

# LONGING FOR CULTURE AND NATURE: THE MALAY RURAL CULTURAL LANDSCAPE “DESA TERCINTA”

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## Graphical Abstract



## Abstract

The Malays who migrated to live in urban areas in Malaysia are well known as a group of community that has strong bonding with their rural villages; the place where majority of them were originated from. Village or known as Desa in the Malay language is always the best place for holiday escapism, festivals and ceremonial events. This paper intends to investigate the characteristics of the Malay village adopting the Information Processing Theory, in order to understand reasons why they are so captivating and longing for by those who lived away from them. A qualitative approach is adopted in this research. A case study was carried out in Perak, the state that is located in the North part of Malaysia. Findings of this study inform that the village natural characteristics, cultural significance and their close-knit communities are among the magnets, pulling the urban people to pay visits and spending their precious times in this natural environment.

**Keywords:** Cultural landscape, Malay cultural landscape, Information Processing Theory

## Abstrak

Orang Melayu yang berhijrah untuk tinggal di kawasan bandar di Malaysia dikenali sebagai kumpulan masyarakat yang mempunyai ikatan yang kukuh dengan kampung-kampung luar bandar; tempat di mana majoriti daripada mereka berasal. Kampung atau dikenali sebagai Desa dalam bahasa Melayu, selalunya tempat terbaik untuk percutian, perayaan dan keraian. Kertas ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik ciri-ciri kampung Melayu mengadaptasi "Information Processing Theory", untuk memahami sebab-sebab mengapa mereka begitu menawan dan dirindui. Pendekatan kualitatif diguna pakai dalam kajian ini. Satu kajian kes telah dijalankan di Perak, negeri yang terletak di bahagian Utara Malaysia. Hasil kajian ini memaklumkan bahawa ciri-ciri semula jadi kampung, kepentingan budaya dan kesatuan masyarakat adalah antara magnet, menarik masyarakat bandar untuk melawat dan menikmati masa mereka dalam persekitaran semula jadi ini.

**Kata kunci:** Landskap budaya, Landskap budaya Melayu, Information Processing Theory

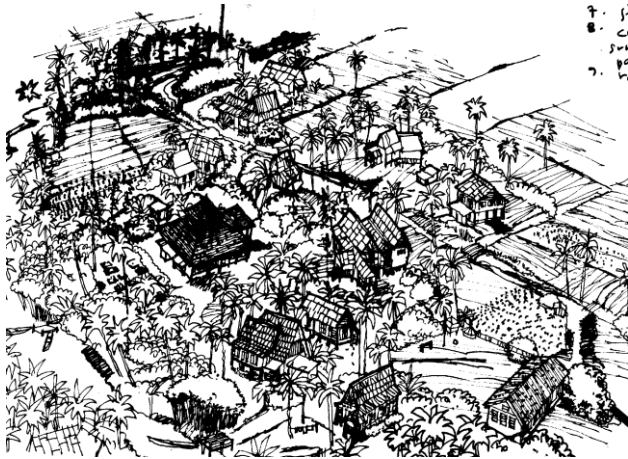
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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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. Malay villages are mostly located near the village's sources of livelihood [1]. Fishing villages are found close to the sea while inland villages are usually located near the paddy fields, rubber or oil palm plantations. Figure 1 demonstrates the typical compositions of the Malay rural cultural landscape



**Figure 1** The typical compositions of the Malay Rural Cultural Landscape

## 2.0 EVOLUTION OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN THE MALAY RURAL VILLAGE

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 ([2]. 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.

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 [3]. 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 [4]. 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 [5]. Rubber and palm oil cultivated areas are mostly found along the interior, located at the foothills scattered along the length and breadth of the Malay Peninsula. 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.

To understand the concept of the Malay village with its cultural landscape setting, we have to look at it from both its macro environment as well as its micro setting. The village is viewed as a whole in relation to its surrounding natural landscape and the Malay house in relation to its compounds and garden setting. The evolution of the Malay village is the result of the interrelationship between man and his surroundings, man and his inherent cultural attributes and the need to survive. These influences have helped shape the course of actions taken by the Malays in the design and composition of their habitat into a cultural responsive landscape. Figure 2 presents a setting of a house in the middle of paddy field in the rural Malay village

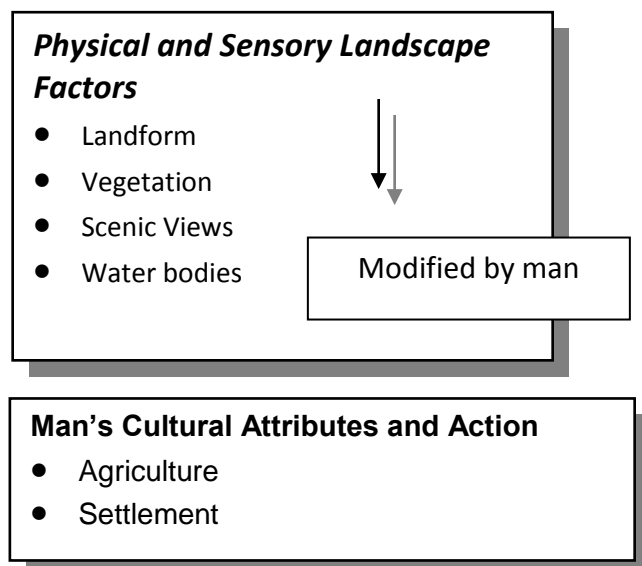


**Figure 2** A setting of a house in the middle of paddy field in the rural Malay village

A family occupies each house and each cluster belongs to related families. However, every house has a compound that is demarcated by trees, usually coconut palms or fruit trees, at the boundary

of the compound. Generally, there are no physical boundaries that segregate each of the house such as fences. Therefore, the openness of the village creates an impression that all external spaces are being shared as a communal space. The residential area will then be connected with a network of curvilinear paths from house to house to various public buildings and communal spaces such as mosques, cemetery, shops, and community hall. Nevertheless, Malay village develops through organic planning without a proper land use planning. The sites of the houses are usually selected according to traditional beliefs. House-building rituals are important in the Malay society, because for the Malays, the spirit of a site must be appeased so that the house will be peaceful and the well-being of the occupants is assured [3]. Traditionally, villagers depend on river for their water supply and use kerosene lamps to light their houses. Wells and rivers also act as focal points for villagers to meet socially. Children bath and play in shallow streams while the womenfolk gather to collect water for their household chores, to bathe and to do their washing. The men, of course, provide food for the family by fishing in the river.

Subsequently, the infrastructures and services such as water supplies, electricity, drainage system, roads and telephone lines have been installed, after the village has arrived at a substantial development [3]. This technological development in the village has developed significant changes in the daily life pattern of the community and these changes are reflected in their cultural landscape. As an example, rivers and lakes are no more the sources of water, but utilized as a recreational area. Nevertheless, the responsiveness and interaction between man and its environment still remain. Figure 3 shows the evolution of the Malay village development



**Figure 3** The evolution of the Malay Village Development

The layout of the macro environment of the village generally reflects its micro-origin of an inherent family oriented beginning, the Malay village gradually evolved into a transparently close-knit community values depending on each other in the daily lives. The spirit of the *gotong royong* or a communal work obviously reflects this nature of the collective thinking and work effort among the residents of the whole community. Festivities, religion or otherwise, such as weddings or deaths in the community would draw the whole community together to attend to the occasion. The building of mosques, the construction of a school or a communal hall would require the collective agreement of the village residents or their representatives. In other words, the village usually with its elected village leader called "*penghulu*" is reflective of its original building block. As the head of the family mediates and renders his final decision, so the *penghulu* performs his similar duty of deciding the livelihood of the villagers.

Whether it is rice-harvesting festival or the gathering of durian and various other fruits such as rambutans and mangosteen, there is always an occasion to celebrate collectively. While the women congregate to prepare for the feast, the men gather to set up the venue for the events. Responsibilities are allotted and carried out primarily in the spirit of volunteerism and practicality, those who can cook will cook and those who can clean will clean up after the events. This is the spirit of *gotong-royong* or the sharing of responsibilities for the benefit of the whole community.

### 3.0 INFORMATIONAL PROCESSING MODEL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PREFERENCE

Kaplan [4] contributes significantly towards the environmental preference studies. In her perception, the landscape is basically a visual experience. People in fact experience much of the physical environment visually. The landscape evaluation process may be either philosophical or aesthetic; or they may be quantitative and use applied measurement techniques in the field of geography, planning, environmental psychology, economics and landscape design [5].

The evaluation of visual quality in landscape is, however, mainly derived from longstanding appraisal of the relationship between man and nature, with a developing aesthetic awareness of landscape since the eighteenth century in the form of philosophic, literary, and graphic preoccupation with the aesthetic qualities in scenery. This research can be defined as the "comparative relationships between two or more landscapes in terms of the assessment of the visual quality; in this context, "assessments are the process of recording visual quality through observer's aesthetic appreciation of intrinsic visual qualities or characteristics within the landscape" ([5]. This understanding is relevant to the Informational

Processing Model of Environmental preference that has been developed by Kaplan [4]. In this model, they suggest that two groups of information are essentially needed by humans in order to function effectively in the world. They are the information regarding the content of the environment and information relating to its spatial configuration. The model strongly suggests that the experience of landscape through sense making and getting involved with the environment is an important concern to people. As an extension to this research, they have developed The Preference Matrix that introduces two domains representing two critical facets of people's relationship to information.

The first domain involves two major categories of human needs namely, understanding and exploration. Understanding has been explained as making sense of what is going on and it is far reaching in its expression. Understanding of the immediate environment is very important as it describes the impression of the space. However, the understanding needs to be supported with knowledge. As an example, Buhyoff *et al.* [3] examine the preference of trees that are already diseased (orange-brown foliage from southern pine beetle damage) is highly rated by the respondents who do not understand the cause of coloration.

The need of exploration is another aspect of human need defined as a curiosity about one's surrounding. Kaplan [4] discusses that exploration is an important element in accumulating experience. It inclines one to expand one's knowledge as well as to increase one's capacity to understand previously confusing situation. In short, Kaplan suggests that if the need to explore is a pervasive human need, it is also reasonable that preferences would be greater where exploration is facilitated.

Kaplan [4] then extends these two domains, understanding and exploration, into four distinct patterns as been shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** The preference matrix

Level	Understanding	Exploration
Immediate	Coherence	Complexity
Inferred, Predicted	Legibility	Mystery

The four factors that have been focused by them are important to predict human preferences in environment. Complexity in this model is defined in terms of the numbers of different visual elements in a scene; how intricate and rich the scene is. Complexity is important in providing a significant character of a setting in a landscape as it represents a variety of elements including that of the natural or man-made. The model expresses complexity as an encouragement of exploration. The composition provides various experience and information, encouraging involvement in natural environment.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In brief, The Malays who migrated to live in urban areas in Malaysia are known as a group of community that has strong bonding with their rural villages especially through the characteristics of their natural village environment. These characteristics are evaluated using the Information Processing Theory. The four environmental factors namely coherence, complexity, legibility and mystery resulted into the village or Desa, becoming one of the best places for holiday and time out.

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