

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF MALAY IDENTITY IN  
NATIONAL MUSEUMS: A STUDY ON  
SELECTED NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN  
PENINSULAR MALAYSIA**

**CHANG YI CHANG**

**UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

**2025**

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PENINSULAR MALAYSIA**

by

**CHANG YI CHANG**

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**September 2025**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the national museums' authorities for granting permission and support during data collection. I am especially thankful to the officers from the following museums: Muzium Negara, Ethnology of the Malay World Museum, Kelantan State Museum, Kelantan State Islamic Museum, Istana Jahar, Kota Kayang Museum, Lembah Bujang Archaeological Museum, Kedah State Museum, Perak Museum, Kuala Selangor District Historical Museum, Sultan Alam Shah Museum, Negeri Sembilan State Museum, Malacca Sultanate Palace Museum, Kota Tinggi Museum, Johor State Museum, and Kota Johor Lama Museum. This thesis is dedicated to all these institutions. I am also indebted to my colleagues and friends from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR): Ms Mok Sew Kuen, Ms Yvonne Hoh Jgin Jit, Cik Bazlin Darina Binti Ahmad Tajudin, Mr Afi Roshezry Bin Abu Bakar, Dr Noor Azmira Binti Mohamed, and Ms Michelle Wong, for their encouragement and companionship. I dedicate this work to my late father, whose passing during my PhD journey left a profound impact, and to my late maternal grandmother. My deepest appreciation also goes to my mother, younger brother, and beloved wife for their unwavering moral support throughout this journey. I would also like to acknowledge Choo Chean Hau, Ng Chong Siong, Ng Boon Kheng, Chong Soon Kung, Ko Nei Seong, and Dr Muhammad Febriansyah for their encouragement, insightful discussions, and valuable feedback. Special thanks are due to Professor Dr Novel Anak Lyndon, Associate Professor Dr Nazarudin Bin Zainun, and Associate Professor Dr Azmil Tayeb, whose feedback during the viva voce greatly enhanced my thesis. Finally, I am profoundly grateful to my supervisor, Associate Professor Dr Mohammad Revaany Bustami, whose patience, guidance, and encouragement fostered both intellectual growth and academic independence.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

|      |                                                               |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| MHF  | Malay Heritage Foundation                                     |
| NCP  | National Culture Policy                                       |
| SOAS | School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) |
| VOC  | Dutch East India Company                                      |

**PEMBINAAN IDENTITI MELAYU DI MUZIUM-MUZIUM KEBANGSAAN:  
SUATU KAJIAN KE ATAS MUZIUM-MUZIUM KEBANGSAAN YANG  
TERPILIH DI SEMENANJUNG MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRAK**

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti bagaimana susunan pameran tetap di beberapa muzium nasional terpilih di Semenanjung Malaysia membentuk dan menyampaikan naratif identiti Melayu dalam kerangka negara bangsa. Penelitian ini memberi tumpuan kepada diorama muzium sebagai medium utama dalam menyampaikan naratif sejarah dan budaya, dengan pendekatan kajian kes yang membolehkan analisis mendalam terhadap representasi kemelayuan. Isu utama yang diketengahkan ialah bagaimana teks muzium, khususnya pameran muzium, dipengaruhi oleh kuasa institusi dalam membentuk naratif hegemonik tentang identiti Melayu. Susunan artefak dan naratif dominan yang dipamerkan secara konsisten membina kerangka Melayu-Muslim sebagai norma budaya yang sah dan diterima dalam ruang negara bangsa. Muzium nasional, sebagai entiti autoritatif dalam penghasilan dan penyebaran pengetahuan budaya, memainkan peranan penting dalam menormalkan dan menginstitusikan realiti serta kebenaran tentang identiti Melayu. Fungsi muzium sebagai mekanisme negara menjadikannya alat formal dalam penghasilan naratif sejarah yang disahkan oleh negara. Proses ini tidak berlaku secara paksaan, tetapi melalui penormalan gambaran ideal tentang Melayu yang dipamerkan secara sistematik dalam ruang muzium nasional. Kajian ini mempunyai tiga objektif utama, iaitu: 1. meneliti representasi identiti Melayu dalam Muzium Nasional di Semenanjung Malaysia; 2. memahami naratif sejarah yang membentuk identiti Melayu dalam pameran dan diorama muzium terpilih; 3. membina tipologi wacana

sejarah Melayu berdasarkan analisis terhadap pameran muzium. Bagi mencapai objektif tersebut, kajian ini menggunakan strategi penyelidikan sosial secara induktif melalui pendekatan kualitatif. Data diperoleh melalui kajian fotografik terhadap semua pameran muzium (kecuali bahagian alam semula jadi) di 15 muzium nasional di Semenanjung Malaysia. Tipologi wacana dibina berdasarkan kategori dan penanda jejak yang terdapat pada pameran muzium, yang berpotensi menandakan identiti Melayu secara simbolik dan naratif. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa artifak yang digunakan semula dalam pameran muzium berpusat kepada kerangka Melayu-Muslim kontemporari. Representasi berasaskan Islam dapat dilihat melalui paparan batu nisan Aceh, Al-Quran, manuskrip Melayu bertulisan jawi, serta elemen Kesultanan Melaka yang dipamerkan di Muzium Negara. Pengalaman kolonial pula digambarkan melalui naratif penderitaan. Empat subetnik Melayu yang paling dominan dalam pameran muzium ialah Jawa, Minangkabau, Bugis, dan identiti serantau Aceh. Secara teoritikal, kajian ini menyumbang kepada strategi analisis makna yang terhasil daripada susunan pameran muzium dan kaitannya dengan analisis kuasa berasaskan pendekatan Michel Foucault. Kajian ini membuka ruang kepada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana kuasa institusi dan dinamika kuasa; membentuk naratif sejarah, identiti Melayu dalam muzium nasional.

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF MALAY IDENTITY IN NATIONAL MUSEUMS:  
A STUDY ON SELECTED NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN PENINSULAR  
MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the display order of museum displays in selected national museums in Peninsular Malaysia. Specifically, it investigates the order of permanent museum displays in the museum dioramas, using a case-study approach to analyse how the narrative of Malay identities and Malayness are represented in the Malaysian nation-state framework. The main problem identified is that museum texts such as museum displays in the national museum spaces are deeply influenced by institutional power, especially on the narratives of describing Malay identity in the nation state. The arrangement of museum artefacts and dominant narratives construct the Malay-Muslim framework. National museums as cultural authorities normalize and govern the reality and truth of the Malay identity in Malaysia. The national museum display is to be repurposed to represent the contemporary Malay Muslim framework in the study. The national museum exhibitions, it normalizes the Malay Muslim through curated national museum narratives. This study has three objectives: 1. To examine the portrayal of Malay identities in the National Museums in Peninsular Malaysia. 2. To understand the historical narratives for the Malay identity in the museum display and dioramas of the national museum in Malaysia 3. To construct a typology of discourses for the Malay history in the Malaysia National Museums. To achieve the objectives, this study employed an inductive social research strategy through qualitative research methods. The photographic research data were obtained from the museum displays (excluding the nature section) at 15 national museums in peninsular



Malaysia. Typologies were also constructed based on the categories and trace markers on the museum display as they potentially signified Malay identities. Based on the findings and analysis, ancient artefacts that are repurposed to exhibit Malay identities and Malayness in Peninsular Malaysia are centered around the current Malay-Muslim framework. Museum displays on Acehnese gravestones, Holy Quran display and Malacca Sultanate narratives are highly represented. Malay subethnic identities represented through selected museum objects give meaning to the affiliation on certain Malay subethnic identities. While representations of colonial encounters adopt an “attack and react” mode. Theoretically, this research contributes to a strategy to study the meaning reflected and manifested from the order of museum displays and its relations to Foucauldian analysis of power. The study of national museums in Malaysia is still relatively underexplored, with intersections between the power dynamics, Malay identity and ethnicity.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is research on the production of common understanding how national museums represented as a microcosm that constructs Malaysian Malay Identity in a nation state framework. A national museum is a public institution acting as a site in the formulation and negotiation of national identity and Malay ethnic identity. In a cultural institution such as museum, it also shares the memories of the ethnicity. In addition, it serves as an important site of exposure to pave the way for the construction of identity formation on both national and local levels of a country. The archival materials (museum depository) of a museum construct and legitimize accepted knowledge on the ethnic identity in a nation-state framework.

Museumization process involves storages of artifacts as museum objects that can signify *Malayness* in Malaysia. The museum space and object will be a space in shaping the community about the discourse of Malay identity in Malaysia. In this thesis, the researcher discussed the basic concepts of the archives of Malay memories and the importance of museum in as a site of the construction of *Malayness* in Malaysia.

The researcher would like to develop a binding an intersection investigation between Malay ethnic identities, national museum and power, the thesis began with its core: the museum. There are several explanations on museums. The thesis investigates museum power dynamics in a postcolonial state context, thus, the niche on the discussion of museums will begin with the European and the western world conceptualizations which also serves as an explanation of the research gap in Malaysia

as a postcolonial polity, tracing back to the related setting is crucial to investigate this research.

Museum institution meets its limits in its physical exhibition. Universally, it is applied to all the museums in the world. Limitation of space means categorizations and most important selections is needed for the exhibition. Selections and categorizations of artifacts involved the idea of power. Museum displays that are selected for display are set to be significantly a representation of importance, and those that are kept but not displayed also has meaning. This research is based on the displays that are exposed to the public. The next paragraph will demonstrate how the ascendancy of power is manifested on categorization, selection, and exhibition in public museums.

To start the background of the public museums, it is relevant to trace the ascendancy and relevance of museums in a postcolonial state, the researcher studied the European experience and form pieces of thoughts from the Enlightenment and the height of European colonialism.

The researcher used scholarly research to substantiate ideas which is relevant notice the intersection between power and museums. By using cases in Europe, it allows us to see how museums are molded by power. Museums are heavily influenced by different periods of time. For example, Britishness stresses on the constructions of British identity, which is based on freedom, and later constitution and the monarchy and their museums follow suit. However, these influences are quickly reducing and the museum serves as an archive of huge amount of knowledge around the world, and the honorable displays of the British Empire in the height of colonialism (Watson, 2019, pp. 68-71).

Collections in the museum comes with intentions which formulated the categorizations and careful arrangement of museum displays. Thus, museum exhibitions are not neutral but guided by ideas and meaningful values. However, values and meanings change overtime, it involves the consideration of power. These patterns could be trace in the early establishments of museums in Europe. The founding inspiration of Museum Ashmolianum was traced back to the poem from the old diary of antiquarian Elias Ashmole. From the poem, it manifested the aspiration and the intentions of the museum. The collection from the farthest reaches of the world are based on the explorational worldview of natural science. These collections are taken from John Tradescant's voyages. Artifacts gathered from sea exploration, establishment of the early global trade and so called the nerve of the empire establish until the "East," particularly India during the throne of Charles II. These curated the importance of intention for setting up museums as well as main reason for museum exhibition (Ritter, 2015).

Museum collection categorization involving power in the European and American setting could be a sum of colonial power in reference to its ethnographic collection in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During high days of colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the label of exotic artifacts was collected from each corner of colonial territories. The ethnological categorization is institutionalized as "others." These exotic artifacts reflect colonial ideologies, values, and policies. It was aggressive, systematic, and was a motivating factor for collection for research purposes. The purpose of the research serves the climax of imperial power to systematically ethnological information on the colonial domains (Shelton, 2006, pp. 64-65).

The sources on the origins of public museums could be traced back over two thousand years ago, the evolutions of public museums meet with different sort of social

needs. However, it is only until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, professional standards and norms on museums are set by conferences, meetings and disciplinary journal that set an idealistic criterion for the “public museum” that distinguishes from private institution or individual ownerships. However, dynamics of social changes influences museum institutions to be continue relevant with its contemporary society. The said changes might be manifested in its exhibitions of museum displays, as the public museum after France revolution served the republic. To serve the people-centric republic, the fashion of museum narratives had been formulated, and branded as an ancient regime. The exhibitions represented the feudal past which is decadent and tyrannic before the France revolution to the so-called public of its time (Abt, 2006, p. 132).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, nationalism is seen as the core value for the Nordiska Museet in Norway and Norsk Folkemuseum in Norway. However, the notion of nationalism had been overemphasized. As by the time of late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the inceptive connotation of state nation means “the people”, but in the end, it shifted from the people towards “the nation”. However, the setting up of both museums are inspired by ethnological inquiries and a based line in searching of primitive culture. The quest of ethnological inquires and any folk culture and ‘old’ collection was to uphold both museums as public education centers and preservation of folk culture and presenting Scandinavians culture. The core value of both museums tied to transcend from politics by upholding culture as going back to the based on public education, ethnology, and folk culture. Only by nationalizing them, the museums had to be compromised by belonging on political territories and state boundaries (Hillström, 2010).

A nation is not a static entity, it is a product of constant negotiations, these negotiations between the people and the ruling institutions have been done by its cultural institutions such as national galleries, museums, public exhibition complexes. As a matter of fact, the displays of public galleries act as a kind of continuity of the nation state by connecting itself to the old monarchies. As referred to Knell (2016, pp. 91-92), nations are not static entities, they are the product of constant negotiation, and this means that even the most stable may be subject to radical transformation in their political utility, internal cohesion, and international outlook. While national museums possess treasures that assure citizens of the historical and cultural depth of the nation and its continuity, these are among the most adaptable of museum types. The nation state will use public galleries and museums to legitimize its position as the continuity of political system and social structure that inherited the heritage of an old empire. As a rule, exhibitions in public galleries tend to be based on important incidents such as war, colonization, nationalism to act as a constant negotiation to the people of a polity.

Meanwhile, the research on intersectional on power dynamics and national museums in Malaysia remains relatively scarce. Journal articles on museum learning and site of visit could be traced. However, in relating museum and the nation state or the subnation state level could be found in the scholarly work by Abu Talib (2015) and Lidchi (1997). This study is carried out by observing the importance of an analysis on an intersectional on power, national museums and Malay identity. An intersectional study is needed because it has evidently shown that the field still has potential to develop as an interdisciplinary study on national museum which still remain less in Malaysia. Until year 2025, the researcher started to traced scholarly work on the museum from the angle of decolonialization, absorption of Islam into national

museum, however not many. Justified that there is a bigger gap to conduct this research.

The scholar called for a holistic decolonization of national museum. The decolonization that must address political, social and ideological dimensions on the national museums. The Malay Islamic based civilization is in a mode of openness and interconnected trade network with the coastal polity such as Melaka and Aceh. Emphasizing on material culture such as Malay manuscript and the usages of jawi scripts reveal how Malay Islamic based civilization have evolved on based on the interaction with Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian and Chinese culture. These should be put in the museums narratives that shown the diversity of interactions in the national museums (Hariz, 2025). Museums are product of the local wisdom. The local archive, collecting and guarding the displays that are important to their historical heritage. The modern museums evolved from European society; its core is based on scientific knowledge and secular principles. Malay Islamic wisdom in Malaysia should be a part of the wisdom that could critically engage on Western museological approach, in synthesizing a representation of Islam which is more museum friendly (Ab Halim et al., 2025).

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

The national museum is a relatively modern institution that transforms artifacts into instruments of meaning-making. This process relies on the exhibition of museum artifacts which are arranged within museum dioramas to construct coherent historical narratives which are later attached to the museum artifacts. Over time, these so-called ‘artifacts’ portrayed as important are labelled as museum displays. These curated

displays are not arbitrary; they are the result of deliberate and rigorous curatorial decisions, be it intentionally or unwittingly.

Malaysian national museums are deeply embedded within structures of institutional power as they function as microcosms where identities are continuously being constructed, negotiated, and contested. In this context, museum narratives are employed to homogenize a particular conception of Malay identity within the framework of a nation-state.

Current national museum displays, shaped by power structure, are designed to frame selected pieces of historical memories through the exhibition of "Malayness" at the National Museum. The arrangement of museum displays and their accompanying museum texts are never arbitrary; rather, they embody power and ideological intent. Power influences the arrangements of museum objects, which in Foucauldian term, through governmentality and normalization of power. These exhibitions reveal the presence of a dominant power structure and the ideologies they uphold.

Museums are not neutral spaces as beneath the surface of categorization, selection, and exhibition, lies a complex web of ideological struggles. The final arrangement of museum narratives and displays reflect negotiated outcomes shaped by institutional authority. These displays are curated selections functioning as mechanisms of knowledge production—specifically, the production of Malay identities within the Malaysian national framework.

National museum displays play a vital role in manufacturing a regime of knowledge surrounding Malay ethnicity that is legitimized under the banner of Malaysia as a modern nation-state. Malay identities, in this context, can be understood as power constructed from national museums across Malaysia that engage in practices



that negotiate, reinforce, and reflect representations of Malay identity through their curated exhibition narratives.

As a postcolonial nation-state, Malaysia's national museums serve as sites of nation-building, where Malay identities are continuously negotiated and normalized. Through the curated museum texts presented to the public, one can uncover the nation-state sanctioned narratives that normalizes specific constructions of Malay identity in national museums across Peninsular Malaysia. The interrogation of museum exhibitions and narratives reveal intersections of power, ethnicity, and selective memory—all of which contribute to the ongoing construction of Malay identities through national museum texts.

The existing scholarship examining national museums in Malaysia are on the museum audience and the management of the museum. Intersections between museum texts that include museum objects, Malay identity and power remains insufficient. This gap leaves unexplored opportunities to build a lens on an intersectional approach for a way into its material culture in the national museums space that unleashes the meaning in regulating and legitimizing the ideal Malay within the nation-state framework.

### **1.3 Research Questions (RQ)**

- RQ 1. How do national museums in Malaysia portray Malay identities?
- RQ 2. What are the historical narratives for the Malay identities in the museum display and museum dioramas of the national museums in Malaysia?
- RQ 3. What is the possible typology of discourses for the Malay history in the Malaysia National Museums?

#### **1.4 Research Objectives (RO)**

- RO1. To examine the portrayal of Malay identities in the Nation Museums in Peninsular Malaysia.
- RO2. To understand the historical narratives for the Malay identity in the museum display and dioramas of the national museum in Malaysia
- RO3. To construct a typology of discourses for the Malay history in the Malaysia National Museums.

#### **1.5 Significance of Study**

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the study of Malay Identity, Representation and Malay historiography and Museums in Malaysia is very limited. The only scholarly work that has been carried out on museums in Malaysia so far is (Abu Talib, 2015) using the perspectives of history and culture in Malaysia are in his scrutiny of Malaysian public museums. However, one can find a range of scholarly work on heritage, Malay identity, history and culture in Malaysia including Ooi (2012), Ahmad Murad (2015), Andaya (2015, 2010). A quick glance of the open access journals on museum studies in University of Leicester, the development of museum can be interpreted from a multiculturalism dimension, nationalism, ethnologies, public sphere and identity formation, among others. From the various scholarly articles, it is noticeable that a research gap exists and therefore there is an urgent need to study Malay Identity as critical and crucial social phenomena. The national museums mentioned in the theses in Malaysia not only preserve Malay memories, but they continue with the dominant values of the ruling ideas. These ideas that had been constructed to refer to the Malay identity need to be re-examined and reconstructed while analyzing a more complex interpretation of Malay identity in the

museums, especially in Malaysia. From the perspective of local knowledge, there is a need in developing an alternative and occidental museum worldview from the elements of Malay civilization in Malaysia.

As detailed above, it is obvious that there are too many research gaps need to be filled to obtain a better understanding of museums in Malaysia. Here, the researcher would use an interdisciplinary approach to explore the related issues. By amalgamating the knowledge sourced from the disciplines such on cultural studies, history, anthropology and sociology and communication studies will surely give an insightful meaning to the field of ethnicity and identity on Malaysian national museum. Indeed, fields of studies such as cultural studies and communication studies have received legacies of interdisciplinary approaches in social science. Observing at museums and museum displays by resorting this knowledge is feasible. It will also bridge the research gaps in social sciences.

## **1.6 Scope of Study**

The researcher focuses on the representation and the narratives possibly made according to the museum artefacts. It is perhaps more accurate to use term museum displays here. The order and arrangement of the museum displays represents selection, selectivity, and final decision about the ideas and values of the public institution are also given careful treatment. Objects displayed at a museum are capable of triggering selected historical memories of the Malay world.

The analysis is based on the knowledge/narrative production site only. It does not involve museum audience, nor museum administrators. It is to look at the order of things that manifested intentional or non-intentional arrangements of museum collections in the museum space, museum exhibition complexes, museum dioramas

etc. The museum displays selected are drawn from permanent museum collections only.

The museum displays are analyzed by the researcher in accordance with appropriate theories, concepts and scopes of ideas that are related to power and cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology. This relevant knowledge in social science areas is important to enhance an interdisciplinary approach in humanities to investigate a museum niche, so that strong qualitative, empirical, and non-empirical evidence can be formulated academically.

Table 1.1 The national museums are selected from peninsular Malaysia

| <b>State</b>      | <b>Federal Government funded National Museum</b>     | <b>State Government Funded National Museum</b>                      |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kelantan          | -                                                    | Kelantan State Museum<br>Istana Jahar<br>Islamic Museum of Kelantan |
| Perlis            | Kota Kayang Museum                                   | -                                                                   |
| Kedah             | Lembah Bujang Archaeological Museum                  | Kedah State Museum                                                  |
| Perak             | Perak Museum                                         | -                                                                   |
| Selangor          | -                                                    | Sultan Alam Shah Museum<br>The Kuala Selangor District Museum       |
| Federal Territory | <i>Muzium Negara</i><br>Malay World Ethnology Museum | -                                                                   |
| Negeri Sembilan   | -                                                    | Negeri Sembilan State Museum                                        |
| Melaka            | -                                                    | Melaka Sultanate Palace Museum                                      |
| Johor             | Kota Johor Lama Museum                               | Kota Tinggi Museum                                                  |

## **1.7 Theoretical Framework**

### **1.7.1 National Museum as a Site of Negotiating Power and Knowledge**

Foucault emphasized that the archaeological method is not about tracing the primordial idea or the moment of its genesis, but about mapping the networks of power, knowledge, and regular practices that legitimize it as truth. These repetitions of regularity differ from positing an essentialist, eternal origin for the idea. The objective is to analyze a formation and the conditions governing the circulation of realities (Foucault, 1972). This study is grounded in an intersectional analysis of power, the national museum in Peninsular Malaysia, museum exhibitions, and the representations of Malay identities in national museum texts. National museums are not neutral microcosms; their exhibitions are curated based on the ideological logic of the ruling institutions of the nation-state. The values and ideas of these institutions shape the construction of Malay identities and the national museum's imaginary serves to legitimize a particular form of Malay identity for the purposes of the nation-state, making it a circulation of reality and truth.

As museums are sites where knowledge is produced and identities are constructed and negotiated, they inherently involve power. Thus, the museum is never a neutral site or space. Therefore, when engaged in the study of museums, it is essential to develop a theoretical framework grounded in the concepts of power, ethnic identity, and museum studies. These lenses are necessary to interrogate the intersection of power, national museums, and the representation of Malay identities within the framework of the nation-state.

Foucault's theory explores how power operates through and within state apparatuses to normalize discourses that serve the interests of the nation-state. He

emphasized that the normalization of power is achieved through institutions of knowledge production—such as museums—which construct and disseminate specific discourses, rendering them natural and credible to society. In elaborating on Foucault’s theory of power, Kelly (2009) explains the shift in how power has been exercised. The ancient form of power based on punishments gives way to disciplinary power, which concentrates on training and organizing institutions, and ultimately, biopower. The three forms of power still coexist today. However, compared to violence and abusive power, power has become a process of normalization; Foucault focused on relations of power among institutions. These institutions manifest power through the normalization of norms by practicing governance in society.

This research focuses on national museums and their collections as essential tools in normalizing representations of Malay identity and act as manifestations of power. The selection and exhibition of artifacts are not neutral acts; rather, they are curated to serve the ideological needs of the nation-state. Often, historical artifacts are decontextualized and repurposed to support national narratives of Malay identity. Museum texts are rendered static and fixed to shape a dominant discourse of Malay identity that serves the interests of the nation-state. Thus, the Malay identities examined in this study are those which have been negotiated and normalized by the state in post-colonial Malaysia.

The normalization and negotiation of identities by the nation-state is an ongoing process. Institutional power continuously utilizes the national museum to sustain its legitimacy and existence. The national museum is not merely a custodian of the past; rather, it mobilizes the past in service of the future and is actively engaged in the construction of contemporary Malay identity in Malaysia. Foucault’s theory is particularly well-suited to museum studies as it provides a critical lens through which

to examine how museums function as instruments of power and as sites for the discursive formulation of identities—or in this case, Malay identity in Peninsular Malaysia.

National museums, in particular, bear the responsibility of aligning with and updating the narratives required by the nation-state, particularly within a post-colonial context like Malaysia's as these narratives often touch upon Malay ethnicity and identity construction. As long as these narratives can be linked to the displayed artifacts, they can be used to construct and reinforce Malay identity. This includes the dominant discourses that are highlighted as well as the marginalization of certain Malay identities, as explored in the selected national museums examined in this thesis.

Foucault examines the context surrounding inquiries into truth, focusing on a regime of truth that constructs reality. This so-called truth is produced through mechanisms of knowledge. The structure of knowledge is presented as a normalization of realities. The internalized regime of truth could be revealed from the order of the museum display as its primary source in this research. The arrangements of museum display in its national museum exhibitions that shown are constructed strictly with the intellectuality of the state mechanism.

Museums serve as sites where ruling elites construct imagined historical boundaries of the state. The ruling elites or political institutions transform museum collections into forms of public national representation and national historical imaginary. In doing so, a political entity could reinforce the publicness of certain histories and identities. In the service of nationalism, the museum—with its cultural symbols—was used as a strategic instrument to stabilize and legitimize a national culture within constructed enclaves aimed to foster identity awareness as a form of

truth and reality. In the process of negotiating selected historical memories and identities, the ruling elites also marginalized ideas that fell outside of their imagined boundaries during the museumization process. Scholars argue that institutions of cultural production serve as instrumental tools for national self-representation. Public museums, libraries, and galleries—many of which evolved from private collections—have been nationalized to emphasize the historical continuity of the nation. National criteria can be transformed into cultural symbols that represent the nation-state's 'origins' and 'early age' of the modern state. The search for a national past is a relatively recent development, reflecting the logic of the nation-state. In this context, museum objects function as instruments for mapping a shared historical imagination, thereby fostering internal cohesion among a specific group (Elgenius, 2015). The national museum objects are not merely artifacts that carry aesthetic value or serve as evidence of human civilizations; they are also primary sources in this research that enable an interrogation of the intersection between power, Malay ethnicity, and the nation-state. Museum displays or objects, as primary sources, are always the end products of curatorial decisions that embody specific ideological narratives. In this context, museum displays and the nation-state project Malay identity within the Malaysian national museum. Thus, the museum display becomes an arena for the unification of ethnic identity—or as presented in this research, a unified conception of Malay identity within Malaysia as a modern nation-state.

### **1.7.2 Power, Political Geography and imaginary of ethnic space of Maritime Southeast Asia**

Maps of scientific management, surveillance, and rationalization seem to have diluted the scent of colonialism. Today's sophisticated crafted maps are precisely those of modern nation states as maps are often products of political power. Our



contemporary imagination of the Malay world revolves around and is confined within the framework of the nation state. The Malay Archipelago, also known as Nusantara when referring to the imagined expanse of maritime Southeast Asia, has, under the guise of today's familiar Malay world map, undergone various 'baptisms' by colonial imperialism. These 'baptisms' were often involuntary and a combination of violence, colonial expansion, modern military apparatus, so-called security orders and comprehensive control over nature. Such colonial technologies ultimately facilitated the emergence of so-called borders and rigid demarcations that have endured the test of time and became the foundation of modern nation-states. Coupled with the rapid withdrawal of colonizers after World War II and the rise of independence movements under the exigencies of the post-war world order, these borders have become the defining circles of ethnic imagination within museums and cultural institutions.

The manufactured discovery of a spatial imaginary began with the labelling of Southeast Asia as *terra incognita*. The so-called fruitfulness of natural science and knowledge inquiry was often led by military expeditions. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, little geographical terrain remained unmapped, but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, data collection on these frontiers in Southeast Asia reached its scientific climax. However, in archiving frontier information, competition arose among various groups, including ethnologists and hydrographers, who recorded maritime Southeast Asia, then called the East Indies, during the colonial period. These competing data-gathering efforts were patronized on a statecraft basis, manufacturing the East Indies as lands to be civilized by imperial powers. Yet, colonial motives lurked beneath the guise of science and escaped detection. Through natural science, educational research publications, discovery, and knowledge production, the colonial character was effectively covered (Tagliacozzo, 2005, pp. 29-31).

Thongchai Winichakul's monumental work on the idea of the "geo-body of a nation" offers invaluable insights for our study when it comes to state and power. He showed that before colonial rule, political life in Southeast Asia was defined by overlapping sovereignties, including kingdoms, local polities and indigenous regimes, which were bound together by webs of loyalty rather than by lines on a map. Allegiance flowed toward the dynasty's king through tributary networks and kinship ties rather than the rigid borders of a modern nation-state. Colonial administrations, and later national governments, drew those borders, transforming a flexible, multidimensional spatial imagination into fixed territories we know today. In doing so, they narrowed our understanding of migration, transformation, and cultural exchange to the single story of the "nation." Yet within Winichakul's text lies the promise of recovering Southeast Asia's richer, highly fluid geo-body before and after colonialism (Winichakul, 1994).

Today, the imaginaries of the circle of boundaries of the Malay world are much more contemporary as the imaginaries of the Malay world are manufactured by the imagination of the nation-state's boundaries. This force must be addressed as it influences the imaginaries of the Malay world within the limits of the nation-state. Simultaneously, it is important for the nation-state to maintain the definitions of the Malay world in the national museum.

## **1.8 Organization of Chapters**

The following is an overview of the entire thesis. Chapter 1: discuss the background of the study by formulating the intersectional context on the museum, power, and identities. The context starts with the European experiences which enable

the research to borrow literature to show the important of research gap as the research could be carried out in selected national museums in Peninsular Malaysia.

Chapter 2: The literature review explained theocratical understanding in relation to the construction of theocratical understanding on the relations of power and museum display. The literature consisted of Foucault's episteme and heterotopias that enable the investigation of orders on selected national museum exhibitions and national museum displays that signified meanings on Malay identities in Malaysia. The Chapter 2 literature review also discussed an understanding of Malay identities in Malay Archipelago, as ethnicity is concern, the concept of Malay identities is always fluid with richness of diversities. The concept of Malay identities changes overtime.

Chapter 3 explained about the qualitative social research method had employ to gather data for analysis. Inductive social inquiry would be the orientation of the research. Data was gathered first done using an inductive approach in social research. From the data embedded case study is to permit varied national museum to be put under said case study, which are the national museums in Peninsular Malaysia to study the museum exhibitions that carried the marker of Malay identity and *Malayness* in Malaysia. The case study meant to be theory testing that is discussed in the literature review. Typologies are formulated to categories and it would detect those museum displays that carried the meanings of Malay identities and *Malayness*.

Chapter 4 consisted of the findings and analysis, in this part, several typologies are constructed to make categorizations of the museum displays that carried the representation of past memories and narratives that associated to Malay identities and *Malayness*. These typologies are: Acehese grave stone, Model of Ship, Usages of Maps in the National Museums, Malay subethnic group identities, Ancient Regimes,

colonialism, Malay Manuscripts, Hang Tuah. Explanations, summary of the data and analysis have been carried out by raw data this chapter.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides the discussion, evaluations and synthetization of the main findings and its reflections of power, museum, Malay identities and postcolonial discourses. It would be important of an interdisciplinary when come to studying a museum. The chapter answer the research questions by proving the theories and concepts in the literature that would provide further explanations on the orders of museum display and exhibitions in the selected national museums. To explain this case study, the discussion would have the synthesizing of the ideas from theoretical understanding. Overall, of discussion on the finding, contributions of the study, and recommendation for policy input, research limits, and concluding remarks.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 The Constructionist Understanding of Ethnicity**

Scholars who elaborate on building by using Fredrik Barth's ideas argued that ethnic identities are not permanently tied to bloodlines, languages, or territories. Rather, interactions and connectivity within sociopolitical contexts shape specific ethnic markers. Ethnic groups are formed through a sense of solidarity that emerges when they interact with out-groups. These negotiations among human groups contest and establish interactional boundaries, which strive to maintain within a community. Ethnicity thus redefines itself through interactions with out-groups, historical epochs, and the dynamics of contemporary political institutions. The practicalities of human mobility and interaction across different group boundaries continually change the meaning of particular communities. This challenges the essentialist premise that ethnicity is inherited by nature (Geary, 2015). The notion of primordial land as an ancestral element has been mentioned in the Sultan Alam Shah Museum, the Selangor State Museum, and the Negeri Sembilan State Museum, especially about the Bugis Malay subethnic identity and Minangkabau Malay subethnic identity. Their primordial narratives provide sentimental legitimacy and serve as markers of deep-rootedness. However, these records of primordial land remain a relatively new phenomenon in human civilizations. By reinterpreting these invented primordial origins through a constructionist lens, the researcher argued that these primordial lands have been recounted and reshaped as new symbols in response to shifting sociopolitical contexts. Today, both Malay subethnic identities are negotiated and reinvented into the subnational identities of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan within the Malaysian nation-

state framework. However, the Malay subethnic identities of Bugis and Minangkabau are placed under the umbrella of Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia. These are markers of the constructionist point of view, where ethnicity is fluid and identities are reconstructed over time, as discussed in the fluidity of ethnic identity.

Constructionism on ethnicity is built upon key scholar Fredrik Barth's vision of ethnic groups grounded on boundaries. Boundaries are created through interactions between communities as communities discern the difference between “us” and “them.” Ethnic boundaries are built and continuously reconstructed through interactions. This perspective opposes essentialist views that consider ethnicity to be inherited forever; as ethnicity are fluid and changes over time. In expanding Barth's ideas, the scholar explains ethnicity in the form of “concentric dualism,” where groups idealize their identities—not as cognitive boundaries but by forming an ethnocentric tendency that extends the imaginary to kin networks, reconfirming themselves while portraying others as different (Antweiler, 2015, pp. 28-29).

## **2.2 Ethnicity, Nation and Nationalism**

The state institution manufactures ethnicity through governmental mechanisms. Instruments such as legal frameworks, subsidiaries, empowerment programs, and censuses identify certain cultural markers of a group of people being constructed towards certain recognized identities. Thus, state power, knowledge production, and categorizations of people eventually became a created social reality that mobilizes a group towards a kind of systematic ethnic conscience. Nevertheless, in the hands of the state, tensions and marginalized groups also came into the picture in these constant selections by the state (Eriksen, 2010, p. 40). Beside the colonial imprint on race and ethnic groups, a nation-state is, by default, tasked with gathering data to recognize,

identify, and record the various categories of its citizens. In doing so, the nation-state projects identities—especially emphasizing a dominant ethnic typology—which then become fixed classifications of people. This fixed nature of identities contributes to the ruling class's knowledge, reinforcing its power to shape and label groups. Once these identities are internalized by the people or a particular group, they begin to define their own self-perception and way of thinking. This fixity of community categorizations creates a kind of ‘freezing’ certain cultural trails, symbols of a communities needed by the nation state. Not only to the Malay as an ethnicity in Malaysia, but also to the large minority, such as Malaysian Chinese descendants, Malaysian Indian descendants, and communities in Sabah and Sarawak. Although the Malay subethnic label survived in the national museum text, generally it has been a subset in the bigger set called ‘Malay’ in Malaysian national museums. These identities are ‘fixed’ and upheld by the nation-state as a constant production of knowledge on what ‘Malay’ currently is in the Malaysian nation-state framework.

### **2.3 Introduction: Archiving *Malayness*, Power and Knowledge**

Universally, ethnic identity is a contested concept, as ethnicity is dynamic and culturally constructed. Contestation of an ethnic identity happens because of material culture and non-material culture. Sometimes this can be traced to shared memories of the past, but features of memories might be highlighted in the construction of a “new” ethnic identity. Ethnic identity somehow refers to the rise of nationalism in a region, or the concept of nation state that always meets argument. Somehow ethnic identities are shared. For example, the Malays can be classified as Siamese Malays, the Singapore Malays, the Brunei Malays etc. Generally, power is the basic element that formulates ethnic identity.

Therefore, the research takes Malay as a dynamic concept which needs a broader discourse in comparative context in the history of Malay Archipelago. An inception of the word Malay might originate from a community near a river bank in Sumatra, but soon the dynamic concept of Malay is attached to different civilization in the galactic form of kingdoms in Malay Archipelago. Though references to ‘Malayu’ first appeared in Srivijaya sometime in the seventh century, its initial use as an exclusive term may have occurred during the early history of Melaka. During the fifteenth century the concept of ‘being Malay’ expanded to include Islam, and remained a vital component as Malay culture had been broadened to become more regionally inclusive. Accordingly, when the northern Peninsula was threatened by the Thais in the north, the idea of *Malayness* could be invoked to refer not only to an identity based on a shared language and customs but also on religion (Andaya & Andaya, 2017, p. 337).

### **2.3.1 Malay Ethnicity: Formulation and Contestation**

In an intellectual discussion of Malay, sociologically or anthropologically, it should gravitate more to the discussion of *Malayness* as a whole. The realm of *Malayness* would be more inclusive compared to the limits of nation state realm of the Malay identity. Scholarly work did highlight the importance to put *Malayness* as the focus point of the discussion which could be applied to the maritime Southeast Asia, or the Malay Archipelago, with reference to (Milner, 2008, p. 17):

Focusing on ‘Malayness’ (at least as much as on ‘the Malays’) provides a perspective on the nation state as well as religion. ‘Malayness’ is shaped in one way or another by experience in different territorial states – Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand and numerous others – just as it has been by contrasting experiences of colonial rule.



As I have suggested, however, it is also to some extent an active agent. In practical ways a transnational ‘Malay’ consciousness continues to foster ambiguities and sometimes tension in border areas. The fate of southern Thailand – in the opening years of the twenty-first century perceived to be one of the most serious terrorist fronts in Southeast Asia – is at least partly bound up with such a consciousness. There is also the possibility – depending on the long-term resilience of the Archipelago nation states – that ‘Malay’ aspirations will contribute to some future reconfiguring of Southeast Asia.

National Museum functions as a microcosm in historical telling of her national memories. The point that started the Malacca sultanate was highlighted in relating it to the romance of a glorified Malay past. No quarrels if it is measured from the sultanate involvement in maritime based economic activities. Nevertheless, the glorified years as a romance memory functions in a need of a nation state: Malaysia. The glorified sultanate had been used as a legitimate successor to bid the needs of Malay identity in Malaysia. Nonetheless, we might not neglect the ongoing changes on the value of the ruling institution in the construction and legitimization of reality. These constructions of Malay ideas change from time to time, for example, the emphasis on the Malay Annals as one of the very important texts in studying the Malay world:

“The *Sejarah Melayu* or the Malay Annals are unique in that they constitute the only available account of the history of the Malay Sultanate in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. They are in the nature of what may be termed as historical literature conveying a historical narration of the origins, evolution and demise of a great Malay maritime empire, with its unique system of government administration and politics. The Annals have universal appeal as they relate to a major transformation in the lives of the people of the Malay Archipelago from a Hindu-Malay matrix to an Islamic-Malay culture.