

The Weeping Cradle Kelantan's Diminishing Arts

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Abstract

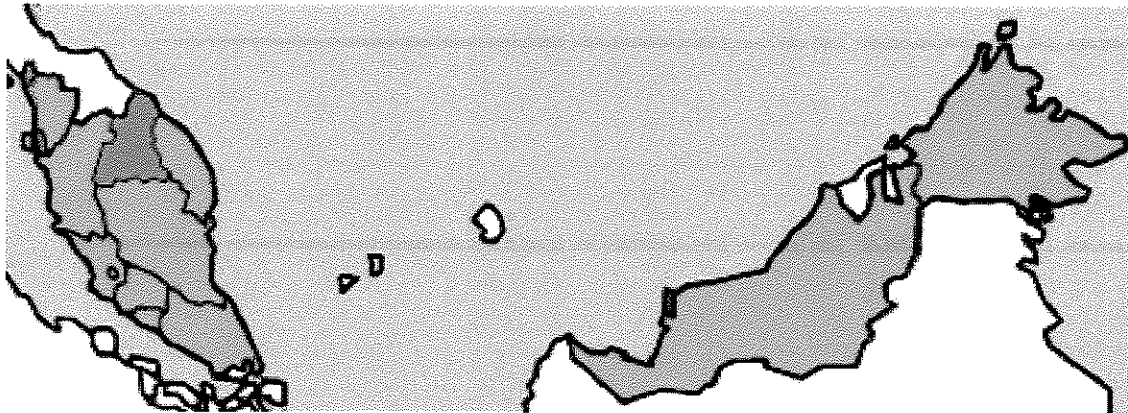
The state of Kelantan is situated on the North-eastern region of Malaysia and is popularly known as the 'cradle of Malay culture'. UNESCO has recognized one of Kelantan's most famous art forms, Mak Yong, an ancient dance drama, as a "masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity" in 2004. Its traditional kite, the Wau Bulan or moon kite, is highly acclaimed internationally as one of the worlds most beautiful. Kelantan is also known for its wood carvings, hand-painted batik and jewellery designs. However, some of these tangible and intangible heritages are fast becoming extinct due to a number of factors, notably political and economic. As a newly established university, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) has been entrusted to oversee some of these issues and efforts are being made to seek assistance in terms of experts and grants. This paper shall discuss issues pertaining to the subject matter and any comments recommendations are most welcomed.

Introduction

For the past two thousand years, Malay performing arts went through numerous stages in its evolution, shaped by an amalgamation of various influences, both internally and externally. It is largely influenced by Malay-Polynesian belief systems with a strong animistic base. Malay performing arts is further influenced or as described by Ghulam-Sarwar (2004), "coloured with influences from religions and cultures which entered the Malay Peninsular from Asia and the Middle East at various times from about the 1st century CE" (pp. 12). The earliest forms of Malay music, dance and theatre such as *Bagih* and *Main Puteri* developed out of the indigenous healing rituals, still maintained today by the Orang Asli or indigenous people, such as the Temiar (see Roseman, 1991). Even among the Malays in Kelantan, there are still trails of such practices being carried these days particularly for healing purposes. New forms of performing arts emerged as a result of religious and cultural influences from the Indian sub-continent and other parts of the Malay Archipelago. Middle Eastern influences are evident in a number of Malay art forms such as the *zapin* dance of Johor and the use of instruments such as the *gambus* or *'oud*. More recent influences came from Indonesia in the form of *Gamelan*, *Barongan*, *Kuda Kepang* and *Randai*. Kelantan indigenous customs and performing arts are not spared of those influences.

Kelantan is one of the most homogeneous Malay states in the Malaysia. It has long been proud of its indigenous art forms such as Dikir Barat, Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong,

Menora, Main Puteri, Wau Bulan (kite-flying), Gasing (top-spinning), Silat, bird-singing activity and handicrafts.



The light coloured green is the state of Kelantan

"The most rustic of East Coast Region of Malaysia, Kelantan truly lives up to its name as the "Cradle of Malay Culture". The state's landscape is a charming blend of quaint villages, small towns and reveries settlements. Amidst the house built on stilts and covered with thatched roofs, one can revel in the time-honoured Malay heritage and culture. Due to its historical background, you can find a mixture of Thai, Chinese, Indian and Malay in the population." <http://www.malaysiavacationsnet.com/kelantan/kelantan.php>

There are many forms of Malaysian heritage that are believed to be originated from Kelantan which are later recognized as the Malay heritage; Mak Yong, Rebana Ubi and Wau are among others.

There are also evidences that some of its culture, handicraft and their well-preserved custom are still in practice today. On the contrary there are also traces that some is also diminishing.

"The people of Kelantan, peace loving and friendly by nature, are rich in tradition and have such exciting pastimes as kite flying, top spinning, shadow play theatres and bird singing competitions, to name a few of the more popular sports, Due to its closeness to Thailand and having been Thai domination intermittently unit 1909, a lot of Thai influence can be seen in the customs and traditions." <http://www.malaysiavacationsnet.com/kelantan/kelantan.php>

Arts flourish where wealth accumulates and culture is rich with multiple influences of values and customs. Thus Kelantan fits into these attributes. Therefore Kelantan is said to be the cradle of culture.

Performing Arts

Dikir Barat.

The authentic Kelantan performing art, which is *Dikir Barat* a dominant traditional song is still being practice and gaining popularity and recognized nationally. It is performed in a group with two leading singers A dikir barat group, which may be of any size, is led by a tukang karut who makes up poems and sings them as he goes along. The chorus echoes in response, verse by verse. Dikir barat groups usually perform during various festive occasions, and their poems are usually light entertainment and may be about any topic, but are not religious in nature. The chorus traditionally consists of all men, but modern groups, especially those performing on television, often include women. Traditionally, no musical instruments are used, the singing being accompanied instead by rhythmic clapping and energetic body movements. Some groups however do use a pair of frame drums or rebana, a shallow gong and a pair of maracas, for accompaniment.

In a typical dikir barat performance, the group will perform in two segments. The first is led by the tok juara, who is often the person in charge of the musical training of the group. This first segment usually contains the more complex musical arrangements, and will likely feature the awok-awok singing in unison with the tok juara, as well as responsorial segments of singing, similar to what the tukang karut does with the awok-awok, later in the performance. Though musically more complex than what will follow, the first segment is seen as the "low-key" segment of the performance.

The creative leader of a dikir barat group is the tukang karut. The tukang karut is usually a former tok juara who was promoted for his talent in creating spontaneous lyrics, for his ability to do this that establishes the reputation of the dikir barat group. Leading the awok-awok (chorus) during the second and concluding segment of the performance, the tukang karut sings pantun—most of which are likely original and improvised on the occasion of the performance, but some which may be known to the audience. (Pantun are an oral poetry form indigenous to the Malay region and are not exclusive to the dikir barat.) That the dikir barat uses pantun does not mean that it is a performance of poetry. The tukang karut is expected to compose lyrics that touch upon life, like any poet, but he can also address social issues, legal matters, animal lifestyles, government regulations and human foibles. The tone can be satirical, sarcastic, or simply humorous, but above all it is expected that it be clever. The tukang karut makes up and sings lyrics on the topic of the performance (which may be pre-established or simply the choice of the tukang karut), and the awok-awok sings the same lyrics back to him. During the performance, members of the awok-awok clap and perform rhythmic body movements, which bring energy to the performance.

Organized annual competitions by the government are evident of people acceptance of the *Dikir Barat*. Recorded version in CDs can be found in the market particularly in

Kelantan. More so the performance is not contrary to the teaching of Islam and in-fact it can be used as a means to propagate the teaching of Islam. Dikir Barat is believed to be the peoples past time activity and not the royal court performing arts.



Dikir Barat performers.

Mak Yong.

The Mak Yong is used to be the royal court performing arts during the sultanate time of yesteryears. This dance drama is performed mainly by women troupes, accompanied by all male musicians who play the rebab, serunai, gongs and elongated barrel drums. (Zakaria Ariffin, 1990). The ancient dance drama of Mak Yong is believed to have the Thai influence and can also be found both in Indonesia and Thailand. So is Manora which has a strong linkages with the Thailand. Predominantly only Kelantan dominates among other states in trying to sustain the activity. However the art and act of dancing in Mak Yong is contrary to the belief of Islam. "A ritual Mak Yong performance is more elaborate than that staged for entertainment, combining shamanism, feasting the spirits and dance theatre. It reflects the deep, mystical significance of Mak Yong's stories and dances, and its original aim to serve as a conduit to the spirit world. Ritual performances are enacted for spiritual healing, to pay homage to a teacher and for the graduation of a performer".

http://anjung.com.my/kelate_attraction_culture.php.

Naturally with the recent resurgence of Islam the state government of Kelantan discourages this particular ancient art drama. However the federal government managed to

put Mak Yong as “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” by UNESCO in 2004.

Menora.

Manora is another dance drama form. It is of Thai origin and is practised mainly in the Malaysian states bordering Thailand: Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis. It is also known as *Nora* or *Lakon Chatri* and is performed as entertainment, in conjunction with religious rituals and on Buddhist holidays, especially Wesak Day. Instruments used include a pair of hand cymbals, a pair of small knobbed gongs, a pair of wooden sticks, a barrel-shaped double-headed drum, a reed instrument and a single headed vase-shaped drum. (Tan1988). Like wise Mak Yong, Menora is more obvious contrary to the belief of Islam. Therefore the public performance is banned in Kelantan.

Main Puteri. (Main teri)

A traditional theatre often performs for healing sick patient. It has the performance rituals. Although the performance is meant for healing ritualistically, it also include comedy element intermittently as an interlude. The group comprises Tok Bomoh, Tok Mindok and musical team. It is perform in the evening and often goes beyond midnight. The stage setup is casual and usually any covered space is sufficient as long as there is space for everybody including audience. During the performance Tok Bomoh and Tok Mindok usually goes into trance occasionally and behaves according to the spirit that occupies the body.

Main Puteri is considered social leveller and watcher. Therefore it is a valid reason why it has to be sustained as long as it conforms to the teaching of Islam. There used to have several groups that practices main puteri. However members of the group usually are old people and there is no succession of young people his/her show interest in it. Naturally it shall fades off over times.

Tari Inai.

Another type of dance, also known as *tari inai*, is performed at weddings ceremonies, but using a different ensemble (1 serunai, 2 gendang, 2 canang, 2 tetawak and kesi). The dance tends to feature acrobatic-like stunts such as the dancer bending backwards to pick up paper money (usually RM10 bills) with his mouth. (Pat Matusky, 1997)

Past Time Traditional Game

Among the predominant traditional game that can be found in Kelantan are as follows:-

Kite flying Way Bulan (Moon-Kite)

Wau bulan is an intricately designed Malaysian moon-kite (normally with floral motifs) that is traditionally flown by men in the Malaysian state of Kelantan. It's one of Malaysia's national

symbols, along some others being the kris and hibiscus. The logo of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) is based on this kite. There are many type of wau in Malaysia. Each with its own specialty. Wau kucing(cat kite) and wau merak(peacock kite) are some of them.

Unique to the east coast state of Kelantan, these was or giant flying kites are often as big as a man, measuring about 3.5 meters from head to tail. It is the largest kite around and is capable of soaring to great heights. Not surprisingly, kite-flying here is a sport for men, as some kites require at least two grown up men to handle. Most of the patterns are based on local flora and fauna like birds, animals and flowers.

It is usually fitted with a stringed bow, which emits a soft, wailing sound when flown. Each kite is lavishly pasted with colourful designs and a work of art in it its own right. Kites are flown throughout the year but especially after the full moon harvest.

Indeed, so remarkable is the Wau Bulan that the national carrier, the Malaysian Airline System, has chosen it as its logo, symbolizing controlled flight. However this is not a dying activity. Annual kite flying activity organized by the respective authority is done annually at national and international level and it is in organized series in a rotational venues at various states in Malaysia.

Gasing (top-spinning)

"The "Gasing" is a traditional game and it is a favourite pastime among the East Coast Malays, especially those in the Kelantan State.

The "gasing" or top is about the size of a dinner plate and may weigh up to 5.5 kg! Spinning one is hardly child's play, as it requires great dexterity and precise timing. After it is launched, the gasing is quickly scooped off the ground with a thin wooden bat and transferred onto a metal receptacle on a short wooden post. An expert top-spinner can make a perfectly balanced gasing spin for as long as two hours at a stretch, although, according to local belief, a top will spin for 24 hours or more if a spirit enters it!

The making of a good top begins with the selection of fine piece of hard wood. In Kelantan and Terengganu, a few species are normally used. Even then, only the base and upper roots or the portion where a branch joins the trunk are acceptable.

The wood takes a few weeks to dry naturally. It is then shaped into a discus. For metal top, the edge has to accurately groove in order to have a good grip of the metal rim. A good top requires perfect symmetry, which is an important attribute to longer spinning time. From start

to finish, a good giant metallic top might need four to six weeks to complete. “

http://anjung.com.my/kelate_attraction_culture.php

Bird Singing Activities.

The popular traditional past time hobby among the Kelantan male folks is bird singing enthusiast. There are several bird species popular among the enthusiast; namely burung Merbuk or Ketitir which is locally known, burung Candik, burung Tekukur Jawa to name among the few. The birds are kept for the tweeting melody and often the enthusiast organize the singing competition. This activity is still active but traces of getting lesser active have shown evident. Birds with a good voice and melody can fetch a good price. The birdcage is also another craft worth preserving because of intricate crafts and design that can be found on it. The design varies according to species of birds that goes in it.

Rebana Ubi.

Rebana Ubi is a drum instrument played by the people and is commonly found in Kelantan. This type of rebana is the only rebana with a decorative pattern on the body and the face and the size is relatively big, seventy centimetre in diameter and one meter high. The sound of Rebana often accompanies Islamic ritual such as the zikir. The name Rebana came from the Arabic word Robbana meaning "our God".

From Wikipedia

In the early days Rebana is used for a distance communication purposes. Normally Rebana is placed on the hill side and play with a different kind of tempo and rhythm for the different requirement and purposes ranging from marriage declaration and hazard warning. Today Rebana is only played for ceremonial occasions besides for past time activity in villages.

Kertuk.

Kertuk is another drum instrument played by a group of people in the village as a past time hobby in the early days. Today kertuk is played during festivals and ceremonial events. It is believed Kertuk can only be found in Kelantan. There are two types of Kertuk, one is made of coconut husk and the bigger ones is made of wood. It is played by a group of ranging from six to twelve people. Kertuk is also considered as a means of communication in yesteryears, informing events and it also played as a means of expressing gratitude's of achieving good harvest. Today Kertuk is only played during official ceremonies and it is getting less popular. This drum instrument is found only in Kelantan. Therefore its geographical significant is worth considering for conservation.

Traditional Kelantanese Customs and Casual Ware

There are several customs worth sustaining due to its vast contribution to the well being of Kelantanese culture that has good values and identity. Kelantan dialect among others reflects the politeness of the Kelantan people especially in dealing with attending guest. The strong identity in terms of traditional costume is *Semutar* the head gear. The *Semutar* a head gear for the village man is very much vernacular in nature. The same material for *semutar* is also used by the woman folk as a head covering tudung. This is commonly found in the market place where the business are commonly done by the ladies .

Traditional Crafts

Silverware

Silverware found in Kelantan is noted for intricate design and workmanship. The surface design found on items are mainly floral motif that depicts the Kelantan identity of silversmith. The silver craft industry can be considered as the authentic Kelantan heritage because no evidence found elsewhere in the Malay states that produce silver craft. The industry flourished in the early fifties and is dying of as demands for the craft is diminishing. Efforts have been made to sustain the industry by the government but no trace of recovery noted.

Brassware

The brassware used to be one of the cottage industries flourished in the fifties. The products are mainly cooking utensils and ceremonial items. The brassware is not noted for its craftsmanship because casting technique is used for production. However the form and certain details and decorations on the products have the indigenous identity of a place.

Batik.

Batik is used to be the Kelantan predominated cottage industry in the early years. However the industry spreads elsewhere particularly in the Peninsular Malaysia. The notable ones is Batik Merbok in Kedah that trademarks geographical identity.

The industry develops over the years with several attempts to create the contemporary design and methods of productions. Kelantan batik has the evidence on design that depicts local identity and even can be classified as classical motif of Kelantan origin. Efforts to identify and sustain the batik motif and techniques that belong to Kelantan has to be intensified before they diminishes over time.

Bamboo Products

Bamboo based products found in Kelantan are mainly functional ones and cannot be considered as craft except a few. Birdcage is the example where the intricate craftsmanship is found and it is made with full attention to details. There are few selective items that reflect Kelantan identity worth preserving.

Woodcarving

Wood carving industry is still surviving through the ages even though there are traces of loosing its popularity is evident. However wood carving products ranging from furniture to building components can still be found and are still in demand. This is due to the increase interest in woodcraft especially among art and craft collectors and building components. Motifs used in woodcarving and the quality of workmanship is among reasons they gain popularity. The notable one is *Kris* a traditional dagger that usually comes with good quality carvings on the Kris hilt and its casing or *sarong*. Although Kris can be found all over the Malay Archipelago, Kelantan Kris has its own identity in terms of carvings, design and material used.

Architecture

Kelantan is among the states that has a strong building typology ranging from the Sultan palace, domestic buildings and public buildings. In the early seventies the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia has started efforts to record and document the traditional buildings all over the Peninsular Malaysia particularly domestic timber buildings and the state of Kelantan is not spared. Space configuration and hierarchy found in buildings is defined by traditional custom. Forms and details found in buildings have a strong indigenous identity. These physical attributes are the basis for identifying their locality. Unfortunately almost all traditional building types made of timber cannot be found these days and only documented evidence is available. Efforts have to be made to reconstruct these buildings as a study model besides enriching and preserving the vernacular architecture of Kelantan.

Social and Economic Change

Due to economic stagnation in Kelantan during the 1970s, youths began to migrate out of the state to seek better opportunities. The uncertainties of the local economy drive the Kelantanese to other parts of Malaysia, thus naturally neglecting the importance of sustaining good value heritage. Coupled with a better understanding of Islamic teachings, certain traditional customs have been discarded in daily activities or ceremonies. The notable one is the absent of live musical performance during the wedding celebrations. Traditionally invitation to the wedding ceremony is to collect monitory presents from the invited guests. This practice is sometime burdensome to some people. Thus wedding ceremony feast has been changed to a free feast in memory of the late family members and the guest is not obliged to bring present although some still do.

Kelantan is not spared from the main stream of urbanization and modernization in holistic manner. Coupled with easy access to knowledge globally through internet, influences from the global trend is unavoidable. Together with the influx of imported consumer products somehow change the consumer perspective and values over the local products. However taking from a positive standpoint the globalized market through electronic means open up opportunities to the market of the world. The crafted hand made one-off products can now reach to the world collectors. This naturally leads to the increase demand through the global market exposure. Thus with extended market the crafted products are possible to sustain and generate the economy.

Questions often asked whether is it a worthwhile effort and feasible economically to sustain these heritage products and value. Are they relevant to the present and future generation?

Issues and Challenges

'The federal government has passed The National Heritage Act 2005. It is an Act to provide for the conservation and preservation of National Heritage, natural heritage, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, underwater cultural heritage, and treasure trove and for related matters. It received Royal Assent on 30 December 2005 and was published in the Gazette on 31 December 2005. The National Heritage Act 2005 came into effect on 1 March 2006.'

<http://www.hbp.usm.my/conservation/MainConservation.htm>

Lack of sensitivities towards heritage values among the local public and less attention given by the local government are among the reasons that there are no experts can be found in this area. Only the enthusiasts take the lead to address this issue.

A common trend that is happening to the local heritage is the interest to sustain and practice is dying. People tend to regard old tradition and values have no economic benefit, therefore the concern and care towards the extinction of this valuable national asset is dying.

Another issue is the financial support to carry out activities especially traditional performances is not encouraging. Although allocations from the government to the respective organizations are available, somehow it is still insufficient. Therefore supports have to come from non-governmental bodies (NGOs) and incentive from the government has to be in placed to encourage participation.

Social awareness on the importance of sustaining heritage is not obvious. The public tends to see it as a non-profitable activity. Therefore the interest shown towards it is negligible.

Conclusion

- In order to address these issues, a concerted effort to draft a strategic action plan has to put in place. Prior to this, series of meetings in form of symposium, workshop,

conference or discourse have to be organized. Participation has to come from those who are concern about the issues, particularly intellectuals from NGQs and government bodies and universities.

- A continuous effort to do research has to be carried out by Universities. Allocation of grants from various sources has to be made readily available.
- Create awareness amongst young talents has to be a major agenda to the government.
- Organize activities by means of workshop, competitions, public talk and heritage expeditions for the young ones are among others.

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