

Tiang Seri Shapes: A Reflection of Status in Negeri Sembilan

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ABSTRACT

In the construction of the Malay Vernacular architecture, Tiang Seri plays a significant role in both the architectural and cultural aspects of the building. It is present in the design and construction of most Malay traditional houses, palaces, and mosques that were built in the period, including the Malay traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan. Nowadays, with the advances in technology and building materials, Tiang Seri is no longer used and is deemed a forgotten practice in the construction of residential houses. In addition, the existing traditional houses are facing extinction along with the Tiang Seri inside it. A study on an aspect of Tiang Seri is crucial for the conservation effort to document the Tiang Seri. This study aims to document the different shapes of Tiang Seri in traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan, analyse their correlation with the social status of house owners, and evaluate their cultural significance for heritage conservation. Qualitative research is employed with a literature review of related studies, a few case studies, and structured interviews to find the shapes of Tiang Seri in the Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional house. The result shows a variety of shapes of the Tiang Seri, which are Belah 4, Belah 6, Belah 8, and a combination of both Belah 4, and Tiang Bulat. Interestingly, the shapes are directly affected by the status of the owner, proving that it is essential to conduct further studies on Tiang Seri to prevent it from being lost to younger generations.

Keywords: Conservation, Malay traditional house, Negeri Sembilan, Tiang Seri

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INTRODUCTION

Tiang Seri is an important component of a Malay traditional house. Culturally, the process of constructing the house must begin with the installation of the main pillar or Tiang Seri. In certain cultures, it is necessary to organise a ceremony during this process to make sure the construction

is blessed, and some even believe that the ritual will influence the spiritual harmony of the house. Beyond its ritual and structural significance, the *Tiang Seri* is a prominent decorative element, making it a potent symbol within the vernacular architecture. This intersection of structure, ritual, and decoration suggests it may also function as a marker of social identity. This concept is supported by Oktawati et al. (2024), who demonstrated that for the Mamasa tribe in Indonesia, social status directly influences the function, form, and decoration of their traditional houses. Similarly, in Negeri Sembilan, a shared cultural trait sees social status reflected in their architectural choices.

Negeri Sembilan is a state in West Malaysia that is known for its unique architecture and culture, which is distinct from its counterparts. This is due to the presence of the Minangkabau matrilineal system that stands out not only as a culture that has impressively strived until today but also has been implemented into the architectural designs of the house. As a result, the Negeri Sembilan traditional Malay house is constructed with careful consideration for the owner's body measurements, taking into account the first woman's role in the social system of Adat Perpatih (Azman et al., 2022).

In modern days, where technology and building materials evolve and advance, building construction no longer requires the presence of *Tiang Seri* in the building construction of residential houses. According to Professor Dr. Mohd Tajuddin Mohd Rasdi, even if one wanted to construct

a conventional home, it would be difficult to find a trained craftsman at a reasonable price, due to the reduction in the number of such workers, not to mention the sheer price of the materials needed (Tan, 2019). The only way to appreciate and study this historical house component is to visit the remaining structures that still feature it, as these components are no longer utilised in contemporary building practices. Unfortunately, these existing houses are facing the threat of extinction, in terms of being abandoned and decayed or going into major renovations, losing their ingenuity along the way (Rashid, et al., 2018). Thus, making it imperative to document and preserve their unique architectural elements before they are lost forever.

In addition, it needs to be highlighted that there is a lack of research on heritage home components, namely the *Tiang Seri* (Rashidi et al., 2022), which is a substantial loss of information. This discrepancy not only impacts our comprehension of conventional building construction techniques but also leads to the depletion of tangible cultural heritage. The *Tiang Seri* fulfils a vital role as both a fundamental structural component and a kind of artistic representation and social status symbol. It is crucial to rectify this research gap in order to safeguard the technical and cultural aspects of heritage buildings.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the role of traditional architectural elements, specifically the *Tiang Seri* shapes, in

reflecting social status within the traditional architecture of Negeri Sembilan. The research focusses on two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to document the various shapes of *Tiang Seri* found in traditional Malay houses throughout Negeri Sembilan. Secondly, the study aims to analyse the correlation between the shape of the *Tiang Seri* and the social status of the respective house owners, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of how architectural features reflect cultural hierarchies and identity in the context of Negeri Sembilan's heritage architecture.

LITERATURE REVIEW / THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tiang Seri and Culture

Tiang Seri goes by many names, as it was a construction practice not only in Malaysia but also in Indonesia (*Tiang Raja*), Java (*Soko Guru*) (Irnawan & Rahayu, 2020), Thailand (*Sao Prayaa*) (Shimizu et al., 2017) and Brunei (Azman et al., 2021). In Indonesia, *Tunggok Tuo* or *Tiang Tua* is used, while experts with decades of experience in woodworking and the locals stated that the widely used term by the people of Negeri Sembilan is *Tiang Tongah*, and was used as the main supporting pillar. In Malay beliefs, *Tiang Seri* symbolises the strength of the house (Abd Rashid & Amat, 2011). It comes in various shapes, as an example, in *Rumah Kutai*, the shape of *Tiang Seri* is either round, square or octagonal (Khairudin et al., 2018). Although the *Tiang Seri* has traditionally served as

the central structural element of a Malay house, there is a lack of research exploring its direct connection to the social status of the homeowners.

Tiang Seri in a Malay traditional house is usually found in the centre of the *Rumah Ibu* with cloth or *Bunga Halang* on the top of the pillar or crown (Abidin et al., 2024). This is said to be a practice to ward off unwanted spirits and protect the occupants. Figure 1 is an example of *Bunga Halang*, a piece of cloth that was put on top of the *Tiang Seri* during the construction of the house. The fabric is adorned with three, five, or seven colours, symbolising the individual's social standing. The variety of colour schemes is associated with different social classes in Malaysia. The common Malays typically have three colours, while the wealthy have five colours, and the royalty has seven colours (Abd Rashid & Amat, 2011).

Figure 1 showcases a remarkable illustration of fabric draped over the *Tiang Seri* or *Kepala Tiang*. In some traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan, a piece of cloth placed at the *Tiang Seri* is usually yellow, white, or red, placed on top of the *Tiang Seri* as a symbolic element.



Figure 1. The remaining piece of cloth found on top of *Tiang Seri*

This practice is believed to function as a spiritual protection and reflects the houseowner's adherence to customary beliefs (Halim, 1985; Mohd Taib, 1989). In the context of Adat Perpatih, such rituals are rooted in ancestral traditions and are considered a way to protect the 'spirit' of the house (Daud, 1991). Typically, the chosen colours for the fabric are yellow or white. On certain occasions, cloth was discovered with Quranic verses inscribed upon it.

The coin in Figure 2 was unearthed during a house demolition and was found buried beneath the Tiang Seri. It was then kept as a memento. The coins or any metal was put at the base of the Tiang Seri as another form of ritual during the erection of the main pillar, while according to a local expert, the reasonings behind the coin are more practical, where it is believed that the date or year inscribed on a coin could be connected to the year of construction of a house. The social status of a family can be inferred from the type and quantity of coins they use. Individuals from privileged backgrounds often opt for more intricate or sizable coins, which serve as a symbol of their affluence and further solidify their position in society.



Figure 2. An old coin that was discovered beneath an unearthed Tian Seri

This aspect connects the ceremonial use of coins to wider cultural beliefs about money and social status. These practices highlight the importance of Tiang Seri in Malay traditional houses as a marker of status.

Negeri Sembilan Malay Traditional House: Architecture and Culture

Malay traditional houses, often referred to as Malay vernacular houses, exhibit distinctive architectural designs that blend aesthetic appeal with historical significance, featuring numerous concealed symbols for new generations to discover and interpret (Hashim et al., 2017). Historically, these house types are constructed in groups, creating a community that exists in a location referred to as a village or kampong – a term utilised in nations like Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei (Samsudin et al., 2020). The houses located in the Malay regions of Malaysia and Indonesia exhibit a remarkable similarity in their diverse styles, often reflecting mutual influences between the two countries.

Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional house, while often being compared to Rumah Gadang, Indonesia, is a perfect assimilation of the culture brought by the people of Minangkabau that migrate to Tanah Melayu and the architectural design of the local buildings. The Malay traditional house in Negeri Sembilan is formed by combining the true Minangkabau matrilineal system with the local matrilineal system, creating a unique complementarity (Azman et al., 2022; Hardono, 2012).

According to research, Tiang Seri serves as a symbol of prestige, power, and social status (Kessler, 1988). Which is why during the Adat ceremony, Ibu Soko or an elder woman who is well-versed in custom will be seated by the Tiang Seri at the center of Rumah Ibu (Maamor et al., 2024). This is why it is crucial to preserve and appreciate the unique architectural elements found in Malay traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan, as they hold significant cultural value. By understanding and passing down these features, we can ensure that the community's cultural identity remains intact and unambiguous (Ismail et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study applies the framework of Oktawati et al. (2024), who established a typology of traditional architecture based on the social stratification of the Mamasai tribe.

Their findings demonstrate four distinct typologies that align with social divisions, differing not only in form, space, meaning, and decorative motifs but also in the quality of materials used. The caste divisions and the traditional house typology of each division are summarised and shown in Figure 3.

Based on the hierarchy, *Tana'bulawan*, or the high nobility, will have more space and access to better quality materials. Not only that, the carvings and decoration diminished as we go down the hierarchy. The buffalo horns found in the commoners' houses are a sign of independence and economic capability. While the *Tana'kua-kua* or the slaves are dependent on their masters for livelihood. The lower the status, the less elaborate the house, with designs adhering to a basic, utilitarian approach. A theoretical framework is developed based on this theory, as shown in Figure 4.

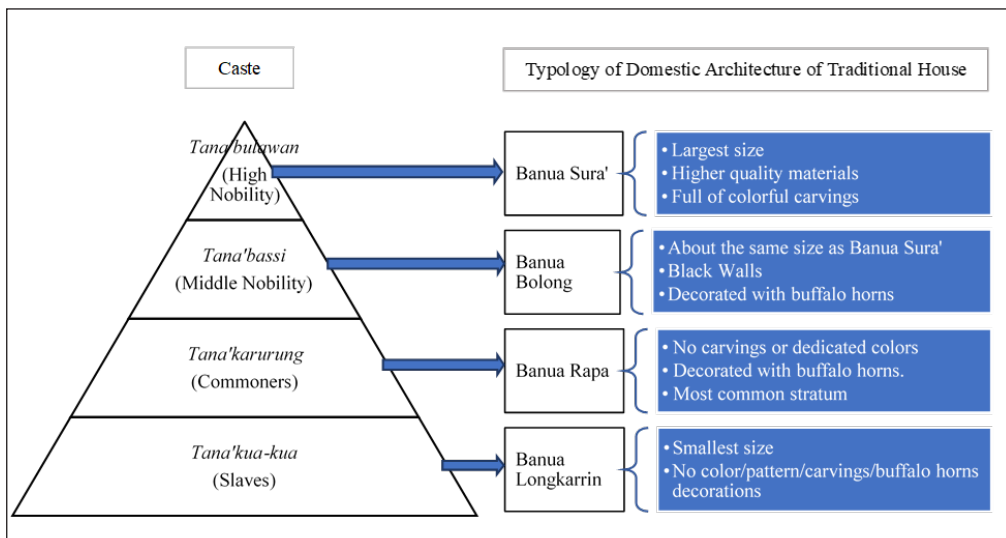


Figure 3. Caste divisions and their typology of domestic architecture of a traditional house

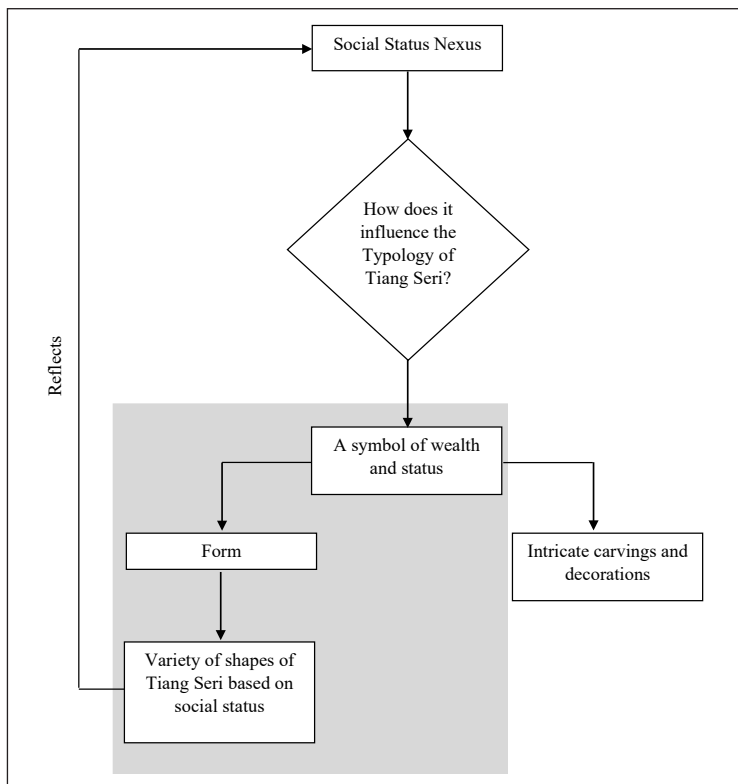


Figure 4. The study's theoretical framework

This study is guided by a theoretical framework based on the model established by Oktawati et al. (2024). Their framework posits that social stratification is the primary driver of traditional architectural variety. This framework is adopted for the present research because it provides a structured lens to analyse Tiang Seri shapes as a marker of social status in Negeri Sembilan.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilised a qualitative method, focusing on a case study approach of 14 Malay traditional houses in Rembau,

Negeri Sembilan. Thus, to gather insights, questionnaires were administered to the 14 owners or representatives, 2 experienced *Tukang Rumah*, and 1 expert respondent who has been involved in traditional house building for many years. Data was also collected through direct observation and photographic documentation.

The case studies started with choosing Malay traditional houses that fit the criteria of a heritage house. The selection was done based on either their architectural or historical value (Kamal & Wahab, 2014). If the building fulfils either of these requirements, it is eligible as a heritage building.

This is essential to capture the cultural, architectural, and technological heritage of past eras. Such structures offer invaluable insights into historical craftsmanship, design principles, and construction techniques, reflecting the sociocultural contexts of their time. Analyzing these houses aids in understanding the evolution of architectural practices and informs contemporary preservation and restoration efforts. This approach ensures the protection and appreciation of significant historical resources, providing a comprehensive basis for heritage conservation and urban planning policies.

The questionnaire will take place during the case study with the help of homeowners and, for some houses, only the representatives. The questionnaire will be carried out with brief questions regarding the age of the house and the historical status of the original owners. This will help later in determining the relation between the status of the owner and the shape of Tiang Seri. Then, the results of the questionnaires and case studies will be presented to the experienced *Tukang Rumah* and expert respondents. Another series of questionnaires was then administered to them to better understand the outcome of the case studies.

Case Study Context

The scope of this study is limited to the district of Rembau, which was selected as the case study site due to its suitability in preserving the originality and authenticity of data. According to Abd Rahim et al. (2023),

Rembau is among the earliest districts established in Negeri Sembilan, with historical records suggesting the migration to Rembau began as early as 1388 while others say in 1338 (Omar & Nelmawarni, 2008). However, another researcher concludes that it began even earlier in the 12th century (Abas, 1953). In addition to its historical significance, Rembau is also known for retaining traditional Minangkabau cultural practices and housing some of the most authentic examples of Negeri Sembilan's vernacular architecture, making it a highly relevant and valuable site for this research.

Table 1 shows a list of Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional houses that have been categorised according to the status of their previous original owner. The Malay traditional houses exhibit architectural characteristics akin to those found in other traditional Malay structures across the western region of Peninsular Malaysia. However, they present subtle variations, particularly in the roof design, where the influence of Minangkabau architecture is distinctly observable (Awaludin et al., 2021). Although the exteriors may appear alike, the interiors reveal distinct variations influenced by the owner's social or economic status.

Negeri Sembilan is a state full of customs and etiquette; therefore, before the case study was carried out, it was necessary to get permission from the ADUN office. This also aims to aid the process, as the contact information of each MPKK was provided to the researcher by the office. MPKK acts as *ketua Kampung*, which is

Table 1
Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional houses categorised according to ownership status

Status	Commoner	Wealthy	Noble
NSMTH			

Note. NSMTH: Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional house

why it was compulsory to communicate with them before reaching out to the owner or heiress themselves. Each homeowner was personally contacted by the MPKK to inform them of the study and whether it is possible to give their permission to enter the premises. Some MPKK have gone above and beyond to lead the researchers to the houses themselves.

Collecting data from houses of more than 100 years old comes with challenges, as not all of them are well taken care of. Some of the houses were in decline as they are no longer inhabited, while some houses are decayed, in ruins, abandoned, and no longer maintained. This leads to the number of case studies being reduced from the originally anticipated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the case study on the physical form or shapes of Tiang Seri in traditional houses and the social status of their owners. The data is summarised with the distribution of Tiang Seri shapes observed, followed

by an analysis of their correlation with the owners' social status. Insights gathered from questionnaires administered to homeowners provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and practical significance of these architectural elements. The Tiang Seri found during the case study proved to be distinct and unique in their own way. In Table 2, case study details of the heritage houses chosen are listed, including the status of the original owner, Mukim, and the address of each house. Although the list should only contain houses in Rembau, one case in Kuala Pilah was added as it is a rare surviving example of Tiang Seri in Negeri Sembilan that could not be ignored. Although from a different district, it still met the age requirement of being over a 100-year-old house, consistent with the criteria set for this study.

Based on the case study done, the shapes found are square, hexagonal, octagonal, and a combination of cylindrical and square-shaped bases and tops. These terms are then changed to match the settings of the research according to the community involved.

The square-shaped pillar is Belah 4, the hexagonal is Belah 6, and the octagonal is Belah 8, while the combination of the cylindrical and square-shaped pillar is Tiang Bulat and Belah 4. The number in the names represents the sides each pillar has. The cross-section of the pillars is represented in Figure 5.

Presented in Table 2 are the houses chosen for the case study. It includes comprehensive information gathered through careful

observation and questionnaires administered to the owners and representatives of each house. The paper offers valuable insights into the historical context of the original owners and the unique architectural features of each house. It also includes images and descriptions of the position of the Tiang Seri, showcasing their distinct shapes and defining characteristics. From Table 3, it is apparent that despite the typology of the house, the Tiang Seri remains at the centre of Rumah Ibu.

Table 2
Case study details

House Code	Status of Owner	Mukim	Address
NSMTH-1	Commoner	Gadong	Kampung Gadong
NSMTH-2	Commoner	Gadong	Kampung Seberang Batu Hampar
NSMTH-3	Noble	Gadong	Kampung Seberang Paya, Gadong
NSMTH-4	Wealthy	Chengkau	Kampung Lada, Chengkau
NSMTH-5	Commoner	Bongek	Batu 20, Kampung Bongek, Rembau
NSMTH-6	Wealthy	Seberang Batu Hampar	Kampung Seberang Batu Hampar
NSMTH-7	Wealthy	Penajis	Kampung Ampang, Penajis
NSMTH-8	Wealthy	Selemak	Kampung Selemak
NSMTH-9	Wealthy	Selemak	Kampung Selemak
NSMTH-10	Commoner	Sepri	Kampung Ampang Batu, Sepri
NSMTH-11	Commoner	Nerasau	Kampung Nerasau
NSMTH-12	Wealthy	Nerasau	Kampung Nerasau
NSMTH-13	Wealthy	Kuala Pilah	Kampung Talang Tengah, Tanjung Ipoh
NSMTH-14	Wealthy	Nerasau	Kampung Nerasau

Note. NSMTH : Negeri Sembilan Malay Traditional House

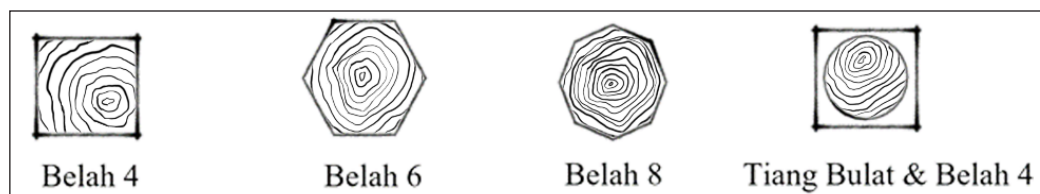


Figure 5. Shapes of Tiang Seri found in the Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional house

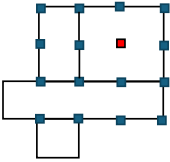



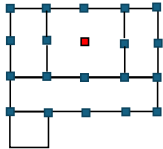



Table 3
Tiang Seri details collected during the case study

House Code	Typology of House	Picture	Close-up Details	Shape of Tiang Seri
NSMTH-1				 Belah 4
NSMTH-2				 Belah 4
NSMTH-3				 Belah 4
NSMTH-4				 Tiang Bulat & Belah 4
NSMTH-5				 Belah 4
NSMTH-6				 Belah 4

Table 3 (continued)

House Code	Typology of House	Picture	Close-up Details	Shape of Tiang Seri
NSMTH-7				 Belah 4
NSMTH-8				 Belah 4
NSMTH-9				 Belah 4
NSMTH-10				 Belah 4
NSMTH-11				 Belah 4
NSMTH-12				 Belah 8

Table 3 (continued)

House Code	Typology of House	Picture	Close-up Details	Shape of Tiang Seri
NSMTH-13				 Belah 6
NSMTH-14				 Belah 4

Note. NSMTH: Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional house

The chart in Figure 6 shows that a majority of the studied Tiang Seri have the Belah 4 shape, which is significantly higher at 78% of the total amount compared to other shapes identified in the case study. This predominance can be attributed to the cost-effectiveness and relative ease of construction associated with the Belah 4 design. Although not part of the formal data collection, additional insights were gathered through casual discussions with several homeowners, which clarifies that the Tiang Seri with the Belah 8 shape is rare, as it is typically affordable only by individuals of high social status. This statement was also supported by experts in related fields. Similarly, the Belah 6 shape and the combination of Tiang Seri Belah Bulat and Belah 4 are also less common and are generally found in houses owned by affluent individuals.

This pattern underscores the correlation between the architectural features of Tiang Seri and the socioeconomic status of the owners, highlighting the role of traditional house components as markers of social distinction.

Figure 7 illustrates that the Tiang Seri Belah 4 is a prevalent shape across all social statuses within the studied Malay traditional houses. This consistency suggests that the Tiang Seri Belah 4 is favoured for its practicality and economic efficiency. However, the study reveals a notable distinction in the variety and complexity of Tiang Seri shapes among wealthier individuals compared to those of lower social statuses.

Wealthier homeowners exhibit a greater diversity of Tiang Seri shapes, including more complex designs such as Belah 6, Belah 8, and combinations like



Figure 6. Number of Tiang Seri and their respective shapes

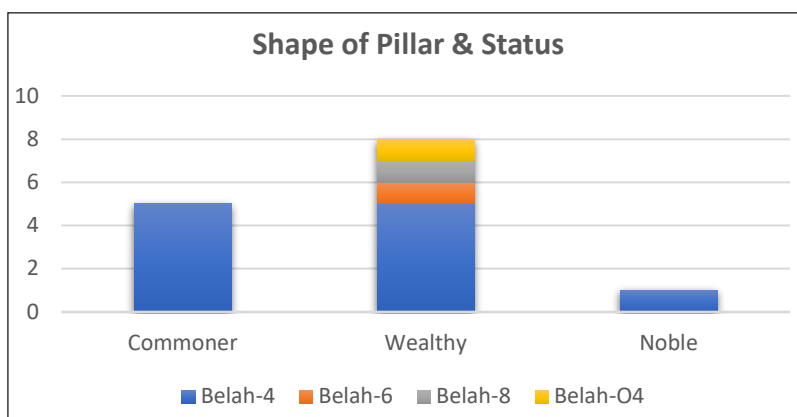


Figure 7. The shape of Tiang Seri and the status of its respective owner

Tiang Seri Belah Bulat and Belah 4. This variety indicates that higher social status is associated with the ability to invest in more elaborate architectural elements, reflecting both economic capability and a desire to display social prestige.

These findings confirm that the Tiang Seri represents the social status of its owner. This provides a concrete architectural case study for Oktawati et al.'s (2024) broader theory of social stratification. Commoners in the case study used only the basic Tiang Belah 4, a shape considered practical and

economical, with minimal to no carvings, which demonstrates their position at the margins of the social status nexus. Although nobles and some wealthy owners in the sample also used the Tiang Belah 4, they distinguished their status through starkly more intricate carvings. This elaboration allowed them to express their status and cultural heritage through architectural detail. While the deeper nuances of the social status are undoubtedly expressed in such motifs, and are a rich topic for future study, the fundamental access to variation in form

itself remains a primary indicator of social status. The restriction of commoners to a single, simple shape visually reinforces their standardised position, whereas the variety of forms is a clear architectural manifestation of their distinct and elevated rank. Figure 8 shows examples of woodcarvings found in a noble house, where each side is unique and beautifully crafted.

Although the sample size in this study is relatively small compared to the total number of Malay traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan, it represents a significant starting point and catalyses further heritage research. This initial examination of Malay traditional house components lays out the groundwork for more comprehensive future studies. It could explore the cultural significance of different Tiang Seri shapes and carvings, their historical evolution, and their impact on the social dynamics within traditional communities, which is why efforts must recognise and preserve not just

the elite architecture, but the entire spectrum of building traditions to fully document a community's social history. Additionally, examining the techniques and craftsmanship involved in creating these intricate wood carvings could provide deeper insights into the preservation of traditional architectural skills and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The study was able to uncover the shapes of Tiang Seri found in Negeri Sembilan and aimed to contribute to the study of heritage building data conservation. The finding revealed the shape of Tiang Seri in the Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional house to be Belah 4, Belah 6, Belah 8, and a combination of Belah Bulat and Belah 4. Most of the Tiang Seri found are square or Belah 4, while other shapes make up a small portion of the total. The dominance of Tiang Seri Belah 4 suggests that economic and



Figure 8. Unique and elaborate woodcarvings on a Tiang Seri found in a noble house

practical considerations heavily influenced its popularity. The less frequent occurrence of Tiang Seri Belah 8 and other intricate designs indicates that these shapes are symbols of a higher social status. This pattern reinforces the hypothesis that Malay traditional house components like Tiang Seri are markers of social distinction, as Tiang Seri, which is unique, requires higher skills to make. In addition, each Tiang Seri is unique and requires a high degree of skills and a deep understanding of local customs to make. During the case study, it is important to address that certain access restrictions due to safety reasons and a lack of owner permission resulted in the exclusion of some selected heritage houses, which limited the range of data collected for this research. Further research on tangible cultural heritage is always needed and should consider investigating other aspects of Tiang Seri, like its wood carvings and materials, before they also succumb to extinction.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This study provides a typological and cultural analysis of Tiang Seri shapes in Negeri Sembilan Malay traditional houses, revealing their role as architectural markers of social status and contributing to the broader understanding of symbolic expression in traditional design. Unfortunately, certain limits must be addressed. The first one is that the study is limited to a certain district in Negeri Sembilan. There are currently more than 500 Negeri Sembilan heritage houses

that have been recorded. However, with time and labour constraints, the focus has been directed to the houses in Rembau, and one special case in Kuala Pilah.

Secondly, the researchers acknowledge that the distribution of case studies was unbalanced as a result of data availability limitations. There are many difficulties in conducting a study with heritage homes that are more than a century old. Because of their age, fragility, or private ownership, these structures frequently have limited access. Because formal authorisation was required to reach some regions, local authority figures were unable to help in multiple cases. Furthermore, some proprietors no longer live on the land, which makes it challenging to get permission or gain access. The extent of direct observation and documentation was further limited by the fact that certain structures were in an unsafe or unstable conditions to be visited. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the chosen case studies were picked with care to offer significant insights into the research issue based on accessibility, relevance, and availability.

Despite the limitations identified in this study, it is highly recommended that subsequent research investigates the underexplored facets of Malay traditional architecture, especially the Tiang Seri and other emblematic structural components. These components, frequently disregarded, carry profound cultural, spiritual, and social significances essential for comprehending the worldview and values of traditional Malay culture. By investigating these neglected or insufficiently documented

pieces, researchers can aid in the preservation of intangible legacy and the perpetuation of information transmitted throughout generations. These initiatives are essential for enhancing scholarly discussion on vernacular architecture and for preserving the cultural identity and knowledge left by our ancestors.

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