

**A HERITAGE, DECADENCE  
AND A HOPE OF PRESERVATION<sup>1</sup>.**

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**ABSTRACT:**

While decadence is the sad fact in folklore, the new developments in technology – especially the internet - offer wonderful new avenues of promotion, dissemination and presences. It is suggested that each of the genres of folklore is given a complete website, with facts, procedures, illustration, the process of preparation and also the performance itself. To this may be added interactive facilities.

In this website too the folklore practitioner and his arts may be introduced in greater and interesting depth, and so his music, musical instruments and history. In fact a visitor should be able to receive a short course on how to perform a genre that interests him.

Folklore tourism may be introduced or enhanced, with a complete guide thus providing a full cultural experience for the visitor.

Other forms of monetary and infrastructural and training support by ministries and private companies may also help give new lives to both the folklore practitioners and their arts.

There is yet hope as and new forms of relevant presences are brought about by new developments in the internet.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper work is based on research done under the University Sains Malaysia Research University Grant (RU), titled "Heritage of nature and cultural in Northern peninsular Malaysia".

There is this eternal question that is never totally answered, and when answered tends to change from age to age. 'What is cultural heritage?'

Though many people tend to have images of palaces, temples, mosques and buildings, as I am from the realm of literature – specifically literature in the Malay language, I lean towards the intangible heritage to be found in the verbal arts, in the mantras, the stories, songs and poems. It is fortunate that we learnt from the Sanskrit, and designate literature as *sastera*, i.e. stories and poems that gives instruction, and besides it is beautiful, *su*, thus literature is *kesusasteraan*.

Literature is collective knowledge, the local knowledge, not only in the oral tale but also others which began with the oral but has come to be transformed into the written, in its various forms, manifestations and transformations.

European languages do not use the word literature for what we know as folklore. For them literature begins from the written word, *littera*, which highlights a different perspective in approaching oral composition, but effectively downgrades it, for it is not written, which is seen as more sacred, reliable and a product of the rational mind.

Be it so oral literature is part of the collective knowledge, collective genius and memory of a people. In Malay and Indonesian this is *ilmu tempatan*, *kearifan lokal*, *kebijaksanaan asli*. It now defines itself against modern knowledge and sits at the core of an identity, and provides an original knowledge that has been transposed into alternative knowledge, which is used to counterbalance western and colonial knowledge.

What is true is that oral literature is not only local narrative recast in fiction or poetry but it is also the local wisdom and philosophy. For Malaysia – without this local knowledge, this collective memory and expression much of what we know of the people, their history, ideas and thought would be almost non-existent. The rest is obtained from architecture, rituals and economic practices. Even these (except architecture) belong to the folklore.

This is the knowledge grown from below, from the roots of experience of living with the land, forests, rivers and the people – and this is necessary language for survival. Though much have changed, some of the tools of survival suggested, repeated and reassessed are still quite relevant and enhance life itself.

It tells what plants may be eaten, grown or picked for their medicinal qualities, which among them produce ink and colours, and which rocks contain which metals, without the help of chemistry.

It is thus a traditional knowledge – an epistemology, nurtured from real experiences and narrated with the very own perspectives of their narrators and singers.

## LANGUAGE AS HERITAGE

Perhaps the greatest of the heritage of mankind is language itself, and within it the precious gems of thoughts and ideas to be found in literature itself. From it too one may extract or read the philosophy of nature, of the meaning of being a human being, and also being part of a bigger universe.

It makes room for other beings, other worlds and other existences – with whom we must share the planet, and which reminds us that there are

other ways, peoples and perspectives and remind us that these perspectives too are valid as they grow from the roots of experience over time and sieved and tested by living itself. Although we have been taught only one, i.e. the colonial perspective, the language of the people, the local language, which is often called vernacular – it is the colonial language that is vernacular!

This language diversity – in many instances. It also talk of bio-diversity, in its myriad terms for the flora and fauna.

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In a world dictated by the tangible and mostly industrial and western values the intangible is often considered as unimportant, and unsubstantiated and unproven. In this definition a huge chunk of the cultural heritage of an oral or pre-industrial or villages society are left out in the cold. And when this is practiced these cultures are left with little or nothing to show for. Their heritage is in the spoken word, in the unrecorded music, and their medicine is in their memory or taste-buds.

Though recognition is being given to this type of folklore, in some societies which use oral heritage, ironically the attitude of rejecting it is fast catching on, and the owners of the heritage itself is looking for the tangible proofs, a modern plan for their lives and the like. They are their proprietress' enemy, as it were.

So we have three tasks altogether – firstly to make the west believe that these intangible wealth that we own is significant not only for ourselves but also for the survival of the human race and the planet they live in, and secondly, ironically to make our own people believe that this so to, and finally to plan for its preservation.



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The steps toward these goals we have to study our stories, songs and poems, and see their relevance in the present context of education, the new technology and possibilities.

We need to reinterpret stories for the young, who will later disseminate their own meaning and particular contemporary taste and choices. Thus more study has to be encouraged, and in the meantime to find jobs and niches for them as they graduate. In the third world countries folklore and literature tend to be attractive in the early years of independence , but after that a new generation seeks the departments of economics or engineering or medicine.

Jobs are as important as folklore, so the country must plan for their folklore graduates and gracefully receive them after they have completed their studies. These studies, I would like to suggest, must not be stuck I a classic mould, to merely tape recording videos, but must venture into possibilities of other media. Perhaps we need to invite media and IT experts to team-teach folklore classes, as the students belong to another age, that the IT people can easily relate to and not their folklore professors. They may provide the colours and graphics that we don't.

In the globalization-swept plains of our verbal heritage, traditions are terribly fragile. Like old denizens they are comparatively weak against the robust forces of the new and those that blow from the west as the factories of industrial countries, and of course the language of the powerful states, i.e. the English language.

Malaysia is such a country, comparatively weak in her traditions, not because it is weak in itself, but rather broken down by colonialisation and a belief (also a clear product of a colonial was education) that the colonial as the western are superior to the indigenous. The stories of the indigenous storytellers are exchanged too easily for soap-fox drama and also Bollywood and Superman or Spiderman. So the local musical groups fall to the twang and electrified rhythms of the American bands.

Decadence originates from within and without all countries must struggle through it, especially when traditions are slowly losing its emotional and moral meaning, as they are not reinvented or recreated for contemporary relevance. Or loved for their original beauty and wisdom in our lives.

However, what is happening to Malaysian folklore is the result of multiple causes. The external/colonial /hegemonic factors, combined with industrialization play a major part. On the other hand, these are the internal causes – including the educational system that is none to sensitive to this heritage of folklore and local knowledge, or the indigenous genius.

From another perspective, the conservative and overly religious beliefs often impact the survival of folklore in Malaysia. These two elements are a strong cause in the decadence of the once-popular ‘cock fight,’ which once tournaments between villages, and all the arts related to it. However, through the enforcement of law, it is no longer continued and is almost dead.

Folk performances like ‘*Mek Mulong*’ a dance ceremony to the spirits of ancestors are equally affected by the present fervour of religious passion. Although *Mek Mulong* may be seen by many as but some kind

of localized performance, however, some critics think they contradict Islamic beliefs – for the mixture of the performance and ritual can bring a negative image to their faith. The will to preserve or develop *Mek Mulong* is equally eroded. In the end this kind of unique folk performance is limited to and protected by a tiny minority of people in Northern of Peninsular Malaysia.

Love for literature, like love for people, has to be not done it quickly reeds past into the recesses of change, transition and oblivion.

But, like love, they tide of reactance too can be blocked as the erosion made slower, the dam repaired and given a new structure and life. Much has been written by various anthropologies, folklorists and also interested tourist agencies, about projects to give a new place and life to this ineligible heritage, at the backbone of a people.

The scenario has changed over the years. And the technological advancement in areas that can help our field has also seen revolutionary transformations. So I would like to survey the possible measures, into light of these how scenario and changes.

#### Some projects to dam the decadence:

1. An International Repertoire to replace a merely western-based reading material.

In general European and American folklore is over represented in mass media vis-à-vis the population. We often red or watch stories based on the German, Norwegian, British and French folktales. Plus we

watch Snow Princess, Cinderella, Pinocchio and stories from Grimm Brother's.

There is now a need to seek other stories, different storylines, to replace these over-exposed and progressively monotonous stories that are heavily dominated by European tales and narratives.

So to enrich our common pool of stories we need to look at as many tales and poems as possible, so as we may gain from the countless creative products from hundreds if not thousands of culture. Although there are some attempts to dig into this repertoire, there has really not been a concerted effort to seek them and disseminate them to the whole world. Perhaps with an understanding of other peoples' perception of the world and

characters and values we may understand each other too much better, and from the heart of their cultures as sketched by their narrators and geniuses. There are thousands of stories from China, India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North and South America, Australia and the Pacific that may be used. When it is folklore that we are seeking we notice that any people would have as much imagination and care for their environment and their common human condition, which also often resound with a universal meaning.

In Malaysia, the Aslian (original Malaysians) folktales illustrate further this tragic same situation, and same predicament as those countries abovementioned. Their tales have survived until now because they have a strong belief in these legends and myths<sup>2</sup>. Their stories always reflect their daily life since a long time<sup>3</sup>, and therefore are seen as relevant. Their sacred tales describe their 'culture heroes' and also

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about Orang Asli life, see Iskandar Carey (1976)

<sup>3</sup> Dundes (1962) described about the relation of tales with the community life around it.

worship<sup>4</sup> practices. From that point of view, these tales are not fictional but for the core of 'truth' as they see it.

For example according to these tales, all members of a tribe must show due respect to certain creatures in the jungle, and thus arrange some rituals, accompanied with some 'gifts.' These ritual are believed to bring their villagers safety and protection and avoid disaster.

Perhaps the most urgent now would be the stories of sustainability, in a world that is hurtling to self-destruct itself. That the human race has been able to survive to the 21<sup>st</sup> century presupposed that they have tools for doing so, and some of these tools are inserted through the verbal arts and stories.

The next issue that needs urgent solution would be to find stories that teach people to live together – especially in a world that is now awash with each other's blood in so many continents and countries. There are many stories that teach us to solve differences through stories, not to jump to violent action but to weigh consequences and 'give peace a chance.'

There stories are collecting in separate volumes, and written to graded audiences.

2. The next unsolved problem that does not help dam the decadence of folklore arises from a system of education that privileges the sciences, economics and computer and engineering, but not the cultural subjects, including literature, through which a student may access his peoples' folk stories and intangible heritage. Sometimes when literature is inserted merely as a component in the study of language, folklore has too little a space or a chance to make itself felt. It is believed that folklore

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<sup>4</sup> These kind of believed had described by Mircea Eliade (1987) and Juli Edo (1992)

and literature help shape the perception of one's culture and identity. If there is not enough of this, and on the other hand being ambushed by the international media, beamed from the values and philosophies of the west, (mostly Anglo-Saxon), and other industrial countries. Surely the world is bigger and other nations too have values as legal tender in a country and beyond. That they have survived they also point to a successful collection of values that all of us need to know and learn from.

So it is time to rearrange a curriculum that is more balanced, more cultured and sensitive to the local imagination, genius and literary products. I would suggest that they should not merely asked to be read but related to their communities, and show them at work, and finally how they can help the contemporary world and its human inhabitants. We need now not merely to teach our children to be mechanics and engineers and doctors, but also thinking and feeling human beings who will not add to the problems of the world. But rather also help solve them.

Perhaps we should make folklore that helps us and our planet to survive a compulsory component of education itself, if we want our world to have a chance. As it is the avaricious and the unscrupulous seem to rule the world.

3. All this needs organizations or institutions, governmental and non-governmental. Both types of organizations should be able to complement each others tasks. There should be departments of folklore in universities, and national institutes that study and plan its future. Here too works may be collected, research done and new ideas and interpretation may be disseminated. Stories can be recreated for the

different types of audiences, translated into his national language, the other local languages and also other international ones.

The arts of in the folklore may be taught, performers and musicians may be trained. In Kuwait the TV stations has its own folk troupe that not only put on performances but also train young people for the different folkloristic arts.

It is generally agreed that a concerted detailed planning and financial support should ensure a future for the folklore heritage in the country. Through this support a younger generation of experts can be trained, and they can systematically be taught and guided in folklore skills, i.e. in performances, singing, orchestration, delivering the stories, dances and other genres of folklore.

A very good example of support for the folklore is illustrated by DIGI Malaysia, one of the several communication companies in Malaysia. DIGI had given some sponsorship to the *Awang Batil* Storyteller<sup>5</sup> in state of Perlis, Malaysia. In this program, DIGI has arranged that Mr Romli Mahmud (Awang Batil Storyteller) to teach a young generation on how to perform the genre of Awang Batil. By efforts like this, hopefully this genre may survive yet for another generation.

There is another role that government can play, i.e. to ensure the folklore does not die out. As many Malaysians still have very little information about the wealth of their folklore - many of them never seen the *Mak Yong* performance; they have never heard the beautiful folk songs, never enjoyed the *Mek Melong* ritual performance etc. the Culture and Tourism Ministries should perhaps propose a yearly Folklore Grand

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<sup>5</sup> More information about Awang Batil, see Mustafa Mohamad (1987)

Festival. Through programs like these more people, locals and tourists, can come know, enjoy and love their own folklore heritage. At the same time, the preservation of folklore is ensured.

In other perspective, the conferences bring together scholars and officers of like mind together and contribute to finding solutions

Local or national folklore organizations will give local and national participation in this area of folklore that can only find its survival if their communities can relate to it with passion and commitment. The local ones can be based on language, genre, and style groupings, so that they are more close-knit and intimate.

They can also perform the function of a pressure group, especially in situations where the politics know little or are not interested in these oral arts, as they do not bring the votes. Perhaps it is high time that culture does not have to worry about votes but more about survival and to ensure that they are living arts in the society.

To ensure that folklore is alive for now and the future, the authorities need to work out programs for the survival of folklore performers themselves. They need to be properly reimbursed or paid a regular income from their cultural activities. If this is not done they will move to other jobs which can bring wages for the daily needs. In Japan for example folklorists are considered as national treasures, supported so that they remain in their own environment and arts, and not go away to earn their living. If this is made a reality folklore activities can have a new role, a more joyous and widespread presence.



4. Now let us move into the technological territory and see how it can help us. But before we suggest new ways of recording and dissemination there is a need to look at work already done in the past. For many institutions and individual research there are hundreds of video and audio tapes that have been lying around. For one these tapes have a shelf-life, they may be stuck and unable to be used. So the first step is to replay them, transfer into cd or other forms that can last about 60 years, as compared to the shorter life-support of the old versions. If they have never been transcribed this is a chance to do it, before the narrators are dead , and they may not be able to be referred to in case there are questions that need to be asked and information that needs to be clarified.

5. There internet allows a new and more glorious life for all types of folklore, fro, the poem, to the story, dance, rituals, songs and also curing.

Firstly we can have a website for each of the folklore genres, in which we can have buttons for each of these categories, but also include papers that may be referred to by its readers. We have a pantun website that introduces, studies, provide maps of those routes of its spread and the also samples from the different areas around the world. For example pantuns from the different Malay dialect areas of the Peninsula and Bornes, and also pantuns composed in non-Malay languages, at least 40 altogether all in the Malay Archipelago and in Europe, Latin America and also Australia.

Secondly, it can include strategic and important photos about the different genres. A good photo tells its own narrative – and so maps and graphics.

These can also be excerpts from real life interviews with the author, his environment, his own processes of preparing for the performance, his very performance and also the picture of the audience and their reaction.

Thus the making of the leather puppets, the carvings, the colouring, the various paints for the different characters, and not too forget the rituals behind the screen or as the puppeteer walk to the venue – all this outside the purview of the audience may be recorded and shown to the audience for a fuller appreciation of the intricate process of making and performing a puppet/ shadow play.

One can press a button and access texts, famous puppeteers, musicians and carvers.

Also one can have excerpts of the music for the different scene of a play, and when necessary even the notes. Besides some one who access it may also learn how to handle a puppet and play it on the screen.

Old plays may be referred to in a archive of performances.

Short excerpts of performances may also be put on the U-tube, and therefore allow a world to see them.

This website may have an interactive facility for those interested to read of the events related to shadow play in the past, in the present or future. This will of course help to connect parts of the *wayang kulit* world.

At the same time it may bring the practitioners and the scholars and audience together in the cyberworld in a community of the interested.

The current technologies promises a wonder variety of presences for our folklore. For example by using the Geo-informatics Systems (GIS), the folklorist can draw a 'Culture Map' for the different forms of the songs, practices and stories – mark every type, performer, instrument of folklore, their actual location, state or country into one big 'Culture Map' for the country. The Culture Map cose interested within and without the country an easy access. d also mpeg video which was related to the folklore. The people more enjoyed to learn about the folklore by using these new facilities.

The Culture Map will also help protect from inadvertent loss or damage of data because it is still saved in the internet, and may be even downloaded onto the CD data or photographic album. Another interesting aspect of this GIS Culture Map is that we can link it to other relevant websites. For example, we can link the *Mek Mulong* data to others ritual performances in Africa, America and so many countries just in one single webpage.

6. There should also be new versions and interpretations of folklore by artists, storytellers, short story writers, choreographers, so they remain within the relevance and artistic experience of the generation. One can get a famous director to make a film of an interpretation of say the Mahsuri legend, in Langkawi, by a famous novelist or poet.

Or there can also be competitions among students, adults etc as who can best interpret certain stories or poems for the present audience.

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When we speak of the *Mahsuri* legend, we notice that the official offices of culture has done a good job for its preservation. For example the Kedah state government has made renovations around of Mahsuri's grave so that now it has become a historical memorial. There is also a

full program for visitors – from a theatrical presentation to traditional musical performances. The result is that many visitors from Malaysia and abroad are quite cognisant of the Mahsuri tale.

On the other hand, the situation is different for *Raja Bersiung* and Mount Jerai legends, also in the state of Kedah. There also equally unique and interesting stories, places and people, related to both legends. But, not many people know about them as there is no promotion done on their behalf. On this point we have come to recognise that promotion plays a big role in folklore preservation.

7. Cartoons and anime seem not to be quite universal in their appeal – especially to the young. Besides the famous western one like Cinderella, Snow Queen and Pinocchio, there was an attempt to bring the Peruvian civilization into the realm of the cartoon. So was Mulan created on almost the same line of thinking. It should not stop there of course. Stories from Hawaii, New Zealand, Borneo, and the Arctic should be as attractive and extend the horizon of the spoken story.

8. It is also to turn some of the famous stories into card games. In Japan the old *tanka* is very famous. There was a card game created where one waits for the other part of the poem to complete it, very much in the principle of gin rummy and son on.

Of course toys are the natural outcome of these stories that are spoken or aired on tv and radio. The spin-off can also come in the form of t-shirts, kerchiefs and other souvenirs.

Poems and proverbs can appear on the shirts and blouses beside certain characters. In Thailand and Indonesia there are quite popular. In fact

one can buy replicas of the favourite characters, from Sri Rama, Sita to the comic characters.

We cannot deny that the some times transformation brings a new and promising scenario to folklore. Transformation sometimes give it a new and glorious fame than ever before. For example, a majority people may be not familiar with the tales of *The Princess of Santubong* in the state of Sarawak. But, after the tales were anchored onto a folk song<sup>6</sup>, the tale itself is now better known. Moreover, the song becomes one of the important ways to promote Sarawak tourism offerings and products. So, indirectly folklore can enhance an economy through tourism.

8. Finally, to make some money from folklore through tourism. One would include this form of visits as cultural tourism, which is present throughout the world. In the Sarawak State of Malaysia there is an annual Rainforest Music Festival brings together music from the rainforest of the world, which has been exceptionally successful. The spin-off are sale of cultural artifacts and visits to the attraction of the state – the tropical forests, beaches, the long houses and caves.

In Padang Indonesia the area near the beach is considered as the site where the prodigal son, Malim Kundang, came home to disown his mother, and was turned into stone by his mother's curse. The houses and villages of famous tellers or tales can also be profitably visited with the help of guides who are conversant in folklore, their performers and their performances.

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<sup>6</sup> For video clips of Princess Santubong song, see at webpage  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkdW3Sh\\_U8M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkdW3Sh_U8M)

In Kuala Kangsar, in the state of Perak, giving commercial value to cultural products has helped to give the traditionally hand-crafted pot called '*Labu Sayong*' a new place for them in the racks of unique products. These products of craft have now their own market among of the tourists and local people. With affordable prices they have become quite popular. *Labu Sayong* has also graduated as new souvenirs, traditional containers and table lamps. As a result, now quite a few entrepreneurs of Labu Sayong can earn their living in Kuala Kangsar and beyond.

In conclusion there is much that a country, a village and a person can do to preserve the dying traditions of folklore. As they form the basis of a country's identity and also contribution to the world, they must of necessity be preserved, and the erosion efficiently damned. Otherwise it would indeed be a culturally impoverished world, dominated by a few cultures and their imagination.

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