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## Influence of Indian Chettiyar Community Heritage on Chettie House Architecture of Malaysia

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Indian Chettinadu cultural legacy was introduced to Malaysia by Indian merchants who made their home there. The aim of this research is to examine the impact of Indian Chettinadu culture on the architecture of Chetti Melaka houses in Malaysia, as well as its continued significance in the modern era. A qualitative approach is used. There was observation, documentation, and open-ended interviewing. There is documentation about the Chetti's residence at Gajah Berang, Melaka, Malaysia, and the Chettiyar residence in Pallathur, Karaikudi, India. To comprehend how users, Chettiyar culture, and architecture relate to one another, the data triangulation method is used. The findings demonstrate how Indian Cettinadu culture has influenced Malaysian home design. But there is an enormous concession made about the size of the house and intricate decorations. In both situations, the local climate and user requirements have an impact on the house's design. The study's findings are used to propose house design guidelines that might be used in a modern setting.

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#### 1. Introduction

Chetty (Tamil: Ceṭṭi; © &L., Malay: Ceti), a term loosely applied to a number of South Indian mercantile castes and moneylenders in the Malay World (Hoogervorst, 2015), The Chetty people, popularly known as peranakans, hail originally from South India and settled in Malaysia and Singapore in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The term peranakans are used to refer the multiracial communities in Malaysia. The peranakans who has Indian origin and settled in Malaysia are known as Chetty's and the peranakans who has Chinese origin, are commonly known as Baba- Nyonya in Malaysia (Pue, 2017).

Although the Indian Chettiyars were known to have established trade in Malaysia and Singapore since the 14th century AD, The Chettys[i]' who reside in the present-day Melaka's districts of Gajah Berang, Tengkera (Tranquerah), and Bachang are commonly known as the 'Chetty Melaka[ii]' (Melakan Chetty). The original Chettiyars were said to marry with the Malaysian or Chinese locals, thus creating an amalgamation of cultures. The Chetty possess similarity to the Malays in terms of spoken and written language, fashion, culinary, food habits, religion, and other aspects of their social conducts due to their intermarriages with the local women folk (Leow & Padiachee, 2020). The Indian-migrated Chettiyars (Chetty) adopted the local Malaysian

and Chinese cultures, retaining the Hindu religion and cultural heritage.

This research aims at understanding the influences of Indian Chettiyar heritage on the Malaysian Chetty houses. The study focuses on understanding the Chetty community house architecture and its relevance in today's context. As a result the following question evolved. Are Malaysian Chetty architecture

# similar to Indian Chettiyar's? What are the parameters considered when designing a Chetty house? What is the influence of the Indian Chettinadu house on the Chetty house architecture? In the present-day context, what are the needs of the people of Chetty in Melaka?

#### 2. Literature Review

Architect Indah Widiastuti has carried out a similar study on the houses of Minangkabau [iii], Indonesia, and Kerala Nalukettu [iv], India. The study suggests that settlement and architecture are results of the establishment of dwelling cultures where kinship is a factor (Widiastuti, 2013). The matrilineal cultural similarities are related to spatial organization and settlement planning. Architect Sita Rajivkumar has done a study to analyze the values in the built heritage of Chettinadu regions in Tamil Nadu. This analysis examines the evolution of strategies targeted at preserving and enhancing the built heritage of the Chettinadu region (Rajiv Kumar, 2019). Photographer Amar Ramesh documents the Mogappu (entrance structures) of the Chettinadu mansions. The book covers the pictorial documentation of these entrances and studies the reflection of the ideals and position of the owners in the social hierarchy (Ramesh, 2023). Architect Samyuktaa has studied the lifestyle, architecture, and planning concepts of Chettinadu architecture (Natarajan, 2015). The cross-cultural references between Malaysian Chetty and Tamil Chettiyars were not covered.

Scholars Adnan et al. have studied the evolution of the language 'Pantan[v]' in Malaysia from various Indian languages, especially Tamil (Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan, April 2020). The culinary connection between the Chetty of India and Malaysia and the millennials preference in consuming the same is studied by the authors Ismail et al. (Muhamad Jufri Ismail, 2023). The objective of the study is to revive ethnic food in its original form since there is a decline in consumption due to urbanization's socio-cultural transformations. Although these studies were conducted in different genres of Chetty culture, the notion of preserving these ethnic traditions remained the same. Further research publications on 'effective incentive systems' encompass an analysis of the existing governmental and non-governmental schemes provided for protecting and conserving the Chetty village of Melaka, such as the National Heritage Act, Melaka Museums Corporation, State Executive Council, etc. The study is concluded by insisting on addressing the needs of residents of Chetty Melaka and the George Town area (Ahmad, 2016). Hence, the study of the house architecture of Chetty Melaka has not been analyzed yet.

The influence of gentrification on heritage identity is studied by author Raja Norashekin of the Melaka region. Chinese, Indian, and Malay populations were considered. The study suggests the participation of local residents in urban planning to respect and protect the rights of the community (Othman, 2017). Melaka is studied in the urban context by the researcher Ibrahim et al. and covers the various land uses of Melaka during the Melaka Sultanate and Portuguese periods. The timeline of the study ends

at 1900 CE. Hence, the migration of the Indians in this region was not covered (Illyani Ibrahim, 2018). The existing research on the Chetty Melaka is limited to studying the heritage in terms of food, clothing, and language. At a broader level, the future of urban planning in the heritage city of Melaka and conservation are studied. Food habits, cultural practices, and language are researched. There is yet scope to study the architectural heritage of Chetty Melaka and document the same with respect to the Indian Chettinadu culture.

#### 3. Methodology

In this research, qualitative methods are adopted. As part of the qualitative method, open interviews with the residents of Chetty community in Melaka, Malaysia, are carried out. Documentation through photographs and drawings and field observations of the traditional houses of Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, and Chetty houses in Gajah Berang, Melaka, are corroborated to understand the influences with respect to spaces and expressions. The sample houses were chosen in Gajah Berang, Melaka, based on the originality of the architectural style and the time period in which they were constructed. The Tamil Chettiyar houses of Karaikudi, which are over 80 years old, are documented. In Malaysia, the Chetty Melaka houses were constructed at a much later stage, i.e., during the 1940s and 1960s AD. Around 46 households, temple priests, public were interviewed in Aug 2023. The interview questions covered parameters such as, Chetty cultural practices and house, the functioning of elements of the house, need for renovation, user group, identity and aspiration.

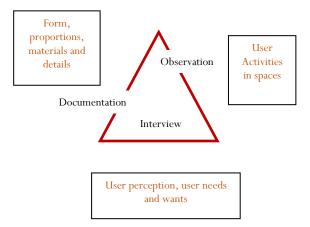


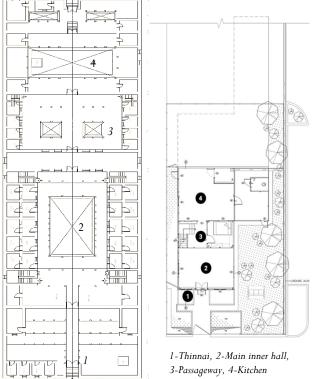
Figure 1 Triangulation method diagram

The data is analyzed using the data triangulation method. Data from the documentation, observation, and interviews are collected in Gajah Berang Chetty Melaka houses. The triangulation helps in overlapping the cultural and architectural

#### 4. Data and Discussion

Documentation and observation: The Chettiyar community in India lived in an elaborate mansion that housed 50 to 100 joint family households. They varied from single to four courtyard zones, as seen in Figure 2. The entrance zone was dedicated to men and their trading businesses. The first courtyard was surrounded by rooms that were given to each offspring (pulli) of the family. The second courtyard was used by the women of the house. The third courtyard contained the kitchen and service quarters. The last courtyard housed the servants' quarters of the family. The first two courtyards are for men and women, respectively, and the last courtyards are for services and servant quarters.

The reasons attributed are the absence of peer pressure to showcase wealth and adopting the minimalist quality of Chinese houses in the area. The financial capability of the *Peranakans* seems limited compared to that of the Indian Chettiyars, which is reflected in terms of the scale and materials of the house.



1-Verandah with Thinnai, 2- First courtyard — Living, 3- Kitchen courtyard, 4- Service courtyard with servant quarters

Figure 2 (Left) Chettinadu ancestral house with four courtyard zones — Pallathur, Karaikudi India. Source:Shreya M (2022)

*Figure 3* (Right)The floor plan for the Chetty's house in Melaka, Malaysia. Source: Author (2022)

similarities between the Chetty communities of Malaysia and India. The triangulation method is one of the methods to observe something from different angles or viewpoints in order to provide a fix on its true location. (Decrop, 2004).

As seen in Figure 3, the Chetty Melaka has similar spaces fitted into a compact layout. Unlike the Chettiyar joint family system in India, the Malaysian Chetty's have created single family units. Many of the single family Chetty's gathered to live together to form a community with a temple and groves. With respect to spatial organization, the front veranda zone consists of thinnai [vi] and columns as seen in traditional Chettiyar houses. Karaikudi. The comparison is discussed in Table 1. The courtyard spaces are not found in the Malaysian Chettinadu houses. The houses are not built to accommodate expanding family members since the Chetty people in Melaka lived in separate houses once the family expanded. The columns in Malaysian Chetty houses are slender wooden or metal posts that serve the purpose of holding the roof structure. The houses have halls that are used for living and dining, sleeping areas, a kitchen, and an attic. The proportions of these spaces are similar to those of the Chettinadu houses in Karaikudi.

With respect to expression the Indian Chettiyar's, had the urge to communicate wealth in terms of grandeur which is not seen in the Chetty Melaka community. The lavish proportions, use of imported materials, and numerological sentiments were not keenly followed in the houses of Chetty Melaka.

**Table 1** Analogy of Chetty/Chettiyar community in Melaka and India. Source: Author (2022)

Elements	Karaikudi,	Melaka,	Influential		
Elements	India	Malaysia	manifestations		
Thinnai / verandah seating			Indian Chettinadu house: Thinnai used as interaction space for male.  Malaysian Chetty: Thinnai used as social space for men, women and children. Influence from India.		
Columns/ Post			Indian Chettinadu houses:  Demonstration of wealth. Use of teak columns  Malaysian Chetty: Simple minimal columns for solving structural purpose.		

Elements	Karaikudi,	Melaka,	Influential	Elements	Karaikudi,	Melaka,	Influential
Roof	India	Malaysia	manifestations	Halls	India	Malaysia Not present	manifestations Indian Chettinadu
Kool			Indian Chettinadu house: Tiled pitched roof used to collect rainwater and store. Clay tile roof keep the spaces cooler.  Malaysian Chetty: thatch pitched roof to drain rain water. Influence from India.			root present	house: as part of cultural gathering during wedding and festivals.  Malaysian Chetty: found absent since these activities as considered as part of the community and not the house.
Door				Stairs			Indian Chettinadu house: narrow 1.5 ft
2001			Indian Chettinadu house: wooden detailed doors with detailings and story panels.  Malaysian Chetty: simple doors wirh external				stairs leading to attic and rooms in upper floors. Stairs are closed with doors. <b>Malaysian Chetty:</b> similar stairs with door is observed.
			ornamentation such as	Attic			Indian Chettinadu house: used as
Window		leaves, pictures etc.,  Indian Chettinadu house: windows facing streets and courtyards. Sunshades with drain holes in the sill.  Malaysian Chetty: windows influenced from Indian Chettinadu houses in a simplified form.				storage and climate regulation  Malaysian Chetty: similarly used as storage. Recent days used as a bed space.	
			Flooring			IndianChettinaduhouse:createdapattern of tiles locallycalledAthangudi[vii] tilesusingthelocallysourced	
Verandah			Indian Chettinadu house: present in the entrance and around courtyard Malaysian Chetty: present in the entrance of the house.				material, made of clay and lime helped people stay cool in the house.  Malaysian Chetty: the flooring is made of wood since it is a locally available
Courtyard		Not present	Indian Chettinadu house: main aspect of				material, acts as an insulator.
	AND BANK		the house dividing various functions in joint family.  Malaysian Chetty: absent since joint family system is not followed	Wall			Indian Chettinadu house: 1 to 2 feet thick brick walls to regulate heat  Malaysian Chetty: 4 inch thin wooden walls as insulator.

As discussed in Table 1, there are many Chettinadu house elements that have been adopted by the Chetty people of Malaysia. The *thinnai* space still remains as part of the entrance

veranda in the Chetty houses. The spaces double up as a seating area for the adults and a play area for the children. The *thinnai* proportion also remains the same, which is 40–50 cm. As observed in the Chettinadu ancestral houses, there is no rigid gender hierarchy in the spaces. The *thinnai* of Chetty houses are used by both genders and households of all ages. The function of *thinnai* seating guests and strangers remains the same.

The hall or living room serves as a multipurpose area to perform various activities throughout the day. The dining area is separate, as seen in the ancestral house of Chettinadu. The rooms serve as the sleeping areas of the households. The kitchen area is found to be similar to the Chettinadu houses since most of their cuisines are the same. The space to cook and grind shall be observed in the kitchen areas. Since there is no courtyard, the spaces for making the preserves are lacking in the house. To create a courtyard in the middle of the house is quite impossible for the Melaka Chetty community here. There is no particular space provided for prayer (puja) in the Malaysian Chetty houses. They use a cupboard, a room, or an attic as a prayer room. The village would generally possess family temples and family prayer houses called padappu veedu [viii]. These Indian temples and prayer houses are brought back to Melaka as an important part of their cultural heritage.

There is a vast difference in the details and construction materials used in Chetty Melaka. The construction materials used in the Chetty houses are lightweight, locally available, and durable. The use of building materials is minimal. They are aimed at solving structural and functional purposes rather than being an element of the expression of aesthetics. The Indian Chettiyar houses have huge columns made out of teak and elaborate capitals, as seen in Table 1. In India, they used imported materials such as stained glass, floor tiles, chandeliers, Burma teak, etc., apart from brick and stone, which are sourced locally as building materials. The Malaysian Chetty houses have walls made of wood, which is light and protects the households from the tropical weather. There are several factors that have influenced material selection for the Melaka Chetty house. The economic status of each Chetty family will determine whether they can afford or not to buy the expensive material for their house. The other reason is the availability of craftsmen who can work on the wood, and their notion to mimic other houses of Chinese migrants in that area contributed to the house form of Melaka Chetty. In Chetty Melaka, due to a flood and termite issue, the house owner has changed from timber walls to brick walls in recent times. Meanwhile, for the roof, traditionally, they used thatch. The reason is the thermal comfort. The thatch helped keep the house cooler (Mohd Sahabuddin, 2016). In recent times, it has been replaced with zinc sheets since they are not fire-resistant.

Since Karaikudi is a dry region, people also had a necessity to collect rainwater through the sloped roof. In Malaysia, due to regular monsoons, there was no necessity to collect rainwater. They got the water from the bore wells. Attic space is a result of the roof structure in both regions and is used for storage in both cases. Recently, the attic spaces have been used as bedrooms and prayer rooms. The stairs were made of wood in both regions;

they were narrow, often closed, and had a door. The proportions of these staircases were found to be similar. i.e., tread 20 cm, riser 25 cm. Hence, the influence of Hindus' culture and beliefs is still strong in the Chetty community (Nasir, 2000).

#### 5. Open Interview Discussion and Observation

From the interview session with the house owners of the houses, one can understand the practices that has remained and that has changed over time. The residents were open to discuss the following aspects. There were few spaces and room which were not open for privacy reasons. Mainly the male head of the families led the discussions.

Chetty cultural practices and house: The residents of Melaka are deeply rooted in their culture. Mostly the men of the family are from India and the women is of Malay origin when they settled in Melaka for four generations. The Indian cultural practices are strictly followed among the family members. The male family member carries out many religious rituals on a daily basis. One of the residents stated that "it is a privilege to be part of Chetty community and heritage. We celebrate many Indian festivals and perform rituals to our ancestors".

The built and unbuilt spaces provide an appropriate set up for performing these activities. The practices and time of festivals such as Pongal, Deepavali, aadi peruku etc., coincide with the Indian Chetti festivals.

The houses have sleeping rooms, kitchen and an attic space. The attic spaces are used for storage traditionally. Although they have been converted into sleeping rooms in today's context. The element- space comparison between Indian Chettiyar and Malaysian Chetty is carried out in table 1.

Renovations and additions: The Chetty house traditionally are built facing north-east and not facing south-east. However, not all houses can follow that direction due to the different orientation of the land itself in the present day. Traditionally the toilets are not part of the Chetty houses. It is considered impure as per Hindu cultural norms. Hence the residents have built toilets away from the main structure in the late 1980's. in recent times in some of the houses attached toilets can be noticed. They also added skylights in the attic area to enhance lighting in the internal rooms. The worn out wood walls are being replaced with brick walls. The thatch roof is replaced with metal sheets due to the cost, availability and durability. Some of the users who are financially capable have renovated the house with original materials. There are additions of bedrooms, tv rooms, toilets made to the existing structure for various modern functions.

**Users and generations**: The users mentioned that they have been living in the house for four to five generations. Originally the ancestors were merchants or moneylenders. From the third generation the occupations shifted to being a government

employee or a private employee. The latest generation of users are graduated and are engineers or doctors.

Other house form influences: The overall form of the Melaka Chetty house has been influenced by Indian, Chinese and Malay architecture. In the early 19th century, the Chinese who came to Malaysia as immigrants came from the southern province of China, mainly from Fujian and Guangdong. They came to Malaysia as laborers for the tin mines (Fee, 1998). Due to this immigrant influx, they need to provide a house to accommodate the workers. Therefore, they built a house by incorporating Malay traditional houses into these Chinese workers' houses. According to Kohl (1984), these Chinese houses comprised structures as high as 30 feet with a huge thatched roof. These features can be noticed in the Chetti houses as well. The parts of this Chinese house can be divided into three main components, just like in a Malay house. The first component is the veranda, similar to serambi [ix] for public areas. Then followed the main house, or rumah ibu [x]. The last part will be the kitchen, or rumah dapur [xi], which has more privacy and is for the household. To double-confirm this Melaka Chetty house based on Chinese worker houses, Chinese always build their houses on the ground with floors made of compacted earth or cement (Fee, 1998). Furthermore, the form of the roof was based on a long ridge roof (bumbung panjang), which is the most common roof in Peninsular Malaysia.

Identity and aspirations: In today's context, the Chetty people still construct houses that follow these conditions. Due to unavailability of traditional materials and craftmanship two of the households mentioned that they had to use concrete and metal for construction. They find this style of architecture suitable for their daily rituals and cultural activities. The Chettys are proud of their Indian ancestors. They strive to bring in their identity through the architecture that they have adopted in Malaysia. The Chetty houses in Malaysia are functional, compact, and comply with the definition of dwelling. At the same time, the scale of spaces and the nature of spaces give them the character that could be attributed to the Chettinadu [xii] houses of India. The resident quoted "we built a house for my brother in the same fashion like our traditional house because we like to being back our traditions". The newer house is constructed using brick, concrete and metal.

**Expressions**: Beside the architecture and intangible expressions in Melaka Chetty houses, the Indian heritage is represented through the *Kolam* (Figure 4) and mango leaves above the main door (Figure 5). In the interiors, many families frame photos on the wall (Figure 6) and also store antique objects that they either inherited from their family or bought from the market, which is similar to the Chettiyar families of India. The women of the house are commonly involved in the daily activities of cleaning, adorning the entrances, using turmeric, neem leaves and mango leaves. The elderly women of the house while interview said "we ladies of the family have cooking, cleaning and decorating to do. I went to school for few years. But my daughter is studying to be a lawyer now".



Figure 4 The Kolam as cultural symbol. Source: Lim Yong Long (2022)



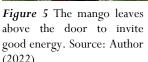




Figure 6 The family photo frame showing Indian origins. Source: Author (2022)

#### 6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to understand the influence of Indian Chettiyar cultural heritage on the architecture of Melaka houses. Triangulating the data through documentation, observation and interview, the study confirms that the Chetty Melaka house is an extension of the Chettiyar [xiii] house from India in an ultracompact manner. The Chetty Melaka houses have tangible similarities in terms of spaces and elements in reduced proportions. The functions of these spaces are found to be similar to those of the Chettiyars of India. The thinnai space is used for gathering, and the hall is used for spending the day watching TV and sometimes prayer. The kitchen space is designed in such a way that it caters to the preparation of Chetty cuisine. There are similarities observed between the intangible aspects, such as the way of dressing, cuisine, religion, and cultural practices. These aspects are also reflected in the Chetty architecture in the form of entrance decorations, display of objects in the hall etc. Since the building itself is simplified, the users have found their own way to add aesthetics to the interior and exterior spaces. The overall form and structure is kept minimal to remain functional.

#### 7. Recommendations

In the study area it is observed that the traditional houses are being demolished due to the lack of funds to replace the original materials and lack of craftsman to re design the original construction. In that scenario the local Chetti community people have attempted to communicate the traditional architectural language using modern materials. Similar houses with concrete and metal sheets can be found as part of the settlement in the last five years as discussed earlier. The Chetty of Melaka migrate to other states of the country. They sell their houses to another Chetty or a Malay buyer. Overall there is a scope to revive these building typology within Gajah Berang and outside. The

learnings from architecture of Chetty community not only could cater to their own community but also to other communities as discussed below.

The Lembahan Perumahan Melaka (Melaka government, 2002) housing scheme introduced with an aim of housing for all Melaka origin population. The Chetty houses are simplified combination of Malay and Indian architecture, one can look at reinventing the elements and spaces in the modern Melaka houses of the scheme. The following are some of the recommendations suggested that could be part of private houses or housing schemes in Melaka.

- Chetty houses are simplified version of Malay, Indian and Chinese homes. Therefore, one can look at Chetti houses spaces and elements as an example for minimal functional design that is relevant in todays context.
- The notion of people to bring back their memories of traditional houses are strongly seen among the people especially Chettys' irrespective of the states where they live. The references from the traditional houses such as spaces and elements contribute to create an identity for the people.
- Architects and planners shall keep in mind the cultural origin of the users and traditional architecture to design the modern houses.
- Multifunctional spaces can be included in the mass housing design. I.e. the inner hall could be used as living, dining and activity room in the modern houses.
- Materials such as local wood can be used for spaces in the modern houses. The supply of wood can be compensated through a community wood farm in every new neighborhood planned.
- The traditional construction technology such as wooden walls and pitched roof shall be recreated in available sustainable materials such as bamboo, and other alternatives for traditional wood used.
- The metal tin roof according to the residents' trap heat inside the house. It could be replaced with bamboo mats and tiles to maintain comfort in indoor spaces.
- As per the modern functional needs one can add a kitchen and bathrooms to the existing hall, bedroom, attic typology of the Gajah Berang houses in future.
- It is recommended that the elements are adopted appropriately based on various cultural practices. For examples the Chinese users shall adopt thinnai and seatings within the house, Malay users shall use the same within screens while the Hindu population generally prefer it at the entrance of their houses.
- The thinnai seating irrespective of the culture could act as a social space for the community. Adding thinnai as an element in the house level (closed or open) and community level shall create hierarchy of spaces for children and adults to use.

- Prayer rooms could be added in the modern homes to accommodate religious necessities as seen in many of the Chetty houses.
- By re-creating and modifying the Chetty spaces and elements, the reminiscence of the Chetty community is conserved in parts but also cater to the modern requirements of the users.
- The entrances act as a canvas to paint the identity of the households. The physical entrances of these Chetty houses serves appropriate for the same. hence similar entrance details shall be adopted in the modern mass houses. The users irrespective of their cultures would have spaces to display their identities in various forms (lanterns, kolam, thoran [xiv] etc.,)
- Local people shall be educated in construction methods, maintenance of their houses which could reduce the cost of construction.

**Further studies**: The above study is carried out in Gajah Berang area of Melaka. Further studies can be carried out in various Chetty settlements in the country. The study could further be elaborated by deriving various housing typologies based on the traditional Chetty houses for mass housing projects. Further, research scholars could study the intervention of Government, INTAC and NGO'S in the practicalities of preserving a traditional Chetty house.

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[i] Chetty: Cross-cultural community of Indian Chettiyars and Malay settled in Malaysia

[ii] Chhettie Melaka: Chetty people who live in Gajah Berang, Tengkera, and Bachang

[iii] Minangkabu, a traditional Indonesian house

[iv] Nalukettu, a traditional Kerala house in India

[v] Pantan: the Language of Chetty's in Malaysia

[vi] Thinnai: platform near the entrance of the house for sitting

[vii] Athangudi: a village that produces Athangudi tiles in Tamil Nadu

[viii] Padapu Veedu: Prayer House of Indian Chettiyar Families

[ix] Serambi-Veranda space in a Malaysian house

[x] Rumah Ibu, the main house of the Malaysian house

[xi] Rumah Dapur: kitchen and private spaces of a Malaysian house

[xii] Chettinadu: a group of Chettiyar community villages in South India

[xiii] Chettiyar: a community of people who live in Chettinadu villages [xiv] Thoran: a string of leaves and flowers used to adorn Chetty houses

#### Appendix

#### Photographs of documentation and interview participants.



SEJARAH KELUARGA