

Department of National Heritage in Malaysia: The Role of Conservation and Preservation of Heritage

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Mak Yong Theatre (Photo by A Ghafar Ahmad)



Malay dance (Photo by A Ghafar Ahmad)

Malaysia is a developing nation of Southeast Asia. A few of their famous slogans reflect the diversity of its present ethnic groups in terms of language, customs and traditions inherited from past generations, 'One Malaysia' and 'Malaysia Truly Asia'. Malaysia's cultural fusion is the result of immigration, trade and cultural exchanges over many centuries with Arab nations, China, and India, where the arrival of the first foreigners brought along with them their wealth as well as their cultural heritage and religion. Presently, these ethnic groups still maintain their cultural traditions, but managed to come together to develop Malaysia's unique and contemporary diverse heritage.

In December 2005, the Parliament of Malaysia passed the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645); an act that encompasses a broad dimension of preservation, conservation and management of the country's natural and cultural heritage. The Act provides for the preservation and conservation of national heritage, natural heritage, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, underwater cultural heritage, treasure trove and related matters. The Act also considers all provisions of the (now defunct) Antiquities Act 1976 and Treasure Trove Act 1957. Antiquity matters which were once under the auspices of the Department of Museums and Antiquities is now under the patronage of the Department of National Heritage.

The Department of National Heritage was established on 1 March 2006 under the National Heritage Act 2005. The Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture is responsible for all heritage policies; headed by the Commissioner of

Heritage who is appointed under the Act by the Minister, the Department of National Heritage is the custodian of Malaysia's rich and diversified heritage. According to the Act, cultural heritage includes cultural property, structures or artefacts, performances, dances, songs and music that are pertinent to the history or contemporary way of life for Malaysians as well as land or underwater cultural heritage of the tangible form. Whilst natural heritage includes natural features of an area in Malaysia consisting of the earth's physical or biological formations or groups of such formations, geological or physiographical features, mountains, rivers, streams, rock formations, sea shores or any natural sites with outstanding value from the point of view of nature, science, history, conservation or natural beauty including flora and fauna.

Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage comprises of (i) oral traditions (phrases and idioms, chanted hymns, folktales, narrated myths and legends); (ii) performing arts (folk music, folk dances and dramatic performances); (iii) customs (rituals, social practices including ceremonies and festivals) and (iv) material folklore (functional objects made by folk groups). Various traditional art forms are still practised including the Chinese opera, Indian dance, Malay dance and Malay martial arts called *Silat*. Festivals such as *Hari Raya* and *Malaysia Fest* are open for everyone inside and outside the community(ies) to enjoy. Malaysian handicrafts have been declared as 'unique' by the UNESCO-AHPADA (ASEAN Handicraft Promotion and Development Association).

One of Malaysia's elements of intangible

cultural heritage is *Mak Yong*, declared by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in November 2005. *Mak Yong* is an ancient form of dance-theatre which incorporates elements of custom, stylised dance and acting, vocal and instrumental music, stories, songs as well as formal and improvised spoken text. The *Mak Yong* orchestra is made up of a three-stringed spiked fiddle (*rebab*), double-headed barrel drums (*gendang*) and hanging knobbed gongs (*tetawak*) accompanied by singing and dancing. *Mak Yong's* singing and musical repertoire are unique and this integral element of Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage was listed as a National Heritage under the Act in 2007.

The Department of National Heritage has been at the forefront of promoting public awareness for the cultural heritage of Malaysia. Their efforts include conserving buildings and monuments of historical, architectural and cultural significance; promoting performance and visual arts; organising exhibitions, seminars, workshops and tours on heritage; publications, websites and competitions; and establishing archaeological galleries. The Department of National Heritage has played a major role in conserving, preserving and safeguarding Malaysia's heritage with support from the state government. To date, 173 heritage items in Malaysia including buildings, objects, intangible cultural heritage, archaeological sites and living heritage treasures have been listed as national heritage under the Act. The Department of National Heritage will strive to preserve and protect Malaysia's natural and cultural heritage as a legacy for future generations.