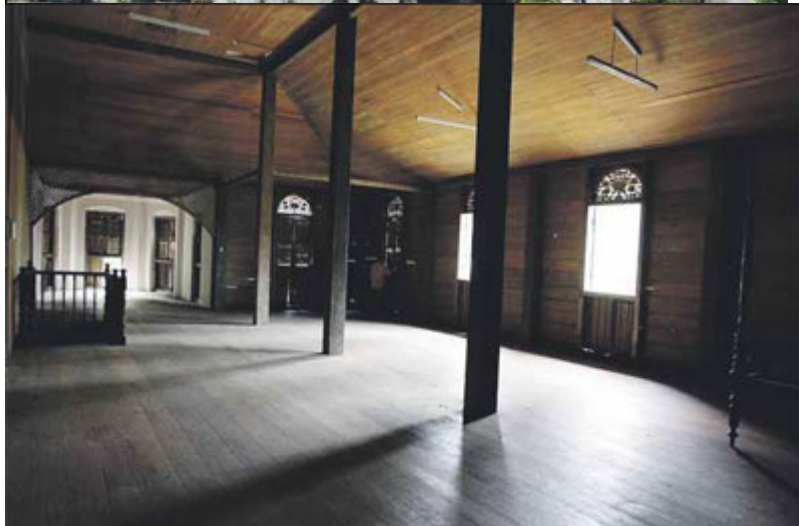


**MANDAILING MANSION: Stately grace of old 'istana'**  
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Rumah Raja Bilah is a 'standout' mansion by the Sungai Perak where the rich and famous of old Perak built their palatial homes. JASPAL SINGH, HALIMATUL HAMID and ILI LIYANA MOKHTAR report.

By any measure or design, the Bagas Godang (literally large house) of Papan is awe-inspiring. Situated atop a hillock, the stately, palatial mansion certainly befitted the dignified persona of its first owner -- Raja Bilah, a Mandailing aristocrat of Sumatran descent, who made Perak his home and final resting place.

Completed in 1896, the two-storey villa has always been the largest building in Papan. Situated next to his 128-year-old timber house (now known as Rumah Asal), overlooking the Papan mosque, the mansion, which is now referred to as the Rumah Besar, was built by Raja Bilah when he was the penghulu of Papan.

According to Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, a local expert on Mandailing history, once Raja Bilah and his followers had attained some measure of prosperity, his concern was to ensure the long-term future of the Mandailings in Perak. "Although most of the Mandailings left Papan by the late 1890s, Raja Bilah maintained his vision that it would be the community hub in Kinta.

"The Rumah Besar was the local equivalent of Bagas Godang, the residence of the Mandailing Raja (in the Mandailing heartland of Sumatra)," said Abdur-Razzaq in an interview with the New Straits Times recently.

Abdur-Razzaq, who with his wife, Khoo Salmah Nasution, co-authored a comprehensive book on the early history of the Mandailing in Malaysia titled *Raja Bilah and the Mandailings in Perak: 1875-1911*, said the Rumah Besar Raja Bilah looked similar to the mansions of Malay aristocracy and the Chinese miners of Kinta. But the interior was different.

On the ground floor was a large hall with octagonal columns and a raised platform (pangkin). In Mandailing architecture, the eight-sided columns symbolised that the building was erected with the support of people from the eight directions of the compass.

Upstairs, there were a few guest rooms and another large hall. The Rumah Besar, functionally, was more like a Sapu Godang (a hall for the conference of Mandailing nobles and elders) than a Bagas Godang (a Raja's residence), said Abdur-Razzaq, adding that neither Raja Bilah nor any other family member ever moved into the Rumah Besar.

Historically, it was used for weddings, feasts and other receptions. "But, most of all, it was a gathering place for the Mandailings and other Muslims of western Kinta, many of whom would come to Raja Bilah with their problems and proposals, especially after Friday prayers at the Papan mosque."

Going by Raja Bilah's will, the Rumah Besar and its "contents" were a family endowment or private waqf. "It was a tradition among the Mandailing chiefs, and men and women of standing, to leave an ancestral home for the clan. It would serve to bring the children and descendants together during ceremonial occasions, such as marriages and Muslim feasts."

Abdur-Razzaq said that before work commenced, supplications (doa) were made and an auspicious day chosen to start building the house, adding that a fistful of soil from the Mandailing homeland would be scattered on the foundation of the mansion.

"Although constructed mainly by Chinese craftsmen, the Mandailings chipped in, gotong-royong fashion, helping their chief put up the house. Elephants may have been used to raise the large timber beams."

A penghulu's office was built into the buttress wall along the side of the hillock, and this was thereafter called Balai Penghulu. The descendants of Raja Bilah, Abdur-Razzaq said, had always called the council hall Rumah Besar, but in more recent times, it has come to be known as Istana Raja Bilah (Raja Bilah's Palace), in the mistaken notion that Raja Bilah was a Malay Raja and his house, an istana.

According to Saadiah Kamaruddin, the great-granddaughter of Raja Bilah, who now lives in Rumah Asal: "My mother told me that the large hall on the ground floor was used for feasts, meetings and other receptions. It was also my playground when I was a little girl. ." Saadiah, 69, said the men would dine on the pangkin at the end of the hall after Friday prayers at the Papan mosque. It is the only mosque in town and still stands tall, although it is no longer used as most Mandailing families moved out after 1910.

A postal bedframe occupies the space in the hall, while a desk and a steel single bed frame are in one of the rooms. Saadiah said the Rumah Besar was always locked and would only be opened when it was in need of cleaning or at the request of family members and visitors.

"We don't hold ceremonies or feasts in the mansion anymore; not even when the whole family returns for Hari Raya. Everyone would gather at the Rumah Asal." Saadiah said the Heritage Department had visited Rumah Besar on several occasions and promised to restore and preserve her great grandfather's mansion.

"They replaced a few broken wooden planks in the staircase and under the door of the main entrance, but it was attacked by termites. Now, we can't open the door because the rotten wood makes it hard to push it open."

Saadiah said the green walls in the Rumah Besar were scraped, but not repainted, and looked more like a "ghost house" now. Saadiah's grandmother was the daughter of Raja Bilah. She was born in 1941 and grew up during the Japanese occupation when most Mandailing families had left Papan for greener pastures. "I don't have children. My sister takes care of the mansion and our house when I am not here."

The Architecture Department of University Technology Malaysia (UTM) made a measured drawing of the Rumah Besar in 1993. It was used as a location set for local and international movies, the most famous being *Anna And The King* in 1999.

### **Community taking stock of identity and legacy**

REMEMBER Aminuddin Baki (1926-1965)? He was the "Father of Education" and a Mandailing. The Mandailings are members of an ethnic group who first arrived on our shores between the 1840s and 1870s from north-western Sumatra. Many ended up in Perak and Selangor, where they worked as miners, traders and factory hands.

They subsequently established themselves in more respectable positions, like Aminuddin, who rose to become the chief adviser on education to the government (the equivalent of director-general of education today). Aminuddin, who hailed from Chemor, near Ipoh, was responsible for getting Bahasa Melayu recognised as the national language and as the medium of instruction in schools in post-Merdeka Malaya.

"Many of the Mandailings in Malaysia today -- including myself -- are descended from these immigrants," said local Mandailing expert Abdur-Razzaq Lubis. The Mandailings gradually involved themselves in local events, such as the Pahang War (1857-63), Selangor War (1867-73) and Perak War (1875-1876).

Abdur-Razzaq said the Mandailings were first labelled "foreign Malays" and later, "Malays" for "administrative convenience". "By 1931, 'Mendeling' was altogether removed from the British Malaya census."

In the peninsula, he said, the Mandailings not only identified with Malayan (and subsequently Malaysian) nationalism, but were also compelled to identify with the Malays to the extent of compromising and suppressing their own identity and culture. The process of acculturation and assimilation was assisted by a measure of colonial social-engineering, followed by post-Merdeka state conditioning, he added.

"Once the Mandailing in Malaya were redefined as Malays, it was only a matter of time before their political-economic functions were prescribed accordingly." But, said Abdur-Razzaq, there was now an awareness among educated Mandailing who realise how important it was for the community to take stock of its cultural, social and political identity in a globalising world.

"We believe that the past is for our ancestors, the present is ours, the future is for our children. As the Mandailing elders always tell their children, every generation has a legacy to protect," said Abdur-Razzaq, who has a website, [www.mandailing.org](http://www.mandailing.org), detailing various aspects of the Mandailing community here and abroad.

## **Papan's penghulu and rich history**

FORMER headmaster Zainal Harun, 80, from Bota, cannot recall much about the house that sits majestically on the other side of the Perak river, except that it belonged to "someone important".

"All houses along the Perak river belonged to penghulus, powerful people who heard criminal and civil cases. In the past, the river was the main mode of transportation, so it was a strategic place for people of importance." Zainal said the only thing he remembered about Papan was that it was a tin-mining area populated mainly by Chinese settlers.

"As time went by, the younger generation left for better prospects in the cities. That is why the town is deserted now." Zainal said Papan was quite a distance from his kampung and it was too much of a hassle to travel there to perform prayers at the mosque there.

"But, usually, the penghulu would treat the kampung folk to a 'feast' after Friday prayers." There were many old mansions and houses of historical value situated by the river, he said.

"Some of these houses have rich histories just waiting to be discovered. Research should be done into these houses and maybe they can be restored for the younger generation to appreciate. "If I remember correctly, there were many communists in Papan and people used to say that it was a dangerous place."

## **No plans to restore glory of building**

THE Rumah Besar Raja Bilah was not just recognised as the symbol of greatness of the Mandailing community leader in Papan. It was remembered by many as a film set, most notably by Oscar-winning production designer Luciana Arrighi for the movie *Anna and the King* (1999).

Arrighi was fascinated with Papan. She described it as a ghost town on the edge of large mining lakes, set in a mysterious cul-de-sac, shrouded and surrounded by dark, forested hills. However, the mansion will soon be but a distant memory as it slowly decays in the "ghost town".

Seven years have passed since it was last restored by the National Museum. The latest check by *New Straits Times* reporters revealed that signs of termite infestation could be seen on its wooden staircases and under the doors. Some sections of the roof were also dilapidated.

A source from the National Heritage Department said the department was involved in conservation efforts of historical buildings in the country. However, Rumah Besar Raja Bilah is not on the Perak list. The source said the Rumah Besar was a family endowment or private waqf, hence its restoration and preservation should be shouldered by Raja Bilah's descendants.