



Adoption of Culture in Bugis houses in Johor, Malaysia

Wan Hashimah Wan Ismail

Department of Architecture, Faculty of Built Environment,
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia,
81310 Skudai, Johor, Malaysia

wan7137shima@gmail.com

Abstract

As elaborated by scholars the built environment is influenced by culture, belief and past experiences. The paper intends to elaborate on the adoption of culture in the design of the Bugis traditional houses in Johor, Malaysia. The methodology involved two main instruments namely literature review and field observation. The studies suggest that even though the houses were built away from their homeland in Sulawesi, Indonesia the culture of the Bugis descendants remains intact. This was revealed in their behaviour and the forms of the plans and elevations of their traditional houses.

Keywords: Culture; traditional houses; Bugis

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1.0 Introduction

The built environment is influenced by culture, belief and past experiences of its inhabitants, as elaborated by scholars such as Rapoport (1977, 2004) and Gustafson (2001). Apart from beliefs, Altman and Low (1992) also relate culture to perception, values and norms, customs and mode of appropriate behaviour that constitute a cluster of characteristics. The suggestion is supported by Gustafson (2001) who argues that the cultural aspects of place involve meanings related to the environment. This can be linked to their opinion that place attachment involves culturally shared affective meanings and activities associated with place that derived from socio-political, historical and cultural sources. Rapoport (1977, 2004) posits that the complexity of the culture that distinguishes one group from the others can be reflected through the variation of the environment. In Malaysia, the cultural principles play an important role in defining the identity of different ethnic groups. The cultural influences seem to be more evident in the design of traditional houses rather than contemporary mass housing. This is basically due to the fact that the traditional houses were individually designed according to the desire of the perspective owners, contrary to the mass housing.

The paper intends to elaborate on the adoption of culture in the design of Bugis traditional houses in Johor, Malaysia. The objective was to clarify the details of the cultural influences that determine the formation of the Bugis traditional houses in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review

The people of Bugis were originally the residents of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Leirissa (1996) posits that after the kingdoms of Makasar and Bone united, it became the biggest kingdom in Indonesia in the 17th century. The turmoil started after the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C) in 1669 with the goal of monopolising the spice trade (Blusse, 1996). This led to the migration of the Bugis. The situation became worse with the wars between the Bugis and the Dutch between 1825 and 1905 that ended the power of the Bugis ruling dynasties. It was during this period that more Bugis migrated to the other parts of Indonesia and other countries including Malaysia (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Areas of Bugis trade and settlement
Source: Leirissa (1996)

The migration was made easy with the proclamation of the ruler of Riau-Lingga in Indonesia as the ruler of Johor in 1812 (Khoo, 2001). It should be noted that trading activities has been going on for years connecting the people of different ethnic groups within the region (Leirissa, 1996). The Bugis also migrated due to job opportunities. In the early 20th century the lands in Johor were planted with rubber, oil palm and pineapple (Trocki, 2001). This opened up the job opportunities to the Bugis. Subsequently, the migration of the Bugis also relates to the building of Bugis houses in Johor.

The culture of the Bugis relates to their multiple beliefs that include indigenous religious traditions, Buddhist and Hindu (Miksic, 1996). The indigenous religious traditions of Bugis as mentioned on *Sure' Galigo* (a written document) is the belief in god *Patoto-e* who hold human fate. It is also believed that the ancestors need to be worshiped in order to avoid calamities. After the arrival of Islam in South Sulawesi at the turn of 17th century almost all Bugis embraced Islam. However, there is a great variation in the types of Islam practiced (Othman, 1998). For some Bugis their practice also relates to the earlier indigenous religious traditions that could not be forsaken totally.

According to Waterson (1998), the rituals traditionally connected with house building show some similarities among societies in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. The practices based on the culture of the Bugis started even before the houses were erected. An expert of tradition called *panrita bola* makes a ritual to choose the spot where the house is to be built. Appropriate rituals need to be performed before trees could be cut or to clear the land for building houses. This is because trees are regarded as having their own vitality or spirit. The positioning of the posts is done exactly the same way as extracted from the tree with the trunk end down to avoid misfortune. The initial ritual in building the house also includes the direct involvement of the woman of the house.

The Bugis have contrasting beliefs in terms of the interior and exterior of the house. The exterior of the house is considered dangerous due to the residing of a spirit known as *to laing*, and other ghosts. Thus, they feel unsafe outside and can be improved if they observe inner strength (*prangirreng*). This can be achieved through meditation before leaving the house. On returning home, one would shake oneself on the upper thread of the staircase before entering the house. Noris (1992) stresses that this practice is done to get rid of the bad influences from outside that adhered to the body.

On the contrary, the interior of the house is considered to be a safe haven for the residents where they are free to do anything. However, some evil spirits may still be able to slip through. According to Errington (1979) the Bugis believe that dangers from outside can slip through the holes or the openings of the house. Pieces of Islamic calligraphy are set above the doors and windows to serve as protective elements to ward off evil influences Waterson (1998).

3.0 Methodology

The methodology involved two main instruments, namely literature review and field observation. The main concern in the literature review was the cultural background of the

Bugis and the connection to their house forms. The Bugis houses were initially visited to get the first hand experience. The documentation in terms of measured drawing was done by Pusat Kajian Alam Bina Dunia Melayu (KALAM) at the Architecture Department of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Altogether 30 Bugis houses were documented; 21 in Johor, Malaysia and 9 in Makasar, Bone and Wajo in South Sulawesi (Celebes) Indonesia. The houses were further analysed focusing on the adoption of culture in the formation of building form, plan and elevation of the Bugis houses in Johor. The Bugis houses in Makasar, Indonesia were used as comparison. Only then, deductions and conclusions were made.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

The roofs of the Bugis houses studied in Johor are either steeply inclined long ridged roof or gabled hip roof (limas). The houses that have steeply inclined long ridged roof include Daeng Mat Diew's house (Figure 2) and Daeng Dahlan's house. These are similar with the Bugis houses in South Sulawesi as elaborated by Djauhari (1990). In some houses the ends of each main ridge are finished by upright sharp wooden projections. It was found that the majority of the Bugis houses studied in Johor have adapted to Johor traditional house roof form that is gabled hip roof (limas) roof form. This is exemplified by the roof of Marilalang's house (Figure 3). This was probably because the houses were built by Johor local craftsmen.

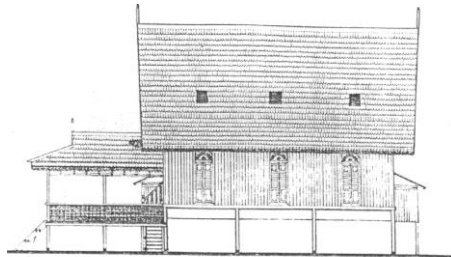


Figure 2: Elevation of Daeng Mat Diew's house, Johor
Source: KALAM (1981)

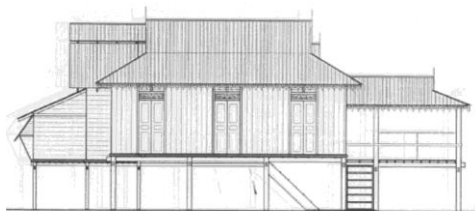


Figure 3: Elevation of Marilalang's house, Johor
Source: KALAM (2007)

One part of the Bugis culture that relate to cosmology is in the 3 layering of their house

form. The uppermost layer is the area below the roof and is known as *rekkeang* or *pemmakkang*. It is for the holy spirits and valuable items such as rice and inherited goods. The central layer is known as *alebola* or *kaleballa* and is the place where the residents live. This relates to their position in the middle of the cosmos. The lowest layer or the area below the floor is for the evil spirits known as *awaso* or *passiringang*. This can either be a dirty place with rubbish, pets or domestic fowls or a clean place for gathering and relaxing.

All the Bugis houses studied in Johor conformed to the three layer division according to the cosmos. These are exemplified by Daeng Mat Diew's house (Figure 2) and Marilalang's house (Figure 3). The area below the houses of Haji Kunok and Masih for instance, were used for storing gardening tools and motorcycles, as the owners were plantation workers. Apart from the belief relating to the cosmos, the climate could be the other explanation for having the three layers. Both Johor and South Sulawesi have equatorial climate, meaning that there is lots of sun and rain throughout the year. Therefore, the timber floor of the house is raised to keep it dry and clean.

Basically the plan of the Bugis houses consists of several rectangular forms or sections (*lontang*). There could be between 2 to 8 sections in each house. The simplest form of a house has 2 rectangular sections consisting of the central section of the house (*ri tengnga*) and the kitchen (*ri laleng*) at the back. Djauhari (1990) posits that the original Bugis house has an open interior without any partition. The studied Bugis house that relate to this form is Ngati's house in Makasar, Indonesia. The whole area is used for several functions such as sleeping and cooking (Figure 3).

The sizes of the Bugis houses studied varied and may display their status in the society. The houses of the aristocrats can have up to 8 sections. This is exemplary by Saoraja's house in Bone, South Sulawesi. It is the biggest Bugis house studied. All the Bugis houses studied in Johor consist of at least 2 sections. None of the Bugis houses in Johor were built without partition as exemplary by Ngati's house. This shows the need for privacy is greater among the residents of the Bugis houses in Johor. It also shows the prosperity of the Bugis in Johor. All the Bugis houses studied have similar sequence of section arrangement inside the house.

An extension may be built to the front and the back of the 2 sections. The later addition is the front section (*ri saliweng*) which is also rectangular but with a slightly lower floor level. This section is used for receiving visitors and has the biggest area. The veranda (*lego-lego*) is also added to the front section and has staircase to the ground level (Figure 2). The visitors would normally stay in the veranda before they are invited into the front section. This relates to the cultural practices whereby the interior of the house is considered private and for the residents only. It was noticed that the door to enter the front section of Haji Kunok's house (Figure 4) is low. This is actually part of the culture whereby one needs to bend slightly as a kind of respect to the house or the residents before entering.

The main post (*tiang seri*) is placed in the central section of the house (*ri tengnga*). It is believed that the spirit of the house (*semangat rumah*) lives in the main column or the main post (Waterson, 1998). The Bugis believed that the guardian of the house known as Ampo Banua (*dewi pelindung rumah*) resides at the main post to safeguard the residents. The guardian is thus given an offering on a weekly basis. The place where the main post

positioned is considered as the safest and holiest in the house. The position of the main posts of all the Bugis houses studied conformed to the beliefs mentioned earlier.

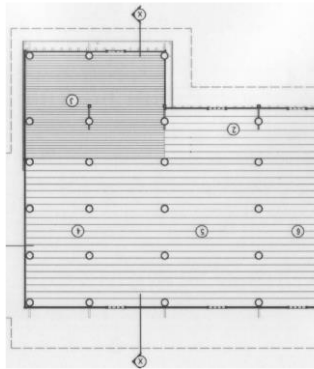


Figure 3: Plan of Ngati's house, Makasar, Indonesia
Source: KALAM (2012)

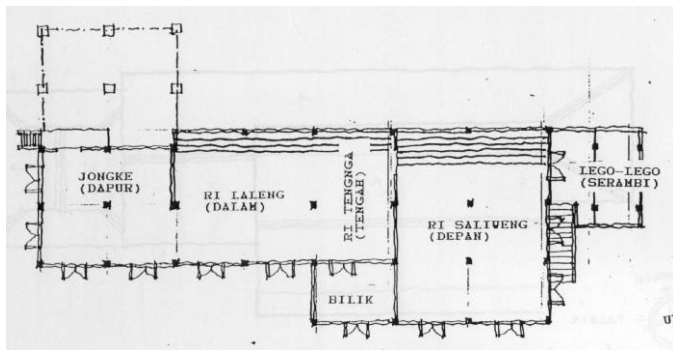


Figure 4: Plan of Haji Kunok's house, Johor
Source: Noris (1992)

The next area is the inside section (*ri laleng*), that is the sleeping zone of the family. It is normally divided into two sections. The inner one is for the young lady while the outside section is for the parents. This is also part of the culture whereby the lady is hidden from the eyes of the visitors until she got married. The furthest section is the kitchen (*jongke*).

The staircase is placed at one end of the house and sheltered by the roof. The simple houses, such as Ngati's house (Figure 3) have a single staircase only. All the Bugis houses studied in Johor have at least two sets of staircases. This is to ensure separate entrances according to gender. The male guests would enter through the front staircase while the female is through the one connected to the kitchen area (*jongke*). The second staircase is also used to go to the toilet or the well or water sources at the back.

There are two main differences between the plans of Johor traditional houses and Bugis houses. Firstly, the entrances for the Bugis houses are at the gable while that of the Johor traditional houses are at the side (compare Figure 4 with Figure 5). Secondly, the difference is in terms of the connection between the different spaces. In Bugis houses, the different sections (*lontang*) are connected with an indoor corridor (*tamping*). This is absent in the Johor traditional houses whereby the main section is connected to the kitchen area through a neck-like corridor (*kelek anak*) (Figure 5).

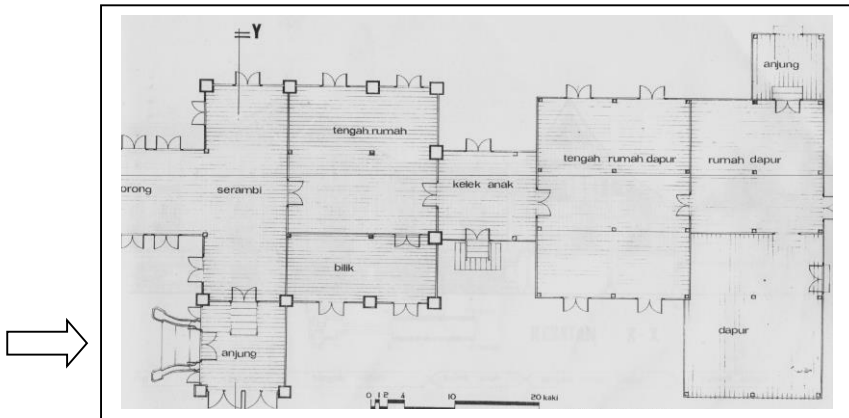


Figure 5: Plan of Elias's house, a Johor traditional house
Source: KALAM (1985)

Another characteristic of the studied Bugis house is the existence of three windows on the side elevation as exemplary by Daeng Mat Diew's house (Figure 2). The windows are built one on each bay and are symmetrically arranged. This 3 bay ruling is not found on all the Bugis houses studied in Johor. The other houses with the 3 windows include that of Haji Kunok's house, Masik's house and Marilalang's house (Figure 3).

It should be noted that some of the houses studied were built by Bugis craftsmen. An example is Haji Kunok's house that was built by Masih, a craftsman from his hometown in South Sulawesi (Noris, 1992). The other example is Daeng Mat Diew's house that was built by craftsmen from Kalimantan (Abdul Halim, 1987). Even the timber roofing tiles (*belian*) were brought from there. This explains the adherence of the houses to the Bugis house forms in South Sulawesi.

Summary

There are some similarities in the house forms, plans and elevations of the Bugis houses in Johor, Malaysia to those found in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. All the houses conform to the layering of the cosmos in term of the house section. All the houses studied have at least two basic sections (*lontang*) and the sequence of spaces shows the adherence to the culture

of the Bugis. This indicates that their culture plays a dominant role in the formation of the houses. A deviation from the practices in South Sulawesi is in the form of the roofs due to the use of local craftsmen in Johor (Table 1). The majority of the houses studied have gabled hip roof (limas) roof form that relates to Johor traditional houses.

Table1: Comparison between the Bugis houses in South Sulawesi, Indonesia and those in Johor, Malaysia

| NO. | POSITION | CHARACTERS THAT RELATE TO BUGIS CULTURE, EXEMPLARY BY 9 HOUSES IN SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA | OUT OF 21 SAMPLES OF HOUSES IN JOHOR, MALAYSIA |
|-----|------------|---|--|
| 1 | House form | Relate to cosmology in 3 horizontal layering | All houses |
| 2 | Roof form | Steeply inclined long ridged roof | 2 houses, the other 19 houses have gabled hip roof (limas) roof form |
| 3 | Plan | Positioning of the main column (<i>tiang ser</i>) in the inside section (<i>ri tengnga</i>) | All houses |
| 4 | Plan | Arrangement of different sections (<i>lontang</i>) according to sequence | All houses |
| 5 | Plan | Main entrance at the gable and not at the side | All houses |
| 6 | Plan | Different sections connected by an indoor corridor (<i>tamping</i>) | All houses |
| 6 | Elevation | Existence of 3 windows on the side elevation | 12 houses, the other 9 houses have either 2 or more than 3 windows of same sizes |

6.0 Conclusion

The findings suggest that there was a strong adherence to culture by the Bugis people in the form making of their houses. It suggested that even though the Bugis houses were built away from their homeland in South Sulawesi, Indonesia the culture of the Bugis descendants remain intact. This was revealed in the house forms, plans and the elevations of the Bugis houses. What should be noted is that the Bugis did not come to Malaysia in large groups. Surprisingly, the Bugis managed to uphold their culture even though they live far apart from the other Bugis.

The studies also suggest that even though the traditional houses in Malaysia were built in the same climate with the same availability of local materials, the house forms of the Bugis differ. These unique characters of the Bugis traditional houses show the richness of traditional houses that are missing in the design of mass housing in Malaysia. Some of the qualities of the traditional houses including those of the Bugis may be considered in the form making of contemporary mass housing design. This may result in a sensitive design to suit the residents with various cultural backgrounds in Malaysia.

The studies conducted covered only 30 samples of Bugis houses both in Johor, Malaysia and in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Thus, the results are not conclusive but can give some suggestions and indications to help further researches.

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