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Photo Essay

Malay Houses in Penang: Circa 1900

by Muhammad Amirul Naim Rosmi



Malay stilt houses by TN Shaik Ismail No. 14 taken c.1902 (ML-3575).



**Images from Marcus Langdon Collection.*

MALAYS IN PENANG traditionally lived inland or along the coast, depending on their livelihoods. This had some bearing on how they built or located their dwellings. One common house style is the *Bumbung Panjang Berserambi* (long roof with veranda), known for its simple yet practical design. The roof has two slopes—an upper and a lower—and the structure allows easy extensions such as a *gajah menyus* (side addition) and an *anjung* (raised porch).

Such houses are divided into three main parts: the *rumah ibu* (core house), *serambi samanaik* (a veranda parallel to the main house), and the additional *gajah menyusu* and *anjung* sections. The design promotes crossventilation, with wide openings on the walls to keep the house cool.

Traditional houses such as these, however, are disappearing. Modern homes that Malays now live in on the island—except some in Teluk Bahang and Balik Pulau, and on Seberang Perai—often lack open yards; this disconnects the families from nature. Today, feet that once touched soil daily now tread on cement and concrete.



A Malay village located along North Beach, believed to be along the Bagan Jermal area c.1910 (ML-5410). Such settlements, especially those built along the coastline, consist of raised floor construction to weather the tropical climate. The space under the raised deck may be utilised for various purposes, including storage.



Penang Malay house c. 1930s (ML-1001). Coconut trees are a common sight around Malay villages. The coconut tree is known as the “tree of a thousand uses” (pokok seribu guna) in the Malay-Indonesian culture.



Penang Malay houses c.1920s (ML-1644). These are typical of dwellings built inland.



*A typical attap house in Penang from the late 1950s (ML-3694). This well-structured house is separated into three parts, a front portion (with the verandah, porch and stairs), a middle portion which serves as the sleeping area, and a kitchen located at the back (as stated in *A Traditional Malay House*, by Abdul Halim Nasir and Wan Hashim Wan Teh).*



Malay children at their morning meal, Penang c.1930 (ML-2272). This morning meal is what we know now as Nasi Kandar. Traditionally Nasi Kandar sellers were itinerant, and would go about from one place to another balancing (mengandar) rice and curry dishes on a pole on their shoulder.



A postcard of a Malay village amid a coconut grove in Penang c. 1910 (ML-2560).



A Malay house in a Penang suburb c.1910s (ML-5045). Much of the architecture is similar to those in Kedah and Perlis, like a wicker work wall seen in this photo.



Malay Kampung, Telok Tikus, Penang

A Malay village, Telok Tikus Penang c.1920 (ML-3599) located by the water's edge, also known as gigi air. Telok Tikus is located close to Tanjung Bungah. This was probably one of the earliest traditional seaside Malay villages.



“No. 27. Greetings from Penang” postcard by August Kaulfuss c. 1905 (ML-1589). This is a scene in a Karo village in Penang. Often referred to as the Karo Batak people, the Karo originated from Northern Sumatra.



Muhammad Amirul Naim Rosmi

holds a Bachelor’s degree in Human Sciences from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). His areas of interest encompass social history, intellectual history and political thought.

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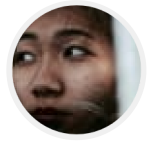
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