

Tracing Malay Traditional Villages in The Mukim Setapak From Socio-Cultural and Historical Lenses

Mohamad Firdaus^{1*}, Siti Hadija¹, Mohamad Hazizie¹

¹ Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: firdausmansor@iium.edu.my

Received: 30 May 2025 | Accepted: 15 August 2025 | Published: 1 September 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2025.7.6.46>

Abstract: *At present, there exist unique hybrid cultural practices and traditions among the locals that are interestingly evident in their daily socio-economic activities, especially among those who reside in several traditional villages in the mukim of Setapak (district of Gombak). A quick glance at them reveals that these practices, strictly speaking, are quite unique to pure local Malay practices and traditions. A preliminary study further revealed that many of these villagers are originally from Indonesia and belong to different ethnicities and clans. They migrated from the Indonesian islands and found their way to Selangor, eventually coexisting with the local Malays. This preliminary paper employs a historical research method to investigate how the locality gradually becomes a melting pot of diverse socio-cultural traditions practised by its people. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the diversity results from the arrival of Malays from different clans of the Indonesian islands, who were driven by socio-political and economic factors and eventually assimilated with local practices in the area.*

Keywords: Gombak; Setapak; Malays; Minangkabau; Traditions

1. Introduction

Historically, the name ‘Selangor’ appeared in the Malay Annals, or better known as *Sejarah Melayu*, when Tun Sri Lanang mentioned some districts or places in modern-day Selangor in the text, such as Klang, Jeram, Langat, and Selangor (Kuala Selangor). All these territories were under the control of the Malacca Sultanate following the Portuguese takeover of Malacca in 1511, which forced the last Malaccan Sultan (Sultan Mahmud) and his family to flee to neighbouring islands until he ended up in Bintan. He ruled from there, roughly from 1512-1526. When his prince, Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah II, founded and ruled the Sultanate of Johor, Klang and Kuala Selangor were put under the Sultanate of Johor’s dependencies. In the 17th century, a noticeable number of Malay Bugis settlers from Sulawesi flocked to the Selangor riverine areas. This presence, however, became much more intensified following the Sultanate’s succession dispute, which resulted from the demise of Sultan Mahmud II, who was said to have left no heir. This dispute involved the Raja Kechik of Siak and the newly crowned Sultan Abdul Jalil IV (former Bendahara during the administration of Sultan Mahmud II).

Raja Kechik of Siak made a pact with the Bugis warriors to help him to ascend the throne. He had successfully wrested the throne without the knowledge of the Bugis warriors, which caused the latter’s dissatisfaction. Eventually, Sultan Abdul Jalil IV was said to have been murdered by an assassin hired by Raja Kechik of Siak. This angered Raja Sulaiman, son of the late Sultan

Abdul Jalil. He then asked for military assistance from the Bugis warriors, famously known as Bugis Opu brothers, to remove Raja Kecik of Siak from the throne. Raja Sulaiman had promised the Bugis brothers to confer a position of Yamtuan Muda in the Johor Sultanate administration. Raja Sulaiman won the war in 1722 and used the title Sultan Sulaiman Badrul Alam Shah. In fulfilling his promises made to the Bugis Opu brothers, he had appointed Daeng Marewah to be the Yamtuan Muda of Johor, and the position was only to be passed among the Bugis descendants. Since then, Bugis started to exert their influence within the Johor administration.

At the same time, in the early 1700s, the local ruler of Klang with the title Tuk Engku Kelang, a relative of Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Shah of Johor, gave the right to rule over Kuala Selangor to a prominent Malay leader of Bugis descent named Arung Pasarai. The rulership over Kuala Selangor then passed to Raja Siti after the former passed away. After some time, Raja Lumu (son of Daeng Chelak, Yamtuan Muda II of Johor Sultanate) replaced Raja Siti over the rulership of Kuala Selangor in the mid-1700s. Kuala Selangor, Jeram, and Kelang were still under the Sultanate of Johor's loose authority. However, by 1766, Raja Lumu was crowned the first Sultan of Selangor by the 16th Sultan of Perak, Sultan Mahmud II, in Kota Lumut, thereby ending Johor's overlordship over Selangor. He adopted a new name and title, which was Sultan Salehuddin. Since then, Sultan Salehuddin's descendants ruled over the Sultanate of Selangor until this day.

Despite the presence of a considerable number of Bugis settlements in Selangor riverine areas at least since the 1680s, a significant number of Indonesians from different clans have resided in the Malay Peninsula, including Minangkabau, Mandahiling, and Rawa, to name a few. In the context of Selangor, it appears that the Minangkabau settlers occupied central positions in several districts of Selangor, including Gombak itself. Nonetheless, this study intends to highlight the presence of the Minangkabau in the socio-cultural and economic developments of the State of Selangor by using Kampung Simpang Tiga in the district of Gombak as its case study. The subsequent discussions attempt to further elaborate on the early presence of the Minangkabau settlers in Gombak and how they eventually contributed to the development of the area, especially in the mukim of Setapak.

2. Methodology

Using the method of historical research, this paper aims to investigate how the locality gradually embodies a complex socio-cultural diversity that presents itself in the form of architectural buildings or sites, local cuisines, traditions, and languages. The complexity or diversity in people's day-to-day lives may be best captured through archival research and fieldwork activities in the area. Specifically, this study intends to discover these early settlers' migration patterns and how they started to settle down in the area by examining the nature of their economic activities. In doing so, the study will utilise a wide range of primary documents from the day, coupled with oral interviews involving the residents from diverse age groups. Additionally, this study may incorporate ethnographic techniques in examining people's day-to-day activities. It is hoped that these research activities will help the researchers better understand the socio-cultural and economic hybridity of Kampung Simpang Tiga, from its early foundational stage to this day.

3. Historical Analysis

The district of Gombak, in brief, is administratively divided into five sub-districts, namely Rawang I, Rawang II, Batu, Setapak, and Hulu Kelang. The district of Gombak came into existence on 1st February 1974, simultaneously with the proclamation of Kuala Lumpur as a Federal Territory. In the 1970s and 1980s, there already existed several villages in the district, which largely comprised Malay Minangkabaus who lived side by side with the local Malays. This paper will, however, dedicate much of its discussion to the district of Gombak, with further explanations in the following sections.

This section will discuss the socio-cultural fabrics of the district of Gombak and its constituents with a specific focus on the traditional villages in the district, including Kg. Simpang Tiga, Kg. Changkat, Kg. Gombak Utara, Kg. Kerdas, and Kg. Sg Pusu, to name a few. Local historians, for instance, N. Bungo, N. Hussin, R. Omar, and A. Bidin (2012), have specifically mentioned the roles of the Minangkabau community in building up early settlements in various districts of Selangor, including Gombak. They argued that, for instance, Kampung Changkat was said to have been opened by Maha Raja Ula Hj. Mohd Arshad, or better known as Raja Kuning, in the 1880s. He was originally said to hail from Pariaman, Sumatera. Similarly, the authors mentioned that Kampung Simpang Tiga was opened by Tuk Kah in the 1890s. He also originally came from Minangkabau. Citing Junipah Hj. Wandu in her writing entitled *Pendatang Indonesia di Selangor: Proses Penghijrahan dan Penyesuaian*, the author noted that Haji Kuning was working in the paddy fields and farms in the area. It is therefore safe to say here that the current realities of these traditional kampungs are certainly different images of their old past, which many of us are unaware of. Thus, this calls for a timely socio-cultural and historical profiling of Gombak and its constituents, which this paper intends to discuss.

Additionally, N. Bungo and N. Hussin (2011), in their joint article, argued that the presence of the Minangkabau community in Kuala Lumpur and the State of Selangor has a direct correlation with the community's '*adat merantau*', or inter-land migration culture. Given this fact, it is not surprising that many Malays of the Minangkabau clan settled in various parts of the Malay Peninsula, as their customary role as traders and merchants already incorporates this *adat*. Their presence, however, was much felt in the 19th and 20th centuries, owing much to the British liberal economic policies, apart from their customary *adat* of *merantau* itself. The authors further mentioned that in the context of Kuala Lumpur, one renowned Malay of Minangkabau descent by the name of Haji Mohd. Thaib bin Haji Abdul Samad had arrived in Kuala Lumpur around the 1870s at the age of 18. He then ventured into small-scale businesses in retailing and mining. He also owned a sizable number of shops and lands in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

Another example of a local figure of Minangkabau descent was Khatib Koyan bin Abdullah. Interestingly, he not only held the position of Setapak's headman but also owned a sizable amount of land from Batu Dua to Batu Sembilan Gombak. Additionally, he ventured into tin-mining business activities along the Gombak River towards Kuala Lumpur in the 1920s. There was also a Minangkabau settlement in Kampung Tengah Batu 6 Gombak. One of the early settlers in the village was the father of Pak Saad, who came from Melampah, Bonjol Minangkabau. He reportedly left behind a vast expanse of land he had explored, stretching from Setapak to Batu 6. At present, Pak Saad and his son Pak Ahmad have inherited these ancestral lands. Abdul Hamid was another Minangkabau settler who had travelled to the Malay Peninsula in the early 20th century and bought parts of land belonging to Pak Saad's father.

In 1939, a woman named Juna Binti Mandaro Hitam arrived in this area from Batang Kapas, on the southern coast of Minangkabau. She used to work as a religious teacher to other Minangkabau settlers in Kampung Tengah Batu 6.

In the early days of Kuala Lumpur, when tin mining was an important economic activity, the city was divided into two settlements, with the Malays occupying the northern part of the city and the Chinese in the southern part. There were two main Malay villages in the northern part of the city, including Kampung Rawa, which was located around the site of the Bank Bumiputera headquarters and Jalan Melaka today, and Kampung Jawa, which was located around the site of Masjid Jamek at present, as well as Kampung Semarang in Jalan Kuching, where *Kompleks Bank Negara* is now situated. At that time, the Malays in Kuala Lumpur consisted of several different ethnic groups, such as Bugis, Rawa, Jawa, Minangkabau, Mendeiling, Batu Bara, and Kampar. The position of the leader who represented the overall Malay population was referred to as Dato Dagang. Based on the records of Haji Abdullah Hukum, when he was in Kuala Lumpur around the 1850s, the Minangkabau settlers had built a mosque near the Gian Singh warehouse in Jawa Street.

In short, it is safe to mention here that the early people's settlements in the State of Selangor, including Kuala Lumpur before it was turned into one of the Federal Territories in 1974, demonstrated that these early settlers were heavily involved in retail-mining businesses, as they had capital by having several shops and large tracts of land in the area besides holding some local positions such as headman and head village. These patterns were the key features of their early presence in the vicinity of both Gombak and Kuala Lumpur.

4. In Context: A Unique Socio-Cultural Encounter At Kampung Simpang Tiga

Historically, according to some archival records accessible in the National Archives of Malaysia and recent interviews conducted by a group of university students from IIUM, it was uncovered that the early settlements in Gombak were opened by one certain man named Khatib Koyan (or his real name was Khatib bin Abdullah), a headman based in modern-day Lumpur. He hailed from Pariaman, West Sumatra. One of the local residents mentioned that the Padri Wars that took place in the 1800s in the Minangkabau region had led to the migration of many Malays from the area, including Khatib Koyan, to the Malay Peninsula. He arrived in the Malay Peninsula around the 1880s and eventually found his fortunes in tin mining and rubber plantations. A local resident also mentioned that Khatib Koyan was a close friend of Sutan Puasa, who claimed to be the real founder of Kuala Lumpur, and interestingly, a fellow countryman from Minangkabau.

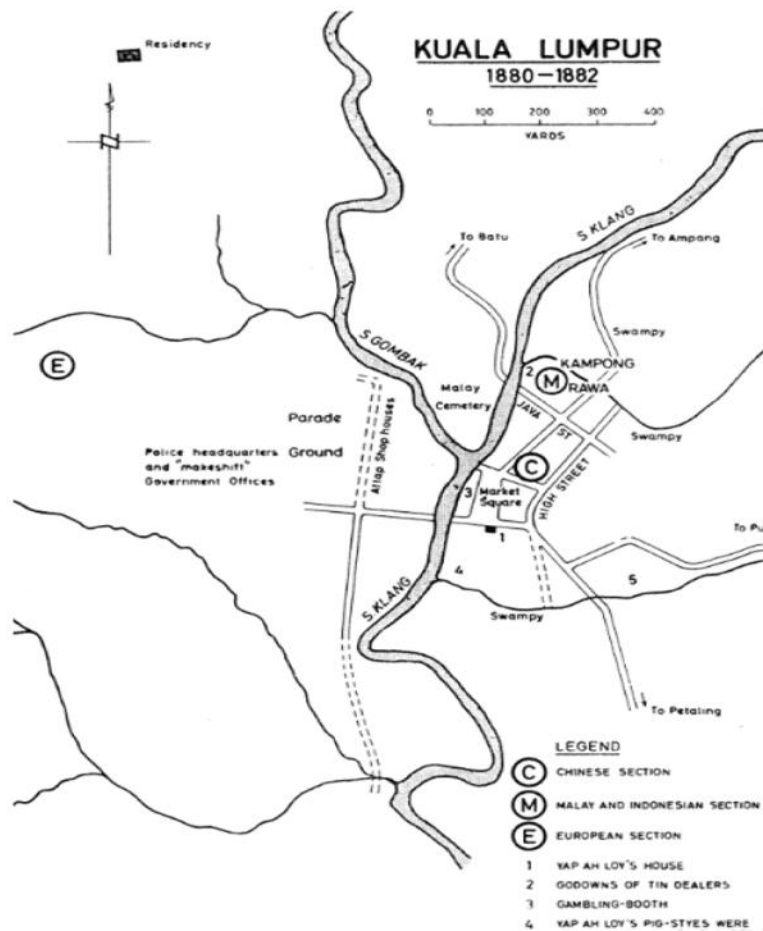


Figure 1: The settlement of the local Malays, Indonesian Malays, Europeans, and Chinese at the heart of Kuala Lumpur in the 1880s

Moreover, in the context of the development of the mukim of Setapak, Khatib Koyan used to bring a sizeable number of Minang people to build and develop settlements in the area. He was involved in tin mining in Kuala Lumpur and its neighbouring areas, owning a large number of lands. He employed a number of Malays from the Mandailing clan to work in the tin mines and paddy fields that operated along the Gombak River. He had opened a few early settlements in places within an administrative district, which is known today as Mukim Setapak. Throughout his life, he had received recognition from the British government for his valuable contributions towards the development of Kuala Lumpur when the British resident of Selangor at that time, Bloomfield Douglas (1876-1882), conferred him with 'the imperial service medal' (cited from *Straits Echo*, dated 7 July 1926). He had served as Penghulu Mukim Setapak for approximately 37 years. An official government record reaffirmed the fact that the person was an influential man who had been entrusted by the Selangor government to administer Setapak and Batu Mukim (cited from Selangor State Secretariat, dated 8 June 1896).

From a demographic perspective, the oral accounts indicate that the early settlers were of Sumatran origins, with the Minang people being the majority and living alongside the local Malays after their arrival from Minangkabau to Selangor. Many of these early Sumatran people turned out to be successful landowners who later acquired capital to invest in tin mining and other businesses. As their businesses grew, they employed their fellow Sumatran people, many of whom were of Minang and Mandailing clans, who had also migrated to the area for socio-economic and political reasons. It appears that the promising economic opportunities available in Selangor, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, tempted them to be involved in lucrative businesses

such as tin mining and retail and commerce activities. It is notable that these Sumatran Malays were actually more successful than the local Malays themselves.

Furthermore, the identified archival records and oral interviews enabled the researchers to capture some images of people’s socio-economic life in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It appears to the researcher that in terms of economic activities, tin mining, paddy cultivation, and rubber plantation industries dominated people’s main occupations in the locality at that time. People were working as rubber tappers, paddy growers, and workers at tin sites located near Gombak River. These economic activities were concentrated roughly in areas from Kampung Chubadak to Kampung Simpang Tiga. Some British colonial records in the 1900s also indicated that there were requests by local miners to apply for prospecting licences in Mukim Setapak, Ulu Gombak (Selangor State Secretariat, dated 12/05/1902).

Additionally, there was a rubber estate named New Amherst founded near the Gombak River. As the researchers browsed through the archival records, Selangor State Secretariat files revealed that the estate company had contacted the Kuala Lumpur Land Office in the 1890s and early 1900s for plantation and mining purposes. Lastly, there was also a rubber factory constructed in an area where Plaza Idaman is currently located (Selangor State Secretariat, dated 24/10/1929), possibly to ease rubber processing activities in the area due to the existence of rubber plantations in the locality. In short, these initial findings demonstrate that these economic activities are viable given their proximity to the Gombak River. Thus, the Gombak River undoubtedly occupied a central position in the day-to-day activities of the local residents.

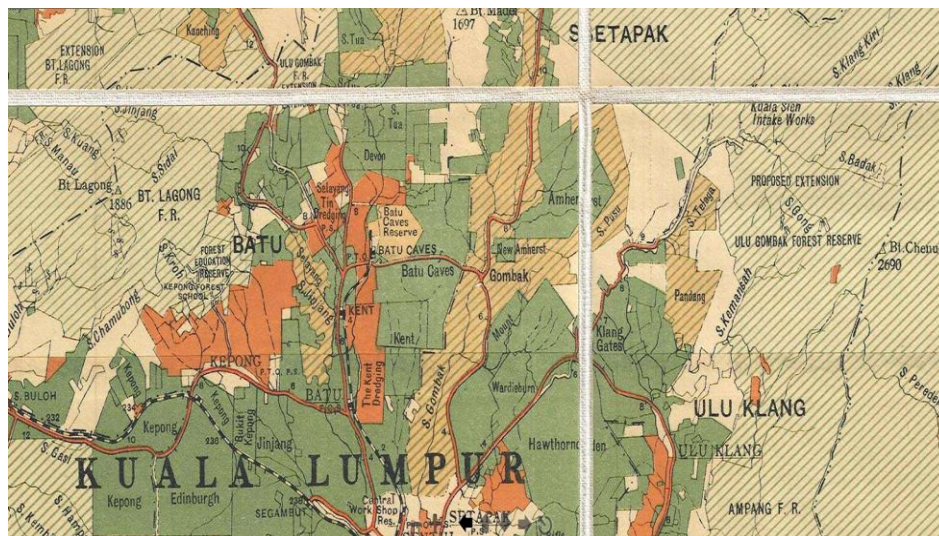


Figure 2: A close-up map of Selangor in 1929 featuring a rubber company named New Amherst near the Gombak River

In addition, some socio-cultural realities of the place could be identified based on oral interviews and archival documents available to the researchers. For instance, these interviews reveal that many elderly residents indicated that efforts were carried out to preserve their cultural traditions, which one may see in terms of their houses, customs, language, and cuisine. An example is the old houses in the village, which bear a resemblance to those in Minangkabau, although they can rarely be found nowadays. According to the interviews, the villagers mentioned that one of the reasons why there exists only a small number of Minangkabau-style houses in the locality is due to a financial factor, as building a genuine Minangkabau-style house is more costly than that of a simple concrete house. Nonetheless, one can relatively find several restaurants that offer authentic Minangkabau cuisine in the area, which is characterised

by its strong sense of spiciness. This essentially indicates their attachment to their own distinctive foods rather than other local foods offered by the Malay restaurants in the area. Finally, while conducting these interviews, a substantial number of respondents, especially among the elderly-often used words or expressions in the Minang dialect. This clearly indicates their preference for and comfort in conversing and communicating in their ancestral language rather than in the more standardised forms of Malay-Indonesian.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is safe to note that the presence of Malays of Sumatran origin, exemplified through the use of Minangkabau-based dialects, cuisine, and architecture in areas close to Kampung Simpang Tiga and adjoining places, indicates the early character of the locality, which was first explored and inhabited by these Sumatran people. That being said, the early settlers exhibited more entrepreneurial attributes than the local Malays, as they were more involved in small-scale businesses, i.e., retail and wholesale activities, as well as those who owned large tracts of land and were involved in large-scale economic activity like mining and rubber plantation. Nonetheless, as these early Sumatran settlers eventually built their settlements in the area, they came into contact with their fellow local Malays who also lived alongside them. This encounter eventually enriched existing local cultural traditions and customs, with some assimilations and adaptations taking place. Therefore, in view of this, some serious efforts must be made to ensure that the traditional villages in the mukim Setapak remain preserved vis-a-vis some growing commercial and business interests in the area.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their special thanks to AHAS-KIRKHS, International Islamic University Malaysia, for providing financial support through the Mohd Kamal Hasan Research Grant Scheme (MKH24-007-0007), without which this work would not have been possible.

Conflict of Interest Statement

This study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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