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# ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY OF KAMPUNG RAJA, BESUT, TERENGGANU

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the search for the architectural identity of Kampung Raja, Besut, Terengganu. The paper is based on a research conducted in Kampung Raja involving site observation, literature review and interview of the residents. Measured drawings and documentations of 3 selected buildings were also executed. The research was focused on the built environment and the communities within the area from the Besut River to the main trunk road in Kampung Raja. This paper is elaborated in three sections. The first section is a discussion on issues relating to the identity of the place by referring to the opinion of the scholars. The second section concerns the historical background on the transformation of the area from a riverside settlement to a royal town and finally an administrative centre that make the place unique. The third section discusses the identity of the place by referring to the architectural styles of both the public and private buildings. On the whole, the findings of the research suggest that most of the new buildings within the area were designed according to the demands of the modern society but seem to be out of place. Some deeper understanding to the local architectural heritage is necessary in order to design new buildings that are sympathetic to the history and identity of the area.

**Keywords:** identity; heritage; Besut

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## 1. Introduction

The paper addresses the search for the architectural identity of Kampung Raja. This seems necessary when one looks at the mixed haphazard new development within the town. Having a rough idea on the rich history and the architectural heritage of the area, it seems a pity to ignore it without addressing in formatting new architecture.

The paper is based on a research conducted in Kampung Raja between the years 2009 to mid 2012. The research was focused on the built environment and the communities within the area from the Besut River to the main trunk road in Kampung Raja. Among others the research was to ascertain the common characteristics of the vernacular architecture along the riverside. From here some ideas on the identity of the place can be clarified.

Kampung Raja covers a large area and it is not possible to cover the whole area within the time frame. Thus, the area covered for the research is from Besut River to the main trunk road that leads to Jertih and Kuala Besut only. This area is actually the older section and relates to the earlier history of the town.

### *1.1 The regional setting of the study area*

The study area is in Kampung Raja in the district of Besut and lies at the uppermost part of the state of Terengganu, on the east coast of West Malaysia. Kampung Raja is currently the administrative centre of Besut and thus has several important public buildings to govern the area. It stands by the River of Besut and the nearest town is Jerteh that is about 20km away. Jerteh is situated along the main trunk road to Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu and is a busy commercial centre. The other town about 10km from Kampung Raja is Kuala Besut, situated at the confluence of Sungai Besut and South China Sea.

## 2. Literature review

As elaborated by Bartusca & Young (1994) it was way back in the nineteen thirties that 'modern' architects particularly Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe who convinced the world to reform the world by clearing the slums, let the sun into every room in the house and put a green belt round every city. This introduced a new era of light, air and green spaces. However, this resulted in the destruction of old cities. The new architecture ignored

regional oddities and local climatic conditions and became known as “the international style”. The box-like buildings, with smooth concrete walls and flat roofs can be found all over the world.

Subsequently, in the later years some architects rebelled against and the non recognition of the local culture and climate and chose to reintroduce a more localised designs. Examples include the work of Alvar Aalto in Scandinavia and Kenzo Tange in Japan. The works by Alvar Aalto were designed sensitively for a northern climate and often using local timber. Tange on the other had related to the works of Le Corbusier at the beginning but later injected influences of Japanese traditional architecture in his work. These two architects promoted the trend of looking back the identity of own country as a guide in creating a more humane architecture.

The importance of the identity of a place becomes a concern to scholars. Carmona et al. (2003) argue that people need a sense of identity or in other words, a sense of belonging to a specific group or place. This relates to Crang (1998) argument that places provide an anchor of shared experiences between people and continuity over time. Individuals need to express a sense of belonging to a collective entity or place, and of individual identity. Adam (2012) posits that the identity of a place and its relationship with a community matter as its part of the community’s sense of belonging. Both architects and planner should consider the community when they change a place. This is because there is a difference between the way an outsider and a community sees a place.

In a research done by Shuhana in 1997 suggests that the distinctive elements associated with the identity of Kuantan town centre by the residents were physical structures namely buildings, urban spaces such as streets and Padang, and landscape features. It was also discovered that the people of Kuantan associated the older buildings with identity of the area. This suggests that the old parts of the town centre have a relatively stronger identity compared to the newer parts (Shuhana, 2012).

### **3. Choice of Methodology**

The architectural characteristics of the buildings at Kampung Raja, Besut, Terengganu are influenced by many factors. This includes history, socio-cultural aspects of the local people and availability of materials. Apart from that the area actually originated with the formation of an earlier settlement of Palembang. Due to the lack of written records, the research employed a mixed method, namely quantitative and qualitative methods, as recommended by Creswell (1994) and Bryman (1995). In collecting data, the quantitative method of exploratory, pilot survey and main survey are employed in getting the feedback from the local residents. This is checked with the qualitative method of literature review, study of documents, field observation and in-depth interview (Table 1).

Table 1: The choice of research instruments relating to the research objectives

NO.	OBJECTIVES	INSTRUMENTS
1	To investigate the history of Kampung Raja, Besut in relation to the history of the bigger kingdoms in the past	Literature review, study of documents, interview, Field observation
2	To ascertain the common characteristics of the vernacular architecture along the riverside and the present architecture of Kampung Raja	Field observation, literature review, interview
3	To identify the remnants of the past within Kampung Raja that still exist in 21 <sup>st</sup> century and	Field observation, interview

### **4. Findings**

The findings include both the historical aspects and the architectural elements of the older buildings in the area.

#### **4.1 History of the area**

Besut was mentioned as one of the places where the people of Pattani migrated in 16<sup>th</sup> century due to the attacks by Ligor in 1504 and 1532, following the order of Rama Thibodi II, the king of Ayuthaya. This included Sultan Muhammad Shah and family who moved to Besut. He was eventually died and buried there. His son, Raja Muzaffar was later allowed to go back to Pattani on the condition that he had to send tribute to Ayuthaya. This was done until 1536 (Abdul Halim, 1994).

There is not much written record on the history of Besut. Several references on the history of Besut were found and based on two types of sources. The first was the written records. The earliest written records on this area are

those found in *Pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan* (1965) and *Tuffatul Nafis* by Raja Ali Haji as mentioned by Wikipedia (2010). The next written record was that written in Sekolah Menengah Tengku Mahmud yearly magazine, known as 'Chahaya Kemajuan' (1974). The stories were also narrated from one generation to the other among the local residents of Kampung Raja. The stories were checked during the research through interview.

The earliest known settlement in Besut was Kuala Besut ruled by a king known as Raja Sang Nyanya, a wicked pirate. After he died it was peaceful enough for traders from Pattani and Sumatera to stop over. Later a group of traders led by Che Latiff from Kota Palembang in South Sumatera, Indonesia, arrived in 18th century and opened a settlement. with the intention of searching for gold (Hamdan, 2010; Yusof, 2010). He then named the settlement 'Palembang' (Chahaya Kemajuan, 1974; Sahul Hamid et al., 1981; Hassan et al., 1981). Under Che Latiff the area developed into a port particularly for traders from Patani, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Sumatera. During that period, trading flourished and Palembang expanded covering several villages.

Che Latiff was replaced by his son Che Kamat in 1791 (Yusof, 2010). During his rule there were frequent disturbances from the pirates. This induced Che Kamat to seek the help of the King of Terengganu, Sultan Mansur I (1726-1793). This started the rule of the kings and a town known as Kampong Raja (literally means 'King's Village') developed, adjacent to the trading area of Palembang. The son of Sultan Mansur I, Tengku Kadir became the first king. He was replaced by his son, Tengku Ali in 1835 (Yusof, 2010). During his rule problems arose with the King of Terengganu and Palembang was then made officially under Terengganu. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Terengganu was under the British and Palembang was under the supervision of an assistant advisor, P.A.B. McKeron who arrived in 1927. It was during the British that the name 'Palembang' was changed to 'Besut'. After the independence of Malaysia in 1957, Besut was under the administration of a district under the state of Terengganu and this continues until the present day.

## 4.2 Architecture

The study on the architectural characteristics of the buildings was done on all the buildings by going through each street in the study area. The overall form and building materials for each building was done in detail. However, this does not involve the interior of the buildings. All these were recorded and summarised. The information is then counter checked with the information obtained from the interview of the local residents and through literature review.

From the research it was found that the earlier houses in the study area are basically on timber stilts (37.2%). The newer buildings are on concrete stilts (27.1%). The reason for raising the floor is due to the frequent rain and flooding. This is particularly critical to the buildings close to the Besut River. The problems relating to flooding has been reduced with the construction of embankment along the river edge. This reflects in the use of low stilts or building directly on the ground (35.7%).

Table 2: House types

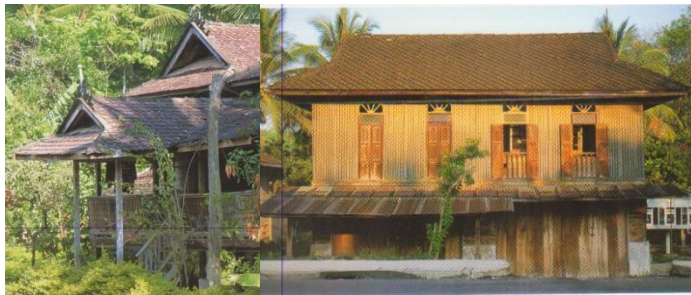
HOUSE TYPE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Raised on timber stilts	77	37.2
Raised on concrete stilts	56	27.1
On the ground	74	35.7
TOTAL	207	100

Table 3: Summary of roof forms

ROOF FORM	NUMBER OF BUILDINGS	PERCENTAGE
Hip-gabled roof ( <i>bujang darat</i> ) roof	64	30.9
Hipped roof ( <i>Perabung lima</i> )	26	12.6
Bumbung panjang	36	17.4

Modern roof	60	29.0
Hip-gabled roof adaptation	10	4.8
Hipped roof adaptation	5	2.4
Gable with jack roof	3	1.4
Pyramidal roof ( <i>bumbung meru</i> )	3	1.4
TOTAL	207	100

Table 3 above indicates that the most popular roof form of the traditional houses in the area is the hip-gabled roof (30.9%) termed as Terengganu *bujang darat* roof by Abdul Halim (1985). This roof form relates closely to the roof form of the Thai Muslim traditional houses in Pattani, South Thailand. The roof form is also known as *blanor* hip-gabled roof in South Thailand (Figure 4.1). Some of the new buildings also have this roof form but the percentage is rather low (2.4%).



**Figure 4:** *blanor* hip-gabled roof examples in South Thailand

There are several building types in Kampong Raja that can be grouped as private and public buildings. The private buildings are the houses of the local residents and these vary according to the period of building. During the Palembang period there was only one public building which was the old mosque (Figure 5). There were also palaces that can be categorized as private buildings. The only palace that can be categorized as both private and public was Istana Tengku Long. Apart from accommodation quarters, it was also used as a meeting place (*balai rong*) between the royals and the local residents (Figure 6).



**Figure 5:** Old mosque



**Figure 6:** Tengku Long palace

The earliest houses at the main settlement along Besut River are the big Palembang houses of the rich. The houses of the other local residents outside the area are relatively smaller. Originally there were about 30 houses grouped closely together in the main settlement. The owners were rich people who were involved in both cultivation and trading. One end of the settlement was an open field and used as a multi-functional space. This place was known as Pengkalan China. This was where the exchange of goods and other activities of the local residents took place. Inevitably, the local residents were of a mixed background with ancestors ranging from Pattani in South Thailand, Kota Palembang in Sumatera and Yunnan in China.

The big Palembang houses were built using *cengal* timber which was abundant around the area. The houses were raised on one storey high stilts. This was due to the frequent flood to the area. The area below the house was used for several activities such as cloth weaving and resting. Due to a big fire at early 19<sup>th</sup> century, only a few houses survived. Majority of the local residents then moved away from the area and the remaining houses were dismantled and reassembled either further inland or in another town (Figure 7). An example is Mariam's house that was moved to Kampong Raja. The stilts were lowered due to the less danger in terms of flooding. The houses that survive until today are still structurally strong due to the type of timber used. The original settlement is currently known as Kampung Palembang and has only 3 houses of different forms.



**Figure 7:** A Palembang house that was moved to Kampong Raja

The other example is Haji Deraman's house. Only the main house was from Palembang earliest settlement. A porch and kitchen were added after the main house was reassembled at a new site in Kampong Raja. The elevation shows that it was designed symmetrically (Figure 8). The other special feature is the jacked roof of the kitchen. Both the use of symmetry and jacked roof shows the influence of Chinese architecture. There are 42 houses in the study area that have similar form of porch.



**Figure 8:** The elevation and plan of Haji Deraman's house



The other unique house is the house of Tuk Guru Haji Omar, a well known religious teacher. The building was initially built for the family use only but eventually for teaching purposes. The building has repetitive elements throughout the house to make it look harmonise. This includes the form, position and sizes of windows. The windows are also positioned symmetrically under each hipped roof. This shows the importance of balance in the construction of the facades. The repetition of similar roof form relate to the roof form of the houses in Kota Palembang, Indonesia as shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 9:** Tuk Guru Haji Omar's house



**Figure 10:** Houses in Kota Palembang, Indonesia

## CONCLUSION

The identity of Kampong Raja can be related to the older buildings that include Palembang house, palaces and the old mosque since they are unique to the area. Some deeper understanding to the local architectural heritage is necessary in order to design new buildings that are sympathetic to the history and identity of the area.

The research was done on the older buildings, particularly the vernacular houses and palaces. From the research the common architectural characteristics of the area was summarised. The problem is that the studies were done on domestic and smaller buildings and not the public buildings that have more complexity in terms of requirements. The aspect that was not explored was how to transfer the characteristics of the local vernacular buildings to the design of modern public buildings. This is another topic that can be explored. This study is crucial in order to blend with the identity to the town.

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