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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MALAY GARDENS FROM THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: EXPLORING THE THEORY AND DESIGN CONCEPT

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Abstract

The early Malay gardens can be traced from within the Malay World (Alam Melayu) or within the Malay Archipelago (Melayu Nusantara). It started from the grounds of the Malay Sultanates as the rulers have the means and might to create a place for their pleasure and leisure. Later on the gardens were initiated by the aristocrats and the common people as time progressed. Several descriptions of the Malay gardens were found from the books such as *Bustanul Salatin* (The Sultan Gardens), *The Malay Annals* and the description of the palace grounds such as *Tanah Serendah Sekebun Bunga*, *Kebun Menseta*, *Forbidden Garden* (*Taman Larangan*). These gardens were adorned with local plant species either from existing growth or planted to meet the needs of the owners. The plants species were utilised for their functions as herbal and medicinal values, food consumption, culinary delights, naming of children after the flowers and as a separation of boundary lines. Many of these plants species within the Malay gardens were selected and planted based upon their owners' needs or from the knowledge from sources such as Koran and medicinal healers. These gardens were based from the concept of outdoor living in harmony with God's creation that utilised local biodiversity. Apart from plants species many facilities and utilities such as *para* (trellis) *wakaf* (gazebos), pots and jars, fishing gears and mats were part of elements of these early gardens especially around the common people compounds. However, due to the passing of time many of these gardens and their characteristics have been lost due to neglect and abandonment.

Keywords: Malay Garden, Malay World, History, Design concept

Introduction

The Malay garden is a cultural phenomenon around the Malay archipelago of Malaysia, Southern Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. The early Malay gardens can be traced from within the Malay World (Alam Melayu) or within the Malay Archipelago (Melayu Nusantara). It started from the grounds of the Malay Sultanates as the rulers have the means and might to create a place for their pleasure and leisure. Plants in the Malay gardens have been the pivotal element in their daily needs and lives in the form of food, medicines and shelters. This paper intends to trace the development of the Malay gardens from the early days of the Malay Sultanate during the 12th up to the eighteenth century. It will focus on the historical aspect, the theoretical aspects of the existence of the Malay gardens, the significance of some parts of the plant species in the aspects of the Malay community. Where were the first Malay gardens found? What are the factors determining the concept of the Malay gardens? The following are the objectives of this paper:

- To describe the existence of early Malay gardens.
- To explain the concept of Malay gardens.
- To identify the selection of plant species used in a Malay community, their purposes and functions.

There weren't many physical evidence of the Malay gardens to reconstruct the historic actuality in visible form. Unlike the architecture of buildings, the Malay gardens do not last due to conquest, neglect, lack of maintenance and changes in the land use (Nik Ismail Azlan, 2001).

2. Literature review

Archival data did not unearth any concrete evidence to show the contents of the Malay gardens. Most of the narratives were passed from one generation to the next through local folklores, epics or hikayat, pantuns and sayir.

The gardens were referred to a series of knowledge, traditions and taboos about the plants and trees that have been passed down through many generations in oral, written and symbolic forms. Stories of princes and princesses, kings and queens, and the living in palaces filled with beautiful gardens have long filled the imaginations of ethnic Malays. The fact that numerous royal courts existed and still exist in Southeast Asia supplied the basis of the early Malay gardens. Wijaya (2003), contemplated that gardens usually compliments the architecture of the day and this were reflected in the dwellings of many rulers surrounded by their private gardens for pleasure and leisure. The origins of the Malay gardens can be traced to the early kingdoms in Sumatra at Sungai Melayu and Jambi in which the settlements were planted with coconut palms (*cocos nucifera*) arecha catechu or pinang palm (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah, 1992). This is natural as the early settlements were located near the rivers as the interiors were difficult to be inhabited. Naturally the plant varieties were of the coastal species such as coconuts and betel nuts. Jambi meant pinang in Minangkabau language. The Malays there used these palm trees for food, building materials and as part of the spaces for gatherings. According to legends a number of Malay princesses were named after parts of the betel palms such as Puteri Mayang Mengurai, Puteri Selara Pinang Masak, Puteri Mayang Sari etc. (Nik Ismail Azlan, (2009).

3. Methodology

The methodology based for this research is conducted by analyzing data from written documents and observations. As mentioned earlier the written documents were retrieved from narratives, story- telling, folklore and messages through syair pantuns, gurindam. Many of the pantuns used several plants species found within the house compound, at the forest fringe or along the boundary lines around the Malay settlements. Some examples of the description in the pantuns are:

Sirih junjung sirih pinang
Sirih kami susun bertingkat
Adat dijunjung pusaka dikenang
Bangsa berbudi hidup muafakat

Sirih gagang tumbuh di batu,
Buluh hutan buatkan galah;
Kasih sayang tak boleh tentu,
Jodoh pertemuan di tangan Allah.

Cuba-cuba menanam sirih,
Cekor ada tumbuh sendiri;
Cuba-cuba bertambat kasih,
Kok-kok ada tunjukkan diri.

A number of narrations of the Malay gardens were found in the description of Bustanul Salatin (The Sultans Gardens), Tanah Serendah Sekebun Bunga, Kebun Menseta and Taman Larangan (Forbidden garden). All these written and narrations reflected the significance of the garden in the Malay society among the aristocrats and commoners. In Bustanul Salatin written by Syekh Nurrudin Al Raniri (1640) described the beauty of Taman Ghairah (garden of Passion) in Aceh daru salam during the Sultanate of Iskandar Thani Allaudin. In this garden all types of tropical plants, scented flowers, fruits and palm trees were in abundant. The scenery described a paradise garden with two clear rivers flowing along the length of the garden. Kebun Menseta was a palace compound in Nilam Puri near Kota Bharu where the common fruit trees were menseta which is Manggis in standard Malay. Also in Kelantan, according to Wan Ali Wan Nuh and Haji Nik Mahmud Haji Wan Ahmad (1934) the story of the female ruler of Kelantan in 1600's mentioned about her kingdom Tanah Serendah Sekebun Bunga Cherang Tegayong where a garden consisting of colourful flowers was set aside for her and her close confidants to enjoy, rest and recreate. Munshi Abdullah, in his book "Hikayat Pelayaran Abdullah" in 1880 mentioned Malay villages in Kelantan and Terengganu. These villages were planted with coconut trees and betel palms. The other plants were petai, jering, kerdas and other vegetable delicacies picked from the forest fringes and sold in the open market.

The basic design consideration is based on the safety purposes, privacy of the space and protocol concern of the royal family (Nooriszai, 2012). The palace garden was used as a place for the royal family members to have their leisure activities and normally the male members will use the garden as a place for hunting and archery practice,

while the female members used the garden for private recreational activities. Hence the name Taman Larangan or Forbidden Garden where only the royal family and their entourage were allowed in the gardens.

Today the importance of garden and landscape nowadays is not only to be considered as a satisfaction but its function has spread as one of the basic needs in human daily life. These gardens were adorned with local plant species either from existing growth or planted to meet the needs of the owners. In Malay culture, landscape plays as a very important function to external and internal life of the abode in order to meet the psychological beauty of the abode itself, as a food resource, medicine and climate modification elements that forms from the harmonious combination between natural environment and physical environment (Nooriszai, 2012).

4. The Malay garden theory

Generally, the Malay garden is a naturalistic form of design expression or nature-influenced style of garden. The naturalistic design arrangements of the garden tend to be locally appropriate and sustainable. The garden theory supports the notion of the harmonious relationship between the Malay and his surrounding environment. This respect for the environment serves two purposes. It emphasizes humans' awareness of the God's creation in its natural state. The other is the observation of the manifestation the Creator of the natural gifts to mankind. The gift of God in the form of natural world would fulfill the needs of the Malays in the form of basic physical, health and spiritual needs.

The basic physical need for the gardens is in the form of food for survival. Hence in the Malay garden several species of edible plants can be found to be planted for their kitchen and culinary delights. Fruit trees were planted to provide the consumption for members of the family and neighbours. The health needs is met by having medicinal plants in the house compound in the event of individuals or family falling sick and needed cure through the use of God's ailments in the form of plants. Being Muslims, the Koran provide a number of verses that alluded to the species of plants for medicine. The spiritual needs refer to the need to reduce stress and anxiety.

Previously it was a common Malay tradition for trees to be planted to commemorate a birth in the family. Coconut trees are the most common plants being used for this purpose. The age of the person is associated with the growth of the tree planted. By having plants and flowers in their gardens the owners tend to be relieved as these plants are the manifestation of the paradise described in the Koran. Understanding of Islam as guidance and way of life has somewhat influence the types of plant species planted in the Malay gardens. These plants are selected based on their functions, needs and mystical influences (Izudinshah, 2008). They were planted for their beauty, medicine, culinary delights and medicinal remedies. Many of the vegetation in the Malay garden also consisted of beautiful and colourful flowers as described in the Koran. In fact many of the plants found in Malay gardens were grown for their flowers.

4.1 Flowers in traditional medicine and culinary delights

The Malays have found that some of the flowers can be used as cures for sickness, culinary delight and to ward off bad luck. These "petua" (tips) are being passed from one generation to another. "Bunga Kantan" was used in food ingredients as "awet muda" or to look young. "Bunga Raya" is used as a remedy for poison cures headaches and fever. "Bunga chempaka" can promote urination and leach out heat from the heart and lung. It can be used to reduce heat accumulation in the chest, irritability, restlessness, sensations of tightness in the chest, and insomnia. "Bunga Tanjung" is used to remove bad breath. Boil the stalk and the water is used as gurgles for a clean and fresh breathes. "Bunga teratai" is used to help in easing constipation. These are just a few examples of the usefulness of the flowers in the Malay gardens.

4.2 Edible flowers served in food

Hundreds of fresh flowers are edible and a few are widely marketed in the Malay heritage as part of the food ingredients, seasoning or flavour and to add color to the dishes. "Bunga telang" the blue pea flower, a natural blue colouring for "nasi kerabu" or "nasi ulam" (mixed vegetables rice) and 'kuih tai-tai'. Bunga kantan, the pink torch ginger flower, is a must for asam laksa. "Bunga cengkih" or clove flower, are cooked with rice and gravy during food festivals, wedding ceremony and special events. "Bunga Betik" (papaya flower) is mixed with other vegetables to form delicious gravy.

4.3 Flowers as remedies

Malays believe that flowers can help to reduce tension and remove bad luck. A potpourri of flowers performed this function. “Mandi Bunga” or Floral bath is as part of Malay aromatherapy or body treatment. Mandi bunga is a cultural heritage practiced by the Malays from the early times. Mandi bunga is a bath ritual to induce the flower energy into the body. Apart from releasing the tension, under duress and stress the flower bath can stabilize the body’s energy field. Mandi Bunga is also done for the purposes of getting rid of bad luck (“buang sial”). When one is feeling unwell, they did the “mandi tolak bala” (bath to rid of catastrophe) when one is facing hardship and misfortune. There is also “mandi pengantin” (wedding bath) for new brides and “mandi bertabal” (royal bath) for a new ruler before being installed. The rationale for mandi bunga is that once a person is void of bad luck, he's able to attract good fortune. The bathe is symbolized as part of spiritual cleansing. The ingredients for Mandi Bunga varies, however, the most popular is Kaffir Lime (*limau purut*) or its scientific name, *Citrus hystrix* of the rutaceae family. The fruit is cut and blended with plain water and several pieces of assorted cut flowers. In Malay civilization, flowers play an integral part in their culture. They are not only admired for their physical beauty and fragrance, but feature prominently in the naming of their children. As mentioned previously the Malays in the early days were fascinated with the beauty of the flowers. Hence many of the Malay gardens were being planted with beautiful and colourful flowers. Many parents named their daughters based on the names of flowers found in their gardens or their neighbour’s gardens. These names are related to the flowers and their characteristics. The following are the examples of the female Malay names based after the flowers:

- Melor (*Jasminum species*)
- Melati (*Jasminum sambac*)
- Cempaka (*Michelia champaca*)
- Kenanga (*Canarium odoratum*,
- Telani (telang- *Clitoria ternatea*)
- Kesuma (*Epiphyllum anguliger*)
- Seroja (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn)
- Teratai (*Nymphaea elegans*)
- Kembang (*Eichhornia crassipes*, water hyacinth)
- Tanjung (*Mimusop elengi*)
- Siantan (*Ixora javanica*)
- Dahlia (*Dahlia juarezi*)
- Yasmin/jasmine (*Gardenia jasminoides*)
- Lili (*Iris pseudacorus*)
- Mawar/(rose (*Rosa majalis*)
- Kintan/kantan (*Nicolaia elatior*)
- or simply “bunga” (flower)

There are also female Malay names that were related to the characteristics of the flowers such as Kembang (bloom), Seri (blossom), Kuntum (stalk), Mekar (bloom), Murni (pure), Suci (pure/virgin) and Mawarni (colourful).

5. Plants that are taboo to some Malays

There are some plants that are taboo to some Malays because of the negative perception and connotations of Malay beliefs. These plants won’t be found in the gardens. Bunga Kemboja (Frangipan) or *Plumeria obtusa* were mostly planted in graveyards many years ago and is often called Bunga Kubur or Graveyard Flower. Bunga Dedap (*Erythrina glauca*) is red in colour but does not emit smell. It is very pretty but without the virtuous fragrant. The uglier version is that, it symbolized a woman who is not faithful to her husband. Bunga Sundal Malam (*Polianthes tuberosa*) is a symbol of mistress of the night or prostitute. However all these beliefs and superstitions have almost died away as more of these plants were proposed by landscape architects to be planted in gardens, resorts, and public parks dispelling all the myths and superstitions previously subscribed.

6. Design Concept

The design concepts of the Malay gardens tend to comprise of informal and naturalistic plantings. It is responsive to the physical and climatic factors of the landscape. The tropical climate has had particularly strong effects on the Malay gardens. This leads to an expression illustrating intrinsic understanding and relationship of the Malays towards their regional and localized living environment. The Malay garden concept provides a relaxed and soothing appeal to the soul as it incorporates the flowing lines found in the wild, rather than the hard edges derived from geometry. It has more plantings than the hardscape materials to showcase the look of a natural garden. The lines between formal and natural areas are often blurred by way of graceful transitions. The property boundary is defined by planting compositions rather than fence or wall. Ismail (2001), suggested that the design concept of the Malay garden is based on daily practicality and the design of garden and its features are partially influenced by ethnicity belief and rituals practices. Wijaya (2003) suggested that canopy trees were planted or were not cut down to serve as respite from the blazing sun and for shady spot. Latiff (2009), observed that Malay communities planted medicinal plants as part of their ethno botanical practices within their house compounds. According to him, it appeared that Malays are very aware of their ambient surroundings especially the role plants play in their well beings. Tajul Muluk is an old set of Malay pseudo-science of metaphysical and geomantic principles that guide a person a set of rites and rules who wanted to build a house or constructing buildings in Malay culture. Tajul Muluk also covered a number of other topics including herbal medicine, astrology and dream interpretation along with geomancy. It has somewhat influenced the Malays in choosing the planting materials and their suitable locations.

7. Discussion

Many designers tried to create their own concept of Malay garden design. According to Ismail and Hussein (2005), the landscape surrounding the house reflects the simplicity of the traditional Malay society based on their observation, needs, beliefs and philosophy. Izudinshah (2008) observed that a small wakaf is usually constructed under some shade trees in front of the house as a resting place or socialization among families, neighbours and friends. It also serves as an observation area for the house owner to look at people passing by. The roof of the wakaf is close to the floor area so as to give shade from the hot sun and prevent the rain from entering the sitting area. Since tropical climate largely influenced nature the plant selections were determined by these plants to grow well under the sun and the owners' needs. The plants selections in the traditional Malay house are more to the "household plants species" such as fruit trees, spices and vegetables, ornamental and medicinal plants. The plants compositions within a house compound are normally divided into three different spaces, welcoming spaces (*Laman tiba*), side garden (*Laman sisi*) and also backyard garden (*Laman suri*). These spaces are similar to the terminologies of public spaces, semi public and private spaces.

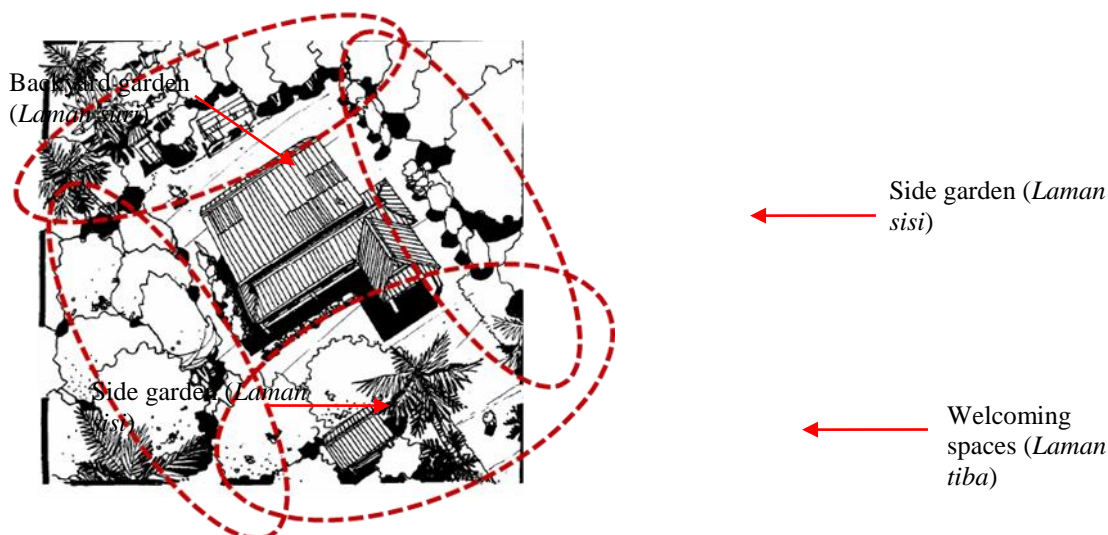


Figure 1: View of a typical Malay village house surrounded by plant species in the compound (Ismail Said, 2001)

The welcoming space or *Laman tiba* was basically formed to create such as welcoming remarks to the guests. Some might say that a typical Malay garden resembles a village with coconut trees around its perimeter with potted bougainvillea lining up in front of a Malay house. The side garden or *Laman sisi* located at both left and right side of Malay house used for feast purposes like wedding ceremony and for family to relax and kids to play around. Normally, in this area big trees were planted in order to give shelter to their surrounding, and added some elements such *wakaf*, where it provides an escape from the burning sun. Lastly, the backyard garden or *Laman sari* normally situated close to the kitchen and possibility act as a space for a kitchen garden. It normally planted with vegetables and herbs like turmeric, lemon grass, piper betel, and *pandanus spp* and all these plants are used for cooking purposes.

CONCLUSION

Malay gardens harness pleasure from God's creation. In respect and awareness of God's creation and greatness the gardens of the Malays are part of the natural ecosystem and inseparable culture. The concept of the Malay garden was based on the interaction between man and God's creation and is an expression of ideas that includes the physically natural characteristic and built environment. The garden development in traditional Malay society therefore is to achieve harmony with the environment and selection of plant species are determined by climatic factors, lifestyle values and spiritual beliefs. The plant species selected are both traditional and practical in choice. Fruit trees are found commonly for food and shades. Coconut palms, betel palms are traditional plants synonym with Malay gardens for their practicalities, utilities and consumption purposes. Gatherings of families and friends for weddings and feasting utilizes the existing plants and vegetation around the house are used together with the materials bought from the market. Historical records proved that the Malays propagate these plants around their houses, and at boundaries between their properties for demarcation purpose. Flowering plants are very popular in the Malay gardens as many of the children's were named after colourful flowers. The sunny and warm tropical climate has made flowering plants in the Malay gardens to flourish well. These gardens therefore form an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Malays for basic physical, social, health and spiritual needs. These gardens are based from the concept of outdoor living in harmony with local climate creation that utilised local biodiversity. The Malay garden is also based on daily practicality and the design of garden and its features are partially influenced by ethnicity belief and ritual practices. However, due to the passing of time many of these gardens and their characteristics have been lost due to neglect and abandonment. Future research directions should continue with identifying the Malay gardens through the ages with respect to the climate, environment, spiritual needs and cultural practice. This is important as very few research findings on Malay garden are being published in identifying the design concept, identity and characteristics. This effort should be an ongoing process to ensure that the Malay garden is given due recognition in comparison with the great gardens of the rest of the world.

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