

# The Influence of Perpatih Custom on the Design of Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Othman Mohd Nor Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan

Department of Architecture, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor, Malaysia

## Abstract

The migration of the community of Minangkabau to Tanah Melayu had brought with them several influences into the local community such as culture and architecture. A significant cultural essence that had influenced the community in Negeri Sembilan is Papatih Custom which is still practiced by the community nowadays. It plays various roles in the people's lives including unity, family units according to the "suku", marriages, deaths and how to inherit land and houses. In designing the traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, the family activities, as well as the community as a whole are thoroughly considered. A house is not perceived only as a place to stay but also a gathering place for other occasions such as weddings, funerals and deaths. The private and public areas are separated harmoniously from the aspects of architecture and religion. The strength of the design of the traditional Malay houses is also frequently depicted in verses and proverbs in the system of Papatih Custom that relates to "kuat rumah kerana sendi rosak sendi rumah binasa" which means the community has to stand together in whatever situation and if they do not they will be weak and chaotic. Just like the role of "sendi" or joints of a house, they have to be designed perfectly because if the joints are loosely built the whole structure of the house would collapse.

**Keywords:** Minangkabau, Perpatih Custom, traditional malay house, Negeri Sembilan

## 1. Introduction

The history of the arrival of the community of Minangkabau to Negeri Sembilan started since the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century. There were also evidences that the community of Minangkabau was brought to Negeri Sembilan by the Siak community. This paper describes the brief history of Negeri Sembilan and Papatih Custom which is being practiced by the local community. Shamsuddin Ahmad (2012) mentioned that Papatih Custom emphasizes the community to live together in harmony while carrying out their everyday life. The legal right of inheriting the wealth of the family is granted to the ladies and this is done through negotiations or "musyawarah" which is the basis of the governance and the way to solve any disputes that will be attended by a representative of each "suku" that has a leader of "adat" who is known as "Lembaga".

The leader or head of every level is appointed by the head from the lower level. In producing a community that is cultured or "beradat", every negotiation or "permusyawarahan" will start at the traditional Negeri Sembilan house of the Malay community or better known as the traditional long roofed Malay houses. According to (Yaakub Idrus, 1996) and Marzuki Monir (2007), there are several beliefs and taboos embedded in the philosophy of the construction of the Malay traditional houses of Negeri Sembilan. Among them are the allocation of the areas in the building, functions and significance of the area, including the rules that are associated with these areas.

## 2. Perpatih Custom in Negeri Sembilan

Hamka (1963) stated that the existence of the Negeri Sembilan Empire that was brought from Minangkabau starting from 1400 was actually formed as an Empire in Melaka. At the time when the people of Minangkabau were unsatisfied with the government, the administrative of Seri Menanti, Nanning, Johol Lukut and others decided to move to Tanah Melayu and set up a new empire in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan. The kings are called "Yam Di Pertuan" so that they will still have the ties to their motherland which is also known as "Tanah Luak Mengandung". The political and social systems of Papatih Custom are definitely wholesome and systematic.

Papatih Custom is evident in the arrangement of the "suku" that is governed according to a stratification that is clear and suitable. In Papatih Custom, the lowest unit is called "Perut" headed by Buapak. This is followed by "suku" which is headed by "Dato Lembaga". Next, would be "luak" which is under the administration of "Dato Penghulu Luak" who is "Undang". Finally is the last unit whom administer the whole units which of the Negeri Sembilan, headed by "Yam Di Pertuan Besar". The Papatih Custom in Negeri Sembilan is not actually the replication of the initial Perpatih custom in Minangkabau. The administrative structure has been refined and difference from the Perpatih Custom practiced in Minangkabau, for example, the "Undang System".

There are no formal written rules of Papatih Custom available. All the rules are being handed over from one generation to another through the word of mouth or verbally. This is done in the form of "kata-kata adat" which are the proverbs and the verses such as the "pepatah dan pertitih", traditional verses and also the

“perbilangan adat”. However, the general concept covers all aspects of legality which are the processes of appointing the heads of the “adat”, distributing wealth, inheritance and land issues and other rules and laws that are equally important.), which is particularly suitable for job-shop production.

### 3. Chronology of Traditional Malay Negeri Sembilan Architecture

For the traditional Malay community especially in Negeri Sembilan, a house is a place to stay in built on stilts with high flooring, walls and roof as well as a flight staircase. This concept directly voids the T-design which is the design that can be found on musollah (mosque) or “surau” (praying place) and also the designs for stalls and coops, barns, huts, “dangau” (small temporary huts in agriculture fields), “bagan” (frame or skeleton of a hut) and so on which are building structures that are associated with their occupations such as farmers and paddy planters. The old Malay community could not accept a building structure which was not built on stilts as a home because a house on stilts had become a compulsory condition and an identity ever since the historical time which was evident through the archaeological findings; “the finding in Sumatera also showed prehistoric settlements such as the kitchen refuse hill, where in the Epi-Palaeolithic period, people lived in house built on poles on the beach (10,000 B.C).”

According to Ahmad Marzukhi Monir (2007), the design of a traditional Malay house is influenced by the surrounding environment where it is elevated above the ground with stilts and elevated flooring. Besides the climate, the traditional Malay houses had to be elevated above the ground to evade the threats of wild animals from the surrounding area. On the other hand, as a house on stilts the roles of the flight of staircase, which is also considered as a part of the component of a house becomes crucial for the occupants to get into and out of the house. The long roof which is extended to the front of the house is built to shade the staircase from the sun and rain. This component is also considered as a part of the house which also known as “rumahtangga.” To depict the importance of the relationship of the house and the flight of stairs, the term “berumahtangga” is used by the Malay community to mean marriage. This phrase is to show the significant and importance of the relationship between the house and the flight of stairs. Here we could see that a house in the concept of Malay community is a building which is raised slightly higher off the ground that comes with flight of stairs. In short, the concept of traditional houses in the Malay culture is a structure or building that are on stilts and has elevated flooring, with walls and roof, as well as with doors and most importantly with windows.



Figure 1. Negeri Sembilan Traditional Malay Houses

Several simple Malay primitive building structures have depicted their quest in understanding the various concepts of traditional houses. These primitive building structures can be taken as the foundation or the beginning of evolution of Malay houses. In Papatih Custom, the concept of incorporating the verses, terms or proverbs which are based on words that are being used in the Malay architectural terms is called “adat bersendi syarak”. According to Muhammad Salleh Yassin (2007), the term “ayat sendi” means the stones which are chiseled or formed with a flat top which are used as the foundation to place the stilts or pillars on so that the position and structure of the house will be more stable and strong as the proverb goes, “kuat rumah kerana sendi, rosak sendi rumah binasa” which means that the strength of the house is determined by its “sendi” and the house would be ruined if the “sendi” is broken.

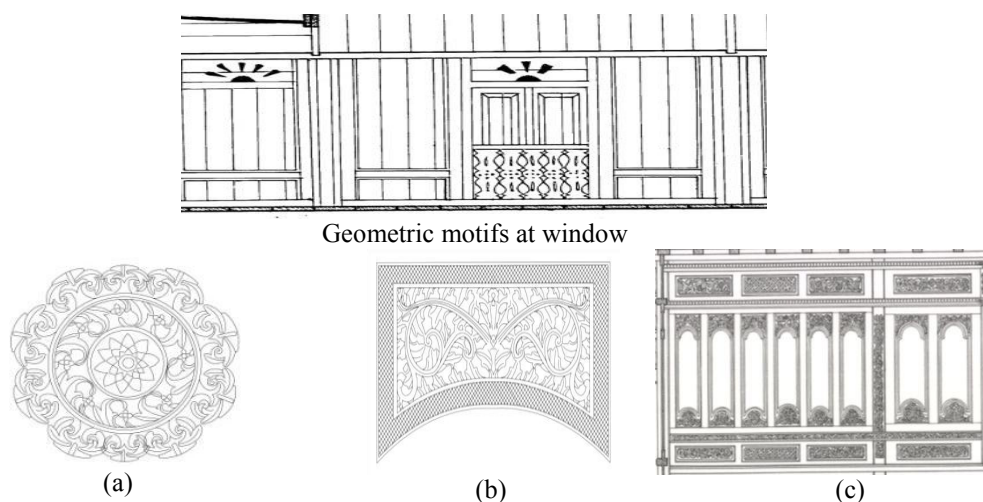
The proverb can also be associated with “rumahtangga” or a family where a strong, united and harmonious family has to cling on to the “sendi” or the foundation which is the religion. Only then, the family can live happily, harmoniously and peacefully. The meaning of the proverb which is the stilts or pillars are erected and then supported with “sendi” is the same as the facts in history where the community of Minangkabau practiced Papatih Custom.

The Malay community also places arts at the highest level in their lives. According to Muhamad Jailani Abu Talib (2012), to visualize the concept of ‘alam terkembang menjadi guru’, the art in the Malay world work on or develop the jest and soul of the “alam” or nature to produce stories and ways of thinking which are

the art form that are produced and visualized.

In the concept of design, “alam” or the nature is the beginning of starting a family, where the whole materials to build the traditional house are obtained from the nature. The preparation to build the house has to start from the nature by conducting and performing various rituals and “doa” (prayers) and also through science to seek the blessing for the occupants before building the house. All aspects will be considered such as whether the foundation is suitable with the soil, whether the underground water is suitable to be dug up and built a well for water source, whether the soil around the house is fertile for agriculture and whether the contour of the land follows the direction or flow of wind so that the occupants will be comfortable during the day and night.

All these have to follow the demands and ways of nature as referred to in the old Malay Testaments like “Tajul Muluk” when preparing for everything that concerns life including in building a house. All the processes including the preparing of the foundation or base of the house need to start off with the recitation of “doa” or prayers to the Almighty so that the building processes will be according to plan and so that the occupants will also be blessed when living the house. The Malay concept of building the areas in the house and its technical elements exist in the building of a traditional house where the whole areas are kept cool and comfortable at all times since these areas are fixed with air ventilators especially through the openings above the windows and doors. The openings above the windows and doors are fixed with engravings that present the designs and motifs of the flora as well as symmetrical designs and motifs.



Flora motifs at (a) (b) door and (c) wall panel/column  
Figure 2. Motifs of the Traditional Malay Houses in Negeri Sembilan

The motifs of the engravings functions as air ventilation and at the same time become the source of lighting and are fixed on the walls or floor of the house. Despite the windows, air can be ventilated in the house through the openings on the roof and the openings between the wooden floor boards or “bukaan bawah rumah” since the traditional houses are built on stilts (rumah panggung or rumah bertiang). The area under the house can be utilized for activities such as to dry the clothes during rainy days or to pound the paddy to separate the rice from the paddy husks during the harvesting season. In exploring the design of Malay traditional houses that incorporates the elements of nature which are the identity of the design, we could see that they are the very same organic elements that are presented by Wright, an architect who plays with the natural elements and resources.

The surrounding ambience of the traditional houses will be surrounded with shady trees of various species and there are also fruit trees and trees with multiple usages like coconut trees. From another perspective, the trees of various species acts as a food source such as coconut trees can bear fruits which can be eaten, the leaves can be made into brooms and so on. While, around the house will be planted with small plants, herbs and vegetables for daily usage that can become as parts of their cooking ingredients and the concoction for their traditional medicine.



Trees at front yard of malay traditional house



Palm trees

Source: Khazli (2015)



Flower trees



Coconut trees

Trees at backyard of malay traditional house



Pandan leaves



Tumeric leaves



Banana trees



Curry leaves

Figure 3. Types of Trees at Traditional Malay Houses

When the male and female visitors arrived at the front lawn of a house, automatically, the male visitors will enter the house using the front entrance, while the female visitors will move to the side of the lawn to go up the stair case to the “selang” area to enter the “ibu rumah” area or to the kitchen area. The aspects of “adab” or courtesy and “muhrim” from the perspective of custom have been practiced fricht from the front lawn itself. The layout or the orientation of the house needs to be on the west side or “baruh” while the layout of the “serambi” area needs to follow the orientation or flow of the river which is from upstream to downstream.

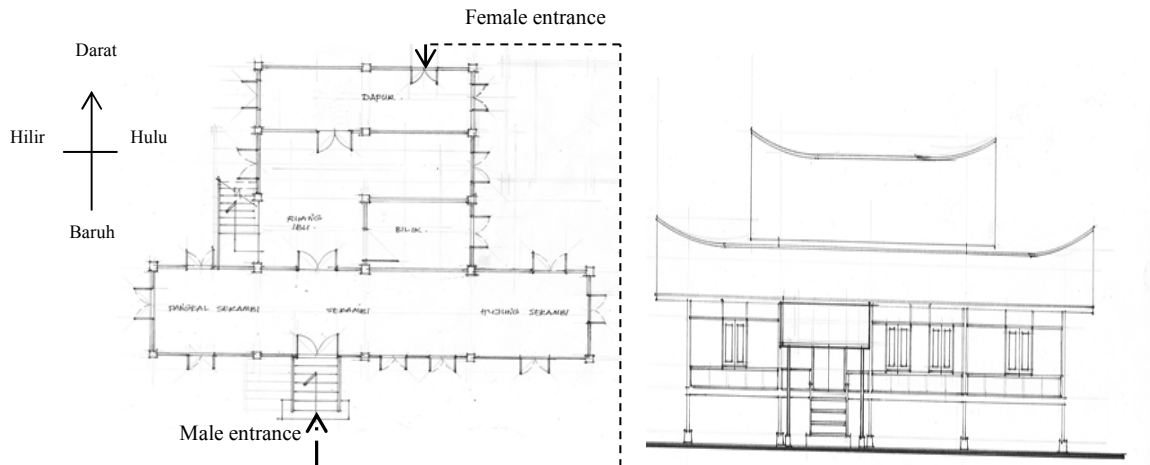


Figure 4. The Movement of the Men Who Will Use the Main Entrance at the Front and the Women Who Will Straight Away Move to the Back Entrance of the House

Normally, the front area of the house will have a lawn which is an open area for the children to play and for other activities such as “silat” (traditional Malay martial art) practices (which were done in the past) and to set up canopies if there are weddings or other ceremonies.

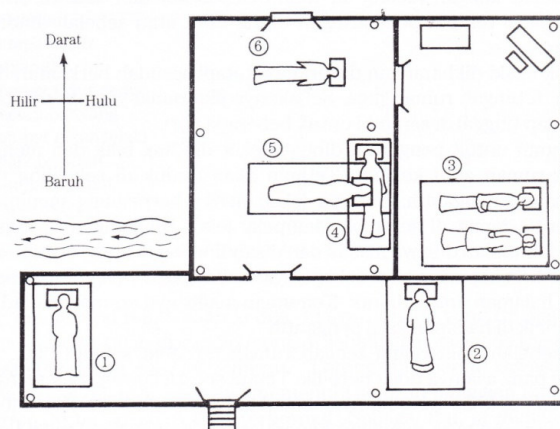


Figure 5. Activities at the Front Yard of Traditional Malay Houses

The front area of the house or the lawn must be kept clean, have no grass or rubbish. The importance of the front lawn according to Yaakob Idrus (1996), is depicted in the daily phrase “*kampung dan halaman*” (home and front lawn). Therefore, if a person is said to be without “*kampung halaman*” it means that the person is extremely poor and homeless. The philosophy of “*halaman*” or front lawn has its own aesthetic elements. The front lawn has to look beautiful and spacious and will be more beautiful when planted with flowery plants around the edges of the front lawn.

#### 4. The Role of Perpatih Custom in the Design of Traditional Malay House in Negeri Sembilan

Ketua Adat’s House means Chief Adat in a village or a place where his residence (House) has always been a place view of Malay society in Negeri Sembilan. From the very aspects of designing like the initial discussion stage of the design, hospitality and entertaining visitors, right to deaths and other living aspects are all pretty much related to the Papatih custom itself. Papatih custom is also applied in designing the layout of the Ketua Adat’s House in Negeri Sembilan such as the design of long living room at the front of the house, the main hall in the middle of the house and also the kitchen area at the back of the house.



- No.1 and 2 is the sleeping position while sleeping at the “*serambi*” for sons
  - No.3 The sleeping position in the bedroom
  - No.4 Sleeping position or person who is ill at the main area of the house (center)
  - No.5 The position of a dead body (corpse) has to be parallel with the long roof beam of the house or following the *kiblat*.
  - No.6 The position of the corpse while it is being bathe and a woman who is giving birth
- (Source : Yaakob Idrus)

Figure 6. The diagram depicts the location of area and the human orientation and their activities at the respective area. The diagram also depicts the position and direction of the legs and head whilst sleeping or while suffering from illnesses or death according to the culture of Negeri Sembilan

According to Raja Ibrahim (1988), in an article written by Ahmad Marzukhi Monir (2007), the living room (*serambi*) from the aspect of location or hierarchy is known as “*selasar*” is an area which is higher than the “*anjung*” area, but lower than the main hall which is at the middle of the house. The “*serambi*” is a common room which is built to honour the male visitors who are non-relative or “*mahram*” (the male visitors who are a non-relative who can be married by the female members of the family). The sizes of each “*serambi*” area are different depending on the rank or position of the owner in the community and this can be clearly seen on the positions of the “*serambi*” which “*serambi hujung*”, “*serambi tengah*” and “*serambi pangkal*” is supported by Yaakob Idrus (1996) and Raja Nafida (1999). The “*serambi*” which is positioned the nearest to the stairs is called “*serambi pangkal*”, while the furthurest “*serambi*” from the stairs is called “*serambi tengah*”. In the Papatih costum system, the allocation of the functions of “*serambi pangkal*” can be seen in Figure 7(a) and (b). This area is used to negotiate or discuss the issues of Papatih costum and family matters like weddings.

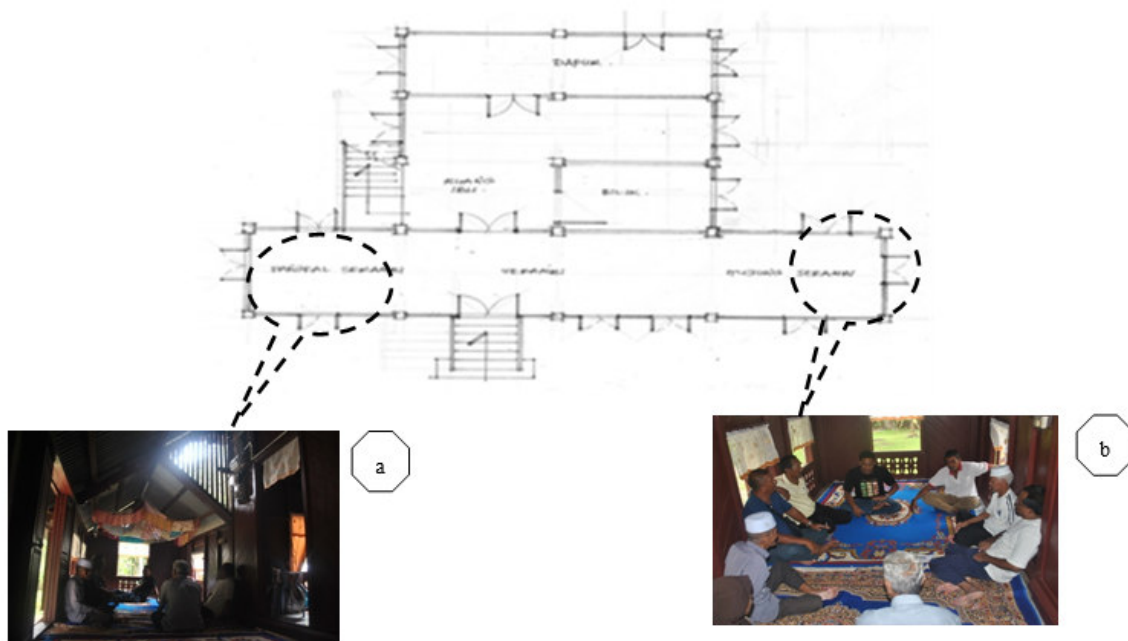


Figure 7. (a) “Serambi” area, the entrance to “rumah ibu”; (b) Negotiations and discussions amongst family members and societies which are done casually and peacefully

The “serambi Pangkal” will be fitted with “kain tabir langit” to honour the “buapak” who are present during the negotiations and discussions. Meanwhile, the “serambi hujung” generally have extra height from “serambi tengah” and “serambi pangkal” to signify its importance in terms of hierarchy than the other areas. “Serambi pangkal” is considered sacred because it is located similar to the position of an upstream of a river where this is the start of the source of water which is unpolluted and considered pristine and sacred.

These matters are also mentioned in several verses of the “adat” such as “Pangkal untuk orang adat, hujung untuk orang syarak dan penghulu”. The houses of the head of “adat” also sometimes come with “anjung” or an annex. The three “serambi” and the “anjung” are not allowed for the houses of commoners or people with no rank in the community. “Serambi” functions as an area to receive and welcome male visitors. The male visitors are only permitted to enter the house up to this “serambi” area only. This area is also an area for the males to perform their “solat” or prayers, as well as the sleeping area for the sons or male visitors. The area is also a more general area and is more opened where there are many windows and other openings that can be seen here.

During weddings, the “hujung serambi” area will be decorated with “kain tabir langit” and “kain tabir panjang” as well as “tilam pandak” or a mattress for the groom to sit on during the “akad nikah” or exchange of vows ceremony. A “sirih pinang” or beetle nut leaves set is also placed to resemble the beginning of the discussion to the wedding ceremony. This is to honour the groom and also the ceremony that will take place, as can be seen in Figure 8(a) and (b). Apart from that, other formal functions or ceremony like dos, circumcisions, prayers for the dead and so on will be done here. Usually during the “akad nikah” or exchange of vows ceremony this area is only specified for the men whereas the women will be seated at the “rumah ibu” area together with the bride. Clearly, the ceremony that takes place here, takes into consideration in separating the “mahram” (people whom you cannot be married to and “non-mahram” people whom you can be married to).





Figure 8. (a) The end area of the “Serambi” which is decorated with “tabir lelangit” cloth, “pandak” mattress, and “tepak sirih” (b) Good air ventilation

The “rumah ibu” area is an area that is dominated by the women. According to Marzukhi Monir (2007), this area is the most crucial component of a Malay house which is located between the “serambi” area and the “selang” area. This is a private area which is only opened for the family members and “mahram”. The level of the floor at the “rumah ibu” area is the highest as compared to the others. This is to show respect to the womenfolk in the house. At the area, a ladder to the loft can also be found. There is also a room in this area. Different from the “serambi” area which is more opened, the “rumah ibu” area only has a window because this is a very private area for the women of the house. Only men who have close ties with the women are allowed to enter the “rumah ibu” area. Therefore, the door that is used for this area is the “sepak” door or if not, there would be a curtain that covers the entrance to prevent the male visitors from looking in.

There are several variations of the entrance or doors to the “rumah ibu” area. If the owner or the occupant is a commoner, the door would usually be a “satu daun pintu” or single door with engravings around the skirting of the door, while if the owner or occupant has a rank in the society such as the head of village or the head or “adat”, the door would be of “sepak” door. The “sepak” door which is located between the “serambi” and the “rumah ibu” can be opened only of the top or bottom part or both at the same time. There will usually be intricate and beautiful engravings on the door which are called “lambai-lambai”.

The kitchen area where the main activity is preparing meals is considered and that completes the house. A secondary (sekunder) house which is slightly small is located behind the main house (rumah ibu) is called a kitchen or “rumah dapur”. If other extensions are added on the sides of of the “rumah dapur”, the “rumah dapur” will be known as the main kitchen or “ibu dapur”. According to Marzukhi Monir (2007), in the layout of the traditional Malay houses, the front part or area of the house is specify only for the men, while the back part or area is specify for the women. When the area for them is located at the back part or area of the house, this enables them to conduct their activities easily. This part or area is also the place for the family to get together and eating together is always done at the kitchen area. Female visitors will also be entertained here unofficially. In short, the kitchen area has multiple functions and layouts.

The activities of negotiation of “adat” seldom take place at the kitchen area. Therefore, the kitchen area is known as an active zone. Yaakob Idrus (1996) mentioned that of late, the kitchen area is mainly use as a family area because most of the family members like to spend time and relax at this area to meet and chat, have breakfast or other meals. This area is also the place when the whole family members can easily get snacks and drinks. Moreover, this area is also provided with television set that also causes the outmost area of the house “serambi” becomes quiet and empty especially during the day time.

The houses for the heads of “adat” usually come with lofts. People of the lower class are not allowed for to enter this area. The hierarchy or status of an individual can be measured from the number of levels or storeys of its roof or “tebar layar”. Only the aristocrats are allowed to build roofs or “tebar layar” with multiple. There are two types of roofs or “tebar layar” which are two or three level or storeys. These types of roofs actually help in the ventilation and the movement of air from the roof into the house. This enables the hot air from inside of the house to be circulated to the outside of the house so that to it would bring comfort to the occupants of the house.

The building systems of the walls also signify the rank of an individual. On the houses of heads of “adat”, the stilts or pillars cannot be seen from the outside of the house since the walls are not built on the walls, therefore the stilts or pillars can only be seen from inside of the house. The inner and outer walls are built using “cembung” wood. The inner walls that use the “cembung” wood are walls that separate the “serambi” and the “rumah ibu” areas. The stilts or pillars are four or eight sided which are known as “Tiang Pecah Lapan”. Yaakob Idrus (1996) and Raja Nafida (1999) claim that there are houses which use the stilts or pillars with eight sided for the interior parts of the houses, but for the back areas of the houses stilts or pillars with four sided are used. There are also beams under the houses which are intricately and uniquely formed or built. The structures of the lowest stilts or pillars are usually placed on supporters or structures made or concrete. This is to avoid the stilts or pillars from being attacked by termites and other natural elements, as well as protecting them from the

moisture from the earth that could ruin or damage the structures of the stilts or pillars and the walls.

The spaciousness of the long roofed houses of Negeri Sembilan can be measured by number of stilts. The aristocrats and the heads of “adat” would commonly build a house with 12 stilts or 12 pillars and sometimes would extend them to 16, 20, 24 and even at time to 28 stilts or pillars. The number of stilts or pillars would be counted based on the main stilts or pillars at the main area (ibu rumah) and also the “serambi”. There is also a main stilt or pillar which is called “tiang seri” that is located the middle part of the house of “rumah ibu”. During the building or erection process of the house the recitation of “doa” will be done to seek for the blessings for the occupants of the house. The “tiang seri” will be given a platform or “pelapik” or gold will be buried underneath it to symbolize wealth and prosperity.

Houses with flight of stairs have also become the criteria for the leaders or ketua adat house’s in Negeri Sembilan. These types of houses are built to protect the occupants from the elements. The specialty of the traditional long roofed Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan which are owned by ketua adat or the heads of “adat” is also due to its decorative styles which are chiselled or carved on the stilts or pillars and other parts as well. There was a wind of change, according to Muhamad Jailani Abu Talib (2012), where after the arrival of Islam, the Malay arts were also influenced by the ways of Islam. The animal motifs are gradually less favourable and the pictures which are depicted directly from the elements of Malay world like animals and fairies are also becoming extinct one by one.

The motifs are replaced by plants and leaves and other natural elements. The engraving and the motifs of the community have been replaced and more emphasis is given on floral elements and motifs, as well as geometrical shapes. These elements, motifs and shapes are chosen due to its aesthetic beauty and shapes and also possess symbolic meanings. The engravings which exist on the houses are of the “tebuk tembus” and “tebuk timbul” types of engraving. The “tebuk tembus” engravings enable the light and air to pass through them and these types or styles engravings usually exist at the upper most parts of the bedroom walls, at upper parts of the walls that separates the “serambi” and the “ibu rumah” and on the “tebar layar”. One the other hand, the “tebuk timbul” engravings appeared on the stilts or pillars and “kasau”.

## 5. Conclusion

The setting up of Negeri Sembilan before it is known as Negeri Sembilan is believed to be of existence during or before the establishment of the empire of Melaka. It started off as a “luhak @ luak” that was ruled by someone who was bestowed the title “datuk” who had his own unique credibility. The people practice the politics and the Malay “adat” or culture that has also taken into account the ratio or “nisab” of the relationship of both of their paternal and maternal sides, however, the influence of the maternal side is more dominant. After the migration of the people who opened new lands from Sumatera and finally with the migration of the settlers from Minangkabau or West Sumatera together with their “adat” system that is more “matrilineal” and “bersuku-suku” their culture has also expended together with them. This system which was very dominant in “luhak” Rembau, Ulu Muar and Jelebu is then followed and practiced by the people of Negeri Sembilan. Whereas, “Johol” is a “luhak” that is less dominant of its Minangkabau’s influence. The coastal areas like Kota Lukut and Port Dickon continue to practice “Adat Temenggung”.

The implications before the arrival of the people of Minangkabau to Negeri Sembilan are it already has a strong culture including the matrilineal culture. The manifestation of this culture can be seen in the design of traditional houses. However, the interior design of the house did not receive a great influence of Minangkabau. Design house is an example of a Ketua Adat of residence in the capture and built with the help of the community and display function room, a meeting with the community and its design symbolizes the character of the local community and its cultural identity. There are no outside influences affected only slightly tapering roof in effect, the only influence that comes from the carving, but the design and shape houses the state remains the same. In short, the Negeri Sembilan has a unique culture that is still intact, which is a sub-culture of the Malay culture. Knowing the cultural aspects and criteria of traditional houses Negeri Sembilan, it can be concluded that each space or room of the traditional Negeri Sembilan houses incorporate social aspects and needs "Indigenous Pepatih" in the design. Where, in terms of religion, we can feel the unity that has taken place automatically even before the time at which part or segregation of men and women were employed. The role of each area or room and orientation of houses built on the environment is in line with the adage 'alam terkambang menjadi guru' (nature environment be a teacher'), in which the environment is used as a guide and model for building a house and home Rumah Ketua Adat also an example of a complete and well to follow. It is therefore appropriate to accept the fact that the state has its own culture and identity and culture of the people should be proud of who they are and have been practicing all along. Therefore, the authorities should take measures and initiatives to develop the wonderful culture that still thrives locally so that it can be lived and experienced by all.

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