

Objects and the Malay Living Room

Zarina Za'bar and Syed Iskandar Ariffin

Abstract—This research seeks to explore the importance of displayed objects in the living room of a Malay house. Whether the objects are for everyday consumption or merely decoration, the following discussion suggests an approach that firmly implies how things are used, lived, and appropriated into the Malay's everyday life. The classification of displayed objects and in-depth interviews were conducted within 30 selected Malay houses throughout Malaysia in this research. The article develops and complements existing ideas and knowledge in Malay cultural living from the past and the present that focuses on the appreciation and understanding of the complex relationships between Malay people and their things: the making, history, preservation, and interpretation of objects. The present study contributes to the existing research by extensively identifying displayed objects in the selected living room, and the relationship relates to how objects act as the embodiment of meaningful connections between ancestors, kinfolk, friends, and other people within their homes. The study is explored via five observed methods of presentation within the living room: objects as an inheritance; objects as a remembrance; objects as affluence; affable objects; and symbols of faith.

Index Terms—Displayed objects, Malay culture, living room, home.

I. INTRODUCTION

The living room is an area where family, friends, and guests gather to spend quality time and to communicate in a home, so it is essential for it to be well-designed and considered as the focal point of the house. Hence, within the space of a living room, occupants would spend a great deal of time and resources to organize the living room furniture and style depending on their personal preferences, needs, and priorities [1]. Apart from the furniture arrangements, the color scheme of the room, and the lighting effects, the 'things' that catch the eye are the displayed objects in the living room. These displayed objects represent the identity of the occupant and, furthermore, provide meanings of everyday life.

The following discussion seeks to expand and bring together issues of everyday activities, daily assumptions, Malay cultural values, and Islamic practices in order to offer a more coherent discussion that would take forward exploration and understanding of displayed objects within the living room. Through 30 detailed interviews and observations, the discussion focuses on the appreciation of each displayed object that is consumed, existed and taken into the occupant's daily activities, and to emphasize the

meanings of each object related to the occupants [2].

Furthermore, the discussion expanded within the related field on cultural studies and anthropology consecutively to identify the significant meanings behind each displayed object within the home and to integrate its existent into the occupant's emotion, awareness, and perception and to provide a social relationship between the family members and guests [3].

II. THE MALAY LIVING ROOM

Currently, there is a growing number of studies on the concept of home. The meaning of home or house was interpreted based on social and cultural values but not in a physical context, a context that also verifies the nature of culture [4], [5]. The most occupied and distinguished space in a Malay house is the living room. The living room reveals the character of the occupants and their personal needs, beliefs, and values. It is a space that displays the personal collections of individuals and their devotion to their culture. A personal collection comprises religious items, inherited objects, and souvenirs [6].

In other words, the living room unveils how the concept of *Malayness* or Malay cultural values are playfully preserved or contested through the displayed objects and subjected to a particular attachment and meaning. This paper debates that there is an increasing need to understand such negotiations within some of the many living spaces. By framing this study within the living rooms, we highlight potential sites for the unconscious Malay psyche, a psyche formed through the preservation of and contestation to Malay cultural identities, intersecting modernity, *adat* (customs), and religion. In short, the unconscious Malay psyche holds that despite Malay subjects' constant engagement with modern globalization, the inhabitants may re-route their ways to return to their familiar local religious grounds and faith [7]. Also, this study opens new inquiries into contemporary investigations, as it will demonstrate how being modern and Malay at the same time can be seen as perpetuating in a non-linear fashion that, in one way or another, may result in tension that co-exists [8].

The significance of a living room in an urban Malay house is used for entertaining and serving guests in festive seasons, such as *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, solemnization ceremonies, or the celebration of a newborn. It is also a physical space that symbolizes the affluence and prosperity of a specific individual or family. Moreover, a Malay living room indicates the inhabitants' faithfulness and devotion to Islamic values through the exhibited *du'a* (cite) and readings from the Qur'an on the walls and throughout the space. The Malay living room is also a remembrance colonnade to display gifts, tokens, awards, and photographs as a commemoration of the past and the ancestors.

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III. BETWEEN THE CONCEPT OF *MALAYNESS* AND THE DISPLAYED OBJECTS

Like any other cultural group, the meaning of a house is revealed through the collection of objects, which gain specific senses and affections over the years. It is likely a personal gallery that is exhibited to unknown individuals. The relationship between the physical form of space and the inhabitants' way of life has been noted to be of significant appreciation in the world today through their knowledge, materiality, and cultural values [9].

Fundamentally, if one is born to Malay parents, speaks the Malay language, and practices Islam and the Malay culture, he or she is assumed to be a Malay. Additionally, Malay culture embraced through *adat* (customs), beliefs, and values is situated between Islamic traditions and its way of life [10]. These beliefs are accentuated where *Malayness* is concerned. Malays value harmony and live by Islamic morality and tradition. The notion of the Malay psyche is the connection of the mind and the heart in the manner of compromise, respect, cooperation, tolerance, modesty, patience, religion, modesty, forgiveness, and repentance [11].

However, the urban Malay houses have shown how the inhabitants enhanced their ways of living by adjusting the modern globalization embodied in their homes amid their Malay psyche with the addition of the displayed objects. These primary elements are the Malay psyche and the objects deployed in the living room as a means of expressing and constituting the Malay culture. This approach challenges our understanding of urban Malay houses and identity by illustrating how objects extend the reach of a home through time and beyond living spaces. For example, the Malay people use the physicality of 'objects' (ornaments, souvenirs, antiques, and sacred items) to draw the memory of the past or the ancestors into their experience of today's way of life. The accumulation of 'objects' into their living spaces is simultaneously a collection of being and a quest for recognition [12].

Meanwhile, the consciousness of the Malay mind, which is the 'subject,' plays an active role in determining the awareness and appearance of the collected 'objects.' Object and subject are the reframed behaviors between mind and matter or awareness and appearance in existence [12].

Deriving on these ideas and incorporating a selection of interviews and object observations, it is possible to identify five different ways in which belongings serve to maintain or emphasize critical social ties and meaningful relationships throughout the home. These five ways are identified as objects as an inheritance; objects as a remembrance; objects as affluence; affable objects; and symbols of faith.

A. Objects as Inheritance

Based on the in-depth interviews of Malay occupants, involved in receiving objects from a deceased family member is an obligation to carefully display those objects in their living room. Feelings of obligation in taking good care of their deceased family belongings have first emerged. Feelings of obligation, Miller would suggest, are borne out of 'love' between family members and can be viewed as 'normative ideology manifested largely as a practice within long-term relationships. Love as a practice is quite compatible with feelings of obligation and responsibility'

[13]. Many occupants point out that these objects are tributes to their parents' legacies, which will remain forever as they are passed to the next generations. They are also symbols of Malay identity preserved devotedly in the form of ornaments, brass vases, *keris* (Malay dagger), and hand-woven crafts.

Some occupants indicate a sense of obligation toward photographs of their late family members as objects of exchange. Usually, the photographs are given or passed on to the occupants as a legacy to be held on to so that the younger generations will know about their ancestors. Some will hang the photographs on the wall, and some will put them on the display cabinet with other cherished valuables. Edwards observes that while the image contained in the photograph is key to the act of exchange, it is also worthwhile to consider how photographs may be used as objects in a social space and how and where they are displayed around the home [14].

B. Objects as Remembrance

It is indicated in this study that the objects in the living room are quite often disliked by the other family members yet are coveted intensely by the occupant because they maintain a connection between past occasions, people, and places. As Riggins contends, it is through objects that we keep alive the memory of families and individuals that may otherwise be forgotten [15].

Then, these personal possessions from photographs, garments, awards, gifts and wedding presents are 'objects that leave traces. These are objects that bear memories and the presence of the person. These are objects that have the potential to stand for the person because they have a presence' [15]. Moreover, this study reveals the use of objects as a remembrance or bearers of other people to preserve the memory of a person and to maintain the cherished connection that once existed in a physical sense through gifts, souvenirs, pictures, artworks, and endearing trinkets.

Furthermore, these objects also symbolize happiness and sadness among the family members through specific occasions. As the study emphasizes, the displayed objects tend to bear important memorials. Thus, it appears that the displayed objects themselves almost lose their assigned identities as vases, artworks, or knick-knacks and instead become an indicator for special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, or anniversaries [16]. Within the selected living room, many displayed objects perform this function. From the first pair of baby shoes to awards for sporting achievements and recent wedding photographs, these objects all mark special moments in the lives of that particular family [17]. As Miller observes, objects are perceived to be instilled with some trace of a person, and there appears to be a strong belief that the preservation of such an object will ensure that this vital connection between loved ones will be maintained [17].

C. Objects as Affluence

There were many instances of objects in the selected living room that showed wealth and prosperity. These objects, such as the collection of fine bone China, the Royal Doulton tea set, and the crystal glassware, were commonly displayed in a particular cupboard (Fig. 1). Even though initially, this luxurious collection is used at the dining table, the occupants tend to present them as objects only for admiration and desire. This action shows their current level of wealth and affluence.

Not only that, but they also derive a feeling of satisfaction from having them portrayed the economic status they worked hard to reach throughout the years. Commonly, a feeling of joy and contentment was displayed when these objects were mentioned in the interviews. They are not only objects in their own right; more importantly, they assume a variety of meanings for the owners. As Miller observes, ‘when combined with the distinctive events of particular lives, their potential meanings are infinite’ [17].



Fig. 1. The collection of fine bone China, the Royal Doulton tea set, brass vases and the crystal glassware, were commonly displayed in a particular cupboard.

D. Affable Objects

One of the most displayed objects in Malay homes is the *tepak sirih* (Fig. 2). It is usually presented on the main table in the living room as a primary item. Many occupants were exceedingly proud of their *tepak sirih*. Generally speaking, the *tepak sirih* is a symbol of a purpose and desire in Malay culture [18]. However, in today’s society, *tepak sirih* simply represent a sign of appreciation and warm gesture when receiving guests at home. It was the tradition to offer the *tepak sirih* to guests as a sign of welcoming and as a diplomatic ritual before any serious verbal communication was established [19]. *Tepak sirih* addresses invitations, earnest discussions, and a sign of agreement among each other. Furthermore, the serving of *tepak sirih* embodies friendliness, warmth, and friendship, and these notions are deeply ingrained into the Malay community. Also, the Malay occupants anticipate that this cultural and artistic object should be preserved for the young generation to be able to recognize the history of Malay civilization.



Fig. 2. The *tepak sirih* represent a sign of appreciation and warm gesture when receiving guests at home.

The *tepak sirih* also implies the meaning of the philosophy, morals, beliefs, principles, and norms in Malay culture through excellent communication skills, prominent personalities, respect towards guests, and ethics in daily activities. Not only that, but *tepak sirih* also functions as the

beginning of a discussion about all things, especially in the matters of a proposal and saying hello. Everything was done with excellent manners, according to Malay identity, which implies maintaining the heredity customs inherited from the ancestors [19]. Through this research, numerous Malay occupants indirectly agree that *tepak sirih* represents the modesty of the Malay culture in social life.

E. A Symbol of Faith

Islam is the predominant religion in Malaysia and is practiced by about 60 percent of Malaysians. Additionally, Islam is an integral part of the Malay culture in everyday practices, values, and daily life. Nonetheless, verses from the Qur’an (Fig. 3) were in every Malay home. Verses from the Qur’an were displayed on plaques, in exquisite calligraphies, or in three-dimensional forms that hung on the wall together with the names of *Allah SWT* and the *Prophet Mohammed SAW*. Some say that this protects the occupants and their homes from any harm.

In most cases, hanging the Qur’an verses on the wall of the home is merely for decoration and adornment, as the verses are written in beautiful calligraphy and colorful brocade. However, some occupants revealed that the Qur’an verses put up around their house are reminders to read the Qur’an regularly to influence the occupants in being good Muslims even though the Qur’an was not revealed to decorate walls but to guide humanity. Commonly, the verse of *Al-Fatihah* and the verses of the four *Qul*, *Al-Ikhlās*, *An-Nas*, *Al-Falaq*, and *Al-Kafiroon*, were displayed as symbols of faithfulness and to state that it was a Muslim house. These verses were displayed to gain awareness and to extend caution about the devotion to *Allah SWT*. Additionally, the verse from *Ayatul Kursi* was also commonly placed on the walls of the living rooms to be recited daily and as self-remembrance as a Muslim. However, some occupants mentioned that the existence of these verses merely justified their religion and their faith towards Islam. These verses, usually framed in gilded settings, serve as the most essential and vital objects in their homes.



Fig. 3. The verse from *The Qur’an* was commonly placed on the walls of the Malay living rooms.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has reported on understanding objects within the Malay home based on the interviews with the occupants in their attempts to ‘make sense’ of what is on display in their living rooms. The discussion suggests five methods in which this takes place: objects as inheritance, objects as remembrance, objects as affluence, affable objects, and symbols of faith. By drawing attention to the importance and meaning assigned to the displayed objects within the living room, the discussion hints at some instances of the complex relationship that exists between cultural values, rituals,

routines, obligations, love, and faith.

The urban Malay house is a reflection of the Malay mind and the Malay way of life [20]. The concept of *Malayness*, which represents the tangibility and intangibility of a Malay house through the Malay cultural values and displayed objects, shows that a house plays a vital role in cultural activities. What can be concurred is that the Malay house can be seen as a physical setting for representing *Malayness* and the unconscious effects on the cultural activities in the living space. Malay inhabitants behave and act accordingly in their living spaces, matching or making congruent their cultural values with the modern context. Maintaining *Malayness* throughout their living spaces is more critical and significant than the physical form of space. The size of the living spaces appears to be a more subordinate property of the house rather than the object and subject as a remembrance of their roots. Thus, in this study, living spaces in the house can be seen as the setting for the presence of *Malayness* and are influenced by cultural values, religious allegiance, privacy needs, social customs, and economic background. By considering the perspectives of Malay inhabitants regarding their behavioral needs, cultural experiences, Islamic values, social customs and personal possessions in the design process, better homes can be designed and built for future house owners [21]. The advantages of this consideration include the fact that the process of adaptation to the environment is necessary and substantial while preserving Malay cultural values and Islamic religion. Addressing Malay cultural values and presentation of objects could result in a better quality of life as well as the ethical parameters of what Heidegger referred to as a 'proper dwelling' [22].

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