocratic and influential families.



Figure 5 View of the 'passage to attic' and the void on the *padong* floor as seen from the *tengah* of House No. 1.

(Source: Author with permission by Haji Kiprawi Sahari, 2023)

Interestingly, further interview data reveals that the *padong* was also utilized as a living space, dedicated as a sitting chamber for the maidens during the *bergendang* (Haji Kiprawi Sahari, 2023; Haji Abu Bakar Sebli, 2023). Detailed inspection of House No. 1 and 2 uncovers that both houses possess a "peeping gallery" (Ong Liang Bin, 1983). Architectural features of this peeping gallery, such as the atrium enclosed by carved balustrades on the *padong* floor, permit the maidens to look down to the *tengah* space below where *bergendang* was conducted. The size and shape of the peeping gallery vary from house to house. This unique feature perhaps is developed from the 'peeping window' from an older version of the rectangular form house, which was built much earlier in 1860. The function is the same regardless- it is a visual link, a medium for exchanging romantic glances between unmarried girls and the male *penandak* during *bergendang*.

However, the same feature, but of House No. 3 differs from the former two by design. Instead of an atrium with a balustrade, the feature on the *padong* floor of House No. 3 is merely a screen made of carved timber with tiny openings. This is probably because the original house owner was an influential religious teacher not keen on *bergendang* activity (Hajah Norliah Arshad, 2022); therefore, the peeping screen was not as elaborate as the peeping galleries. Instead, this screen was likely to be used occasionally by the maidens to peek at the activities happening at the *tengah* below. The peeping galleries and peeping screen are illustrated in Figure 6.

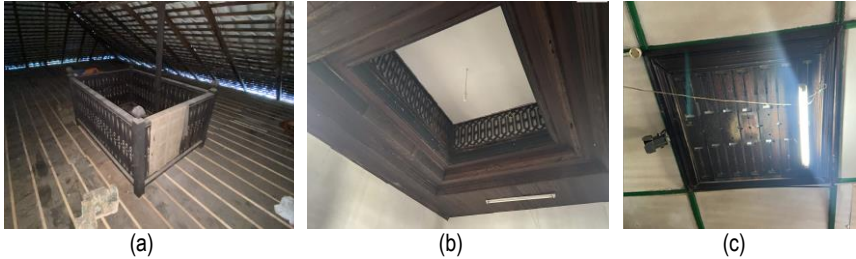


Figure 6: Variation of peeping gallery and screen (a) the peeping gallery of House No. 1 viewed from the *padong*. (b) the peeping gallery of House No. 2, viewed from *tengah*, now has been sealed. (c) the peeping screen of House No. 3 viewed from *tengah*.

(Source: Author)

As for House No. 4, 5 and 6, the function of *padong* as a sitting area during *bergendang* was never mentioned. According to the occupants, the *padong* was solely used as storage space. Examination of spatial layout during the fieldwork supports this verbal data, where no indication of a passageway to the attic was observed in any of the three houses (refer Table 1). As these houses were built much later, the social system in the traditional setting where the maidens needed to be separated was no longer followed. This is one possible reason for the discontinued use of *padong* as a sitting chamber and the disappearance of the peeping gallery and screen in Class B houses.

5.2 Gender segregation of space during *bergendang*

According to the occupants of Class A houses, although *bergendang* is a social event, limitations on mixing boys and girls were still being implemented. A Malay Muslim's *adab*, or orderly manner, was given the utmost importance in traditional Malay society's values. This can be seen in how *bergendang* was conducted and the way the seating for guests was segregated by gender. Abdul Wahid (2014) mentioned that the position of female *sehgendang* and male *penandak* was separated by the *tabir*, and there was no mixing of gender in both divisions- a clear sign of modesty.

This literature was supported by the data obtained, where early model house occupants denote specific spaces for male and female guests, maidens and the *penandak*. Figure 7 below illustrates the researcher's reconstruction of spatial usage in House No. 1 based on the interview. House occupants revealed that when *bergendang* was conducted in the *tengah*, the maidens, especially those who intended to seek a husband, sat behind the *sehgendang* behind the *tabir* (Daud, 1999). The seating for maidens is specified at the *padong*, while other female guests gathered at the *dapor* to cook and prepare for the feast or

kenduri. Meanwhile, the boys who would like to *bertandak* would gather at the *luar*, while the other male guests at the compound of the house (Haji Kiprawi Sahari, 2022).

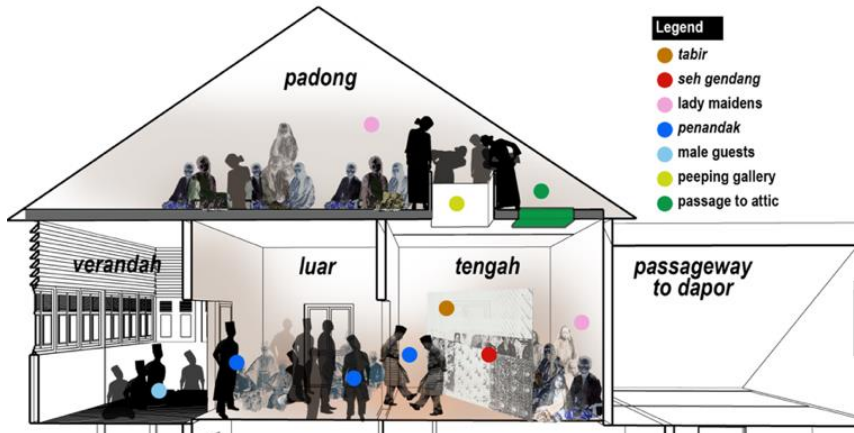


Figure 7: Section cut through the peeping gallery of House No. 4, showing an example of spatial usage of a *bergendang* party.
(Source: Author)

How *bergendang* was conducted aligns with the Islamic privacy concept in spatial segregation of gender and public-private (Razali & Talib, 2013). Additionally, the house's gender-segregated spaces manifest how the Malay interpret their sociocultural norms, which were further accommodated by the house's spatial configuration (Al-Mohannadi et al., 2023). Figure 7 further proves that the *padong* and peeping gallery both play an essential role in protecting the maidens from view while providing them with 'the view'. Heightened visual privacy and ensuring modesty while still providing hospitality are three principles particularly evident in the traditional house of Sarawak Malay, parallel to the main components of a traditional Muslim home model as outlined by (Othman et al., 2015).

5.3 Changes of social relation reflected in spatial organization

Around the 1930s, this early tradition of *bergendang* or commonly known as *Gendang Melayu lama* ended. Along with the development of *wayang gambar* (cinema) and *kugiran* (musical band), a new form of *gendang* was detected. In this *Gendang Melayu baru*, the function is more for socializing, where female dancers could join the *bertandak*. The cloth partition, from allowing only 1 to 2 inches of opening, has been increased to about a *hasta* or 18 inches (Ali, 1994). Changes in *bergendang* resulted from the social relationship progression in Sarawak Malay society, which has become more open and less restricted. Foreign influence brought by colonial officials is one of the possible causes. This

transformation could also be observed in the ordering of spaces of the houses built around the 1930s until the 1960s, which were House No. 4, 5 and 6.

Compared to Class A, Class B houses have their *bergendang* activity held at *ruang teko*, the appendage attached to the frontal part of *tengah*. However, according to Hajah Latipah Bojeng (2023), the house host needed to ensure that the structure of the *ruang teko* was strong enough to withstand the intensity of the *penandak* dances. Therefore, *bergendang* at her house (House No. 4) took place at the undercroft to be safe. As restrictions on mixing girls and boys during this period were lighter, the boundaries of gender segregation in the domestic space had also become increasingly blurred.

5.4 House form and roof height

Above mentioned findings explained a possible reason behind the variation in roof height among the houses in these three zones. Only the houses belonging to the upper class in the stratified traditional Sarawak Malay society have exaggeratedly high-hipped roofs in which underneath is an occupiable *padong* (House No. 1, 2 and 3). The roof height is further elevated when a peeping gallery exists at the *padong* (House No. 1 and 2). It is reasonable to say that the early model houses needed a much higher space to accommodate the peeping gallery's field of view. If the floor-to-ceiling height were lower, the visual of the *bergendang* spectators on the *padong* would be limited.

The changing function of *padong* in the Class B houses displays stark differences in roof height, as illustrated by Figure 8. In essence, the exaggeration of roof pitch in some traditional Sarawak Malay houses is more than just a response to Kuching's hot and humid climate, or a portrayal of Malay architectural tradition, as earlier described by Walker (2010).

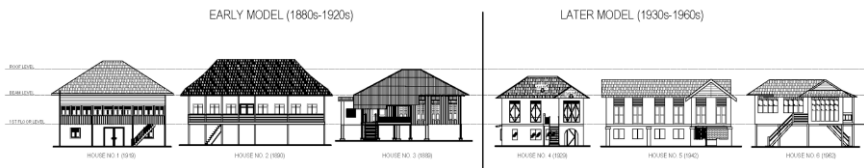


Figure 8 Comparison of Class A (early model) and Class B (later model) houses, showing differences in roof height.

(Source: Author)

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, the spatial organization of traditional Sarawak Malay houses depicts a direct relationship with the sociocultural influences of *bergendang*. The monumental form of Sarawak Malay early model houses, enhanced by the exaggeratedly high-hipped roof, could be owing to the need for *bergendang*'s spatial use. Although *bergendang* is not to be said as the sole reason behind the unique features of the peeping gallery and occupiable *padong*, it is unlikely that these features were used for other purposes. It is also possible

that the height of the roof symbolically represents the social status of Sarawak Malay's high-ranking society in the early twentieth century.

Bergendang continues to evolve in tandem with the development of social relations in Sarawak Malay society. Spatial layout transformation from Class A houses to Class B demonstrates house occupants' changing needs and lifestyle- from a life with limited communication between the opposite gender to one that is not as restricted. However, along with this transformation, the distinctive identity of traditional Sarawak Malay houses has simultaneously and gradually dissolved. The exaggerated high-hipped roof is no longer a prominent feature in the panorama of traditional villages along the Sarawak River since the peeping gallery is superfluous in contemporary settings. Today, *bergendang* is still being conducted by wedding hosts and government agencies for cultural and tourism events. *Bergendang* party at home, however, is now considered rare, and unfortunately, its significance too is lessened compared to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Bergendang and traditional houses are two fundamental cultural heritage of Sarawak needed to be safeguarded urgently before they permanently disappear. Therefore, further research on the influences of sociocultural factors on the architectural space of traditional Malay houses in Sarawak riverine settlements is highly recommended to establish a framework for vernacular Malay houses of the northern Borneo region.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Investigation of Sarawak Malay house spatial organization is uncommon in the northern Borneo region's vernacular architecture field. This paper is the first of its kind that attempts to link a sociocultural activity in Sarawak Malay culture to the spaces in the traditional house. It not only provides a piece of new knowledge to this field but also fills in the severe gap in Malaysia's Malay architectural studies.

Authors Declaration

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- 3) Haji Abu Bakar bin Haji Sebli, 10th October 2022, Kampung Nombor 6, 93400 Kuching, Sarawak
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