The Kampong Laut Mosque during the big flood in 1966.

The Mosque after the flood had receded.
The Oldest Mosque in Malaysia

Moves to a safer site

by

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There are very few timber dwellings in Malaysia which are more than 100 years old. But there is one class of timber building which escaped the ravages of fire and civil disturbance in the 18th and 19th centuries, and which was, until recently, unaffected by the changing fashions in Malay architecture, namely the rural Mosque.

Although the principal Mosques in all the State capitals have been built of stone or brick for more than a century, old village Mosques were almost invariably of timber construction, and were usually built of Chengal, the most durable of Malaysian timber.

The oldest of all the Malay timber Mosques was, until 1968, sited close to the bank of the Kelantan river, about two miles north of the capital, beside a thickly populated village called ‘Kampong Laut’, — the ‘Village by the Sea’.

The village, as the name suggests, was once near to the coast, but it is now about 3 miles inland. The broad Kelantan river has gradually changed its course during the 18th. and 19th. centuries, and while doing so, has dredged away a stretch of land half a mile wide on which many of the oldest houses and graves once stood, including the fenced residence of the former Raja Kampong Laut. The village Mosque had been sited in the centre of the population, over half a mile from the original river bank, but in 1966 it stood on the very edge of a high, crumbling bank. When the flood waters swept down from the hills in December 1966, they rose to the level of the Mosque roof, and when they subsided the whole of the long verandah, which had been sited on the river side, had disappeared down stream, and some of the floor pillars had been undermined, and were suspended in mid-air: the concrete ablution tank had fallen into the river, and the mosque floor and part of the roof were tilting dangerously. The authorities declared the Mosque to be unsafe, and it was closed.

In 1967 the Kelantan Government decided to build a new Mosque of stone and concrete, some distance inland, and the old Kampong Laut timber Mosque stood in silence, waiting for another flood to end its existence.

The Malaysian Historical Society came to know of this sad situation in the middle of 1968, and made enquiries about the Mosque’s historical background.

There was no date inscribed or carved anywhere in the building, but the oldest inhabitants of Kampong Laut maintain that the Mosque was already in existence at least five generations ago, in a community where many men live to an age of over 80. Oral tradition, handed down by these elders, claims that the Mosque was built by a group of visiting Muslims, who landed from the sea, which was then close by. It is believed that these same Muslim pioneers sailed on and built a timber Mosque at Malacca, and another at Damak in Java. A photograph of the old timber Mosque at Damak, which the writer has examined, bears a striking resemblance to the Mosque at Kampong Laut.

Local tradition also maintains that Kampong Laut has been in existence for many centuries, and that there was a Chief of the area long before a Raja Kampong Laut was appointed. It is an
established fact that the title of Raja Kampong Laut was first conferred on one of the eleven sons of Long Yunus, who was the founder of the present Kelantan dynasty and ruled from 1763 to 1798. It is most unlikely that Long Yunus, the Raja of Kelantan, would have given his son the title of Raja Kampong Laut unless the area was thickly populated and of long established importance. It is therefore reasonable to accept the local tradition that there has been a centre of population and a Mosque at Kampong Laut for not less than 300 years.

The Malaysian Historical Society therefore asked for permission from the Kelantan State Government to dismantle the ancient Mosque, then in a state of dilapidation, and to re-erect it on another site, far away from the hungry Kelantan river. Permission was readily given, and the Society began to appeal for funds to meet the cost of the rescue operation.

It was estimated that the cost of replacement of the lost or damaged timber and roof tiles, and of the ablution tank would amount to about $8,000, and that the wages of skilled Malay carpenters and labourers, while they were dismantling and re-erecting the building would total another $8,000.

It was feared that if another flood, even a minor one, hit the bank and the unsteady Mosque, they would both collapse, and render the task of reconstruction almost impossible. The Committee of the Historical Society therefore decided to proceed with the dismantling of the Mosque, numbering every beam and plank, and to move them all to a new site, further inland, without waiting to collect the necessary funds.

Work began on November 3rd 1968, (the 12th day of Sha'aban) which was considered by the Master Builder to be an auspicious day, and the Mosque was successfully dismantled in brilliant sunshine during the remainder of month. No nails had been used anywhere in the building, during the original construction, and most of the timber, which was all Chengal, was still in good condition.

The Master Builder, in charge of the whole operation, was Hussein bin Salleh of Kampong Bunut Payong, and the work
A View of the Kampong Laut Mosque taken in about 1905, and published in 1908 in a Book on Kelantan by W. A. Graham, Adviser to the Kelantan Government (appointed by the King of Thailand).

was most carefully supervised, from beginning to end, by Haji Zain bin Haji Awang Kechil of Kota Bharu. Meanwhile the State Government had selected a new site, about 6 miles from Kota Bharu, on the road to Kuala Krai, opposite the Centre of Higher Islamic Studies. The Mosque was reconstructed on this site, and although the verandah and part of the outer plank wall, and many of the roof tiles had been replaced, giving the building a renovated appearance, the shape and size of the Mosque were unchanged. The Mosque pillars were originally 8 feet high, and a local legend related that the Raja of Kampong Laut used at one time to ride to Mosque on an elephant, and to tether the elephant under the building while he attended prayers. But the space under the Mosque floor had been gradually filled up with river silt, in the course of many floods, and these giant pillars were buried up to floor level at the time of the 1966 flood. When the pillars were excavated, the lower half was found to be defective, through long burial in the ground, and they were cut short, leaving the top four feet to be fitted under the reconstructed building.

Only a small part of the cost of the project was met from public donations, and the greater part of the total cost, which amounted to a little over $16,000, was paid from the funds of the Malaysian Historical Society, leaving the Society’s reserves almost exhausted.

The restored Mosque was formally handed back to the Kelantan State Government by the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Society, Haji Hamdan bin Sheikh Tahir, on May 8th, 1970. It was accepted, with expressions of appreciation, by the Mentri Besar, Dato Haji Mohd. Asri bin Haji Muda.

The Mosque, which so nearly ceased to exist, will be used for daily prayers by the students attending the Centre of Higher Islamic Studies, on the opposite side of the road.
Tuan Haji Hamdan speaking, before handing back the Mosque to the State Government in May 1970.

Dato Mohd. Asri (left) Mentri Besar Kelantan, after unveiling the memorial Board, recording the history of the Mosque.