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SEMAI FOREST CULTURAL VILLAGE: CULTURAL ECOTOURISM CENTRE FOR ORANG ASAL SEMAI IN CAMERON HIGHLAND, PAHANG

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ABSTRACT

This study presents research on the development of a cultural ecotourism centre for *Orang Asal Semai* located in Cameron Highland, Pahang, Malaysia. The study aims to promote ecotourism while promoting and preserving the Orang Asal Semai's culture. The Semai clan, is a native indigenous group in Peninsular Malaysia. The proposed cultural ecotourism centre will serve as the main hub for community development and growth, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. In return, the centre offers visitors immersive and unforgettable experience such as building traditional crafts, storytelling, trekking, medicine and herbs making, and educational workshops. It is a place for visitors to dwell themselves in the Semai way of life. This initiative is supported by the participation of the Semai people in Cameron Highlands, ensuring the community hands on involvement, leading to the planning, management, and the operation of the cultural centre. By nurturing this cross-cultural exchange, this project improves the preservation of the Semai culture while serves as a model for Orang Asal led ecotourism.

Keywords: *Orang Asal Semai, Cultural Ecotourism Centre, Community, Cameroon Highland.*

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism comprises several distinguishing features, making it an experience for visitors. Firstly, it is crucial for the conservation of culture and heritage. Besides that, the key factor to ecotourism is the reinvestment of income to maintain a consistent quality of resources and conservation. Furthermore, ecotourism must be ecologically, economically and socio-culturally sustainable. Lastly, ethical education on biodiversity, habitats and cultures is the guideline to successful ecotourism.

Ecotourism is a collaboration between the government, the private sector and local communities in managing tourism sustainably. These collaborations must adhere to these guidelines. Firstly, is to maintain the utmost respect for nature. Secondly, it contributes to conservation and rehabilitation. Thirdly, is to be beneficial to the local communities. Lastly, is to be sustainable and ethically managed.

"TO PRESERVE THE SEMAI SPIRIT IS TO PROTECT THE PULSE OF THE LAND. FOR EACH AND EVERY OF ITS TRADITION, EVERY STORY, EVERY KINDERED SPIRIT ECHOES THEIR BOND WITH THE LAND."

-AUTHOR

The Semai tribe in Cameron Highlands is part of the largest ethnic group and one of the most prominent Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Many have adapted by engaging in eco-tourism, selling handicrafts, and participating in community-based tourism ventures.

They also rely on hunting, gathering, and forest resources for food and medicinal purposes. They live in houses on stilts with a strong horizontal emphasis. Modernisation and land development in Cameron Highlands have posed significant threats to the Semai's traditional way of life. Deforestation and commercial agricultural expansion have reduced access to their ancestral lands, affecting both their livelihoods and cultural practices. Therefore, the aim of this study is to preserve the cultural heritage of Orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highland by designing the Cultural SEMAI Forest Cultural Village: Cultural Ecotourism Centre For Orang Asal Semai In Cameron Highland, Pahang.



Figure 1: show the framework of Cameron Highlands development in 2024 indicating *Teras 2: Pembangunan komuniti yang Sejahtera and inklusif (Jilid 2)*

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

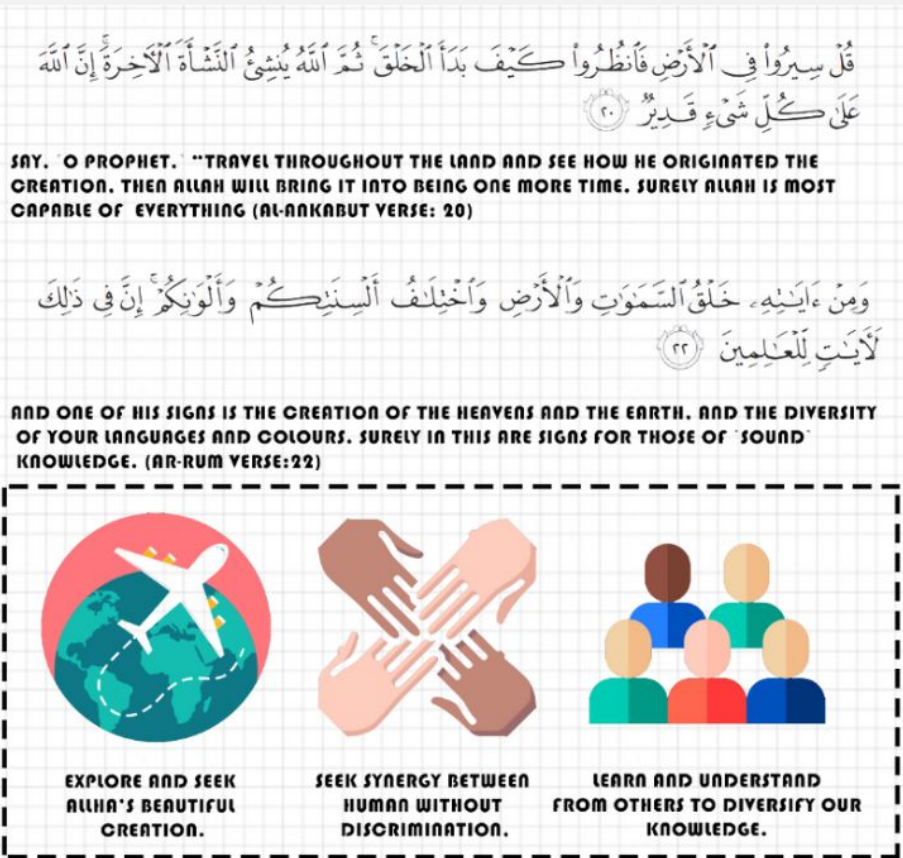
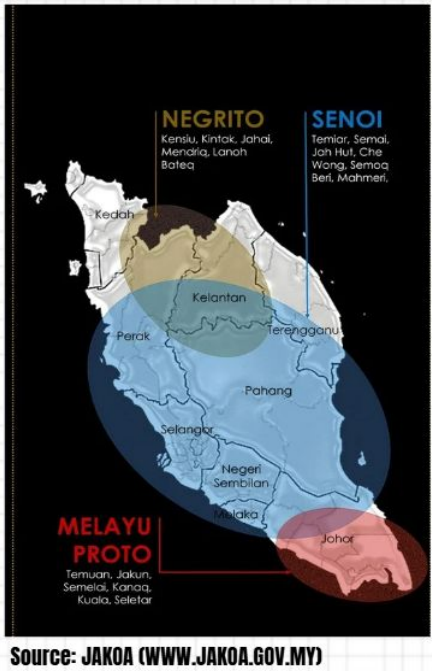


Figure 2: Shows the Islamic Perspective taken from the Quran

BACKGROUND STUDY

Figure 1 shows the distribution of Orang Asli in Malaysia (www.jakoa.gov.my).



Source: JAKOA (WWW.JAKOA.GOV.MY)

Figure 3: Shows the Orang Asli tribes in Malaysia (JAKOA)

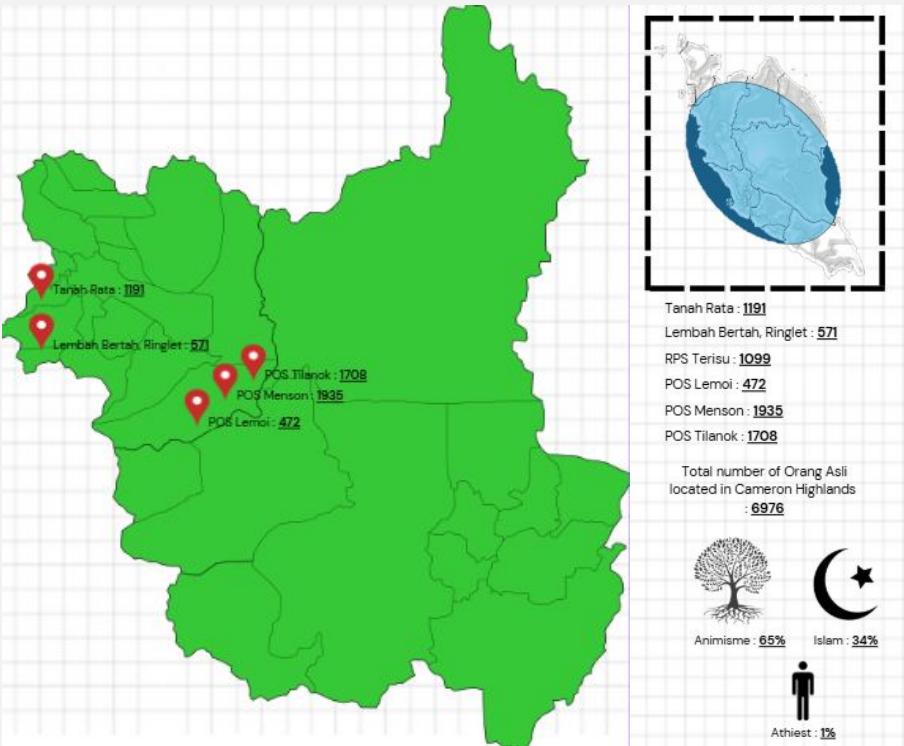


Figure 4: Shows the number of orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highlands (JAKOA)

There are six major tribe groups for the Orang Asli people of Senoi which are Che Wong, Mahmeri, Jahut, Semaq Beri, Semai and temiar. These tribe groups are located on the Mountain Ranges of Titiwangsa (Banjaran Titiwangsa) (Denten, 1975).

SUKU SEMAI IN CAMERON HIGHLANDS



Figure 5: Shows the people of orang asal Semai in Malaysia (Ronnie Bahari)

The Semai tribe in Cameron Highlands is part of Malaysia's largest ethnic group and the most prominent Orang Asal community in Peninsular Malaysia (Benjamin, 1989). The Orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highland have adapted by pursuing and engaging in eco-tourism, selling, making and promoting handicrafts from roadside shops to proper shops to visitors (Rambo, 1988). They also participate in community-based tourism ventures, as it is their nature to uphold their community.

The Semai people are known for their instilled and deep-rooted connection and their belief in animism (Gianno, 2023). They practice spiritual practice that involves praying and honouring natural elements like the river, trees and animals. The community's main shaman is crucial in maintaining the balance between the spirit realm and the physical realm. When it comes to day-to-day trades, the Semai people have mastered traditionally practised agriculture, such as slash-and-burn agriculture (Gianno, 2023). They grow crops such as tubers, rice and vegetables and herbs (JAKOA). Besides agriculture, the Semai people rely on gathering and hunting from the forest to survive. Furthermore, it is also for them to collect crops for traditional medical purposes.

Currently, land development and modernisation in Cameron Highlands has posed threats to the cultural and heritage significance of the orang Asal Semai (Ramli, 2018). Due to commercial growth and deforestation, the Semai people have limited access to their ancestral land, which in turn affects livelihoods and the Semai way of life.

MAKLUMAT PERKAMPUNGAN ORANG ASLI DAERAH CAMERON HIGHLANDS									
BIL	KAMPUNG	NAMA BATIN	SUKU KAUM	AGAMA	JUMLAH KELUARGA	JUMLAH PENDUDUK	JARAK DARI TANAH RATA (PERGI DAN BALIK (KM))	NO. TELEFON	KATEGORI KAMPUNG
TANAH RATA									
1	KOA SUNGAI RUIJ	KADIR A/L AH SAN	SEMAI	ANIMISME	211	813	8	017-4779815	PINGGIR BANDAR
2	KOA SUNGAI UBI	OSMAN BIN B.BUN	SEMAI	ANIMISME	76	378	14	012-4375785	PINGGIR BANDAR
LEMBAH BERTAM , RINGLET									
3	KOA SUNGAI TIANG	BAH CHOI A/L BUSU	SEMAI	ANIMISME	73	327	36	011-40202705	PINGGIR BANDAR
4	KOA SUNGAI TIANG	KOSONG	SEMAI	ANIMISME	34	137	36	TIADA	PINGGIR BANDAR
5	KOA SUNGAI KABUK	BARBORANAK SINGA	SEMAI	ANIMISME	30	107	36	TIADA	PINGGIR BANDAR
RANCANGAN PENGUMPULAN SEMULA (RP5 TERISU)									
6	KOA SUNGAI GETAN	AHMAD BIN NANGGONG	SEMAI	ISLAM	45	186	38	014-7457166	PINGGIR BANDAR
7	KOA TERLIMAU	YUSOF BIN HAMID	SEMAI	ISLAM	73	295	42	014-7457166	PINGGIR BANDAR
8	KOA TERISU	JAAFAR BIN TIMOR	SEMAI	ANIMISME	87	367	44	014-2469550	PINGGIR BANDAR
9	KOA SUNGAI JERIK	JOHARIBIN ALONG	SEMAI	ISLAM	61	251	46	017-5606630	PINGGIR BANDAR
PUSAT PENTADBIRAN KECIL (POS LEMOI)									
10	KOA LEMOI	ZAINAL BIN BAH SIAPA	SEMAI	ANISMISME	38	192	90	TIADA	PENDALAMAN
11	KOA TERLIMAU	SALMAN BAH MANANG	SEMAI	ANISMISME	36	158	80	TIADA	PENDALAMAN
12	KOA CHENAN CHERAH	KOSONG	SEMAI	TIADA	19	122	102	TIADA	PENDALAMAN
PUSAT PENTADBIRAN KECIL (POS MENSON)									
13	KOA PANGGEN	KAMARUDIN A/L BAH KUMAN	SEMAI	ANISMISME	61	324	54	016-5679793	PENDALAMAN
14	KOA MENSON	ZAMANI BIN BAH TUIN	SEMAI	ANISMISME	28	119	60	014-7422890	PINGGIR BANDAR
15	KOA KUALA BOH	NORDIN BIN PANJANG	SEMAI	ISLAM	150	625	64		PENDALAMAN
16	KOA LERYER	BAH KAPAS BIN PANCHING	SEMAI	ISLAM	81	336	62	010-2067301	PINGGIR BANDAR
17	KOA SUNGAI RELONG	BAH RAHIM BIN ARKOM	SEMAI	ANISMISME	129	531	72	017-4625393	PENDALAMAN
PUSAT PENTADBIRAN KECIL (POS TELANUK)									
18	KOA SISU	SAMSUL BIN ALI	SEMAI	ISLAM	57	248	94		PENDALAMAN
19	KOA TEJI	ALIN BIN ESAH	SEMAI	ISLAM	44	178	90		PENDALAMAN
20	KOA ABU	JOHARIBIN SENDONG	SEMAI	ISLAM	58	224	92	0113-6413455	PENDALAMAN

21	KOA TIAT	ANGAH BIN BATIN RAHMAN	SEMAI	ISLAM	27	101	106		PENDALAMAN
22	KOA CHEROS	MAHMUD BIN BIYAH	SEMAI	ANISMISME	40	192	104	013-4798809	PENDALAMAN
23	KOA TERAKIT	ALANG A/L ITAM	SEMAI	ANISMISME	23	77	130	019-5515036	PENDALAMAN
24	KOA RENING	ABDUL BIN BUSU	SEMAI	ANISMISME	40	171	134	013-4314206	PENDALAMAN
25	KOA SUNGAI LOON	RASMAN BIN PADANG	SEMAI	ANISMISME	32	141	96	019-5511820	PENDALAMAN
26	KOA RENGLAS	BAH KABOT BIN BAH TENGOK	SEMAI	ANISMISME	65	275	126	019-4425980	PENDALAMAN
27	KOA SUNGAI PINANG	KOSONG	SEMAI	TIADA	19	101	108		PENDALAMAN

Figure 6: Shows the personal and cultural details of individual Orang Asal Semai tribes residing in Cameron Highlands. (JAKOA)

The data contains personal and cultural details of individual Orang Asal Semai tribes residing in Cameron Highlands. Sensitive data is handled with care and cultural consideration to protect community dignity.

STUDY ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

There are several issues related to this study. Firstly, it is due to the loss of ancestral land to development (Benjamin, 1989). Besides, there is a decline in the use of mother language of the Semai people. The younger generation of Semai people are now increasingly utilise English and Malay as their main language. As such, the beautiful Semai language is getting lost in time, even though the language tells histories, ritual knowledge and folklore that keep the spirit of Semai alive (Yusoh, 2010). This happens because of intergenerational transmission of the language is diminishing.

Moreover, the current education system overlooks the significance of indigenous culture. This is because the current curriculum usually does not highlight Orang Asal culture and history (Ramli, 2018). The younger generations of the Semai people rarely teach their own cultural identity, which leads to cultural disconnection.

ISSUES

DATA FINDINGS FROM 100 RESPONDENTS OF SEMAI TRIBE



JAKOM
 JABATAN KEMAJUAN ORANG ASLI

Table 2 Respondent Profile

a) Education

Education	Percentage
Education Level	
Never schooled	13.0
Informal education	19.2
Primary school	11.5
Secondary school	54.8
University college	1.0
Highest Certificate	
None	13.0
Primary school	11.5
LCE/SRP/PMR	29.8
MCE/SPM/SPMA	15.2
SPM	0.8
SPM/Matriculation	0.8
Skill certificate	19.2
Reason for not furthering studies	
Financial difficulty	25.2
No interest	21.4
Unsatisfied academic performance	9.9
Family pressure	7.6

b) Work Experience

Work Experience	Percentage
Primary Occupation	
Permanent	59.6
Temporary	40.4
Type of Permanent Job	
Private	16.8
Government	9.5
Tourism sector worker	29.0
Self employed	4.6
Estimated Average Salary	
Below 440	40.6*
Help 500	15.9
500-1000	31.3
1001-1500	10.7
1501-2000	1.5

c) Knowledge and Skills

Skills	Highly skilled	Unskilled	Skillful	Skillful	Highly skillful	No of response
Reading and writing	9.9	16.0	9.9	18.1	39.7	94.6
Proficient in Malay language	6.1	5.3	9.2	32.1	46.6	99.1
Proficient in English language	27.5	25.3	21.4	20.6	10.7	100
Proficient in Mandarin language	58.8	7.6	6.1	3.1	16.0	91.6
Proficient in Indonesian language	15.3	3.8	0.0	8.4	66.4	93.9
Art	34.4	3.8	6.9	9.9	19.8	74.8
Craft	36.6	3.8	6.9	8.4	13.0	68.7
Agriculture/Farming	42.0	2.3	13.7	11.5	22.1	91.6
Livestock-rearing	38.1	3.8	12.2	9.2	17.6	90.0
Hunting	53.4	6.9	9.2	5.3	16.8	91.6
Tracking	56.5	5.3	6.1	4.6	16.0	88.5
Technical/vocational (radio, boat, motor repairs)	55.0	7.6	9.2	6.1	9.9	87.8
Traditional medicine	60.3	3.1	4.6	7.6	13	88.6
Entrepreneurship (business)	49.6	5.3	12.2	7.6	12.2	86.9
Tourism related activities (single track, caddy)	46.6	4.6	9.2	6.1	18.3	84.8
Sports/recreational activities	36.6	6.1	9.2	15.3	19.1	86.3
Cooking skill	20.6	4.6	7.6	16.8	27.5	82.5

Figure 7: Shows data of 100 people of the Semai tribe. (JAKOA)

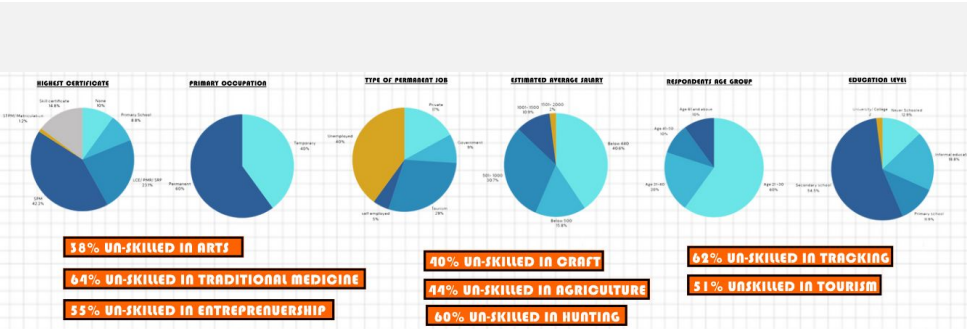


Figure 8: Shows results from respondents from 100 people of the semai tribe. (JAKOA)

The data shows that the Orang Asal Semai faces a decline in skilled practices such as arts and crafts, farming/agriculture, livestock rearing, hunting, trekking, production of traditional medicine, entrepreneurship and ecotourism-related matters (Ismail et al, 2021). The younger generation of the Orang Asal Semai are facing this decline, with 60% of them being 21-30 years old. Besides that, the average salary for semi-skilled people is only around RM440 to RM2000 and only 14.8% are equipped with a skill certificate. Lastly, 40% of the Semai people do not have secure jobs, and 40% of them are unemployed.

ISSUES RELATED TO LITERATURE REVIEW



Source: New Strait Times and The Star, malaysia care, suhakam, malaysia straits, malaysiakini

Figure 9: Shows article reviews relating to issues faced by the orang asal semai in Cameron Highlands.

There are not many initiatives that continuously and actively protect the Semai cultural heritage. Government supports are the main catalyst to the recognition of the Semai land as a cultural right. However, this is yet to be seen. It can be said that many developments, growth and loss of the Semai land is happening. More often, these initiatives treat Orang Asal and their place as tourist attraction rather than a tradition that needs to be preserved and sustained. Therefore, a cultural centre is required to maintain their cultural beliefs, the social belief, and provide jobs for them for sustenance.

STUDY AIM

This study aims to preserve and protect the cultural significance of the Orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highlands while helping them improve their social welfare.



Figure 10: Shows the research aim. (Author)

RESEARCH QUESTION

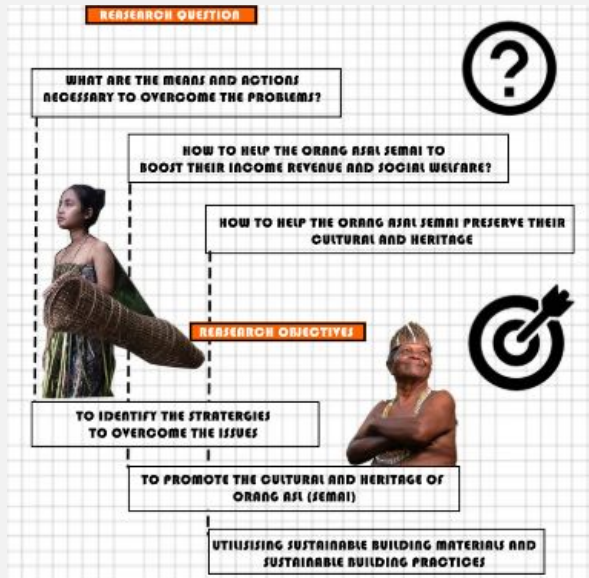


Figure 11: Shows the thesis research questions. (Author)

STUDY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

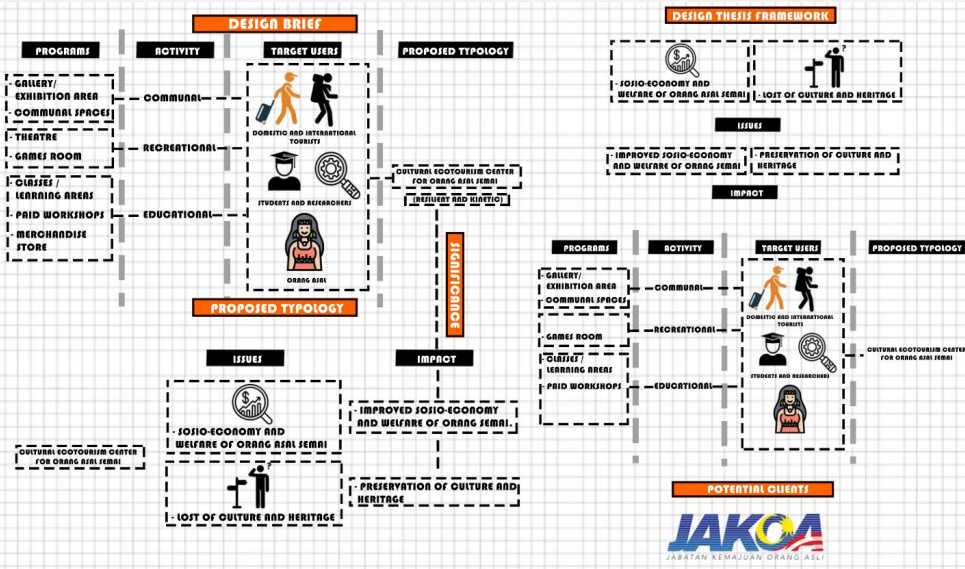


Figure 12: Shows the theoretical framework of the project (Author)

METHODOLOGY

The primary data was gathered through a series of site visits, interviews with locals, the authorities, and experts' points of view. The literature review serves as a fundamental guidelines on how the research is being carried out. Several site visits were conducted to the proposed site to analyse and to do some documentation of the synthesis outcome. Both qualitative and quantitative data are utilised.

Interviews are conducted to gain in-depth insight on the challenges faced by the orang Asal Semai located in Cameron Highland, to understand further on the issues faced by them to preserve their culture and heritage while ensuring their social welfare is preserved.

Secondary data refers to the literature review conducted on the subject matter (Orang Asal Semai) in Cameron Highlands, Pahang. This step involves examining and synthesising data from a plethora of sources, including academic writings, journals, articles, newspapers and magazines. These sources play an important role in providing insights and context necessary to aid the research, offering an overview of relevant precedents and case studies.

A key focus to highlight is on identifying and analysing information related to the orang asal semai in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia. This is to identify issues on how to accommodate the Orang Asal Semai on preserving their culture and heritage while improving their economy.

PRIMARY DATA



Figure 13: Shows the primary data (Accessibility) towards the site. (Source: Google Earth)

SITE SURVEY



Figure 14: Shows the primary data (Site Survey) towards the site. (Author)

The proposed site is located next to an Orang Asal Semai village (Kampung Susu). Kampung Susu is located southeast of the site. Kampung Susu is a flourishing Orang Asal Semai village filled with cheerful and lovely people. They hold strong oral traditions and are very proud of their culture and heritage. The site is used for the village people to indulge in leisure activities such as playing football and *sepak takraw*. Most of the time, the site is used as a communal ground for the village people and the nearby school (SK Telanok) located on the west side of the site.

The site faces Sungai Bertam towards the south. It is endowed with a beautiful panoramic view of the surrounding nature, the luscious greenery and hills surrounding the site. Sungai Bertam serves as a fishing spot for the people of Kampung Susu. In conclusion, the internal circulation of the site is highly accessible as it is a clear field with some degree of elevation. It is a common ground and a recreational space for the surrounding users.

SITE SURVEY

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT



Figure 15: Shows the primary data (Site Survey) towards the site. (Author)

Pos Telanok is a suitable environment for the Orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highlands due to its vibrant and fertile land. Its rich natural surroundings and strong community-driven development is being kept alive by the Semai people there. It preserves whatever ancestral land they have left and preserves cultural traditions while adhering to sustainable initiatives governed by locals. The people hold strong communal bonds with one another. Kampung Susu, where the site is located, is a luscious greenery-filled surrounding filled with deep-rooted Semai people preserving their cultural identity.

SK TELANOK

WATER AND ENERGY PROXIMITY



Figure 16: Shows the primary data (Site Survey) towards the site. (Author)

The presence of Sekolah Kebangsaan Telanok, a primary school, enables kids they receive formal education while preserving their cultural roots. Besides that, the site is located nearby with the Ulu Jelai Dam. In return, the surrounding area benefits from close-proximity of infrastructure development.



Figure 17: Shows the primary data (Site Survey) towards the site. (Author)

The service area within the site is being shared with SK Telanok. It is located on the west side of the site. This is because there is already an existing service area located in SK Telanok. Therefore, a service road is proposed there. For easy access, the path is shared.

INTERVIEWS

Local Authorities

Interviews with the local authorities give significant insights into the concerns in Kampung Susu. Most of the concerns are regarding the need for the improvement of infrastructure. There is no place where the Semai people can easily be in order to sell their goods. They will resort to selling on roadside stalls. The prominent leader in the area, Tok Batin Cheros Rizad, mentioned that the improvement of infrastructure must be aligned with the support of economic growth and education. This, in return, will empower and conserve the Semai people.

Locals

The people of Kampung Susu raises deep concerns in the adversity happening in the surrounding area like natural disasters, which pose infrastructure limitations. They want a place where the Semai people can have full control without other organisation budding in. The Semai people are highly capable people of managing their economy and social growth.

Visitors

Interviews highlighted that isolation of the Orang Asal Semai is felt since they do not seem to flourish, even though they make up a big percentage of the people living in Cameron Highlands.

SITE SELECTION CRITERIA AND JUSTIFICATION

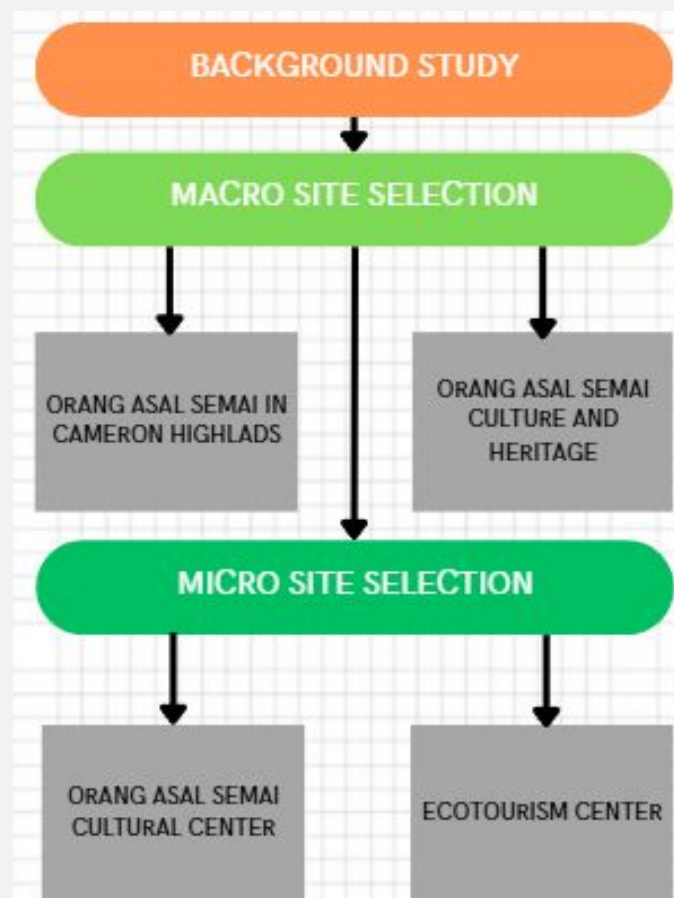


Figure 18: Shows the site selection criteria and justification framework. (Author)

MACRO SELECTION



Figure 19: Shows surrounding environment of Kampung Susu. (Author)

Why Cameron Highlands?

With its rich, lush natural environment, rich biodiversity and strong indigenous heritage. The Semai tribe in Cameron Highlands is part of Malaysia's largest ethnic group and the most prominent Orang Asal community in Peninsular Malaysia. The Orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highland has adapted themselves by pursuing and engaging in eco-tourism, selling, making and promoting handicrafts from roadside shops to proper shops to visitors (Salleh, 2013). They also participate in community-based tourism ventures, as it is their nature to uphold their community.

The region provides authentic Semai villagers with people who some still living the Semai way of life. Because of the scenic landscapes and the Semai's beautiful culture and way of life, tourism infrastructures with sustainable development are an initiative to showcase their culture and heritage. This multicultural surrounding promotes cross-cultural exchange to appreciate the Semai traditions (Salleh, 2013; Weng, 2010). This is because tourists are attracted to the inclusive atmosphere, which makes them feel welcomed, enhancing opportunities for the Semai people to spread the Semai way of life.

MICRO SELECTION



Figure 20: Shows the demographics of Kampung Susu. (JAKOA, Cameron Highlands)

Why Pos Telanok?

Pos Telanok has a highly dense population of Orang Asal Semai, precisely Kampung Susu, which houses more than 150 homes. Because of the close-knit community, the Semai people in Kg. Susu preserves its cultural heritage, offering an authentic and unique cultural experience. Kampung Susu is also a place where the Semai people have lived for many generations. This shows the bond and deep-rooted connection that the Semai people have with the land.

LAND USE

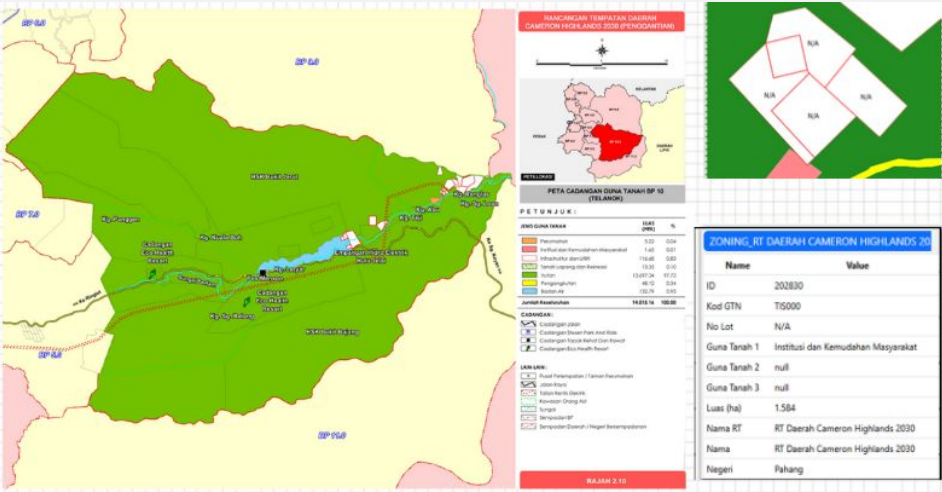


Figure 21: Shows the land use of Pos Telanok and the proposed site. (Rancangan Tempataan Daerah Cameron Highland 2030, Jilid II)

The site designated for Semai Cultural Forest Village is classified for community institution and facilities, which is aligned with the current and proposed building functions. This zone is concentrated in a community filled area. The strategic placement of residing in between SK Telanok and Kampung Susu further supports the need of a cultural center.

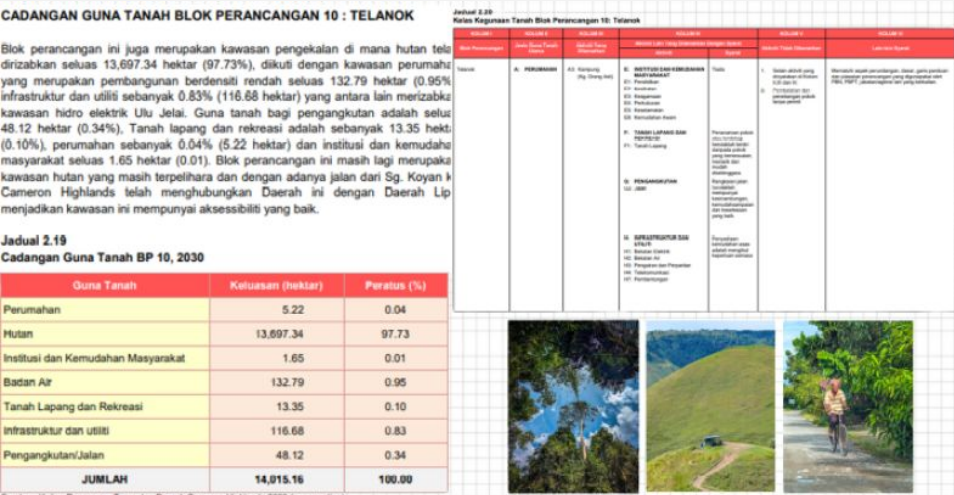


Figure 22: Shows the land use of Pos Telanok and the proposed site. (Rancangan Tempataan Daerah Cameron Highland 2030, Jilid II)

It is also mentioned that the site is included in a reserve area only for the local Orang Asal Semai. This supports the thesis aim for wanting an Orang Asal-led ecotourism and community-led development.

CLIMATE

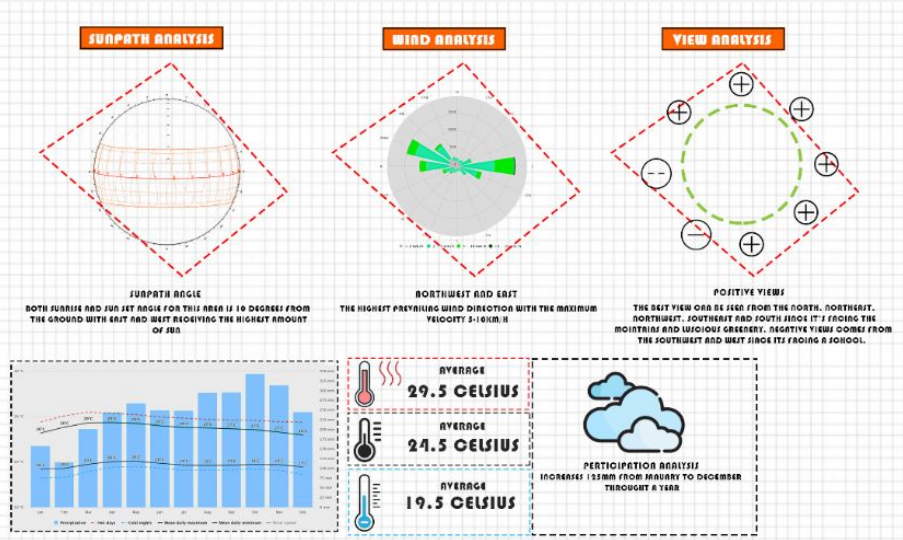


Figure 23: Shows the climate analysis at the proposed site. (www.Meteoblu.com)

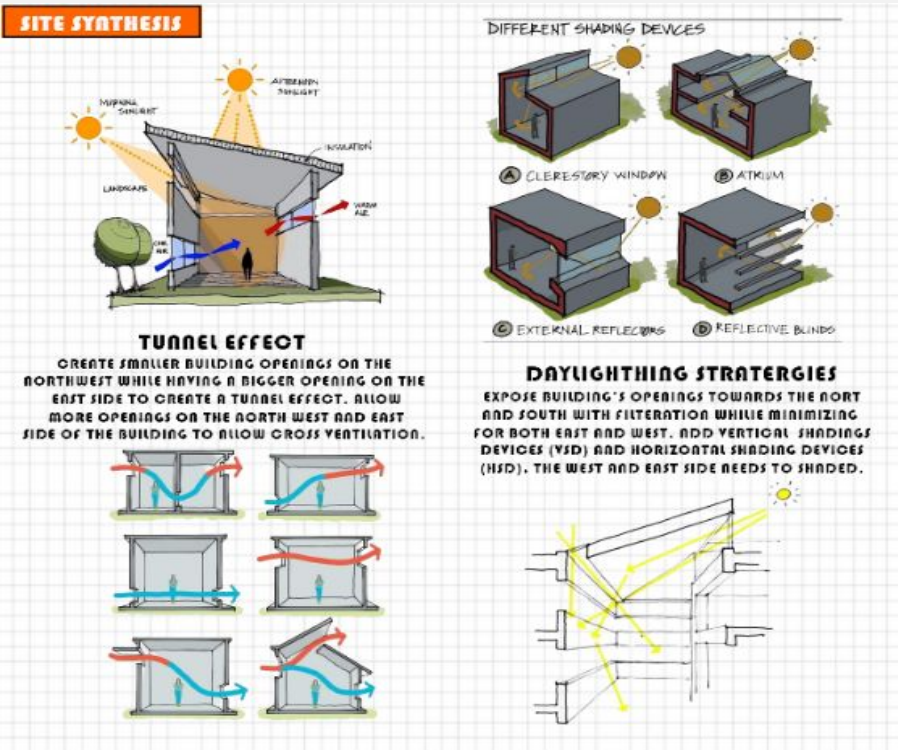


Figure 24: Shows the climate site synthesis at the proposed site. (Author)

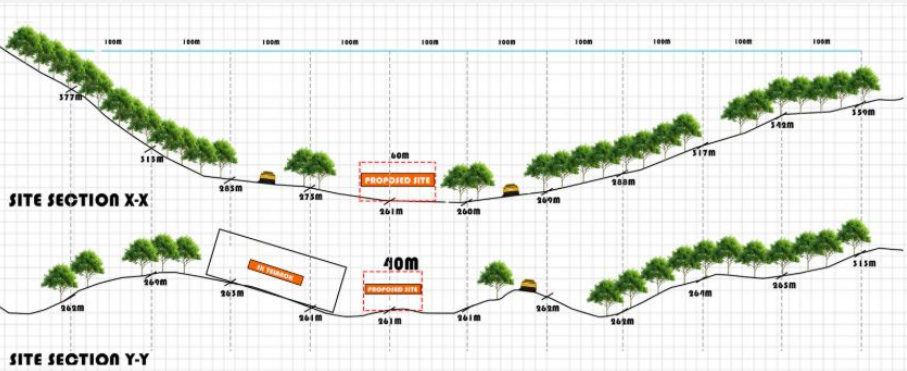


Figure 25: Shows the site section at the proposed site. (Author)



Figure 26: Shows the site Accessibility at the proposed site. (Google earth)



Figure 27: Shows the site masterplan at the proposed site. (Google earth) (Author)

DESIGN CONCEPT

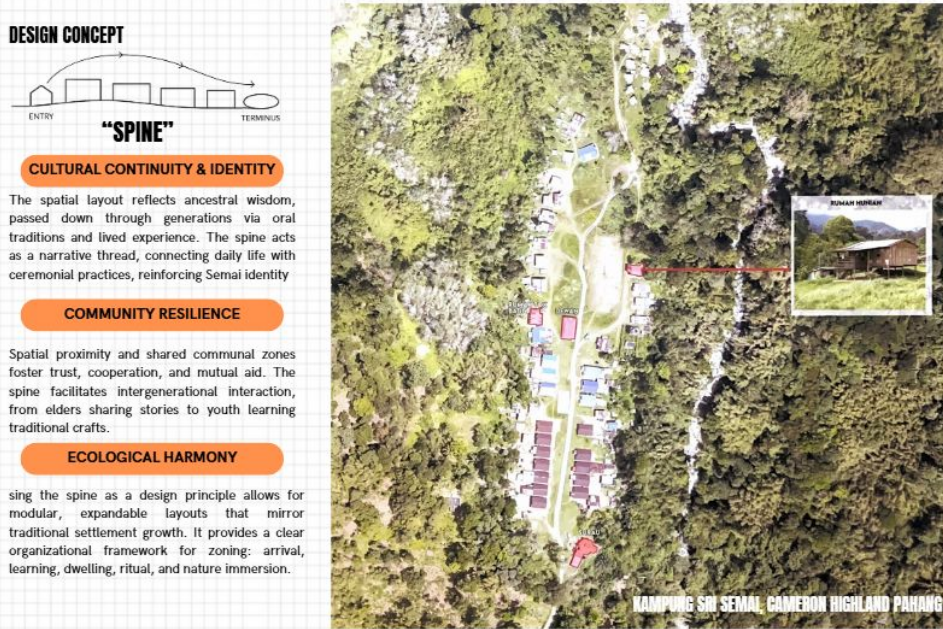


Figure 28: Shows the design concept. (Author)

DESIGN ASPIRATIONS

DESIGN ASPIRATION



Figure 29: Shows the design aspirations for pusat kebudayaan rimba semai. (Author)

Ecological harmony, communal life and ancestral wisdom are what a Semai building structure needs to be. It takes aspirations from a generic Semai structure with its elevation on stilts. It breathes with the surrounding context of luscious greenery. Besides that, it utilises the same building construction material such as bertam leaves, bertam woven walls and bertam roofs. Rattan is used throughout the structure for details and ornamentalations. It shows resilience, adaptability and connection to the land and nature’s spirit.

RESEARCH / PROJECT FINDINGS

DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

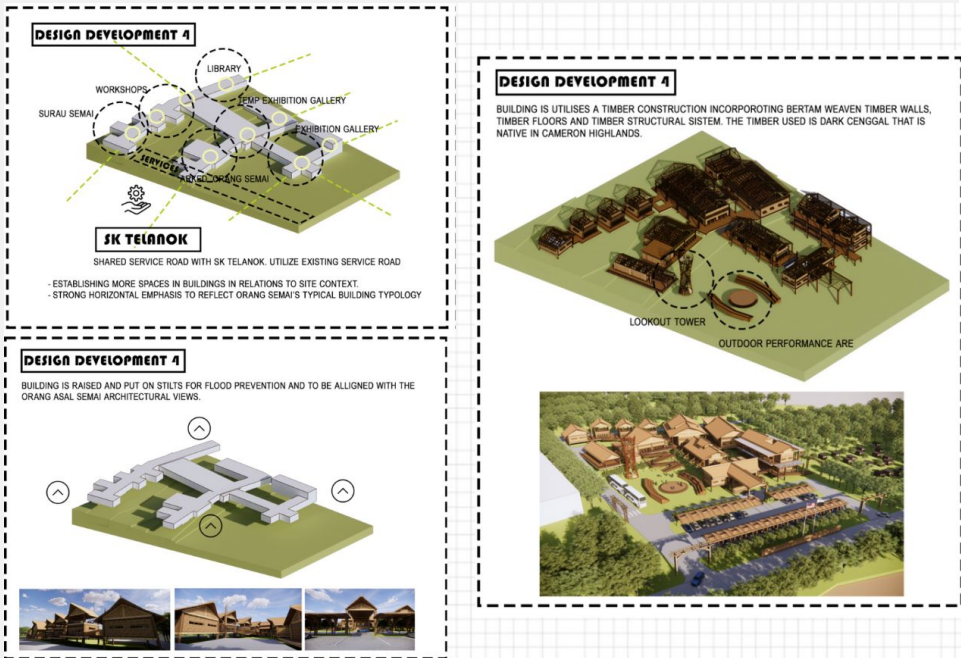
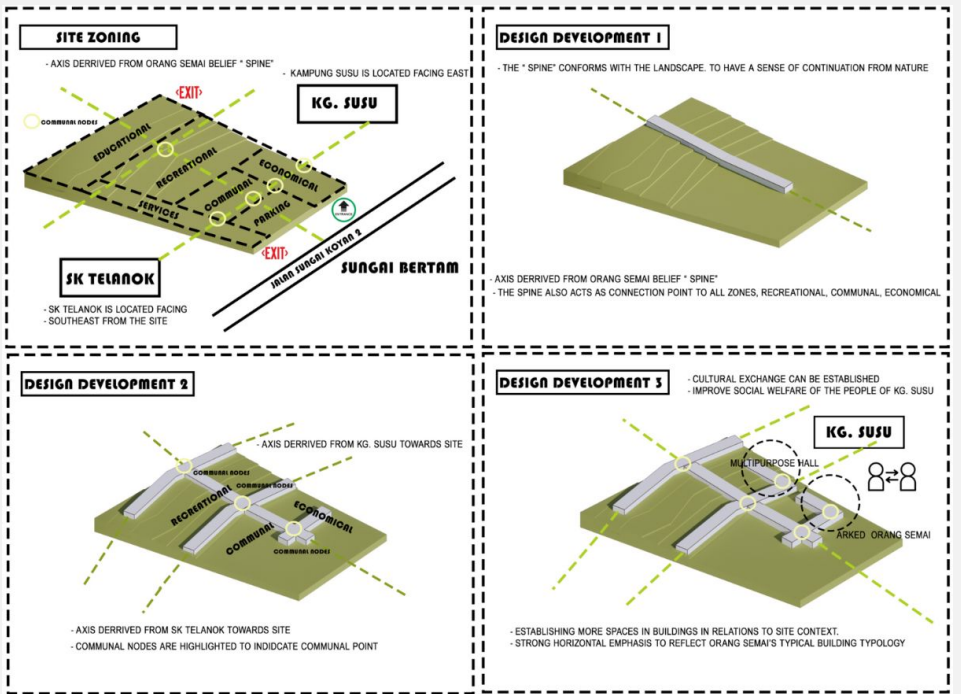


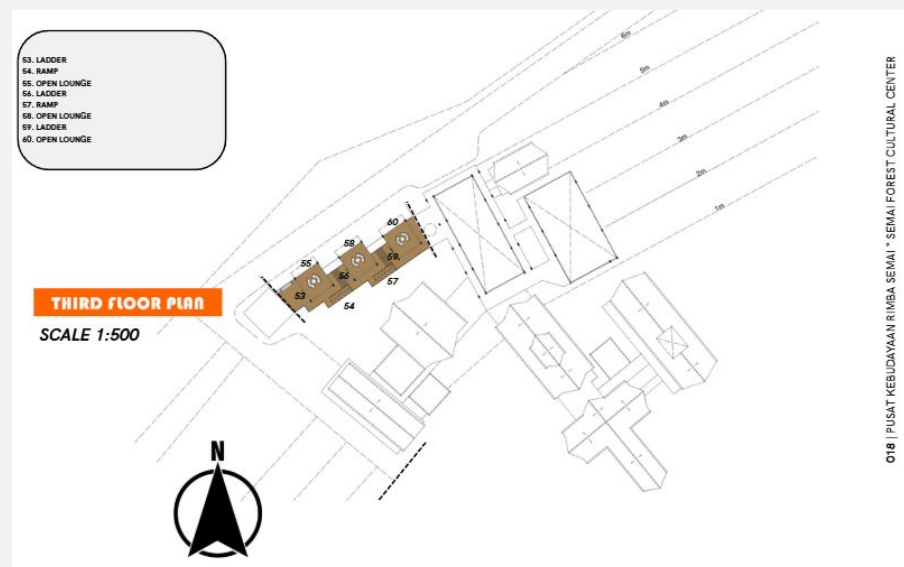
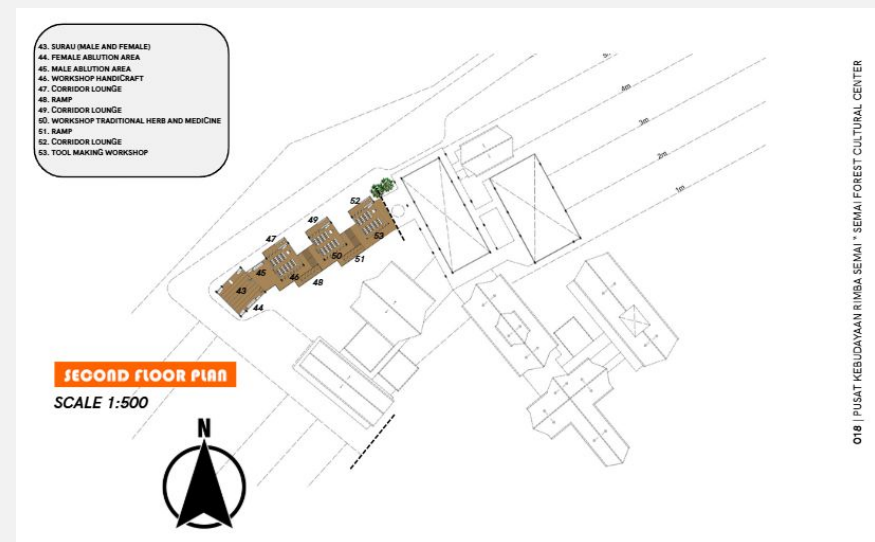
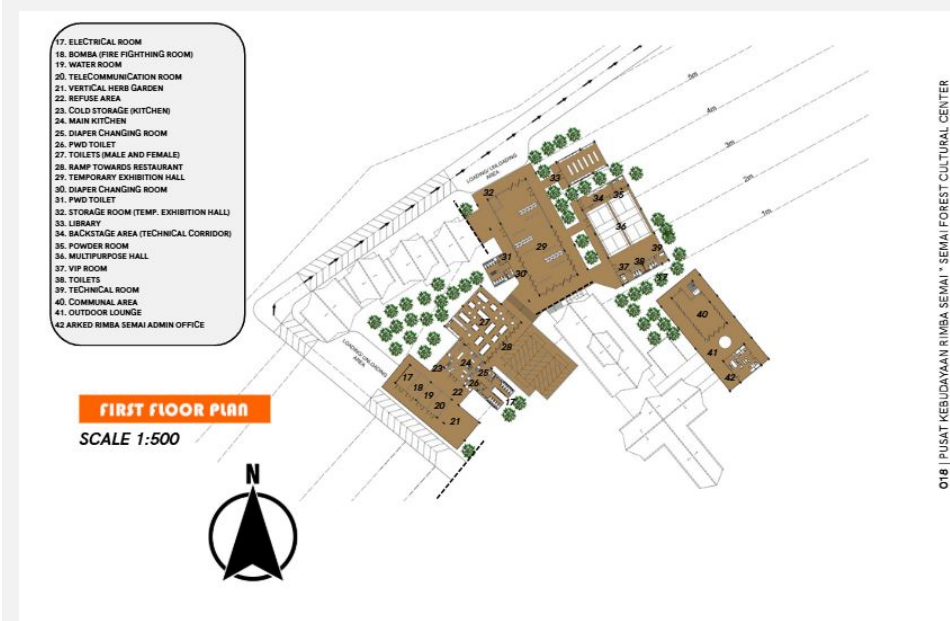
Figure 30: Shows the design development for pusat kebudayaan rimba semai. (Author)

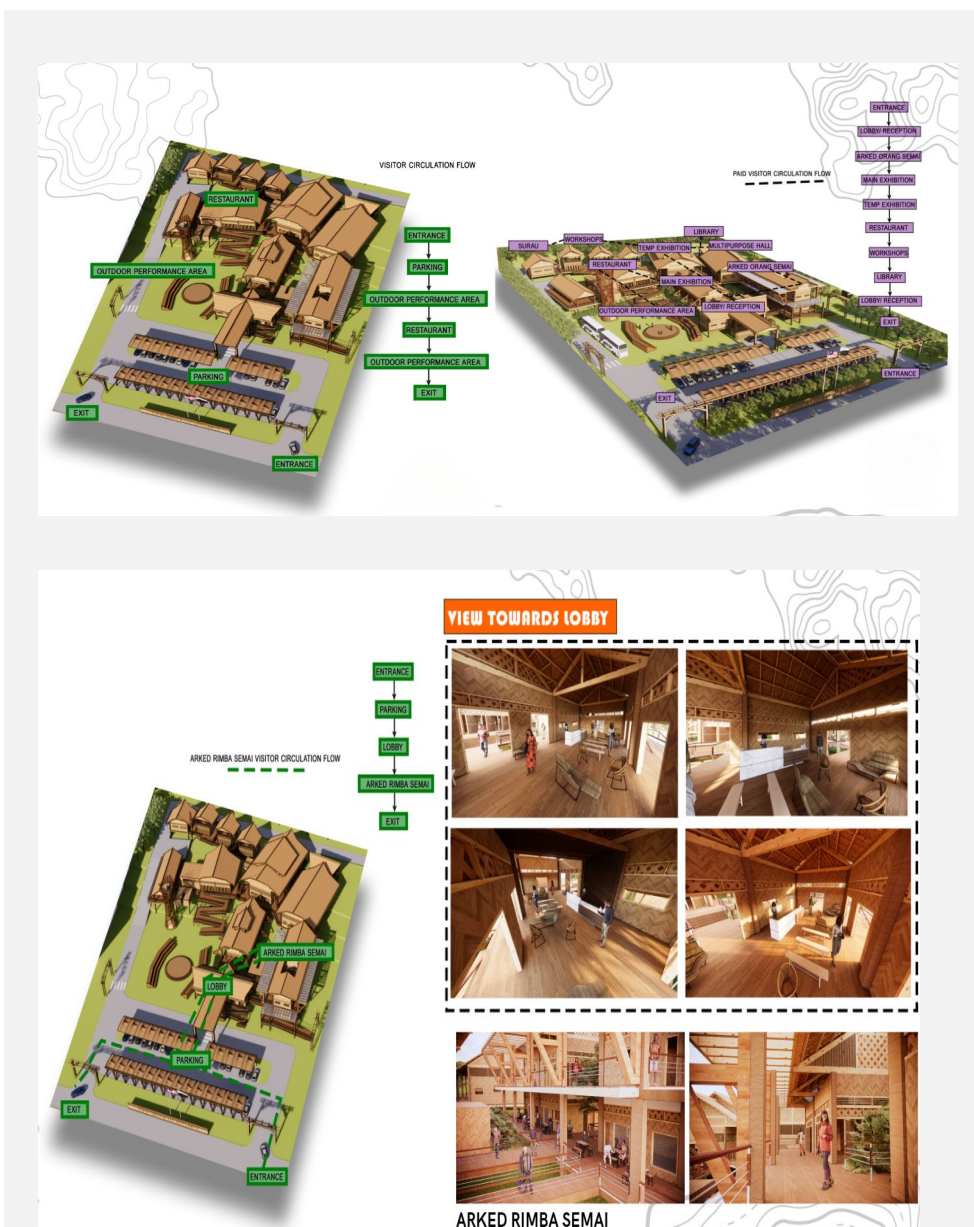
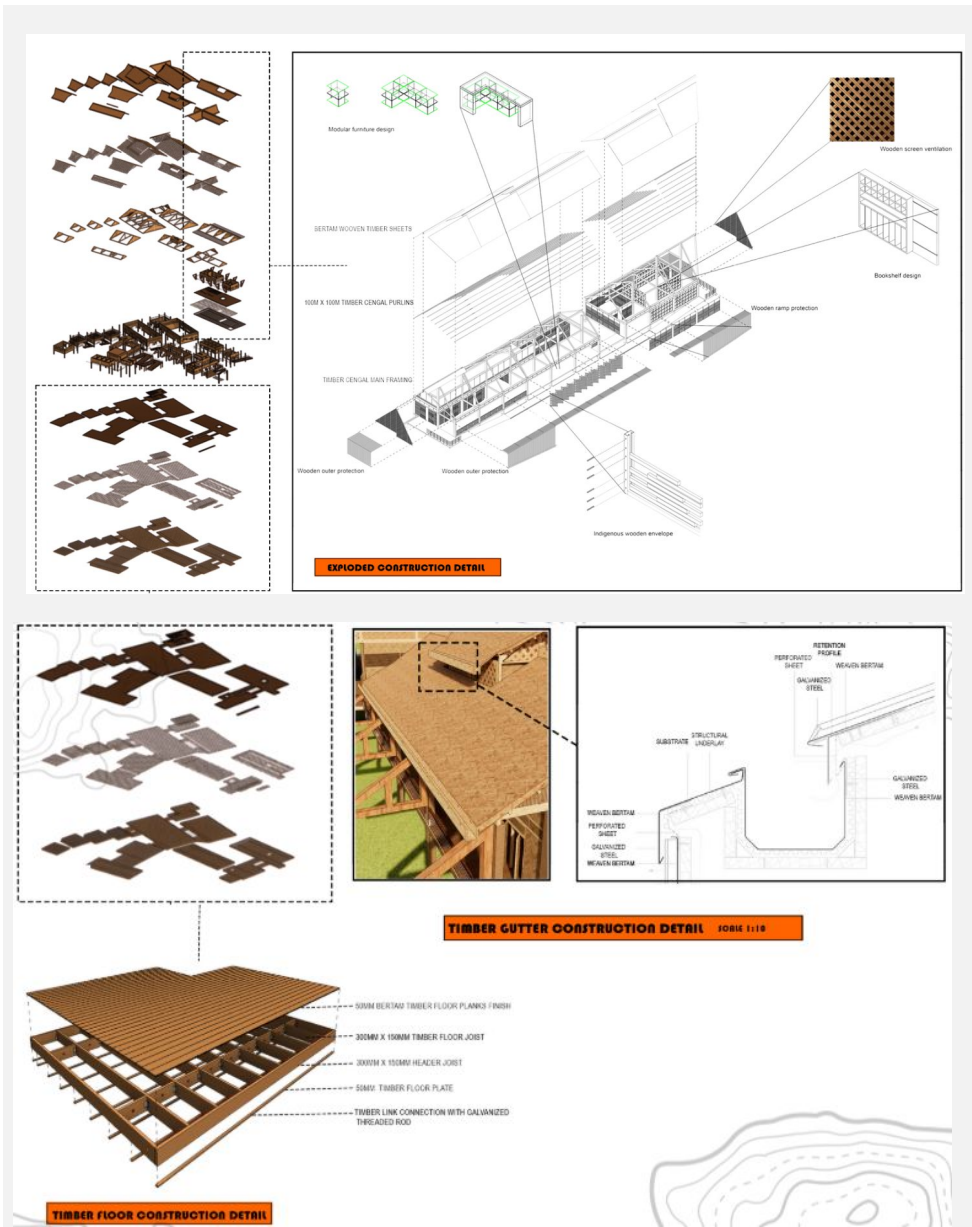


Figure 31: Shows the site plan and aerial views for pusat kebudayaan rimba semai. (Author)



Figure 32: Shows the aerial view for pusat kebudayaan rimba semai. (Author)





SUMMARY

A cultural heritage is crucial for the Orang Asal Semai in Cameron Highlands, not only for a tourist destination but a living archive of resilience and sustainable identity. It acts as a foundation in preserving history and oral traditions that are increasingly threatened by modernisation and environmental development. This cultural centre will serve as a vessel for history, culture, heritage and intergenerational continuity.

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