



# Urbanism, place and culture in the Malay world: The politics of domain from pre-colonial to post colonial era



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## ABSTRACT

This study is to explore and examine the sense of place in the Malay world. The purpose is to unfold and unveil the aspects and characteristics of what and why place is. This study is expected as a contribution to theory of landscape design and the built environment. In what extent is the place able to carry out and sustain its function and meaning for urbanism? Scrutinizing and examining concepts related to the phenomena of building and dwelling will be the focus of this essay. The aim is to recognize the sense of place for local people observed from planning and design perspective on what they call it as home. The study is carried out from the author fieldwork in the region from 2010 to 2013. The data were collected with participant observation as the author's life and work experience, supported by literary sources.

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## The Malay world

Pre history of habitation in the Malay Peninsula was a long story of empty land except small populations, which were probably descendants of Hoabinhian hunter-gatherers known as *orang asli* (see also [Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 9](#); [Bulbeck, 1996, p. 52](#)). However, most ancient populations in Southeast Asia shared similar linguistic and anthropological traces (pp. 21–40); they lived on the house on stilts, grew rice and millet, domesticated animals, betel chewing, sailed with outrigger vessels, did tattooing for their adult skin with ink, weaved their clothes, moulded and burnt their pottery. The Malay world today is the socio-cultural and historical habitation system of the multiethnic populations in today Malaysia that geopolitically takes place in the areas of former British colony, from the Southeast Asian Peninsula to Sabah and Serawak regions in the Island of Borneo/Kalimantan.

Historically, the Malay Peninsula was the land of immigrants; most of them came from the regions of Southeast Asia archipelago, India, and China. Ethnically speaking, the Malay world has been plural and the concept of identity has been always challenging because of this historical fact.

The root of the sense of place in this country is likely the necessity for dealing with differences with geographically shared domains, instead of trying intentionally to integrate all in a common space.

Since the British colonial era, each racial group has been running their own school based on their values and beliefs system. How people from different backgrounds interact and communicate? The Malay language has been working well as their platform because of its simple grammatical order. Since the 15th century, the Malay language has been functioning well for traders and merchants in the region ([Ammon, 2006, p. 2014](#)). It is not surprisingly, people in the region, –regardless their origin and background, – understand and know the Malay language as *bahasa orang pasar* – the language of people in the market place. From this fact, the sharing of meanings for places and domains is made possible by all ethnic groups.

Even though the geographical realms of those who speak, read, write, and understand the Malay language does not restrict the Malay world, most ethnic populations in the Malay Peninsula as well as in the archipelago have practiced the *bahasa melayu* since the pre-colonial times either for daily interaction or for international trade (see also [Grime, 1996, pp. 719–20](#)). However, the Malay world in this study is limited only for the phenomenon of habitation in the country of today Malaysia.

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Indeed, the variety of customs and tradition does exist in the Malay Peninsula in terms of arts, designs, and culinary. However, on cultural values they hold to similar principles in the context of *nilai-nilai murni* or original virtues (Subramaniam, 2008; Baba, 2009, p. 180). Most of the virtues are well conserved in the form of poems, idioms, and proverbs. In this case, the Malay language is the house of intrinsic meanings and messages.

The existence of the Malay world takes place in various built environments that consists of house, village, urban areas and places. Each place has its unique uses and designs that build, establish, maintain, and sustain habitation. The Malay speaking populations used to live in various places of the Southeast Asian archipelago. Traditionally, their settlements are organized with a village polity called *kampung* (Ghazali in Blunel, Parthasarathy, & Thompson, 2013, p. 122). Houses for the Malay speaking populations are architecturally simple single detached house with gable roof form. Bamboo and timber are common material they use for the house construction. In the Malay Peninsula, all habitations take place on the land of *kampung* as a common property. The village assembly and the village head have the right to assign the spot of the house for village households. Commonly, the head of the village has a privilege to occupy a strategic place for his home so that he can oversee and control the territory visually. The traditional Malay world is the world without domination of land by any proprietor. The origin of land claim as property or wealth had never happened until the British colonial empire controlled the different areas of the Malay world.

As a phenomenon of habitation, place in the Malay world is a historical and sociocultural realm that develops and sustains unique customs and traditions. Contextuality in this respect is more than just a network of relations but it includes local values and potentials that work and fit well in its environment and society. The relationship between place and people in the Malay tradition is understood under the notion of *adat istiadat*, literally meaning customary laws. Each place has its own *adat istiadat*, because place is always associated with the built environment or man-made domain with sociocultural habitation. In the Malay speaking world, the words for space and place have different meaning. The Malay concept for space is *angkasa*; it is not to signify a domain or room. Space in this sense is indefinite entity, without boundary, and open. On the contrary to space is room; the Malay word for room is *ruang* meaning confinement, domain, and space in between. *Ruang* is potentially occupied area with specific use and design, which is usually for people or things.

Since the British colonial era, the use of the land has been being regulated and administered by the state. Unlike the Portuguese empire in Malacca, the British colonial rule regulated and administered the land by using and maintaining relationship with the indigenous rulers. The colonial practice of the British Empire since the period of Sir Stamford Raffles was unique, which was based on the concept of defeating the local rulers, then bringing them for treaty agreement, and controlling the commercial interest in their regions. The British colonial power had achieved the full control over the Malay world in 1874; the Malay sultans signed the Pangkor Treaty authorizing the British to govern the land and its resources under the British com-

mon laws system. This treaty is considerably the turning point of formal relationship between the British and the Malay States (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 157). Nevertheless, the Pangkor Treaty confirms that the British colonial officers are the primary economic and administrative advisors of the Royal Malay households (Gullick, 1969, p. 53).

The relationship between the British colonial administration and the Malay sultanates was actually quite formal in a strictly business relationship. The British was subtly acting as the protector and trustee. The Malay rulers were not able to manage the territorial economy without any advice and direction from the British officers. Moreover, the practice of colonialism by the British was based on the principle of “divide and rule” (Rappa & Wee, 2006, p. 32). In doing so, the British rule left various ethnic groups beyond the Malay populations, – such as Chinese and Tamil people, – in their own worlds. As formulated with such a treaty, the British colonialism held “the divide and rule” government business (Khan, 2006, p. 140) and stayed away from *adat* and religious affairs. In this case, the British is in charge for government matters while the Sultanates take care for religious and sociocultural affairs. With such a treaty, the British had actually taken over the political control of the Malay sultanates over their land and resources. What was left for the Malay sultanates was likely nothing but their symbolic authority on indigenous culture, customs, and traditions.

Since 1895, economically and politically, the land was not under the control of the Malay states, but under the British centrally bureaucratic authority in Kuala Lumpur. However, the use of the areas beyond the already occupied lands by the indigenous or Malay people remained as it was. The British had more interest in opening opportunities of the uncultivated land for plantations. In its practice, the British colonialism in the Malay world can be divided into three categories (Lange, 2006, pp. 184–5). The first was a direct trade control over the three city-colonies: Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. The second was the direct political control over the nine Federated Malay States: Selangor, Perak, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Perlis, Kedah, Terengganu, and Pahang in 1895. The third was indirect political control over the Non-federated Malay States, such as Serawak and Sabah, between 1909 and 1914.

Even though the Dutch had controlled Malacca and other parts of the Malay world since the mid of 17th century, the Dutch VOC did not intervene into the local affairs of the Malay states. Indeed, the Dutch and the British were in competition for the commercial control of the Straits of Malacca since early the 17th century. The Dutch VOC in Malacca did not penetrate into agricultural business, but more focused on commercial trade control at the coastal areas of the archipelago (De Witt, 2007, p. XVIII). Indeed, the expansion of Dutch and British colonialism into the agricultural business took place in the midst of the 19th century, when coffee, tea, rubber, and tobacco became worldwide commodities in European market.

### Tempat

General concept for place in the Malay speaking world is *tempat* meaning literally location, site, container or

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