

# Understanding Traditional Malay Communities In Riau Using The Levi-Strauss Framework of Structuralism

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## ABSTRACT

Riau is one of the provinces in the middle of the island of Sumatra. Geographically, Riau's land stretches from the slopes of Bukit Barisan to the coast of the Strait of Malacca. Many traditional Malay settlements are found along the Kampar River, Rokan River, Kampar River, and Indragiri River. Malays are very dominant in Riau Province, but there are also various other ethnic tribes such as Chinese, Banjar, and others. This study will examine the typology of Malay settlements in Riau Province. Typology is the study of types, that is, the attempt to conduct a review of types based on certain criteria. In this case, the framework of Levi-Strauss structuralism is the basis for a review of typology. Levi-Strauss believes that structuralism based on structural studies developed in cultures such as myths, beliefs, language, and symbols can be used as a reference for understanding a society including in the study of traditional settlements. This study uses literature research methods. The stages of the literature review are determining research topics, collecting information and data through various materials and scientific papers, discussion, and writing. Learn from various information about Malay settlements in Riau Province such as the Koto Sentajo settlement, Akit Tribe settlement, Kampung Dalam settlement, Siak Hulu settlement, and Rokan Hulu Defense Village settlement. Culture played an important role in the formation of these traditional Malay settlements. Each Malay settlement formed its distinctive features based on the cultural structure that was developed and adopted. Different cultural elements such as Malay dialects, social strata structures, customary institutions, rituals, inheritance, and kinship systems affect different typologies of traditional Malay settlements.

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**Keywords:** settlements, Malay, structuralism, Levi-Strauss, culture

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## 1. Introduction

Riau is a province located in the central part of the island of Sumatra. The area of Riau province is 87,023.66 km<sup>2</sup> which stretches from the slopes of Bukit Barisan to the Strait of Malacca. The population of Riau Province is currently ± 6.8 million people. The ethnic tribes that inhabit the land of Riau Province are diverse with the dominance of the Malay tribe so it is known as the Homeland of Malay. Several large regencies/cities in Riau Province such as Pekanbaru, Kampar, Siak, Bengkalis, Dumai, Rokan Hulu, Rokan Hilir, and so on. Based on the composition of the dominant population the Malay tribe, the dominant religion is Islam. Malay which is synonymous with Islam known as the Malay World is the Islamic World. Geographically the river is very influential in the development of settlements, so many traditional settlements developed on the banks of the river. Major rivers in Riau Province such as Siak River, Kampar River, Rokan River, and Indragiri River. The culture that is rooted in the Malay community is characterized by the Malay language, the existence of a kinship system, an inheritance system, a tribal system, and social position. The culture is implemented with the unique

characteristics of each Malay settlement in Riau Province. The profile above is extracted from the Riau Province RPJMD document 2019-2024 [1].

The Malay world of existence is characterized by a built environment consisting of houses, villages, urban areas, and places [2]. Each traditional place has a uniqueness that is arranged traditionally called *kampung*. This research is a literature review of the typology of traditional Malay settlements in Riau Province. According to many studies, traditional settlements are influenced by cultures that are deeply rooted in people's lives. Balinese and Sasak people see the importance of orientation. Ritual spaces have always been part of placement in settlements arranged for the sake of sacred trust. Language and myths that are built in the community become symbols that are manifested in physical form both building elements, clothing, tools, and so on. So that based on this culture, the typology of traditional Malay settlements can be analyzed. Typology studies are studies of the splicing of elements that make it easier to classify architectural types through certain types[3]. The study of the typology of traditional Malay settlements of Riau Province is seen from the framework of Levi-Strauss structuralism theory. Levi-Strauss structuralism is one of the paradigms of anthropology in revealing culture so that it can be used as an epistemology in research. Furthermore, Levi-Strauss defined culture as the essence of a symbolic or configuration of symbolic systems[4].

The research method used is the literature method, namely research through the exploration of information and data through books, journals, and other scientific works. The information data obtained is then analyzed, and report writing is carried out. The object of study is the typology of traditional Malay settlements in Riau Province. Typological observations based on the culture that formed traditional Malay settlements arranged as a reflection of life.

## **2. Method**

This research approach is descriptive-qualitative i.e. an inquiry that seeks to build a comprehensive depiction, encompassing the articulation of multiple points of view, the identification of many contributing elements in a particular context, and a thorough depiction of the emerging holistic representation [5]. Efforts to describe this research are literature research methods, namely the exploration of theoretical concepts, as well as the examination of reference materials and other scientific works related to culture, values, and norms that arise in the social context being investigated [6]. The steps carried out in this study were adopted [7] First, the determination of the research topic, namely the typology of traditional Malay settlements from the view of Levi-Strauss structuralism. Second, exploration of information and literature data through journals and books. Third, the presentation and discussion of information or data obtained, and the writing of research descriptions. The research instrument is the researcher himself who sets the data sources obtained from the internet and libraries. Literature writing techniques by paraphrasing by capturing the essence of the data with the redaction of writing by the researcher himself. The data analysis method used is the content analysis method, which is an analysis focused on actual content and internal media features that examine human behavior toward author communication. The scope of the literature review focused on research already in publications that have been conducted on Malay architectural research in Riau province.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### ***3.1 Levi-Strauss Framework of Structuralism and its application to research***

The formation of societies everywhere has the same diversity. The variety is influenced by the same cause, namely culture. Cultural phenomena never cease to develop as continuous phenomena. Cultural readings that do not manifest in written form can still be described as expressions of meaning intended by the community itself. Each society produces different languages, stories, clothes, rituals, buildings, and spaces, so to reveal the characteristics of society, it is necessary to interpret these phenomena. Lévi-Strauss viewed social phenomena such as myths, folklore, clothing, and traditional ceremonies, as part of linguistic phenomena consisting of texts. Levi-Strauss divides three forms of language and culture relations, namely (1) language is a reflection of the whole culture, (2) language is part of the culture, and (3) language precedes culture so that through language it recognizes the culture of society [8].

Levi-Strauss structuralism developed in cultural studies can be used as a basis for the study of settlement spatial patterns by paying attention to phenomena related to beliefs, kinship systems, marriage patterns, inheritance systems, and community activities that embody the spatial order of settlements [9]. Rural settlements are influenced by culture through complex social structures with the result of the division of spatial functions based on their use [8]. Understanding Levi-Strauss structuralism by looking at the implementation of several studies, the structure of Sasak settlements in Kampung Puyung shows that the settlement order is influenced by community beliefs and kinship systems as basic principles, then there is a transformation of structuring that is influenced by new views of the entry of Islamic beliefs such as determining orientation and completeness no longer based on old beliefs but in terms of accessibility and economic value area [9]. In the study of myths judging from the process of *Sedekah Bumi "Nyadranan,"* it is concluded that the village is a manifestation of the results of ancestors who saw the importance of togetherness and respect for trust in neighborly or community life [10].

The myth of simple living and helping each other is the basis for determining the traditional settlement arrangement of Kampung Naga. The house was built adjacent to occupy the north and south positions, while in the middle part, there is a *Mosque* and *Bale* (hall), and the square on the east side of the mosque. While in parallel on the west side, there is a sacred building called *Bumi Ageung*. In addition, there are sacred forests, sacred tombs, rice-pounding places, and rivers [11]. The study of structuralism can be seen in Javanese society which interprets its traditional house as an expression of harmonious relations between Javanese people and the surrounding environment. This is done to seek salvation as the main goal of life. So the spatial structure of the Javanese house is an expression of the harmonious relationship of Javanese people with three unitary forming environments, namely *Senthong*, *Emper*, and *Jogan* [12]. Efforts to make people settle on land can change the cultural identity of the Banjar Tribe sea nomads. However, state conditions that force to have a population identity require settlements as places. Banjar tribal settlements called *Kampoh* form a semicircle that functions to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters such as strong winds, storms, and waves. *Kampoh* is divided into 3 main buildings, namely *Kampoh* (residential group), *Sapekan* (weekend market), *School* (educational facilities). While *Kampoh* is formed into three functions according to the activities that take place in the space such as (1) *dego-dego*, front part (2) *posi-posi*, middle part (3) *tatambe*, and back part [13]. In Dayak society, the figure of hornbills (*enggang*) living amid society has become a myth that is maintained. The hornbill myth is implemented in various forms such as clothes, stories, objects, and buildings. The traditional building of the Dayak people is lifted from the myth of hornbills with the name *lamin* which is equipped with carvings and paintings of hornbill motifs [14].

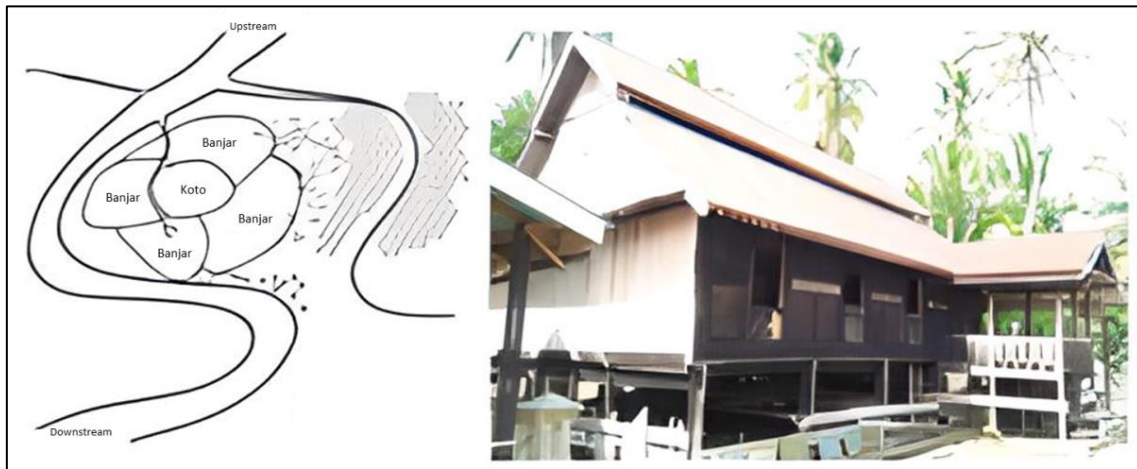
### 3.2 Malay settlement typology based on the Levi-Strauss structuralism framework

Levi-Strauss says there is a connection between culture and symbols. These relationships build arbitrary order through symbols that represent the ideas, values, and atmosphere of community psychology [15]. The typology of Malay settlements in Riau will be studied from the views of Levi-Strauss's structuralism theory discussed earlier. In the study do not look based on the typology of specific settlements one by one based on each existing settlement. The study of Malay settlement typology is based on aspects of the study to be observed, namely beliefs, social strata, marriage, inheritance, symbols, and activities. This aspect is discussed based on the literature sources obtained. Furthermore, we see the relationship between these factors in the formation of Malay settlement typology in Riau.

#### 1. Learn from the Koto Sentajo Kuantan Singingi settlement

Koto Sentajo is a traditional Malay settlement in Kuantan Singingi. The formation of the Koto Sentajo settlement is a form of culture that has been rooted for a long time [16]. The belief system in the Koto Sentajo community is seen in the elements of the *Mosque* and *Rumah Godang*. The *mosque* is an element of religion and *Rumah Godang* is an element of customary institutions. So the existence of religion is inseparable from people's lives [17]. While the social strata of society are still adopted to this day such as the existence of traditional leaders and ordinary people. Traditional leaders are called *Datuk* and *Penghulu*, while the community has an upper class called *urang godang (orang besar)* [16]. In *Koto* (village) there is a *Rumah Godang* which functions as a place to gather and deliberate traditional institutions and traditional ceremonies

[18]. Meanwhile, the spatial arrangement of *Rumah Godang* is based on the activities of residents, namely the front room, middle room, and back room with differences like space or territory. In the symbol of *Rumah Godang* apply carvings on poles or walls (Figure 1 on the right) [19]. The settlement pattern looks like the koto is located in the middle with the banjar around it as in Figure 1 on the left.



**Figure 1.** Settlement Pattern Scheme in Kuantan River (Left) Godang House of Piliang Tribe (Right)  
 Source: Gun Faisal et al’s documentation [16], Sepli Yandri’s documentation [19]

2. Learn from the settlement of the Akit Tribe of Rupert Island

The Akit tribe has a customary stratum in the form of tribal chiefs inherited from women because women have very large rights [20]. In terms of lineage, the tribe follows the mother. All property belongs to the woman, so the inheritance is divided after the wife dies, with a portion of one-third for the husband, one-third for the wife's family, and one-third taken to the grave. The religion of the Akit tribe has long adhered to Buddhism and animism, according to the history and myths of the community. But today, Islam, Christianity, and ethnic Chinese influence rituals. The Akit tribe works a lot by cultivating nature as fishermen, farmers, and ranchers. The language used is the Malay dialect Akit. The Akit tribe has rituals and ceremonies such as *Buang Anca*, *Badekeh*, *Bebedak*, *Nawar*, *Pebayu*, *Nuka Ladang*, *Bersih Kampung*, and others. There are two types of linear Akit settlement patterns, namely along rivers such as the Morong Strait River or in the Bay, as well as settlements near fields. Each house is long-distance or not in groups[21]. The house has a certain orientation according to *Feng Shui*. Figure 2 shows an early Akit house in the form of a stilt with wooden poles, roofed with leaves, bark walls, lumber lantau or bamboo, with tie joints and pegs. The basic shape of the house is generally rectangular, with the layout of the front of the bulbs as a resting place, an inner room, and a kitchen [22].



**Figure 2.** One of the houses of the Akit tribe  
 Source: web of sultaninindonesiablog, 2023

3. *Learning from Siak Hulu Settlement, Kampar Regency*

Siak Hulu is a traditional area that develops with urban characteristics. Residential areas developed along the Kampar River. The livelihoods of the community are diverse, with the majority being entrepreneurs and fishermen. The people of Siak Hulu are inhabited by a variety of religions and ethnicities. The majority are Muslim and ethnic Malay. One of the literary customs of the people of Siak Hulu is singing Bagandu songs (traditional songs), which function as the formation of morals, identity, and education [23]. The settlement pattern of Siak Hulu is in the form of a beaded linear type. This shape is influenced by the distribution of areas such as the core area as the center of activity, the skeleton part formed by the road spinally, and the body part as the content of the house placement [24]. Figure 3 shows the house generally in the form of stilts, the orientation of the house tends to face the house, the geometry of the basic shape is generally rectangular, and adding space tends towards the side. Residents added ramps to enter motorcycles [25].



**Figure 3.** One of the houses in the Siak Hulu settlement  
Source: Sudarmin’s Documentation [26]

4. *Learning from the Village on the Banks of the Siak River*

Kampung Dalam is an old settlement formed for generations from community activities on the banks of the Siak River [27]. The uniqueness of this settlement is formed from the mixing of Malay culture and Chinese ethnicity. Settlement and residential patterns are influenced by the shape of the river and the activities of people who use the river as a source of livelihood. The placement of religious facilities is adjusted to the character of the activity. The mosque is placed in the middle of the settlement because the majority are Muslim, while the temple is close to the trading area because ethnic Chinese tend to be traders. Settlement patterns tend to bend linearly along rivers and roads as Figure 4 on the right. The house is linearly along the river with stilt construction. The house has carvings as a symbol of the identity of the Malay community as Figure 4 on the left.



**Figure 4.** One of the old houses and settlement patterns (left) Kampung Dalam Settlement pattern (right)  
Sumber: Dina Purnama’s documentation [27]

### 5. Learn from the Defense Village in Rokan Hulu

One typology of traditional Malay settlements in Riau Province can be seen in the Seven Layer Fort. This settlement was built by Tuanku Tambusai in 1835 with the function of a *Kampung Pertahanan*. This village is synonymous with the struggle against the Dutch colonizers. This area has seven layers with a square shape seen in Figure 5 on the left. The interior of the area is the residence of fighters against the invaders. Activities that are inside the fort are the activities of soldiers as a place to live. The fort was built from earthen mounds, and between them, there was a moat that was fed by water as Figure 5 on the right [28]. The religion and beliefs of the occupant group are Islam, with the Malay dialect of Rokan Hulu. The house uses a stage construction that is not too high off the ground.



**Figure 5.** Settlement Pattern of Rokan Hulu Seven Layer Fort (left) House Shape (right)  
Source: Yusfa Hendra Bahar's documentation [28]

### 4. Conclusion

The author argues that traditional Malay settlements are very interesting to study considering the many factors that influence the development of settlement forms and patterns, one of which is Buddhism itself. Each Malay settlement has its characteristics that are formed naturally from the process of forming the culture of its inhabitants. There are basic similarities to the Malay community of Riau Province which is characterized by the Malay language, Islamic religion, kinship system, inheritance system, ceremonial rituals, and the use of carved symbols on buildings. However, each traditional Malay settlement developed with its characteristics such as the development of dialects, mottos and songs, ethnic mixing, inheritance systems, and different rituals. The development of this culture resulted in a diverse typology of Malay settlements. There are basic similarities to the Malay community of Riau Province which is characterized by the Malay language, Islamic religion, kinship system, inheritance system, ceremonial rituals, and the use of carved symbols on buildings. However, each traditional Malay settlement developed with its characteristics such as the development of dialects, mottos and songs, ethnic mixing, inheritance systems, and different rituals. The development of this culture resulted in a diverse typology of Malay settlements. The author sees the distribution of various architectures based on different characters according to regions such as peisir and archipelago areas, and mainland Malay areas affected by Minang and North Sumatra. For this reason, further research is needed in mapping Malay architecture according to local culture.

Based on the theory of structuralism, Levi-Strauss can examine the typology of settlements by understanding the system of cultural structures formed from cultural values adopted in the life of Malay society. These cultures are implemented by defining each in the physical form of traditional settlement and residential patterns. The spatial order formed is inseparable from the structural system built in the middle of the Malay community in Riau province. In the next stage, field research can be developed by looking at other settlement typologies that are still largely unstudied.

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## 6. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research study.

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