

## Understanding Cultural Responsive Landscape of the Perak Malay Village: Symbiosis of Human and Environment

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### ABSTRACT

Globally, issues of cultural and natural integration are considered as an international importance where people begin to express their concerns on the degradation of cultural landscape. The environmental convention stressed on the cultural, economic and social causes of environmental conditions and the need to look for approaches to manage environment. It is a holistic approach to landscape, which is alive to both the cultural and natural values. Therefore, it is essential to know and understand the relationship of the Malays toward their natural landscape. This paper explains Perak Malay rural house compound as a culturally responsive landscape through its planting composition. The discussion focus on the attributes of the cultural responsive landscape of Perak Malay villages and its residential compound. Understanding of this relationship will give inspiration to landscape architect or land planner to design a conducive living environment.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Malays who originated from the surrounding areas of the Malay Archipelago such as Indonesia were one of the earliest settlers of the Peninsular Malaysia. They brought with them their traditional cultural values and lifestyles as they settled the coasts and the hinterland of the peninsular embedded their cultural landscape.

Prior to the arrival of Islam, the Malays were animistic in their beliefs [10]. They had a sense of reverence towards nature and treated the natural environment with a sense of awe and wonder. Their daily lives were rooted in deep spiritual beliefs and every decision and choice made was based upon the fear of upsetting the spirit or appeasing them. To them, they believed that illnesses and diseases were the result of some negative elements that have been offended or the spaces or locations that have been desecrated. The forests and rivers, the mountains and the seas were living entities with spirits that can cause harm or grant bounties.

Hence, the traditional Malays held his environment with high esteem and respect, if not fear [2]. The choice of a location for a home is a paramount undertaking as it means that one is occupying a space out of nature. This space that would be permanently occupied for generations to come is looked upon not merely from its physical aspect but also from its spiritual and psychological well-being. Thus careful rituals were carried out to appease the unseen occupants of this space to acquire their permission to co-exist.

The Malay village house is a model for the high humidity, sometimes unbearably warm tropical climate [2]. The house is traditionally built entirely with timber structures and thatched roof, made by splitting fronds of the *nipah*, *rumbia* or *bertam* palm and reinforcing the spine with a timber or bamboo batten. It has large open windows with railings that allows air circulation into the building. Normally, the house is erected on stilt in which the floor section is raised above the ground. In addition, this practice improves the ventilation. This structural design has many advantages that include safety and health reasons, comfort and aesthetic. Houses as everywhere else on this planet are built close to the agricultural areas or the rivers, and where fishing is the main source of income along the coastal areas. The Malay environment is blessed with ample supply of food and water for subsistence as the soil is generally fertile and rivers and seas are abundant with lives. Nevertheless, these responses to the tropical biome and its equatorial climate are evidently subtle, without causing detrimental

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effect to the landscape resources. This integration develops cultural landscape; a modified cultural landscape [1].

Modification of the natural resources is based on the cultural values to fulfill both the physical and spiritual needs of an individual community as a whole. Their interaction is intimate using the five senses that change the form of resources but still maintain the habitat ecosystem. Their preferences for nature are rich, similar to the discovery by Kaplan [4] that people often prefer settings that include nature. This is due to the natural character of the landscape that changes through time and seasons resulting in an interesting and adventurous background in their daily activities.

### *2.0 Cultural Landscape:*

Colvin (1970) determines that man cannot exist independently and must cherish the relationship binding him with the rest. This relationship is expressed usually by the landscape in which we live. This statement supports the landscape evolution which has started during the Romanticism Movement. This movement is fundamentally the awakening point in environmental consciousness. It was developed during the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century where at that time, researchers have established provision of new scientific ideas that made possible a new perspective in rational comprehension, as opposed to the spontaneous enjoyment of the landscape [1]. From this moment, people start to recognize that there was a variety of landscape characters that determined its categories. One of it is known as cultural landscape.

Lewis (1985) Melvick (1983), Bryan (1979) and Taylor (1975) define the natural landscape as that which surrounds us, where the cultural landscape is the one which man has adopted and shaped to suit his lifestyle and survival. Cultural landscape in Malaysia is predominantly landscapes of the rice fields, coconut groves and rubber plantation. Nowadays, oil palm plantation has become an added scenery to the cultural landscape of the country since the early 1970's. Rice cultivated landscape is found in the northwestern region of the peninsular as well as along the foothills of the coastal areas in the east coast. Rubber and palm oil cultivated areas are mostly found along the interior, located at the foothills scattered along the length and breath of the Malay Peninsular. The natural landscape is predominantly forest covered and coastal areas.

One would be amazed with a typical breath - taking cultural landscape that can be experienced as one travels to Sungei Petani, Kedah. Kedah is located at the north western part of the peninsular Malaysia. This scenic view mainly comprises vast areas of rice-fields with scattered human settlements shaded by palm trees. Waterways criss cross these flat open fields that are dissected by bunds that also act as footpath and small road inter-connecting the scattered homes to the main road. This dynamic cultural landscape epitomizes the sustainable co-existence between man and nature in the Malay cultural landscape setting.

Ismail *et al* (1999) identifies that cultural landscape often reflects specific techniques of sustainable land use, considering the characteristic and limits of the natural environment it is established in, and a specific spiritual relationship to nature. Hence, humans modify the physical and biological characteristic of landscape extensively and therefore protection of traditional cultural landscapes is helpful in maintaining biological diversity.

Malay villages evolve from the settlement of a family or two into a cluster of homes as the family grows into extended families. Inter-marriages between families help to further expand the sizes of these clustered communities as more adjacent lands are cleared to accommodate new family units. With the increase in the population of this clustered community, communal necessity such as burial ground and a home for communal worship or mosque comes into being. The choices of locations for such facilities are the deciding factors that help to map the composition of the cultural landscape.

### *3.0 Methodology:*

The Layer-Cake Relationship that is also known as overlay method influenced the data collection and data analysis of the case study in three villages in Perak. This model was developed by Ian Mc. Harg *et al.* (1971) it provided a central group of biophysical elements for the inventory and analysis. In this method "each element is considered one "layer" in the landscape as a whole" [8]. This layered or also known as overlay cake has been numerously lent to help to "illuminate bivarite relationships and aids in analyzing multiple interrelationships between elements across the landscape" [8]. This method is normally preferred in the study of natural resources in sensitive areas such as forest recreational areas. The aim of this method is to identify site potential and site constraints in order to produce design guidelines in the development of the area. Illustration of this method is presented in figure 1.0.

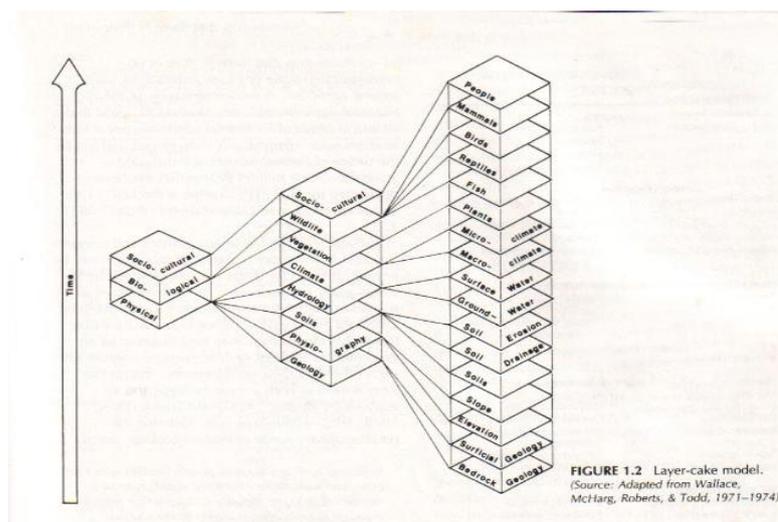


FIGURE 1.2 Layer-cake model.  
(Source: Adapted from Wallace, McHarg, Roberts, & Todd, 1971–1974)

**Fig. 1.0:** Illustration of the layered-cake model  
(Fredrick Steiner, 1991)

To facilitate this research, some modifications to the method were made. Comparatively, the overlay method uses landscape elements such as the water, flora and fauna, socio-cultural studies as one layer by itself to be studied. All these elements will be layered together in order to obtain the site potential and constraints. Modification of the method in this research is done by adapting each of the villages independently; performing as one layer by itself. Basic component of the villages comprises the houses, road system, river, the mosque, agricultural areas and natural forest areas.

#### 4.0 Cultural Responsive Landscape of the Perak Malay Village:

The information on spatial zoning, plant species and their compositions in the villages of Kampung Pasir Salak, Kampung Gajah and Kampung Sayong and their house compounds are synthesized in the following order (i) macroenvironment, and (ii) microenvironment. The varieties of landscape elements and vibrancy of the villages activities proved that the villages offer opportunities for further investigation of their landscape properties.

Their location, which is in the verdant agricultural village adjacent to the Perak River, becomes the vertebrae of the making of the cultural responsive landscape. Even though direct interaction with the river such as utilizing it as the mode of transportation and source of water is negligible nowadays, the river is still a major reference for new development such as the development of the Pasir Salak Historical Complex. Historical attributes of Perak which originated along the river hold a cultural significance and it is a pride to the previous and present community.

Traditionally, the location of the houses and other land uses such as orchard, agricultural area and public building and spaces were developed through organic planning and spiritual beliefs towards nature. The Malays believed that any development should coexist with nature. Interactive road were naturally developed connecting the spaces based on the desirable routes. Modernization growth from the nineteenth century after the villages have been substantially developed clearly showed that the infrastructures were provided based on the organic planning of the villages. For example, the road, drainage system and electricity were introduced to the community to complement their daily activities. These developments caused modification and improvement in terms of the economy and educational standard of the community. For example, the growth of the systematic farm and plantation, development of health center and schools were encouraged towards the improvements of their living standard. At the same time, these changes created an impact to their cultural landscape where many parts of the forest have been turned into development areas, mostly covered with rubber and palm oil plantation.

Investigation into the three villages in Perak justified the expansion of these phenomena. Layout of the villages in the organic setting naturally displays the agricultural setting. In the morning, it is a routine for the villagers preparing themselves to work in orchards or agricultural fields such as paddy field, rubber and oil palm farms. They go to the site by motorcycles or bicycles depending on the distance of the farm from their houses. They pass through lush greenery of edible plants such as banana, tapioca and coconut. Verdant agricultural fields merge with the natural forest to become an interesting backdrop for the village setting. Undulating and curvilinear roads inspire a sense of mystery to be explored. The setting would not be complete without the singings of the birds, insects and mammals searching for food. In the orchards, the men will handle major works such as doing the maintenance of the trees while the women help to clear up the scrubs.

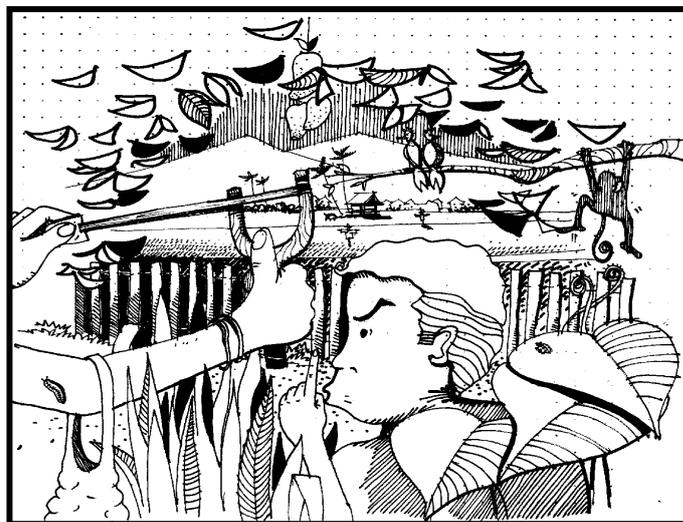
Sometimes, they will harvest edible herbs near the river to bring home for cooking. It is also a playful time for the children while helping their parents especially during school holiday to experience boundless nature excitement such as climbing the trees and playing *hide and seek* in the bushy leaves of the farm. Normally, the farm or orchard is closely located next to each other. The farmers will get together for break, sharing food that they have brought from home. While relaxing, the children will take the opportunity to take a swim in shallow stream in the vicinity. The experience described above clarifies a responsive interaction between man and its environment. Figure 2.0, 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0 presents examples of this experience in a rubber tree farm.



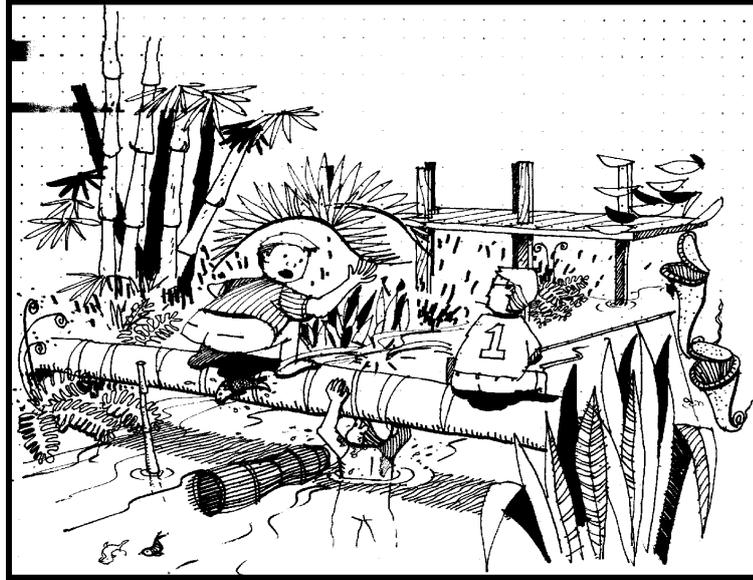
**Fig. 2.0:** Examples of interaction between man and environment

The children interact with nature in everything they do whether in the form of game or fishing and hunting. Often the children would discover new playgrounds around the village, new water holes to fish or a new clump of bushes to play “hide and seek”. These newly discovered places over time will later become common places perceived by the villagers. The children grow up in the environment and thus become closely related with it. The garden is merely an extension of the natural environment they grow up in recognizing their environment including the wild forest. The care and respect accorded to the garden are always emphasized when they venture into the unknown. They learn to avoid plants and eating fruits that are not common in their gardens. They are less prone to wanton destruction of plants and habitats. This reflects their care towards the gardens. For instance, Figures 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 illustrate the exploration of the children towards the boundless relationship between man and man and at the same time develop a sense of belonging towards nature. Therefore, the communal strength is constantly

nurtured from time to time socially and culturally and this shapes the identity of the village significantly. Hence, the cultural landscape develops a *genius loci* to the place that provides the setting of these experiences.



**Fig. 3.0:** Nature that promises excitement



**Fig. 4.0:** Children play in the village landscape



**Fig. 5.0:** Boundless nature promises tremendous experience in the cultural responsive landscape in Perak

The locations where children usually gather to play in a large group such as soccer match, often turn as congregational venues for the community. The soccer field may also turn into the *sepak takraw* court. These spaces become the feature of a cultural landscape in most village setting. When these open spaces are not occupied by children, they become the grazing ground for cows and goats.

In the communal spirit of *gotong-royong*, the adult male villagers would carry out jobs such as clearing up an area or constructing new bridges. Sometimes, a drain or well may need to be dug for a common use, the grave site may need care taking and a large trees that pose threat to children may need to be cut. The women would in the meantime be busy preparing a small feast to celebrate the event. This collective effort helps to foster a close knit relationship among the villagers as well as identify their common goals and issues in relation to the environment.

In fact, the so many facets of experience involving man and nature in the macroenvironment of the village clearly show that cultural landscape derived from the everyday activities is a necessity required by the community. They develop components, layouts, and feelings that help the evolvement of the Perak Malay cultural village into a conducive living environment. On the contrary, urban residential development represents a formal residential planning and layout. The community would only dwell after the houses are ready to be occupied. Obviously, their cultural landscape needs longer time to develop and the social interaction would be less interactive as compared to that of the rural residential areas.

*Conclusion:*

Study on the landscape characteristic in the macro environment of the villages clearly shows that their environment is culturally developed into a conducive living environment. This statement is based on the Information Processing Theory. The two criteria namely understanding and exploration are fulfilled by their cultural landscape character. The Understanding of the landscape is achieved through having opportunities for meaningful participation, complexity in the elements, legibility of the environment and coherent of the setting, at the same time exploration achieved by having sense of mystery, visual pleasure and human sign, enhancing familiarity, variety in landform and separation from distraction. Therefore, these findings evidently justified the reason of why rural cultural landscape has become one of the most preferred settings especially for the residents who have migrated to live in the urban areas. They will always come back to spend holidays, celebrate events such as *Hari Raya* and the fruit season. The characteristic of the cultural responsive landscape in the macro environment of the villages profoundly influences the characteristic of the residents' gardens.

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