



THE INFLUENCES OF THE ARCHITECTURE AND ORNAMENTATION IN MELAKA TRADITIONAL HOUSES: A CASE STUDY OF RUMAH DEMANG ABDUL GHANI, MERLIMAU, MELAKA

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ABSTRACT

Melaka, which is located in the southern region of the Malaysian Peninsula, next to the Straits of Malacca, is well-known as a state which is rich in its historical value. One of the famous traditional houses in Melaka is known as Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani, located in Merlimau, which is now gazetted by Melaka Museum Corporation (PERZIM) and Department of National Heritage under National Heritage Act 2005. It is well known as an authentic traditional house which is considered as Malaysia's national treasure. The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors influencing its architecture and the ornamentation found in the whole house, ranging from the roofs, walls, staircase and its planning layout. The building was very significant because of its historical value starting from the year that it was first built in 1894, been abandoned for a period of time before the conservation work done by the government in 2008, and now it has been converted as 'Galeri Demang Abdul Ghani'. The house had been inherited by three generations of Headmen. Findings show that the architecture and ornamentation of this house is heavily influenced by several factors in terms of geographical, political, cultural background and civilization which will be discussed further in this paper.

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Keywords: Historical value, Gazetted, National heritage, Influences, Architecture, Ornamentation.

Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the social-cultural factors that have contributed to the architecture and the richness of ornamentation found in traditional

vernacular houses, especially in the Malay world. Thus, it will be beneficial in appreciating the added value of heritage and conservation works.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani is located in Merlimau, Jasin, Melaka. This traditional house is believed to be built by Demang Abdul Ghani bin Penghulu Abdul Majid, a tycoon whose descendants came from Palembang to Malay land in 1894 [1]. The house is believed to be constructed on the same year of 1894, therefore the age of the house now is estimated to be 121 years old. Despite on its age which was more than 100 years old, the house is still conceitedly stand on a land surrounded by greeneries. It had been gazetted by Melaka Museum Corporation (PERZIM) as national heritage after some renovation done. The house was made of several types of wood which are *merbau*, *cengal* and *jati*, which are well-known of their durability to guarantee the house lasts longer. Newspaper [2] The house was using the skills of three house builders named Mahmud Kelantan, Manap Gopeng and Pendek Pendekar. It was built without using any nail. It took about two years to be completed with the estimated cost of RM33,000.00 (value during construction).

A good move has been done by the state government, as well as The Malaysian Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture which had registered the house as 'Warisan' (Heritage) under National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645). Archeological excavation research project was carried out in July 2007, before the restoration, repair and conservation works done by the Department of National Heritage. By the terms and conditions stated on the act, the house had been converted to a gallery as to preserve the originality, aesthetical and historical values of the house. This unique house which now known as 'Galeri Demang Abdul Ghani' has attracted people from all over the world to visit and research on Malay traditional houses [3].



Figure-1. Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani which is still stands firm, having esthetic value that is still intact. This picture was taken on 2014.

Source: Field study.



Figure-2. Condition of the house before the conservation work done.

Source: Malaysian Department of National Heritage.

2. METHODS

This research had been carried out through primary and secondary data. The study includes data collection, and analysis through observation and field studies of traditional houses Melaka which are still exist in the country at present. Apart from inventory study, there are also data obtained from the Melaka Museum Corporation (PERZIM), Center for The Study of Built

Environment in The Malay World (KALAM), Malaysian Department of National Heritage and also the interviews' script from local people in the area, academicians as well as woodcarvers around the country. Until today, PERZIM has gazzeted more than 56 traditional houses all around the state, and one of the outstanding house is the house of Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani, not only in terms of its aesthetical value surrounded all over the house, but also the historical value that still can be felt inside the house. Exploration methods used in this study, where observations were carried out on the entire house, artifacts and ornaments that are still intact in this house up to this day. Data collection was collected through audio visual recording (digital and video cameras), sketches on site and interviews.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Geographical Factors. Geographic factors are circumstances which associate with a physical location that affect humans living within a specific area. In this case, the study of factors contributing to the architecture of Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani is based on its location in Merlimau, Melaka. Based on the past history of Malaya, Malacca is said to have received a lot of outside influences as a result of trade, colonization and migration of rural population to the state history. It has undergone various phases of administration since the Malacca Sultanate era (in 1400 sehingga 1511), the Portuguese colonial era (1511 to 1641), the Dutch colonial era (1641 to 1795), the British colonial period (1795 until 1957), the Japanese colonial era (1942 to 1945) and also the post-independence era, beginning in 1957 until now [4, 5].

Located in Merlimau, Melaka, the name 'Merlimau' is believed to be derived from ancient Malay society as narrated skilled *bersilat* (one of Malay's famous martial art) and using a dagger as a weapon for self-defense. To keep it powerful, there is a ceremony called Balas Keris, where they gathered in the house of their *Tok Guru* (the teacher) every Friday night. If asked where they want to go, they kept saying 'want *melimau*' and finally the place was named Merlimau. The story itself has narrated the way of life of people in this area, whereas the appreciation of cultural values was highly demonstrated.

Located in Malay land which has a nearly uniform temperature, high humidity and abundant rainfall throughout the year, make the agricultural sector as the major economic contributor to Merlimau's population since years ago. Therefore the imitation of flora and fauna found in the surrounding can be seen in architectural elements in this house too. As a result, there are carved ornaments on the houses inspired from animals and plants. Just like other traditional houses in Malay land, the house was also raised up in order to protect the house from flood and wild animals' threat. There are a lot of openings provided in each space in the house, in term of carved wall, balustrade, and louvers which act as passive cooling devices to help to reach thermal comfort in the house naturally.



Figure-3. Carvings of flora and fauna on some parts of the house.



Figure-4. Verandah is enclosed by balustrades and built on stilts to create more airflow to the house.

3.2. Political Factors

Social Status. This traditional house is believed to be built by Demang Abdul Ghani in 1894. He had been appointed as the ‘*Demang*’ (headman) in the Merlimau area. *Demang* was known as a small ruler and highly respected by the society at that time. ‘*Demang*’ or ‘*Penghulu*’ or Headman is often implicated as the head or leader of the community in a certain district. Headman system is believed to have been existed since the time of the Melaka Sultanate and was given the responsibility of acting as a leader to be in charge of caring, leading and solving the problems faced by the districts community, keeping peace and also acted as a representative of the Sultan’s tax collector. They were appointed to be the headman as to ease the administration and management in the state by only covering the certain districts[6].



Figure-5. High roof with carved *tebar layar* (gable end) on both sides of the house has made the house to be more easily recognizable, hence can be a landmark for the area.



Figure-6. The *rumah ibu* (main house) is the most important part in the architecture of a traditional house. This is where the ‘main pillar’ or *tiang seri* is located.



Figure-7. A throne-like dais with Chinese motifs is placed at the main house in accordance to the headman’s role as ‘small ruler’, also used as a spot to collect taxes.

To suit its highly status, ‘*Demang*’ is highly respected by the community and has a relatively strong economic position. Unlike many villagers who mainly work in private sectors such as farmers, breeders or trader, the *Demang* would be given monthly allowance from the government, which makes their economy status higher from the rest of the villagers [7]. Hence, the scale of this

house is much larger than usual size of Melaka house, as well as the colors painted on its wall and floor patterns which make it differs from the other house during its era.

Administration. The post of ‘Demang/Penghulu’ is decided by the Sultan, who is usually appointed by leadership qualities and preferences of the community. According to Malaysian Department of National Heritage, due to its high ranking of position which is also known as a so-called ‘small ruler’ [8] the post of a Demang/Penghulu will be passed down only to his children and grandchildren. This has led the situation that the house has been inhabited by three generations of Penghulu which are Penghulu Abdul Majid (1831-1834), Demang Abdul Ghani bin Abdul Majid (1834-1934) and Penghulu Mat Nattar bin Abdul Ghani (1934-1978) contribute to the title of this house which had been recognized as the village’s administration centre. ‘Courteous as the Malays, discuss as the English’ (*Berhemah secara kemelayuan, berbincang secara Inggeris*) is the motto of Demang Abdul Ghani in carrying out his responsibilities as the leader of his time, suited to the era of British government administration in Malay land.

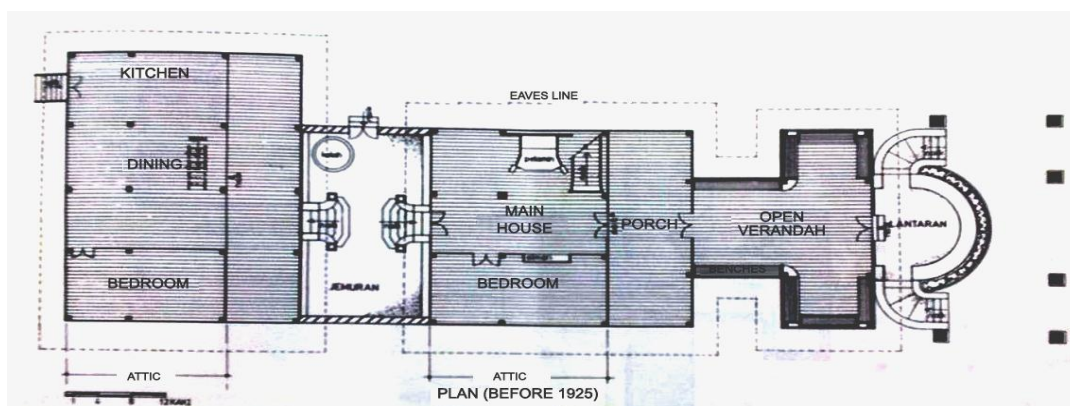


Figure-8. The planning layout of Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani, showing the ample space to gather many people for meeting at one time (especially at the open verandah into the main house) suited to its function as an administration center. It has the essential characteristic of Malay houses but with balcony with ‘limas’ roofs. The house is huge that it comprises of the open verandah, porch, kitchen separated with a compound, wet kitchen, attics for women and a well. (Source: Kajian Terukur Rumah Penghulu Md. Nattar, KALAM UTM)



Figure-9. Victorian style benches are provided in between the pillars for the guests to rest while waiting to meet the Penghulu. The row of seat has been a comfort zone for British officials who visited the house to sit down and rest more comfortably if compared to cross-legged sitting.



Figure-10. Built on an area of 1,350 meter square land, the house has spacious open area easy to facilitate any functions or ceremony.

The house was used for discussion, meeting of community affairs among the villagers and

their leader. As to suit the responsibilities given, the house planning and architectural details were designed as to fulfill the need and aspiration of the whole village to become an administration center. According to one of the heir of Demang Abdul Ghani , Md. Ramli Md. Natar, 66, the house was considered as '*Istana Merlimau*' (Merlimau Castle) and there is no any house or castle that could compete this house at the time. The differences between the headman's house and the other traditional houses of Melaka can be seen from the pillars and wall bricks which are adorned with various sculptures of their own philosophy. Traditional motifs in the shapes of leaves and flowers are featured on the pillars and walls.

3.3.Cultural Background

Religion and Beliefs. In Melaka, Islam is the absorption process occurs in stages among the Malays who started from the palace, magnifying down to ordinary people. With the spread of Islam, it has been used as the core in the construction of traditional culture. Malay people who embrace in Islam are aware of the values that have been set by the religion and adapting legacy of culture and requirements in Islamic way. Islam has established a new way of life in the community everyday practice. Malay practices that once were characterized by superstition and myth has been gradually abandoned by the community, thus creating the kind of housing that meets the required values according to the syari'a [9].

Malay traditional houses usually have only one bedroom for the women to sleep in, while the men will sleep at the verandah, suit to their role as the leader and the protector for the whole family. However, there are two bedrooms in Demang Abdul Ghani's house. The philosophy behind this is suitable as the Islamic rules which to separate women and men, as for the hadith reported by Ahmad, Abu Dawud: '*Order your children to pray at the age of seven and beat them when they are ten (if they do not pray) and separate their beds.*' The front room has a little privacy space adjacent to it. This room is used as a sleeping space for the head of the family, while the girls are placed in a second room at the kitchen. These are to separate the owner's family and the guests so that they will get some privacy.

Characteristics of the traditional Melaka Malay house are clearly visible on the open platform functioning as a link between the main house and the kitchen. Philosophy of Islamic teaching which limit the mixing of men and women is clearly depicted here. The main house is usually the location for the men's activities while the middle of the house will be occupied by the women. Visiting guests will be restricted around the balcony while women guests will occupy the middle part of the house. Only relatives or close friends will be permitted to cross through the platform to the kitchen.

Islamic teaching has also encouraged art in daily lives. One of the arts that are encouraged in Islam is the art of Arabic calligraphy. History of Islamic calligraphy started simultaneously with the birth of Islam, since revelations received by the Prophet s.a.w. since the beginning. Islamic calligraphy is strongly associated with Al - Quran and Hadith. The implementation of Islamic calligraphy in this house can be seen on top of the verandah-main house's door.



Figure-11. The calligraphy found on top of the main door stated the year of construction of the house in Hijri, while the outer layer is carved with floral pattern as to highlight the art in Islam.

Islam also emphasizes cleanliness as one of the areas of concern in this religion. Word of the Prophet says: "*Cleanliness is half of faith*" (Reported by Muslim). Based on the planning layout, the toilet was separated from the main house, just like other traditional Malay houses. This is to prevent the bad odor from entering the house. Normally, there are a variety of crops planted around the house, especially the flowering trees shrubs. It also encourages a good relationship between humans and nature, which is also one of the goals in the teachings of Islam. Word of the Prophet that says: "*Purify (decorate with landscape) yard of your house and do not imitate the Jews (who does not like to clean their homes)*" (Reported by Hadith Al-Tirmizi). The same situation can be observed in Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani. In addition, there are two '*kolahs*' (water ponds) built on the two sides of the staircases, so that the guest can wash their feet before entering the house to make sure the cleanliness of the house. The two '*kolahs*' also represents Chinese beliefs of pumpkin and pineapple motifs which means overflow or luck (Ong Lai). There are still carvings which symbolize living organism such as birds and dragons due to its influences from various cultures to the architecture of the house. This house is rich with carvings of various hidden meanings implied in the patterns of flora and fauna. Chinese cultural elements are clearly highlighted with the motifs of 'Eng Ling' (Golden Dragon sculpture) which associated with control and protection in Chinese beliefs. It also represents prosperity, good fortune, also the symbol for the Emperor, divine mystical creature, and symbol of the natural world, adaptability and transformation [10]. The ornaments can be seen in the main gate in front of the staircase. Furthermore, the flora and bird motives on the door head, windows and couches that are rare in authentic Malay houses again highlight artisanship Chinese Peranakan style, permanently built at main house. Birds in Chinese culture associated with the freedom, sun and served as family emblem in ancient China[11].



Figure-12. The door head presents the birds motifs on the woodcarving, showing Chinese influences.



Figure-13. Wooden mousedeer head represents owner's hobby as a hunter.



Figure-14. Verandah entrance also represents Chinese influences with lotus and dragons motifs.



Figure-15. A pair of dragons motifs found inside the main house.

Social Values. The social values mean the adaptation of the architectural and ornamentation of the house toward the surrounding, mainly the interaction between people in and outer the house. It can be seen from the planning layout of the house. There are several spaces in this house which portray the thought of social value during its design phase.

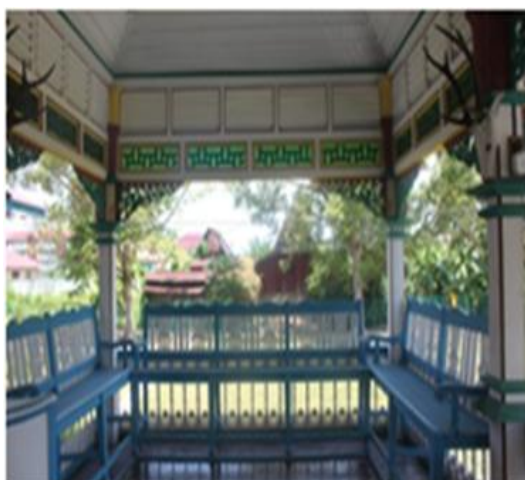


Figure-16. Benches are provided in between the pillars for the guests to rest while waiting to meet the *Demang*, can be clearly seen from outside the house.



Figure-17. The staircase design which creates the sense of welcoming towards the guests.

The verandah is located at the most front of the house, has a *balai* (hall) with benches constructed between the columns, used for the public to sit on while waiting for their turns to meet the *Demang*. It acts as a focal space for the public, and as a symbol status for a *Demang*. The space is decorated with colored and patterned woodcarving at several sides. The open verandah was designed for good ventilation specially designed for packed time for crowd during an occasion. It was also designed on that way so that other people walking by this house would see the guests that coming over to the *Demang*'s house. The front yard is left open to facilitate variety of gatherings held occasionally. Spacious open area is provided to facilitate any function or ceremony. The staircase was built the way to create sense of welcoming to the guests, in terms of its shape and patterned tiles.

The layout of this house has been properly designed and suited to its purpose, especially when it comes to the title of 'administration center'. The *rumah ibu* (main house) is the most important quarters in the architecture of this traditional house. This is where the *tiang seri* (main pillar) is located. This quarter is only reserved for the use of families and special guests. A throne-like dais is placed here in accordance with the headman's role as a 'small ruler'. Discussion with all the community leaders is held here before all the decisions are determined by the headman.

The kitchen area is used by the women carrying out daily activities in line with the philosophy of traditional architecture that inhibit interactions between the sexes in accordance with Islamic teachings. An open platform featuring the architecture of Melaka's traditional house serves as a space to dry paddy and a place to hold water.

3.4. Local-Foreign Assimilation

Melaka was once be known as the Malay trading center in the East. Some of the ornamentation found in this house were imported from several countries all around the world, especially the tiles finishes. Tiles finishing is widely used on pillars and front stairs. The use of three dimensional and fully textured tiles imported from China show that Demang Abdul Ghani is a rich man and has a vision.



Figure-18. The decorative tiles on the staircases which stated that they were made in Belgium.



Figure-19. Decorative louvers found in this house similar to louvers found in many houses in China.



Figure-20. The roof tiles for the back entrance is said to be originated from Dutch.

The assimilation of local-foreign population has also contributed to the architectural planning of this house. This was happening due to historical values of Melaka which had been connected to many foreign countries through occupation, trading factors and immigration. The head of the stairs is made of concrete pillars which resemble the hat of a British soldier. While Chinese tiles is used on the roof which is from textured concrete form of '*singgora*'. All European style furniture equipment such as tables, wardrobes, chairs and couch are in use wear in this house different to the traditional Malay way as habit that just sit cross-legged. The main house's roof was imported from China, while the kitchen roof was made from Indian tiles. The building is painted with motifs having various colors, which said to be influenced by the Chinese architecture because the usual Malay traditions only use unpainted natural wood color. There are two small roofed doors covered

with elements of Chinese architecture and the use of 'S' shaped tiles or Dutch roof tiles. The structure of the rectangular-shaped kitchen has a Dutch influence using 'V' shape tiles roof or better known as Chinese tiles.

4. CONCLUSION

There are many factors that heavily contributed to the architectural and ornamentation of Melaka traditional houses. Political factors, cultural and religious values, local-foreign assimilation and geographical factors have influences on the architecture and the ornamentation of this Rumah Demang Abdul Ghani. The uniqueness of the architecture with a combination of materials and spiritual to bring a variety of meaning has made this home very special. This study is hoped to create awareness of the importance of preserving historic buildings as a responsibility that should be shouldered by every individual, rather than on the government's burden alone. It is also to inspire architects and designers to be more sensitive towards the history and symbolic meaning implied in a national heritage before they will be used in modern buildings.

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