

The Kelantan Traditional Arts as Indicators for Sustainability: An Introduction to its Genius Loci

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Abstract

The genius of a place (genius loci) is known as the presiding deity or spirit; therefore, every place has its own unique physical (tangible) and perceived (intangible) qualities. Kelantan state situated at the North East region of Malaysia is regarded as a “cultural pot of Malay culture.” The tangible and intangible heritage of Kelantan is not only known for uniqueness, but also the realistic traditional concept of art in Malay. Many forms of Malaysian heritage are believed to be originated from Kelantan; although they are later recognized as the Malay heritage, however, the uniqueness in Kelantan art makes it a masterpiece concept which cannot be found elsewhere in Malaysia. Among others are; the intricately designed moon-kite known as *Wau Bulan*, *Rebana Ubi* and *Kertuk* drum, the bird singing activities and *Mak Yong* art drama named by UNESCO in 2004 as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity. Thus, this paper seeks to highlight and illuminate on the Kelantan traditional arts. The paper also elaborates on the intrinsic values behind these unique heritages; analyzed the current issues and challenges and conclusively proposed how these issues can be addressed. These will guide on how the heritage values can be enhanced and sustained as genius loci.

Keywords: Arts; Culture; Kelantan traditional arts; Heritage; Genius loci

JEL classification numbers: Z10

1.0 Introduction

Art is a diverse range of human activities and the product of those activities include performing arts (poetry, dancing, sing, etc), crafts (painting, sculpture, pottery, woodcarving, etc). Art in Malay culture traditionally existed alongside with the invention of utility items. The traditional Malay arts has been known to be a reflection of splendour and beauty of the aesthetic elements or ornamentation adorning them that carry deeper philosophical and sacred meanings. In Kelantan community, arts are not merely objects of beauty but also serve as means of creating an environment of peace and tranquillity. Kelantan state situated at the North East region of Malaysia is regarded as a “cultural pot of Malay culture”. 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.

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 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.

The people of Kelantan, peace loving and friendly by nature, are rich in tradition and have such exciting pastimes activities such 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 their customs and traditions (Malaysia Vacations Net, 2012). However, arts flourish where wealth accumulates and culture is rich with multiple influences of values and customs; thus, the most rustic of East Coast Region of Malaysia, Kelantan truly fits into these attributes and therefore said to be the "Cradle of Malay Culture.”

2.0 Performing Arts

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, pp12), “coloured with influences from religions and cultures which entered the Malay Peninsula from Asia and the Middle East at various times from about the 1st century CE.” 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 (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. Some of their well-preserved custom and performing arts that are still in practice today includes; *Dikir Barat*, *Mak Yong*, *Menora*, *Main Peteri*. (*Main teri*), *Tari Inai*.

2.1 *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. According to Malm (1974), *dikir barat* is a style of call and response singing originating in Kelantan. Although there is no actual set size, but is typically performed by groups of ten to fifteen members (Patricia, 2003). It is performed in a group with two leading singers in competitive environments. A group usually sits cross-legged on a platform, sometimes surrounded by the audience. Where the *dikir barat* is performed competitively, the two competing groups will both be on the stage at the same time (Patricia, 2003).

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 (Aziz & Wan, 1994). 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*. However, *Dikir barat* using *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 (Zaharan, 2008). 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 (Zaharan, 2008).

The annual competitions organized by the government are evident of people acceptance of the *Dikir Barat* (Fig. 1). 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.



Figure 1: *Dikir Barat* performers.

2.2 *Mak Yong*

The *Mak Yong* is a traditional form of dance-drama from northern Malaysia, particularly the state of Kelantan. It is used to be the royal court performing arts during the sultanate time of yesteryears. This dance drama is performed mainly by women troupes (Fig. 2), accompanied by all male musicians who play the rebab, serunai, gongs and elongated barrel drums (Zakaria, 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 linkage 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* 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 (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2004).

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 2005.



Figure 2: *Mak Yong* dance drama

2.3 *Menora*

Menora is another dance drama form originally from Thailand and is practised mainly in the Malaysian states bordering Thailand such as 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 (Tan, 1988). The basic features of the performance include a lengthy invocation, a dance by the main character, and a play or skit. The invocation is enacted by slow rhythmic movements of legs, arms and fingers (Terry & Sean, 2008). 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 (Tan, 1988). Likewise *Mak Yong*, *Menora* is more obvious contrary to the belief of Islam. Therefore the public performance is banned in Kelantan.

2.4 *Main Peteri (Main teri)*

Main Peteri is a traditional theatre often performs for healing sick patient (Fig. 3). 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 Peteri is considered social leveller and watcher, and there are several groups that practice *Main peteri*. However members of the group usually are old people and there is no succession of young people that shows interest in it.



Figure 3: Main Petri (A traditional healing musical dance)

2.5 *Tari Inai*

Tari Inai is another type of traditional dance. It 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, 1997)

3.0 Past Time Traditional Game

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

3.1 *Kite flying Wau Bulan (Moon-Kite)*

Wau Bulan is an intricately designed Malaysian moon-kite (Fig.4). It is normally decorated with floral motifs and 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* (kite) in Malaysia, each with its own speciality; *Wau kucing* (cat kite) and *Wau Merak* (peacock kite) are some of them. However, *Wau Bulan* is unique to the east coast state of Kelantan and the 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. 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. Annually in Kelantan, kite flying activity is organized by the respective authority at national and international level.



Figure 4: Image of *wau bulan*

3.2 *Gasing* (top-spinning)

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



Figure 5: Image of *Gasing*

3.3 *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; among them are *burung Merbuk or Ketitir*, locally they are known as *burung Candik*, *burung Tekukur Jawa* respectively. The birds are kept for the tweeting melody and often the enthusiast organizes the singing competition where birds with a good voice and melody can fetch a good price. This activity is still active in Kelantan. The birdcage is also another craft worth preserving because of intricate crafts and design that can be found on it (Fig. 6). The design varies according to species of birds that goes in it.



Figure 6: Bird Cages and bird singing competition

3.4 *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 centimetres (70cm) in diameter and one meter high (Fig. 7). The sound of *Rebana* often accompanies Islamic ritual such as the *zikir*. The name *Rebana* came from the Arabic word *Robbana* meaning "our God". 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.



Figure 7: Image of people playing *rebana*

3.5 *Kertuk*.

Kertuk is another drum instrument played by a group of people in the village as a past time hobby in the early days (Fig. 8). Today *Kertuk* is played during festivals and ceremonial events. It is believed *Kertuk* can only be found in Kelantan. However, there are two types of *Kertuk*, one is made of coconut husk and the bigger ones are made of wood. It is played by a group of people 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.



Figure 8: *Kertuk* a traditional musical instrument

4.0 Kelantan Traditional Customs

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. It is customary for the Kelantan people to be hospitable as possible. This is in conformity to the teaching of Islam. The strong identity in terms of traditional costume is *Semutar* (headgear) (Fig. 9). 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 ladies commonly do the business.



Figure 9: A Kelantanese wearing the headgears (*Semutar*)

5.0 Kelantan Traditional Crafts

5.1 Silverware

Silverware found in Kelantan is noted for intricate design and workmanship. The surface design found on items is 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.

5.2 *Brassware*

The brassware is one of the cottage industries that flourished in the fifties. The products are mainly cooking utensils and ceremonial items (Fig. 10). 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.



Figure 10: Brass ware

5.3 *Batik.*

Batik is one of Kelantan predominant 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.

5.4 *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.

5.5 *Woodcarvings*

Wood carving industry is still surviving through the ages; therefore, 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 are among reasons

they gain popularity. The notable one is Kris (Fig. 11), 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.



Figure 11: Image of Kris

5.6 Architecture

Kelantan is among the states that have 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. Among others is the *Pemeleh and Tebar Layar* design in Kelantan traditional architecture (Fig. 12). *Tebar layar* is a Malay word for gable roof design used in Kelantan traditional architecture while *pemeleh* is a pair of timber pieces located on two fascia ends of the gable roof (*tebar layar*). Rashid & Amat (2008) described *pemeleh* as a shape slightly curving and sharpens towards the top as a sign of strength in the design language of houses in Kelantan.



Figure 12: Vernacular Architecture found in Kelantan

6.0 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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 monetary 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 holistically. 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 opens up opportunities to the market of the world. The crafted handmade one-off products can now reach to the world collectors. This naturally will lead to the increase demand through the global market exposure. Thus with extended market the crafted products are possible to be sustained and generate the economy.

However, a common trend that is happening to the local heritage is the dying interest to sustain and to practice preservation and conservation. This is due to lack of sensitivities towards heritage values among the local public. They tend to regard old tradition and values that they have no economic benefit; therefore, the concern and care towards the extinction of this valuable national asset are dying.

Therefore, in order to address these issues, 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. This National Heritage Act 2005 came into

effect on 1 March, 2006 and with this, it is believed that local public will be encouraged to conserve and preserve the heritages values.

Conclusion

Kelantan people has been identified to be rich in tradition and having such exciting pastimes activities such as kite flying, top spinning, shadow play theatres and bird singing competitions, to name a few. However, these pastimes activities and traditional games are only possible in an environment where there is peace and tranquillity. Thus, Kelantan fit into these attributes and therefore known to be the cradle of culture. Therefore, effort must be made to ensure that these traditional heritages are sustained and preserved. In order to achieve this, a concerted effort to draft a strategic action plan has to put in place. Prior to this, series of meetings in the 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. Also, creating awareness amongst young talents has to be a major agenda to the government. After which activities can then be organized by means of workshop, competitions, and public talk and heritage expeditions for the young ones.

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