

A REVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE COCOS MALAY DWELLINGS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

This paper studies the unique anthropology of the Cocos Malays of Cocos (Keeling) Island in Australia. The focus of the study is on the evolution and transformation of their dwelling architecture and culture. Cocos Island is an isolated coral atoll located in the vast Indian Ocean and it became a home for the small community of Cocos Malays. Cocos Malays is a group of people from various ethnicities who were brought by a British merchant as slaves when he decided to inhabit and settle on the island in the 1820s. The slaves were a combination of people, mostly of Malay origin with the majority coming from Banjarmasin, Indonesia. These people later became assimilated into what is known today as the Cocos Malays. Starting by being slaves to the British and later as Australian subjects, this paper traces their history through the transformation of their dwelling culture until the present time. The dwellings, apart from serving the function of basic needs for human being also acts as a place for them to experience their sense of belonging, culture and worth of a people displaced by circumstances beyond their control. Through archival research and present observations the paper in progress elucidates the transformation of the architectural practices of the Cocos Malays' dwelling culture.

Keywords: Cocos Malay, Cocos (Keeling) Island, Dwelling culture

1. Introduction

This paper is an ongoing research where the main purpose is to analyse the evolution of the Cocos Malays' dwelling culture starting from the first settlements by Alexander Hare and his slaves in 1826 until today. In addition, this article gives a quick overview of the Cocos (Keeling) Island and its history. It states the transformation of the dwelling culture starting from the past to present and how the evolution does not necessarily relates to the needs and wants of the Cocos Malays. The other objective of this paper is to investigate the journey of the Cocos Malays from various places and ethnic groups to the island. The first settlers included people from Bali, Bima, Celebes, Madura, Sumbawa, Timor, Sumatra, Malacca, Penang, Batavia, Cerebon, Banjarmasin, Pontianak and Tasik Malaya (Australia Press).

This paper also intends to explain and justify the factors that influence the current architectural practices of the dwelling culture of the Cocos Malays on the island.

2. Background of the Studies

Cocos (Keeling) Island is a small remote island located at the Indian Ocean and the island is included in the group of islands in the Indian Ocean which is part of South-eastern Asia. It is positioned at southwest of Indonesia, about halfway between Australia and Sri Lanka and located at 2,950 kilometres north-west of Perth, 700 kilometres west of Darwin and 900 kilometres south west of Christmas Island (96° 52' East, 12° 10' South) (Figure 1) (Australian Government, 2015.)

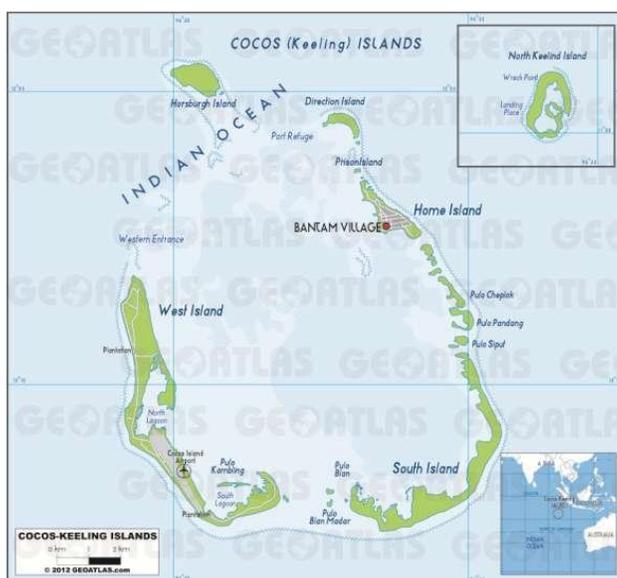


Figure 1: Cocos (Keeling) Island Map.

Source: Geoatlas.com (2012) (<http://www.geoatlas.com/en/maps/dependencies-overseas-6/keeling-islands-7019>)

There are 27 coral islands in the group with a total land area of 14 square kilometers approximately. The terrain is flat with low-lying coral atolls. The islands experience two main seasons that often overlap which are the trade wind season from April/May through September/October, and the calmer season from November through April. Temperatures are fairly consistent, remaining around 30°C during the day, with a minimum evening temperature that rarely drops below 24°C (Bunce, 1988).

The first group of settlers were brought to the island by a British merchant, Alexander Hare in 1826. They were mostly Malays with a few Chinese, Papuans, Indians and possibly some of African heritage. The present Cocos Islanders are made up of Cocos Malays who stayed on Home Island and the westerners (Australians and European descents) who stayed on West Island. The population of the Cocos inhabitants as at July 2014 was estimated around 596 people (Australian Government, 2015) and their languages commonly used by the islanders are Malay in the Cocos dialect and English.

Previously, Cocos (Keeling) Island was famous because of its coconut industry which exports copra to all parts of the world. Up until now, the existence of the coconut trees is synonym with this island, thus the name. However through the lack of demand for copra, the island no longer produces and exports the coconut commercially. The trees growing throughout the islands are only for domestic consumption. Small local gardens and fishing activities contribute to the food supply but additional food and others necessities are brought in from the mainland of Western Australia. The local agricultural products are vegetables, bananas, pawpaws and coconuts. The Cocos Island invested heavily in tourism industry but, because of the small numbers of accommodations available and the low frequency of the air services to and fro the island, the business becomes limited.

The Cocos Islands Cooperative Society Ltd is the main employer of Cocos Malays (along with the Shire Council) and is responsible for the management of the supermarkets on Home and West Islands and the current public transport service on behalf of the Australian Government (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015).

The serenity of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands today gives little hint of their colourful past, their human dramas and tragedies, under the different rulers who controlled them. The history starts when Captain William Keeling discovered the islands in 1609, but they remained uninhabited until the 19th century (Australia, press). In 1825, Captain John Clunnies Ross (a Scottish trader) landed on the island to investigate Christmas Island for a settlement but because of bad weather, he cancelled that plan and surveyed Cocos (Keeling) Island instead.

A little later in 1826, Alexander Hare (a British merchant) with a group of his slaves was brought to the islands by Robert Clunnies Ross (brother of John). Hare set up the first settlement on Home Island, then called Goose Island and became the leader. A year later, in 1827, John Clunnies Ross and his party arrived and settled on Home Island. Tension soon broke out between the two regarding territory and finance, which resorted to John Clunnies Ross moving to South Island. Later, increasing disputes between Alexander Hare and John Clunnies Ross led Hare to go back to Batavia in Java but he never returned. Hare died in 1834 and upon his death, John Clunnies Ross assumed control over the island. He moved to Home Island and took over Hare's operations.

From the 1820s to 1978, members of the Clunnies Ross's family have controlled the islands and the copra production. Presiding like kings they kept the island private and most of the Cocos Islanders had little freedom or contact with the outside world. In 1886, Queen Victoria granted all the Islands to John Clunnies Ross's grandson, George and his heirs reserving powers to the Crown to resume the land for public purposes and much later to conduct cable communications. From 1944 to 1946 the islands came under military administration during World War II and it became key targets because of its strategic position in the Indian Ocean. As mentioned before, most food had to be brought in into the island by ships. But due to the war, food shortage started to occur because only a few ships dared to sail the seas. In a bid to save the island, the Clunnies Ross family hatched up a plan to migrate some of the population, which in 1941 reached a peak of about 1500 persons, too many locations on the island. The Cocos Malays were forced to migrate to Christmas Island, Western Australia, Malaya, Singapore and North Borneo in order to find a better place to dwell. Along with them, they brought their unique culture to the new places.

In 1978, the Australian Government purchased the Clunnies Ross's property interests under George, save his family home and surrounding grounds on Home Island (approximately 5 hectares in total). The following year ownership of the village area of Home Island was transferred to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands Council which are the local governing body elected by the Home Island community to be held in trust for the residents. In 1984, the islands were fully integrated with Australia, following a United Nations' supervised referendum (Cocos Keeling Land, 2015).

2.1 Evolution of Dwelling in Cocos (Keeling) Island

From 1826, the Cocos Malays, from being slaves and later gaining independence in the 70s have always lived in dwellings that were given to them until today. Since then, the dwelling culture of Cocos Malays had experienced the major transformation. The majority of Cocos Malays have lived on Home Island while a small group of Europeans dwelled in West Island. In this paper, the concern is in respect to the evolution of dwelling culture of the Cocos Malays on Home Island. From just a tiny village of rickety shacks the settlement has transformed to what it is today as shown in Figure 2.

Source: Google Earth (2012)



Figure 2: Bantam Village Plot Organization on the Home Island

In the late 1800s, there were two residential areas or kampong. The first kampong was resided by the Cape People (Orang Cape), while in the other kampong was resided by Orang Banten (Bantamese). In the early settlement period, the houses were a one-room affair served for the family as a place for sleeping with the kitchen placed outside. The bathing and washing was done on the surrounding beach. Later, with the addition of more family members, the islanders were allowed to extend their houses to consist of two rooms for sleeping and attached to the open space (serambi) (Heriman, 2014). The houses were built with gridironplannings which is typical of the European influence but not with local organic planning typical of the Malays.

A few years later, the transformation has changed in three stages: the first one is RumahAtap (1920s to 1950s); second is RumahB of houses atu (1950s to 1980s); and lastly RumahBaru

(1980s to present). In 1908, a cyclone had destroyed most of the Home Island residences. With the effort of the islanders, new homes called 'Thatch Roof' (RumahAtap) were built in the 1920s (Omar, 2008). During that time, each family was given one plot of land to reside. Based on the firsthand account, by the Cocos resident's stories, the dwelling compound consists of the main house, outdoor kitchen, toilet and well (Figure 3). The houses solely served as a place for the dwellers to do their basic daily routine such as cooking, sleeping, bathing, washing etc.

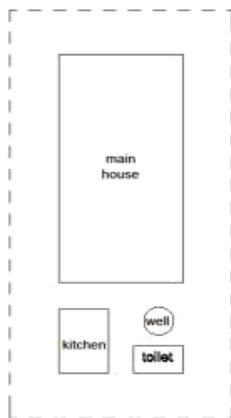


Figure 3: The Dwelling Compound in the 1920s (Not to scale)

This RumahAtap house were constructed with local building materials and built off the ground on top of short stump. The walls were made from the spine of the palm frond; the frame was made from local hard wood and the roof from the layers of woven palm fronds. The layout of the house was roughly square in shape and divided into three areas; one served as a sitting room and the other two for sleeping purposes.

Herrimanand Omar, 2008) discussed on Gibson Hill's writing where he mentioned that the houses were "all identical in size and of outward appearance, arranged regularly in straight, parallel rows. They were plain, rectangular buildings, about eighteen feet wide and twenty-six feet long. In most cases the interior was divided by partitions to form two small rooms, which were used for sleeping, and a large room, which was used for the reception of visitors. There was a door in the centre of each end and usually one half ways along one of the sides as shown in the examples in Figures 4 & 5.

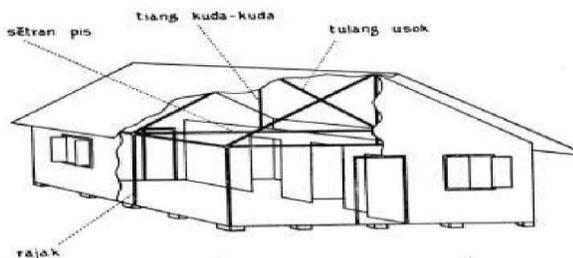


Figure 4: The RumahAtap on the Home

Figure 5: A Diagrammatic Showed the Internal Structure of the RumahAtap on Home Island.

Source:<http://nicholasherriman.blogspot.com/2014/06/homes-in-history.html>

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In the 1950s, the RumahAtap was replaced by RumahBatu or Concrete houses. The walls were cast inside huge moulds and the design was similar to the previous model. Wooden kitchens, storage sheds and washhouses were built separately at the back as before. Based on the photography evidences and firsthand account from the Cocos resident's explanation, the layout plan was sketched roughly and converted into Auto-Cad 2D. From the layout, it clearly showed a straightforward plan consisting of two rooms (bilik) and a middle of the house with a space (tengahrumah) (Figure 6). Tengah rumah acts as an area to entertain the guest and family gathering while the rooms act as a place for sleep.



Figure 6: Layout Plan of RumahBatu (Not to scale)
(Source: Author)



Figure 7: The façade of RumahBatu with mono-pitched roof

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(Source:<http://nicholasherriman.blogspot.com/2014/06/homes-in-history.html>)

From 1980s till present, Home Islanders have resided in the 96 "New Houses" (RumahBaru). As part of the Home Island Development Plan, they were built on the same plan. One aspect that was flexible was the number of bedrooms because houses with more bedrooms was built for larger families. The current house was developed from the result of the surveys of family living patterns and community desires. The programme was carried out by the islanders and has been financed by the Australian Government. The layout plan was built in two parts. First part consists of middle of the house (tengah rumah), kitchen (dapur) and store while the second part consists of bathroom (bilik mandi), toilet (bilik air) and three bedrooms. Both parts were separated by a covered open space called selang (Figure 8). From the plan, it showed that the layout was an extension from the previous design. This design created an extra space for the residents to do their activities in a more comfortable environment.

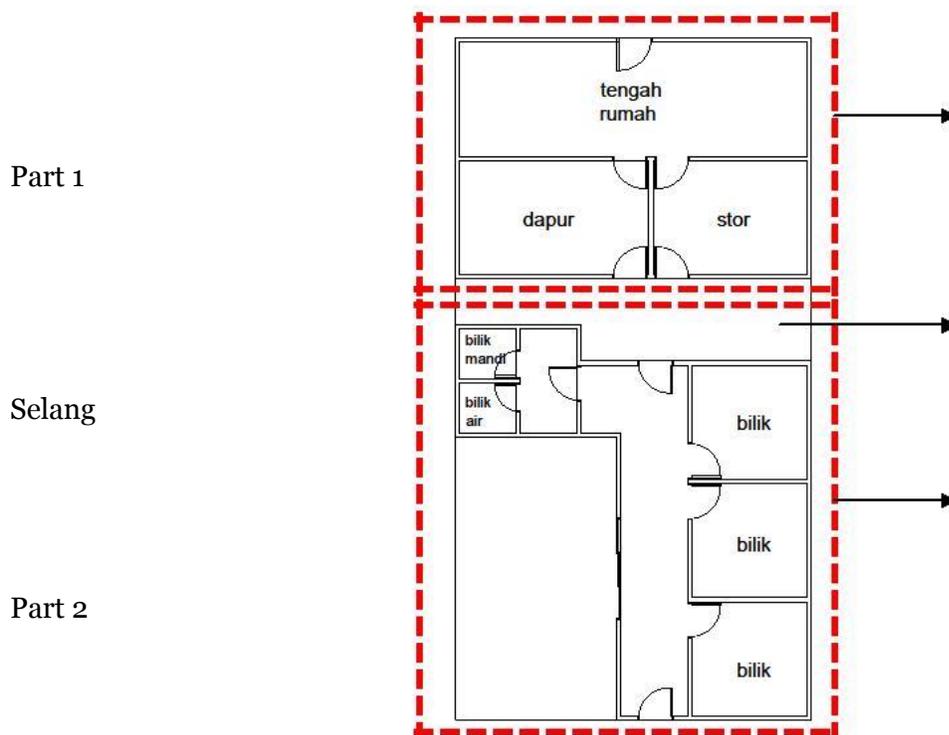


Figure 8: Layout plan of RumahBaru (Not to scale)
(Source: Author)



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Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure (9) and (10): The exterior view of the New Houses(*Source: Author*)

3. Methodology

This research is an exploratory research, which argues for an architectural-anthropological approach that would document the dwelling culture transformation throughout the years, social life, architectural forms etc. in order to interpret the obscured historical processes. The research inquiry was conducted in Cocos (Keeling) Island with the Cocos Malays as the main population and source of information.

Several research methods were used which are literature review, in-depth interview using a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire, non-participatory observation, photography, videography, architectural sketches, measured drawing, as well as group discussions with the key informants and local residents. Various aspects such as age, sex, family background, education, leadership and marital status were considered in establishing the focus group discussions. Then, all the qualitative data were gathered and analyzed by using content analysis with the aid of schematic sketches in addition with the findings from questionnaire.

4. Conclusion

Cocos (Keeling) Island has been recognized for its historical origin and natural beauty. Its strategic location has led Alexander Hare to choose the islands for settlement and begin to develop many houses. However, based on the observation and research that has been done, the evolution of the Cocos Malay dwelling culture has transformed over the years in order to adapt to the culture and the current way of life of the inhabitants. Among the three types of the houses, the first one, which is RumahAtap, was totally replaced. The three types of houses were basically built with the same design unlike in the first two where there is no trace of individual preference in the design of their houses. The main purpose was to solely serve the basic needs of the residents.

In the last type (RumahBaru), which was constructed by the Australian government, further extension of the house were done taking into consideration the event of receiving additional members(born or married)into the family. For further studies, a better understanding of the Cocos Malay's dwelling culture will be discussed as to explore the meanings behind all the renovations and extensions to the house, whether intrinsic or symbolic.

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