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The Symbolism of Faith and Identity: A Phenomenological Study of Malay Traditional Houses in Bengkalis, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the symbolic link among faith, identity, and architecture through a phenomenological and semiotic analysis of traditional Malay houses in Bengkalis, Indonesia. Moving beyond typological and structural study, the research examines how architectural elements—such as spatial orientation, elevation, ornamentation, and material choices—reflect the Islamic worldview and Malay moral philosophy. Using qualitative document analysis and visual interpretation, the study examines the traditional house as a lived space that demonstrates how belief and culture converge in its built form. Results indicate that the Malay house functions as a living cosmology, in which architecture expresses *tawhid* (divine unity), *adab* (ethical propriety), and *ukhuwah* (community harmony). The Qiblah direction symbolizes submission to divine order, while the raised platform (*rumah panggung*) stands for transcendence and purity. Carvings and ornaments (*ukiran*) function as visual *dhikr*, reminding of God through beauty and symmetry. Natural materials reflect an ecological awareness grounded in Islamic ethics of balance (*tawazun*). By combining phenomenological experience with semiotic interpretation, the study discusses Islamic aesthetics and sustainable cultural heritage. It concludes that the traditional Malay house is both a theological and architectural symbol—a dwelling that teaches and reminds us that to build is to believe, and to dwell is to remember.

Keywords: Malay traditional house; phenomenology; semiotics; Islamic aesthetics; cultural identity

Introduction

Architecture has long been recognized as more than a mere physical structure; it embodies a complex language of symbols, values, and worldviews that reflect a community's collective identity. (Azman Nor Syawallina et al., 2024). Traditional architecture, in particular, serves as a cultural text that records the history, beliefs, and social organization of its people. In Southeast Asia, traditional houses are not merely dwellings but living expressions of harmony among humans, nature, and the Divine. (Rashid et al., 2021). Each architectural form, spatial layout, ornamentation, and construction technique is imbued with cultural and spiritual meaning. Within this framework, Malay traditional houses stand as one of the most profound manifestations of how faith and identity are materialized through space, structure, and symbolism. (Taufik et al., 2022); (Ismail & Mohd Salleh, 2023).

The Malay world, which extends across Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and southern Thailand, has historically been shaped by a synthesis of indigenous animist beliefs, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, and Islamic values. (Mustapha Kamal & Kamal, 2024); (Yaman et al., 2024). However, Islam has emerged as the dominant and unifying force that redefined the Malay worldview and aesthetic expression. The Islamization of the Malay world introduced new ethical and philosophical dimensions that profoundly influenced architecture, art, and daily life. (Rashidi et al., 2022). In architectural terms, this transformation is evident in the integration of Islamic principles such as modesty, symmetry, cleanliness, and orientation toward the *qibla* into local building traditions. Traditional Malay houses thus represent a harmonious negotiation between faith and local wisdom, in which the sacred and the secular coexist in spatial design. (Yusof et al., 2022); (Saragih & Siregar, 2023).

In Bengkalis Regency, located on the eastern coast of Sumatra, traditional Malay houses remain as vital markers of cultural identity and continuity. (Azman et al., 2024). As a coastal region historically linked to maritime trade routes and Islamic scholarship, Bengkalis developed a distinct

architectural tradition that reflects both its Islamic devotion and its local adaptation to the tropical environment. (Prasetyo et al., 2021). The use of elevated wooden structures, sloping roofs, and intricate carvings is not merely functional; it also carries symbolic meanings tied to purity, protection, and humility before God. For instance, the elevated floor signifies spiritual elevation and separation from worldly impurity. At the same time, the symmetrical arrangement of the house reflects balance and order as moral virtues rooted in Islamic cosmology. (Siregar & Aisyah, 2024). These architectural symbols are not mere decorations; they embody collective faith and identity within the Malay-Muslim community of Bengkalis. (Prasetyo et al., 2021).

Despite their rich symbolic value, studies of traditional Malay houses in Bengkalis remain limited, particularly those that approach them from phenomenological and semiotic perspectives. (Helen et al., 2022). Previous research on Indonesian vernacular architecture has often focused on structural typologies, materials, and conservation techniques, neglecting the more profound spiritual and philosophical meanings embedded in architectural design. Similarly, existing studies on Malay culture tend to emphasize oral traditions, dress, and social customs rather than spatial expressions of faith. Consequently, there is a significant research gap in understanding how traditional Malay houses function as phenomenological spaces in which faith, identity, and experience converge. Addressing this gap is crucial for preserving not only the physical heritage of Bengkalis but also its intangible cultural and religious values. (Aisyah & Siregar, 2024); (Kuswoyo et al., 2022).

This study aims to explore the symbolism of faith and identity embodied in the architecture of Malay traditional houses in Bengkalis, Indonesia, through a phenomenological lens. Instead of relying on interviews or ethnographic fieldwork, this study employs qualitative document analysis and visual interpretation to uncover the symbolic meanings of faith, identity, and cultural values embedded in the architectural elements of Malay traditional houses. These meanings are expressed primarily through spatial arrangements, decorative motifs, and construction forms, which are best understood by examining visual and documentary evidence such as architectural drawings, heritage records, historical descriptions, and photographic archives. Document analysis provides non-reactive, historically grounded data that reveal the original cultural logic behind

these forms-something contemporary informants may no longer fully recall or articulate. Given the phenomenological focus of this study on interpreting how meaning is embodied in physical structures rather than on capturing lived experiences or social interactions, document analysis is the most appropriate and methodologically coherent approach for interpreting the symbolic dimensions of Malay traditional housing in Bengkalis. Drawing upon phenomenology, this study treats the traditional house as a “lived space” that reveals how the Malay-Muslim worldview is inscribed in built form. By engaging with existing literature, photographs, and cultural archives, the research seeks to interpret the implicit dialogue between the seen and the unseen-the material and the spiritual-within the architectural language of Malay tradition.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in bridging architectural semiotics, Islamic aesthetics, and phenomenological philosophy to provide a more holistic understanding of cultural heritage. It advances the discourse on how Islamic faith shapes local architectural identity and, conversely, how architecture reinforces communal spirituality. Furthermore, by situating the analysis within the specific cultural landscape of Bengkalis, this study highlights the significance of regional expressions of Islamic architecture beyond the dominant narratives centred in Java or Peninsular Malaysia. The findings are expected to enrich interdisciplinary discussions in Islamic studies, architecture, and cultural anthropology, while also offering insights for policymakers and heritage conservationists seeking to preserve Malay traditional houses as living symbols of faith and identity.

Literature Review

Traditional Architecture and Cultural Identity

Traditional architecture embodies collective memory, translating intangible cultural values into tangible forms of dwelling and space. Scholars such as Rapoport (1969) and Oliver (2006) assert that vernacular architecture is a cultural product shaped by local beliefs, environmental adaptation, and social organization. In Southeast Asia, traditional houses serve as socio-religious symbols rather than mere functional shelters. They articulate the cosmological order of their builders, signifying a microcosm

of the universe where human life is harmonized with divine law and natural forces. (Waterson, 1990).

In the Malay context, architecture reflects the principle of *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah* (customs rooted in Islamic law). This maxim underscores that cultural expressions, including architectural practices, derive legitimacy from Islamic teachings. (Fajria & Fitriasia, 2024). Thus, the traditional Malay house is not only a product of aesthetic taste or climatic adaptation but also a manifestation of Islamic values internalized through local tradition. The structure, orientation, and ornamentation of the house collectively signify an ethical-spiritual worldview that positions faith as the center of daily life. (Hasanah, 2020); (Mariana et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, studies on traditional Malay houses—such as those by (Liu et al., 2025), have explored typological diversity, craftsmanship, and socio-cultural symbolism. However, research focusing on the phenomenological interpretation of architecture remains limited. (Pallasmaa, 2012). Most analyses describe the house as an artifact rather than as a lived experience that embodies spiritual consciousness. This study seeks to move beyond typological description by interpreting the Malay traditional house as a phenomenological space—an existential manifestation of the Malay-Muslim identity, lived and experienced through sensory, spatial, and symbolic dimensions.

The Phenomenological Approach in Architecture

Phenomenology offers a philosophical lens to understand how people experience and interpret their built environment. Rooted in the works of (E, 2019) Phenomenology emphasizes the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)-the world as experienced directly through human consciousness. In architectural studies, phenomenology shifts attention from the external form of buildings to the lived experience of space, material, and light. It investigates how spatial arrangements evoke memory, identity, and emotion. (Shields, 2023).

According to Norberg-Schulz (1980), architecture is about creating “places” that enable human dwelling spaces that nurture belonging and spiritual continuity. In the context of Malay traditional houses,

phenomenology helps interpret how architecture mediates the relationship between humans, culture, and God. The wooden pillars, verandas, and elevated floors are not just physical elements but “lived symbols” that evoke humility, balance, and transcendence. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body as the primary site of perception also applies here: the body’s movement through space-ascending stairs, entering the veranda, or kneeling for prayer-translates faith into embodied experience.

This study adopts phenomenology as an interpretive framework to engage with the visual and textual representations of traditional Malay houses. Through the analysis of photographs, architectural drawings, cultural records, and classical Malay manuscripts, the research seeks to uncover how faith and identity are embodied in architectural form. Rather than reconstructing the house as a physical object, the study aims to illuminate its phenomenological meaning as a lived space of dwelling and believing.

Architectural Semiotics and Symbolism

Architecture communicates meanings through spatial organization, proportions, materials, and ornamentation. This communication process can be analysed through semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. Psarra (2009) argues that architecture is a system of signification where each element carries connotative meaning shaped by cultural codes (Wölfel & Dibra, 2024). In Malay traditional houses, every structural component—such as the *tiang seri* (central pillar), *anjung* (veranda), *bumbung panjang* (long roof), and floral carvings—functions as a signifier of moral and spiritual values.

For instance, the *tiang seri* represents the household's spiritual axis, often associated with stability, faith, and divine blessing. The *anjung* symbolizes hospitality and community engagement, reflecting Islamic ethics of generosity (*ikram*). The symmetrical layout embodies the concept of balance (*tawazun*), which is fundamental in both the Malay worldview and Islamic cosmology. Meanwhile, the floral carvings, frequently inspired by local vegetation, manifest the Islamic prohibition of human figurative imagery while celebrating the beauty of God’s creation (*tanzih*) (Amini et al., 2023).

By integrating semiotics with phenomenology, this study interprets the Malay house as both a symbolic and experiential structure. Semiotics explains what symbols represent, while phenomenology explores how they are experienced and internalized. Together, they reveal the dynamic interaction between visible forms and invisible meanings—a duality central to the Islamic conception of *zahir* (outer) and *batin* (inner) realities.

Islamic Aesthetics and the Sacredness of Space

Islamic aesthetics, rooted in the concept of *tawhid* (the unity of God), provides a theological framework for understanding the sacred dimension of architecture. According to (Osim, 2021), Islamic art and architecture aim to reflect divine unity through harmony, proportion, and balance. The beauty of a structure lies not in ornamentation per se, but in its ability to evoke contemplation of the Divine. Architectural space in Islamic tradition is designed to facilitate remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and to maintain order between human and cosmic realms. (Al-Hassani, 2022).

In this perspective, the Malay traditional house in Bengkalis can be seen as a microcosm of Islamic cosmology. The central hall (*rumah ibu*) functions as the spiritual nucleus, where family prayers and communal gatherings occur. The separation of public and private spaces mirrors Islamic principles of modesty and moral boundaries. The orientation of the house, often aligned with the qibla or adjusted for climatic harmony, also signifies devotion and submission to divine order. Thus, Islamic aesthetics imbue the Malay house with moral geometry—a spiritual discipline encoded in its spatial and decorative language.

Furthermore, Islamic aesthetics in Malay architecture represent a synthesis of revelation and local wisdom. Rather than mere imitation of Middle Eastern models, the adaptation of Islamic principles within the tropical and maritime context of Bengkalis exemplifies the localization of faith. This creative synthesis underscores that Islam in the Malay world is not external or imposed but internalized through cultural forms that embody humility, order, and piety. Such aesthetic embodiment transforms the traditional Malay house into a living theology—a dwelling that teaches faith through structure, space, and silence.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the above theoretical pillars, this study constructs a phenomenological-semiotic framework to interpret the symbolism of Malay traditional houses in Bengkalis. The framework rests on three analytical dimensions:

1. Phenomenological Dimension: Understanding the traditional house as a lived space—a setting of faith and identity that conveys meaning through spatial experience, material texture, and sensory perception.
2. Semiotic Dimension: Decoding architectural elements as cultural symbols that represent Islamic and Malay moral values. The emphasis is on interpreting signs (form, ornament, color, spatial hierarchy) as communicative expressions of belief.
3. Theological-Aesthetic Dimension: Situating architectural meaning within the Islamic metaphysical principle of tawhid, where harmony, order, and humility reflect spiritual truth.

Through this integrative framework, the study does not seek to generalize but to reveal the essence (eidos) of Malay traditional architecture as a manifestation of faith and identity. The house becomes both a material artifact and a spiritual metaphor—a phenomenological testimony to the convergence of Islam and Malay culture in architectural form.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in interpretive and hermeneutic traditions. The phenomenological approach was chosen to uncover the essence of lived meanings embedded in the architecture of traditional Malay houses in Bengkalis. Rather than focusing on quantitative measurements or survey data, this research seeks to interpret the symbolic and experiential dimensions of architectural form—how faith, identity, and culture are intertwined and expressed through physical space.

Following the interpretive philosophy of Heidegger and Van Manen, this study employs phenomenology not through first-person interviews but through a reflective engagement with texts, images, and cultural artifacts. The central aim is to understand the *being* of the Malay house—how its form, function, and symbolism disclose the worldview of its builders and occupants. In this sense, the research draws on what Van Manen describes as phenomenological reflection - a mode of “writing as a way of thinking” that seeks to reveal the meanings of dwelling and faith as they unfold within architectural space. (Horrigan-kelly et al., 2016).

To complement phenomenology, the study also integrates semiotic interpretation as a secondary lens, based on the principle that architectural elements function as cultural signs. This dual approach enables a deeper reading of both the essence of experience (phenomenology) and the symbolic language (semiotics) of Malay traditional architecture. Thus, the research design follows a phenomenological-semiotic synthesis, in which meanings are derived through a layered interpretation of cultural texts, historical documents, and visual imagery.

Data Sources

The data are grouped into three categories:

1. **Documentary Sources.** These include academic publications, ethnographic reports, architectural studies, and regional cultural archives from institutions such as the Bengkalis Regency Cultural Office, Balai Pelestarian Budaya (BPCB) Sumatera, and the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture’s heritage database. Classical Malay texts and manuscripts that reference traditional housing norms and Islamic ethics are also considered supporting materials.
2. **Visual and Architectural Sources.** A collection of photographs, sketches, and architectural plans of Malay traditional houses in Bengkalis, drawn from online repositories and cultural heritage documentation, is used for visual interpretation. Each visual element is treated as a piece of text with symbolic meaning. Details such

as the structure of the pillars, roof forms, carvings, and spatial organization are analyzed semiotically.

3. Literary and Historical Sources. Written narratives, folk stories, and historical records concerning the origin of Malay architecture in Bengkalis and its Islamic influences are also examined. These texts provide contextual understanding of how Malay society perceives architecture not merely as a technical construct, but as a living reflection of moral and spiritual order.

All selected materials meet two main criteria:

1. Cultural authenticity, ensuring that the sources originate from or directly discuss the Bengkalis Malay context; and
2. Interpretive depth, meaning that they allow for phenomenological reading and symbolic interpretation.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis follows three interrelated stages inspired by phenomenological reflection and semiotic decoding:

1. Phenomenological Reduction (Epoche and Description). In this stage, the researcher engages in epoche, a conscious suspension of prior assumptions and theoretical bias to approach the objects (the houses) as they appear in their essence. The researcher describes observable architectural features such as space division, elevation, ornamentation, and material texture as they manifest visually and textually. This stage aims to capture the raw appearance (phenomena) of the Malay traditional house without imposing external interpretations.
2. Thematic Interpretation. Next, through reflective analysis, thematic meanings are extracted from the architectural and cultural data. This involves identifying recurring motifs and symbols that represent Islamic or Malay values—such as purity (*kesucian*), balance

(*keseimbangan*), humility (*kerendahan hati*), and communal harmony (*ukhuwah*). Each theme is then linked to its phenomenological significance in the lived experience of Malay faith and identity. For instance, the elevated house floor may be interpreted as both a physical adaptation to floods and a spiritual symbol of transcendence above worldly impurity.

3. Semiotic Analysis and Hermeneutic Synthesis. The final stage involves reading the house as a semiotic system, treating architectural elements as signifiers linked to signified meanings shaped by the Islamic worldview. Drawing upon Eco (1976) and Barthes (1972), this analysis decodes how visual signs-carvings, roof curvature, symmetry, and spatial hierarchy-communicate moral order and spiritual cosmology. The results of phenomenological and semiotic interpretations are then synthesized hermeneutically to construct a coherent understanding of how the Malay traditional house in Bengkalis materializes faith and identity.

Results and Discussion

The Architecture as a Living Text of Faith

Architecture in the Malay world is never merely a physical construct; it is a living expression of *iman*, *adat*, and *tauhid*. The traditional Malay house in Bengkalis, locally known as Rumah Melayu Panggung Bengkalis, serves as a living manuscript (*naskhah hidup*) that encodes layers of moral and metaphysical meanings. Within its timber structure lies the embodiment of the Malay worldview, one that integrates human existence (*insan*), communal order (*umamah*), and divine unity (*tawhid*).

From a phenomenological perspective, architecture in this context is a form of dwelling as remembering (Heidegger, 1971). The Malay house is not built merely to occupy space but to reflect the presence of God in daily existence. Every spatial proportion, line of symmetry, and rhythmic pattern of ornamentation is a manifestation of spiritual order. The act of designing a house is therefore perceived as an *ibadah*, a devotional act that translates faith into form.

The house stands as both shelter and sermon, a silent teacher whose geometry encodes moral instruction. The rhythm of its pillars, the orientation of its windows, and the flow of air through its latticework are metaphors for purity, balance, and divine harmony. The rumah panggung structure embodies humility, symbolizing that human life is suspended between earth and heaven, between the temporal and the eternal.

From a semiotic standpoint, the Malay house can be read as a sacred text of space. Its visible elements—pillars (*tiang seri*), walls, roofs, and carvings—serve as signifiers of unseen principles. The *tiang seri*, the central post believed to anchor the house's soul, symbolizes the heart (*qalb*) of human faith. The *bumbung panjang* (elongated roof) signifies sheltering grace (*rahmah*), while the *ukiran awan larat* (flowing cloud motif) represents continuity of divine mercy. Together, these elements form a symbolic syntax through which theology is spatially narrated.

In this sense, the Malay house performs *zikr* through its structure—it “remembers” God not through words but through proportion, light, and rhythm. The alignment of space to the *qiblah* reflects the orientation of life toward the divine. Even the shadows that move across the wooden floor throughout the day symbolize the passage of time as *amanah*, a trust from God.

Thus, the Malay traditional house in Bengkalis becomes a sacred microcosm, where architecture mediates between *iman* and *alam*, between the divine and the earthly. It does not merely house the body—it dwells the soul. To live within it is to inhabit faith itself, to be surrounded by material forms that continuously remind the self of God's presence and one's duty as *khalifah fil ardh*—steward of both the spiritual and the ecological realms.

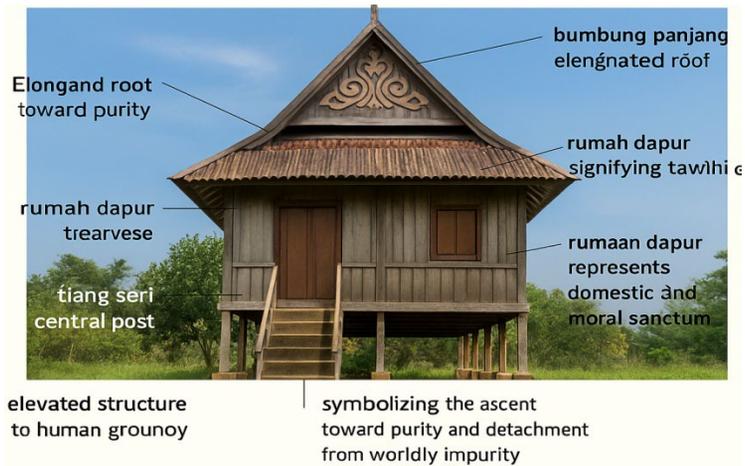


Figure 1: The Symbolic Layout of The Malay Traditional House in Bengkalis

The Orientation of the House: Symbol of Tawhid and Cosmic Alignment

One of the most striking symbolic features of Malay traditional houses in Bengkalis is their orientation toward the *qiblah*, the westward direction toward Mecca. Even when physical geography poses challenges—such as coastal winds or uneven terrain—builders intentionally maintain alignment as an act of devotion.

From a semiotic viewpoint, this orientation functions as a primary sign (signifier) of tawhid, the unity of God, and the submission of human design to divine order. The Malay term *serambi menghadap kiblat* encapsulates both spatial and spiritual alignment.

Phenomenologically, this alignment reveals how faith organizes lived space. The Malay builder (*tukang rumah*) perceives architecture not as a human-centered act of creativity, but as a continuation of divine geometry. The house's orientation thus materializes an existential orientation: life is meaningful only when directed toward the divine center.

As Husserlian phenomenology suggests, perception and meaning are inseparable; the act of facing-in, whether in prayer or in dwelling, constitutes the essence of Malay being. In the Malay context, *menghadap*

kiblat means more than direction; it symbolizes obedience, balance, and the moral compass of daily life.



Figure 2: The Orientation of the Malay Traditional House Toward the Qiblah as a Symbol of Tawhid and Cosmic Alignment

The Elevated Structure (Rumah Panggung): Between Earth and Heaven

A fundamental characteristic of Bengkalis Malay houses is the raised platform or *rumah panggung*, supported by wooden stilts (*tiang seri*) and traditionally built from local hardwoods such as meranti or cengal. The elevated form serves practical functions, providing ventilation and protection against flooding or wild animals. However, phenomenological reading reveals its metaphysical symbolism.

The *rumah panggung* represents a vertical mediation between earth and heaven—between the profane and the sacred. The space underneath, often used for storage or livestock, signifies the material realm (*duniawi*), while the elevated living area (*rumah atas*) symbolizes spiritual ascent.

In Islamic philosophy, human life is understood as a journey of elevation (*mi'raj al-ruh*)-ascending from the material to the spiritual. The act of climbing stairs to enter the house mirrors this metaphysical process. Each step signifies purification before entering a sanctified domestic sphere, echoing the ablution (*wudu*) before prayer.

From a semiotic standpoint, the stilted design communicates a message of humility and transcendence: humans do not belong entirely to the earth, but dwell temporarily within it, seeking divine proximity. This understanding aligns with Malay proverbs such as *hidup ibarat*

menumpang di dunia, reflecting an awareness of impermanence that is architecturally embodied in the raised house.

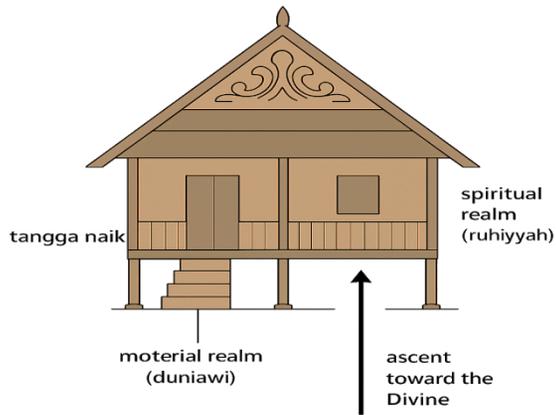


Figure 3: The Elevated Structure (*Rumah Panggung*) as a Symbol of Spiritual Ascent and Earth–Heaven Mediation

Spatial Division: Manifestation of *Adab* and Communal Ethics

The interior organization of Malay houses in Bengkalis follows a moral logic rather than a purely functional one. Spaces are divided into three main sections:

1. *Serambi depan* (front veranda) – public and male-dominated;
2. *Rumah tengah* – semi-private, transitional;
3. *Rumah dapur* – private and female-centered.

From a phenomenological angle, this spatial hierarchy expresses the ethical principle of *adab*-propriety in social relations. The *serambi depan* acts as a liminal space of hospitality and negotiation, where guests are received, and social bonds are affirmed. The *rumah tengah* accommodates family gatherings, while the *rumah dapur* is reserved for intimate, domestic activities.

This gradation from public to private reflects the Islamic concept of *aurat* (boundaries of privacy). Architecture, in this case, becomes a moral regulator that preserves dignity, respect, and modesty.

The semiotic reading of this layout reveals how spatial design encodes moral codes: thresholds, partitions, and curtains are not merely physical boundaries but ethical interfaces. They signify the respect for hierarchy (*tertib*), purity (*suci*), and relational harmony (*muafakat*) that structures Malay life.

Thus, space itself functions as a didactic system—teaching adab through movement and interaction. The phenomenological essence here lies in how people inhabit moral space: to dwell is to internalize ethics spatially.

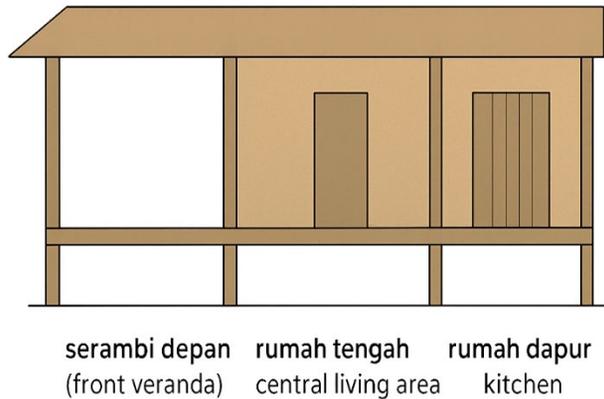


Figure 4: Spatial Division of the Malay Traditional House in Bengkalis—Manifestation of *Adab* and Communal Ethics

The Carvings (*Ukiran*): Language of the Invisible

The visual ornamentation of Malay traditional houses, especially on windows, gables, and railings, is another domain of symbolic richness.

Common motifs in Bengkalis include floral patterns (*pucuk rebung*, *awan larat*), geometric arabesques, and, at times, stylized calligraphy representing divine attributes (*asmaul husna*). These carvings operate as a visual dhikr, rendering remembrance of God visible through beauty.

Phenomenologically, *ukiran* bridges the visible and the invisible—it externalizes inner faith into tangible artistry. Each curve, repetition, and interlace pattern reflects the Islamic notion of infinite unity within multiplicity (*wahdat al-wujud*). The repetition of forms evokes the eternal

rhythm of divine creation, while symmetry symbolizes justice and divine balance (*mizan*).

From a semiotic perspective, ukiran serves as an iconic sign—a representation of the invisible world through visible geometry. Its symbolic function is not decorative but didactic: to remind the observer that beauty (*jamal*) is a manifestation of divine perfection (*kamal*). Thus, the ornamentation transforms the house into a visual theology—a silent discourse on God’s presence within daily life.

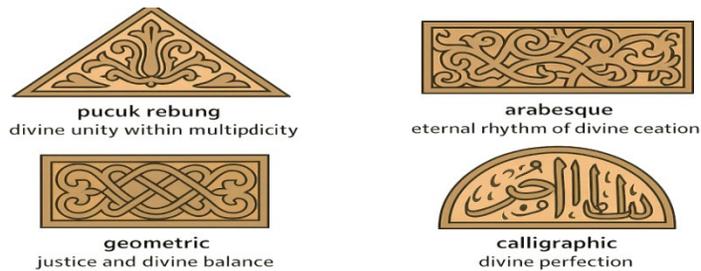


Figure 5: The Carvings (Ukiran) as a Visual Language of the Invisible in Malay Traditional Architecture

Roof Form and Cosmic Harmony

The roof design, often steeply pitched and layered, plays both a structural and symbolic role. In Bengkalis, the *bumbung panjang* and *bumbung limas potong* are the most common types, reflecting a synthesis of aesthetic grace and cosmic symbolism.

From the phenomenological viewpoint, the roof represents the cosmic canopy—a shelter under which life unfolds in harmony with nature and divine order. The upward slope gestures toward the heavens, symbolizing aspiration and surrender to God’s will.

Semiotically, the multi-tiered roof functions as a metaphor of hierarchy and protection: the uppermost layer signifies divine authority, while the lower layers represent human and natural realms. This architectural stratification mirrors the ontological order (*tanzil*) in Islamic cosmology, where creation descends from the divine to the material.

The carved ridge (*tulang bumbung*) often features motifs symbolizing unity and balance, reminding dwellers of the interconnectedness of heaven and earth, man and God, and self and community.

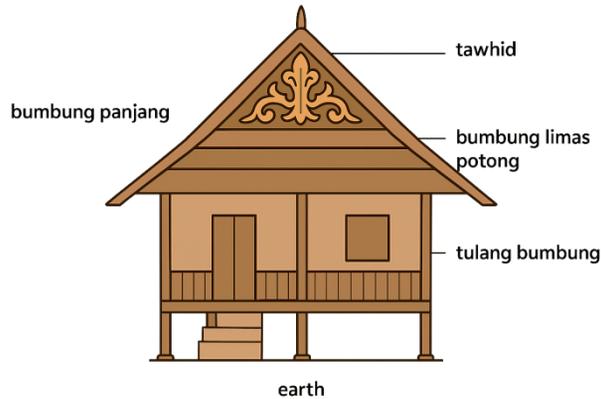


Figure 6: Roof Form of the Malay Traditional House in Bengkalis- Symbol of Cosmic Harmony and Divine Order

Color, Material, and Environmental Ethics

The Malay house in Bengkalis utilizes natural materials-timber, bamboo, palm leaves, and clay-reflecting ecological consciousness deeply rooted in Islamic ethics.

From a phenomenological stance, the tactile warmth of wood and the organic scent of materials evoke a sensory awareness of fitrah, the natural purity of creation. Dwelling within such materials nurtures an affective bond between human and nature, reinforcing the sense of stewardship (*amanah*).

Semiotically, the material selection serves as a sign of humility and sustainability. It articulates the ethical principle that human life should harmonize with, rather than dominate, the environment. This aligns with Quranic injunctions against waste (*israf*) and in favour of balance (*tawazun*). Therefore, the traditional Malay house embodies a sustainable architectural theology in which beauty, faith, and ecology coalesce into an integrated worldview.

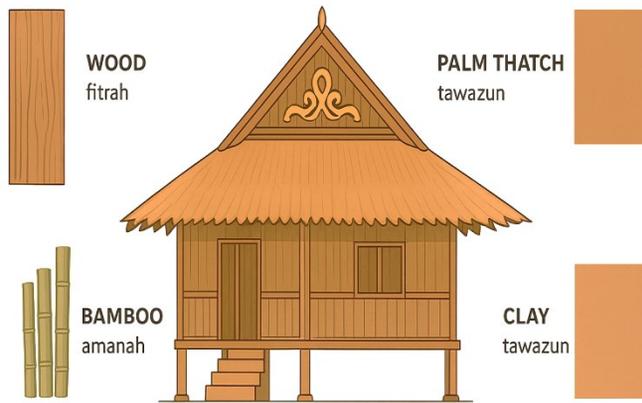


Figure 7: Natural Materials and Color Palette of the Malay Traditional House in Bengkalis-
Expression of Environmental Ethics and Islamic Aesthetics

The House as Collective Memory and Identity

Beyond its structural and aesthetic functions, the Malay house operates as a repository of collective memory. Each house narrates generational continuity—the wisdom of ancestors (*adat pusaka*) fused with Islamic virtue. Through its persistence amid modernization, the Malay house symbolizes resistance to cultural erosion and an affirmation of identity. Phenomenologically, to dwell in a traditional house is to inhabit history; one's identity is continually re-enacted through daily rituals of living within inherited space. This connects to Heidegger's idea of dwelling: the essence of being-to-live is to care for one's world.

Semiotically, the house signifies the Malay-Islamic self; its pillars and carvings serve as visual metaphors of continuity, stability, and faithfulness. The home becomes a living archive, sustaining *adat* and *agama* in spatial form. In this way, architecture becomes an act of cultural remembrance—a tangible preservation of moral and spiritual lineage.



Figure 8: The House as Collective Memory and Identity

Integrative Interpretation: The Unity of Faith, Form, and Life

Synthesizing the phenomenological and semiotic findings reveals that the traditional Malay house in Bengkalis is a holistic system in which architecture, faith, and identity are inseparable. Each element of orientation, elevation, ornamentation, and space acts as a sign of submission to divine order. The dwelling is thus not a static structure, but a living cosmology that embodies *tawhid*, *adab*, and *ukhuwah*.

In phenomenological terms, the meaning of dwelling emerges not merely from the physical form but from lived experience—how individuals and communities engage the space as a reflection of their faith. In semiotic terms, every architectural feature becomes a sign through which cultural and religious meanings are communicated, internalized, and transmitted across generations.

This synthesis highlights the ontological depth of Malay architecture: it is theology built from wood, ethics carved in ornament, and history dwelling in space.

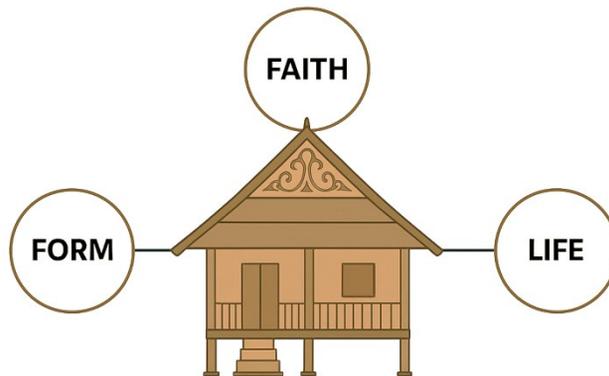


Figure 9: Integrative Interpretation of the Malay Traditional House in Bengkalis - The Unity of Faith, Form, and Life

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the Malay traditional house in Bengkalis functions as a living embodiment of Islamic cosmology, moral order, and collective identity. Each architectural component—orientation, elevation, spatial division, carving, roof form, and material selection—communicates layers of symbolic meaning that link the physical environment to the metaphysical realm. From a phenomenological standpoint, the house operates as a “lived text,” where the human experience of space is deeply intertwined with faith and ethical consciousness. Dwelling, in this context, becomes a form of *ibadah* (devotion) expressed through spatial awareness, material tactility, and rhythm of daily life.

The semiotic interpretation reinforces this view by decoding architectural elements as communicative signs that embody Islamic values such as *tawhid* (unity of God), *adab* (ethical decorum), and *tawazun* (balance). The *tiang seri* represents the spiritual heart of the household, while the *rumah panggung* structure reflects humility and transcendence. The floral and geometric carvings (*ukiran awan larat* and *pucuk rebung*) articulate the infinite continuity of divine creation, whereas spatial hierarchy preserves moral order between public and private life. These features collectively illustrate that architecture in Bengkalis is not merely a cultural artifact but an ontological statement, in which form is theology and space is pedagogy.

This study also contributes to contemporary debates on sustainability and cultural resilience. The use of natural materials and the ecological harmony inherent in traditional Malay design correspond closely with Islamic principles of stewardship (*amanah*) and moderation (*wasatiyyah*). In the modern era, where architectural practices often prioritize aesthetics over ethics, the Bengkalis Malay house offers an alternative paradigm: one that integrates spirituality, ecology, and cultural identity into a coherent worldview. Therefore, the phenomenological-semiotic framework proposed here provides an interpretive model for re-engaging traditional wisdom in contemporary architectural discourse, especially within the growing field of Islamic environmental aesthetics.

Ultimately, this discussion situates the Malay traditional house as both a cultural testimony and a spiritual manifesto. It embodies an epistemology of faith materialized through structure, reminding us that architecture, at its most profound level, is a form of worship—the art of building meaningfully within the divine order of existence.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the traditional Malay house of Bengkalis stands as a profound manifestation of the unity between faith, identity, and architectural expression. Through phenomenological and semiotic interpretation, the research demonstrates that every aspect of the house, its spatial arrangement, elevation, ornamentation, and materiality, embodies Islamic theological and moral principles. Architecture here is not a static artifact but a dynamic medium through which the Malay-Muslim worldview is lived, remembered, and transmitted across generations.

The house functions as a living cosmology, connecting the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual. It demonstrates humility before God, promotes social harmony within the community, and maintains ecological balance. By interpreting these qualities through the lens of tawhid, adab, and ukhuwah, the study emphasizes that Malay architecture in Bengkalis is both a cultural heritage and a spiritual teaching—a dwelling that communicates and teaches.

Scholarly implications of this research include enriching the discourse on Islamic phenomenology in architecture and offering a conceptual model for integrating traditional wisdom into sustainable design practices. Practically, it underscores the urgency of preserving traditional Malay houses as sites of moral, spiritual, and ecological knowledge—heritage structures that continue to shape the ethical landscape of Muslim life in the Indonesian archipelago.

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