

**STUDY ON PHYSICOCHEMICAL AND
HYDRAULIC PROPERTIES OF
TROPICAL ORGANIC SOIL
IN BEAUFORT, SABAH**



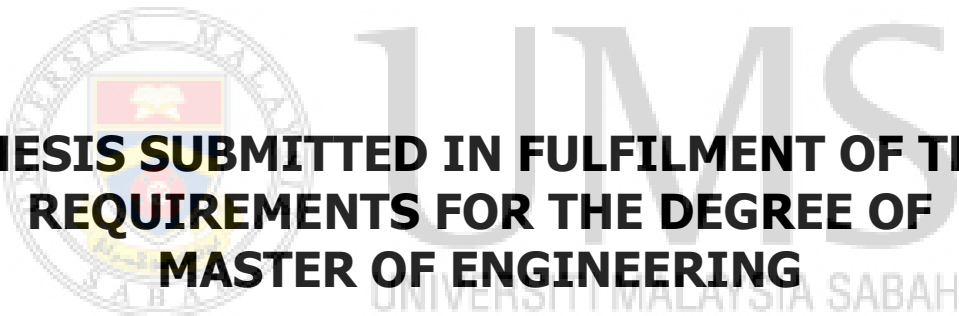
NURUL IRAH FAZIRAH BINTI SAPAR

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**FACULTY OF ENGINEERING
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
2023**

**STUDY ON PHYSICOCHEMICAL AND
HYDRAULIC PROPERTIES OF
TROPICAL ORGANIC SOIL
IN BEAUFORT, SABAH**

NURUL IRAH FAZIRAH BINTI SAPAR



**THIS IS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ENGINEERING**

**FACULTY OF ENGINEERING
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
2023**

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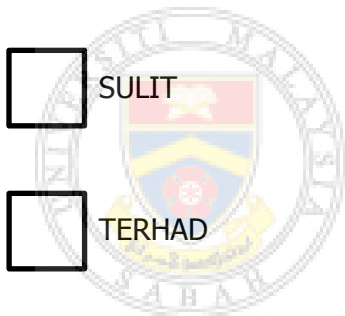
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is submitted to Universiti Malaysia Sabah as fulfilment of the requirements for the master's degree of Master of Civil Engineering and has not been submitted to any other university for any master's degree. I also certify that the work described herein is entirely my own, except for the quotations and summaries, the sources of which have been fully acknowledged.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



I express my gratitude to Allah S.W.T for his blessing so that I could finish up this thesis successfully. The success and final completion of this study required a great deal of direction and support from many people, and I consider myself quite fortunate to have received this support during the completion of my research. I would like to send my thanks to my supervisors, Dr. Siti Jahara Binti Matlan and Prof. Madya Dr. Aniza Binti Ibrahim, for their support in giving guidance and ideas for the accomplishment of this research. I appreciate the frequent meetings held by them as it gives me continuous improvement in the research.

Sincere gratitude is given to my examiner and lecturers for their concerns and opinions on improving this research. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my family, especially my mother and father, for their unwavering financial, transportation, and motivational support during the process of completing my master's degree. I would like to thank my friends, namely Masyittah, Amira, Aziana, Afiqah, Dhabit, Affi, and others for their encouragement, as well as their prompt assistance and direction till the completion of my research work.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone at the Civil Engineering Laboratory, FKJ officers and Postgraduate Officers, especially Sir Julius Sokodor, Sir Afflizailizam Bin Ali Hassan, Mdm Dg. Masliah Marasuka, Mdm Nur Afini, Sir Azwan Gakau, Sir Masrin Bin Samian and Mdm Zaiahsheila Binti Sidik for their timely support, guidance, and assistance in operating the lab requirements. Finally, thank you to everyone who helped and prepared for this research, as well as those who made it possible.

Nurul Irah Fazirah Binti Sapar

24 August 2022

ABSTRACT

Organic soil is a difficult soil to work with in the engineering field due to its characteristics that make it unsuitable for building or highway construction. It is fragile and has low shear strength, a wide deformation range, high compressibility, and a high-water holding capacity. Due to the fact that water is always the primary factor influencing how soil properties behave, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of tropical organic soil properties, particularly their hydraulic characteristics, in order to facilitate a better understanding of such soils. Soil water characteristics and hydraulic conductivity are two major components of hydraulic properties. The primary goal of this research is to characterise the physicochemical and hydraulic properties of organic soil in order to establish a relationship between them. Two locations were considered: the Lumadan site and the Klias site, where organic soil samples were collected in Beaufort, Sabah. Field tests such as the von Post test and an investigation of organic soil depth were carried out at the study sites. The scope of the study includes index and chemical properties tests such as natural density, moisture content, organic matter content, fibre content, liquid limit, specific gravity, and pH tests; hydraulic properties tests such as permeability and soil-water retention characteristics; and mechanical compaction properties. The microstructural characteristics and chemical composition of the samples were also determined in this study using the Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) and Energy-Dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) tests. As per the findings of the research, Klias and Lumadan organic soils were classified as hemic (pseudo-fibrous), with von Post scales ranging from H6 to H7, indicating a degree of decomposition in the intermediate range. The organic soil depth at Lumadan is 4.5m, while it is 4.0m at Klias. Moisture content, organic content, fibre content, specific gravity, liquid limit, and acidity results indicated that organic soil index properties varied between the Klias and Lumadan sites. The chemical composition of organic soil samples collected at both study sites also demonstrates that the elements present are influenced by the type of cultivation, groundwater level, and local climate conditions. Microstructural analysis reveals that the characteristics of organic soil samples vary slightly. Klias samples are made up of fibres and appear to be woody and porous, whereas Lumadan samples are made up of flaky granular. In terms of hydraulic properties, the average coefficients of permeability of Lumadan and Klias samples are 9.89×10^{-6} m/s and 9.11×10^{-6} m/s, respectively, indicating that organic soil has a low degree of permeability. Four models were used to describe the soil water characteristic curve. Based on the fitting analysis, the Brooks and Corey and Fredlund and Xing models were found to be the best fitted models to represent the soil water characteristic curve for organic soils in Beaufort, Sabah, with a linearity coefficient (R^2) ranging from 0.9368 to 0.9978. Organic soils demonstrate a high-water storage capacity, and even at high pressure conditions, such as 1500 kPa, the soil can still store water at a rate of 0.5 to 0.6 residual volumetric water content. Organic soil decomposition alters the hydraulic parameters significantly. In conclusion of this study, soil degradation caused by peatland drainage significantly alters the physicochemical and hydraulic properties of organic soils.

ABSTRAK

KAJIAN TENTANG SIFAT FIZIKOKIMIA DAN HIDRAULIK BAGI TANAH ORGANIK TROPIKA DI BEAUFORT, SABAH

Tanah organik adalah tanah yang sukar untuk diusahakan dalam bidang kejuruteraan kerana ciri-cirinya yang menyebabkan tanah tersebut tidak sesuai untuk pembinaan bangunan atau lebuhraya. Ia bersifat rapuh dan mempunyai kekuatan ricih yang rendah, julat ubah bentuk yang besar, kebolehmampatan yang tinggi, dan kapasiti pegangan air yang tinggi. Disebabkan fakta bahawa air sentiasa menjadi faktor utama yang mempengaruhi bagaimana sifat tanah berkelakuan, kajian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan pemahaman yang mendalam tentang sifat tanah organik tropika, terutamanya ciri hidrauliknya, untuk memudahkan pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang tanah tersebut. Ciri-ciri air tanah dan kekonduksian hidraulik adalah dua komponen utama sifat hidraulik. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mencirikan sifat fizikokimia dan hidraulik tanah organik untuk mewujudkan hubungan antara mereka. Dua lokasi telah dipilih iaitu tapak Lumadan dan tapak Klias, tempat sampel tanah organik dikumpul di Beaufort, Sabah. Di tapak kajian, ujian lapangan seperti ujian von Post dan penyiasatan kedalaman tanah organik telah dijalankan. Skop kajian termasuk ujian sifat indeks dan kimia seperti ketumpatan semula jadi, kandungan lembapan, kandungan bahan organik, kandungan gentian serat, had cecair, graviti tentu, dan ujian pH; ujian sifat hidraulik seperti kebolehtelapan dan ciri pengekal air tanah; dan sifat pemadatan mekanikal. Ciri-ciri mikrostruktur dan komposisi kimia sampel juga ditentukan dalam kajian ini menggunakan ujian Mikroskop Elektron Pengimbasan (SEM) dan Spektroskopi X-ray Penyebaran Tenaga (EDX). Hasil daripada kajian ini, tanah organik Klias dan Lumadan dikelaskan sebagai hemik (berserabut pseudo), dengan skala von Post antara H6 hingga H7, menunjukkan tahap penguraian dalam julat pertengahan. Kedalaman tanah organik di tapak Lumadan ialah 4.5 m, manakala Klias pula 4.0 m. Kandungan lembapan, kandungan organik, kandungan gentian serat, graviti tentu, had cecair, dan keputusan keasidan menunjukkan bahawa sifat indeks tanah organik berbeza antara tapak Klias dan Lumadan. Komposisi kimia sampel tanah organik yang dikumpul di kedua-dua tapak kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa unsur-unsur yang ada dipengaruhi oleh jenis penanaman, paras air bawah tanah, dan keadaan iklim tempatan. Pemeriksaan mikrostruktur mendedahkan bahawa sampel tanah organik menunjukkan sedikit variasi dalam ciri-cirinya. Sampel Klias terdiri daripada gentian serat dan kelihatan seperti berkayu dan berliang, manakala sampel Lumadan terdiri daripada berbutir berkeping-keping. Bagi sifat hidraulik pula, purata pekali kebolehtelapan bagi sampel Lumadan dan Klias ialah masing-masing 9.89×10^{-6} m/s dan 9.11×10^{-6} m/s menunjukkan tahap kebolehtelapan yang rendah. Empat model telah digunakan untuk menerangkan lengkung ciri air tanah. Berdasarkan analisis pemasangan, model Brooks dan Corey dan Fredlund dan Xing didapati merupakan model yang paling sesuai digunakan untuk mewakili keluk pengekal air tanah bagi tanah organik di Beaufort, Sabah dengan pekali linearity (R^2) iaitu antara 0.9368 hingga 0.9978. Tanah organik menunjukkan kapasiti penyimpanan air yang tinggi walaupun dikenakan tekanan yang besar seperti 1500 kPa, tanah masih boleh menyimpan air pada kadar 0.5 hingga 0.6 kandungan air isi padu sisa. Parameter hidraulik diubah dengan ketara oleh penguraian tanah organik. Sebagai kesimpulan kepada kajian ini, degradasi tanah yang disebabkan oleh saluran tanah dengan ketara mengubah sifat fizikal dan hidraulik tanah organik.

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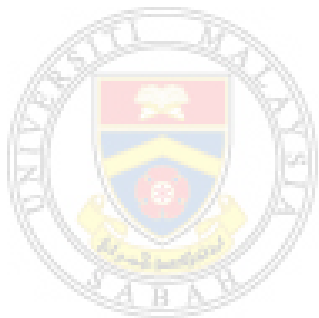
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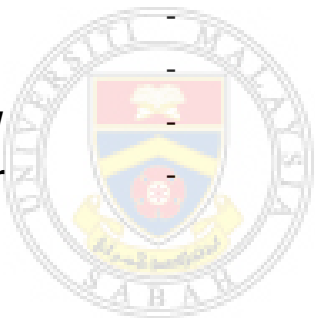
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LIST OF SYMBOLS

| | | |
|-------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| $>$ | - | Greater Than |
| $<$ | - | Less Than |
| \geq | - | Greater Than or Equal to |
| % | - | Percentage |
| θ | - | Volumetric Water Content |
| θ_w | - | Volumetric Water Content |
| θ_v | - | Residual Water Content |
| θ_i | - | Measured Volumetric Water Content |
| θ'_i | - | Modeled Volumetric Water Content |
| θ_r | - | Residual Volumetric Water Content |
| θ_s | - | Saturated Volumetric Water Content |
| e | - | Void Ratio |
| $^\circ$ | - | Degree Sign |
| ψ | - | Soil Suction |
| σ | - | Width of the Pore Radius Distribution |
| ρ | - | Bulk Density |
| ϕ | - | Angle of Internal Friction |
| λ | - | Pore Size Index |
| ρ_w | - | Density of Water |
| w | - | Moisture Content |
| w_i | - | Weighting Aspect |
| u_a | - | Matric Suction |
| D_{10} | - | Sieve Size for 10% Passing |
| D_{50} | - | Sieve Size for 50% Passing |
| a | - | Fitting Parameters of SWCC |
| A | - | Permeameter Cross-Section |
| Al | - | Aluminium |
| Al^{3+} | - | Aluminium Ion |
| Au | - | Augite |
| c | - | Cohesion |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| C | - | Carbon |
| Ca | - | Calcium |
| Ca²⁺ | - | Calcium Ion |
| Cl | - | Chlorine |
| D | - | Soil Water Diffusivity |
| Fe | - | Iron |
| FeS₂ | - | Pyrite |
| <i>fit</i> | - | Fitted values |
| h_b | - | Air Entry Value of the Soil |
| h_j | - | Measured Heads at Measuring Tips 1 and 2 |
| h_m | - | Capillary Pressure Head |
| Hg | - | Mercury |
| <i>i</i> | - | Numbers; 1, 2, 3, ... |
| <i>j</i> | - | Parameter vector |
| K | - | Potassium |
| K⁺ | - | Potassium Ion |
| K | - | Soil Hydraulic Conductivity Function |
| K | - | Number of Estimable Parameters (Degrees of Freedom) |
| k_h | - | Coefficient of Horizontal Permeability |
| k_v | - | Coefficient of Vertical Permeability |
| kr | - | Relative Permeability |
| K(ψ) | - | Unsaturated Hydraulic Conductivity Function |
| K_s | - | Saturated Hydraulic Conductivity |
| L | - | Distance between the Two Piezometer Measuring Tips |
| m | - | Fitting Parameters of SWCC |
| Mg | - | Magnesium |
| Mg³⁺ | - | Magnesium Ion |
| MW | - | Pore Water Pressure |
| n | - | Porosity |
| n | - | Fitting Parameter of SWCC |
| N | - | Nitrogen |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| <i>N</i> | - | Number of soil-water characteristic data values |
| Na | - | Sodium |
| Na⁺ | - | Sodium Ion |
| NH⁴⁺ | - | Ammonium Ion |
| O | - | Oxygen |
| <i>obs</i> | - | Observed values |
| P | - | Phosphorus |
| Pf | - | Decimal Log of Tension |
| Q | - | Flow Rate |
| Rb | - | Rubidium |
| S | - | Saturation Level as Fraction |
| S | - | Degree of Saturation |
| <i>S_e</i> | - | Effective Saturation |
| <i>S_r</i> | - | Saturation |
| Si | - | Silicone |
| Ti | - | Titanium |
| W | - | Tungsten |
| Zr | - | Zirconium |



UMS
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | | |
|------------------|---|---|
| AASHTO | - | American Association of State and Highway Transportation Officials |
| AEV | - | Air Entry Value |
| AI | - | Artificial Intelligence |
| AIC | - | Akaike Information Criterion |
| ASTM | - | American Society for Testing and Materials |
| BC | - | Brooks and Corey |
| BS | - | British Standard |
| BSE | - | Backscattered-Electron |
| BS EN ISO | - | British Standard European Norm International Organization for Standardization |
| CBR | - | California Bearing Ratio |
| CEC | - | Cation Exchange Capacity |
| CREAM | - | Construction Research Institute of Malaysia |
| CU | - | Consolidated Undrained |
| EDX | - | Energy-Dispersive X-Ray Spectroscopy |
| EVAC | - | Evacuated |
| FAA | - | Federal Aviation Administration |
| FC | - | Fibre Content |
| FX | - | Fredlund and Xing |
| GBNN | - | Genetic Based Neural Network |
| GHG | - | Greenhouse Gas |
| GP | - | Genetic Programming |
| Gs | - | Specific Gravity |
| HCl | - | Hydrochloric Acid |
| KEP | - | Kampung Endap, Kota Samarahan |
| KFR | - | Klias Forest Reserve |
| KHFR | - | Kampung Hindian Forest Reserve |
| LL | - | Liquid Limit |
| LOI | - | Loss on Ignition |

| | | |
|----------------------|---|--|
| MARDI | - | Malaysian Agriculture Research and Development Institute |
| MC | - | Moisture Content |
| MDD | - | Maximum Dry Density |
| MMT | - | Montmorillonite |
| M1, M2 | - | Matang areas 1 and 2, Sarawak |
| OC | - | Organic Content |
| OMC | - | Optimum Moisture Content |
| PNFR | - | Pulau Nabahan Forest Reserve |
| PNpt | - | Parit Nipah in Batu Pahat, Johor |
| R² | - | Coefficient of Determination, R-squared |
| SEM | - | Scanning Electron Micrographs |
| SOC | - | Soil Organic Carbon |
| SWCC | - | Soil Water Characteristics Curve |
| SWRC | - | Soil Water Retention Curve |
| UCS | - | Unconfined Compressive Strength |
| UNDP | - | United Nations Development Programme |
| UPVC | - | Unplasticized Polyvinyl Chloride |
| USDA | - | United States Department of Agriculture |
| USCS | - | Unified Soil Classification System |
| UTHM | - | Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia |
| VG | - | van Genuchten |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Peatland is a massive terrestrial ecosystem that contains huge amounts of carbon (C). Peatlands cover only 3% of the world's land area, which is 4,000,000 km², storing 550 gigatons of carbon in peat (Parish *et al.*, 2008). According to the Malaysian Department of Environment and the Ministry of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment, and Climate Change (Peatland Fire Prevention Programme to Mitigate Haze in Malaysia, 2019), peat soils cover approximately 2.56 million ha (roughly 7.74 percent) of Malaysia's total land area.

In Malaysia, agriculture and oil palm plantations account for more than 60% of the total peatland area (Miettinen *et al.*, 2016). Sarawak has the most peat soils in Malaysia, accounting for 64.27 percent of total peatland area, with 1,645,585 hectares, followed by Peninsular Malaysia (714,156 ha, or 27.89 percent), and Sabah (200,600 ha, or 7.83 percent). Only 18 percent of peat soil remains beneath peat swamp forest in Sabah, despite more than 70 percent canopy cover. The peat soil in Malaysia is depicted in Figure 1.1.

Tropical peats that are water-saturated and largely degraded with organic material are typically found at lower elevations. Peat soil is an organic soil with a higher value of organic content generally more than 75% (Moayed and Mosallanezhad, 2017). In addition, peat soil in Malaysia has a water content ranging from 250% to 985.40% (Adnan Zainorabidin and Habib Musa Mohamad, 2017a). Due to its high moisture content, high compressibility, and low shear

strength values ranging from 5 to 20 kPa, peat is a deliberately inappropriate soil for sustaining foundations in its natural form.

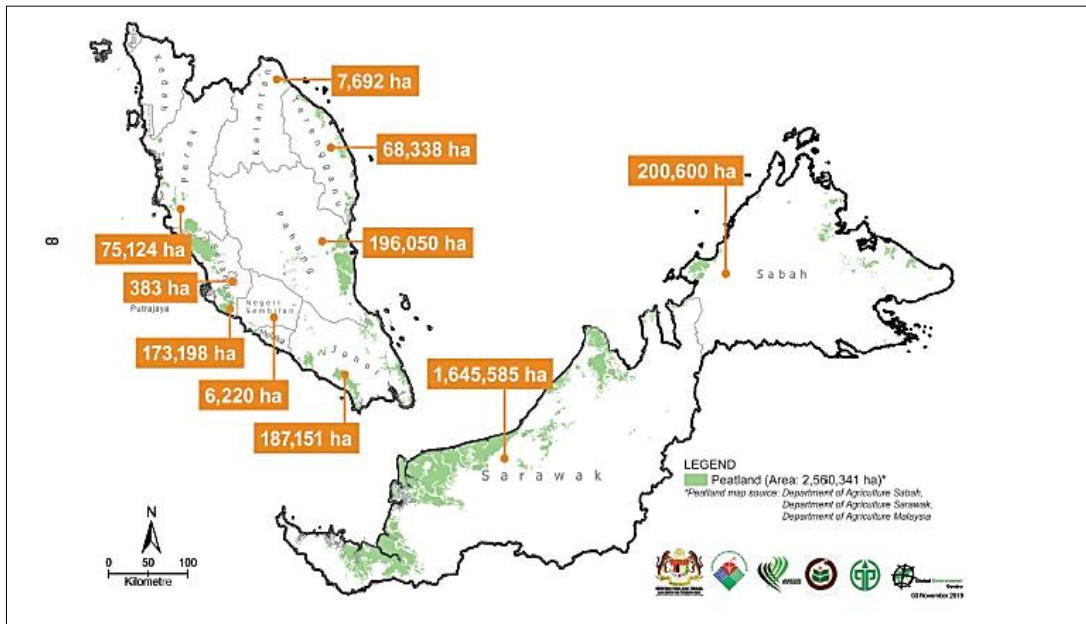


Figure 1.1 : Distribution of peatland in Malaysia

Source : Peatland Fire Prevention Programme to Mitigate Haze in Malaysia (2019)

According to Rahgozar and Saberian (2016), peat soil has high permeability, porosity ratio, compressibility, and consolidation settling while having low pH, bulk density, bearing capacity, shear strength, and plasticity. Peat has a unique property in that the pore produced when it accumulates with fibrous materials allows water to resist and remain in the particles, resulting in high water content. Sina Kazemian *et al.* (2011a) discovered that the in-situ void ratio of fibrous peats is relatively high because very compressible and bending hollow cellular fibres generate an open, entangled network of particles and the high initial water content.

Soil hydraulic properties include soil moisture retention and hydraulic conductivity (coefficient of permeability). Under equilibrium conditions, the soil water characteristics curve (SWCC) or water retention curve, defines the functional interactions between soil water content (w , θ_w , S_r) and matric potential. It is one of the essential characteristics of unsaturated soils that has been discovered to change with matrix suction and investigate soil water storage. The soil-water