

Ulasan Buku / *Book Review*

Akademika 89 (2)

The Remembered, Preserved and Imagined Past. My Heritage Memoirs
by Tun Ahmad Sarji, Petaling Jaya, Pelanduk, 2018, vii, 156 pages ISBN 978-967-978-996-6

“If we believe that heritage buildings tell a story of the city, its people, its way of life, then what happens when they are destroyed?” (pg. 10). Starting with such a poignant line of enquiry, which sets the scene for the book on Tun Ahmad Sarji’s collection of Heritage Memoirs, we could say that the book’s title - “*The Remembered, Preserved and Imagined Past. My Heritage Memoirs*” – captures the heart of one man’s passion for heritage recognition and conservation. This book has six chapters, which encompassed Tun Ahmad Sarji’s commitment to heritage identification, recognition, preservation and conservation, through his various capacities and involvement in different organisations.

Proceeding on such a compelling *raison d’être* for the preservation of built heritage, Tun Ahmad Sarji had successfully demonstrated the overwhelming urgency for the preservation of built heritage, where the role played by a formalised platform in the form of the National Heritage Act 2005 would be instrumental in safeguarding the continuity, the legacy of the intangible dimension of buildings and places – the values, memories, place-making and identity that came together with the preservation of these built heritages, from the “pitchfork of the economic demon” (pg. 27). Tun’s book drew attention to the importance of good governance in our quest to conserve heritage. Indeed, consensus, trust, expertise, experience, integrity and most important of all, the extent to which the authorities and other relevant stakeholders are conversant with “diverse culture of the people of the country” (pg. 33) are instrumental and pivotal to the preservation and conservation of heritage.

The book is an excellent record of sorts that not only make explicit the good work carried out by the Heritage of Malaysia Trust over the years; it also documented the rationales behind their preservation works, which had directly served to keep the narratives of these heritages alive. However, a melancholic air lingered after the reading, and studying of Tun Ahmad Sarji’s book, *The Remembered, Preserved and Imagined Past. My Heritage Memoirs*, especially when reading about the loss he felt after witnessing the disappearance of some of the country’s heritage – “of the old urban fabric of our city centres, namely the rows of heritage shophouses and the residences in the neighbourhood only to have them replaced by new and unsympathetic structures” that was so tangible (pg. 23). The despondency compounded when Tun Ahmad Sarji commented that the fate of our historical urban fabric “lies precariously in the hands of the local authorities” (pg. 23), which aptly describes the bleak future of heritage being held in the hands of persons, agencies or institutions that might not fully comprehend the impact of their decisions over the range of invaluable heritage of not just the Malaysians, but the humanity as a whole. Most of us failed to recognise that heritage represents the richness of cultural diversity of the human society, and the ingenuity and resilience of humankind.

The air of melancholy was somehow lifted by an enthusiastic introduction of Tun Ahmad Sarji’s relatively recent appointment as Chairman of the Foundation for Literary and Creative Arts, which places a heavy focus on literary works (pg. 110), and other artistic works such as paintings, drawing, etchings, lithographs, prints, maps, photographs, letters, engraving and prints, and the work of architects in the form of buildings (pg. 139). The appointment also highlighted Tun Ahmad Sarji’s fascination with all things heritage, covering something as tangible as buildings, or as intangible, and as fine as *hikayats*, chronicles, folklores, proverbs *etc.* that reflect the Malay mind and the Malay world view – their moral, social and ethical values, their thoughts, likes and dislikes, and their sense of justice (pg. 111), and the close ally between Malay literature and the history of the Malay people (pg. 120). It is hopeful that the West, through these Great Malay Literary Works (pg. 120) would be greatly impressed by “both the unique genius of Malay civilisation and its impact across the ages” (pg. 121) and would come to recognise that “beneath the exotic and orientalist veneer, and across the lines that divide, we share many common values and aspirations” (pg. 121).

In the case of multi-ethnic Malaysia, Tun Ahmad Sarji’s book made a significant contribution when he highlighted the role of heritage to national unity. In chapter 3, Values of Built Heritage (pg. 46), Tun

Ahmad Sarji noted the importance of interpretation of heritage in attracting and engaging with the audience. Interpretation identifies what is unique and special and as such helps to make sense of places. It can encourage national unity by giving communities a sense of place, of ownership and belonging, and can even help build bridges between different groups in a community. However, in this book, Tun Ahmad Sarji did not go beyond mentioning the word 'national unity'. Perhaps, if Tun is planning to have a sequel to this book, then besides the attention given to Malay classics, Tun could also give some space to the literary classics and craftsmanship of other ethnic groups in Malaysia.

The ingenuity of Tun Ahmad Sarji in crafting a book on his collection of memoirs on heritage that explored the concept of 'heritage' as "the thing or things which is or are important to us – as an individual, as a community, as a nation, as the world" (pg. 151), which weaved through both tangible and intangible dimensions of the concept of heritage, is masterfully demonstrated through the foundational theme that tugs at the heart-strings of those who genuinely care about heritage, and those who mourn their untimely demise. Heritage buildings stand not only to allow us to marvel at the ingenuity, craftsmanship or passion that led to them being built, but also to appreciate the narratives that had been woven into these structures; the stories, intrigues, myths and legends, along with personalities, feuds, vendettas, and the many occasions that had graced them, allowing us to better understand how they had culminated the past and shaped our future. The narrative embedded within a heritage as tangible as a majestic, beautiful piece of architecture is the essence that gives meaning to its continued preservation. The narratives of our heritage are what make our past present for the future.

On this note, it is heartening to note that this book serves as a timely reminder to us all Malaysians, to ask ourselves the question of, do we have, or do we know of such heritage places, sites, or buildings in Malaysia where the various communities in Malaysia share a common sense of ownership over a heritage past?

Lee Jing

The Governance for Heritage Conservation Research Group
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
43600 Bangi, Selangor
Malaysia
E-mail: leejing@ukm.edu.my

Sharina Abdul Halim

The Governance for Heritage Conservation Research Group
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
43600 Bangi, Selangor
Malaysia
E-mail: sharinahalim@ukm.edu.my

Ong Puay Liu

The Governance for Heritage Conservation Research Group
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
43600 Bangi, Selangor
Malaysia
E-mail: pliu@ukm.edu.my

Sarah Aziz Abdul Ghani Aziz

The Governance for Heritage Conservation Research Group
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
43600 Bangi, Selangor
Malaysia
E-mail: saziz@ukm.edu.my

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Rahimah Abdul Aziz, Datin Paduka Halimaton Saadiah Hashim, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Geraldine Chan Kim Ling, and Dr. Tanot Unjah, members of the Governance for Heritage Conservation Research Group, UKM for the insightful comments provided during the course of the preparation of this Book Review. The critical discourse we embarked on in deploying the art and craft of narrative to explore the dimensions of heritage, its contemporary values and relevance would not be possible without the generous funding awarded by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for a research entitled “Continuing Legacies: Engaging Custodians in Heritage Conservation” (KRA-2017-020).

