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Exploring Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Documentation of the Untold Stories of Mak Yong Performing Art: A conceptual framework

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Abstract

UNESCO has recognized Mak Yong's Theatre as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity since September 2005. Currently, there is a lack of existing collection on ICH in Malaysia, especially of the performing art heritage at the national information agencies. There is a significant need to urgently safeguarding this ancient theatre to keep them alive. The objectives of this research are to explore the undocumented stories of Mak Yong performing art theatre in Malaysia and to develop a new technique of information packaging in documenting the untold stories of the Mak Yong theatre.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; documentation; Mak Yong

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1.0 Introduction

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have recognized Mak Yong's Theatre Performing Art as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity since September 2005. However, this culture has been banned by the state government of Kelantan since 1991 due to resistance to Islamic practices (Shamsul Akmar 1991; New Straits Times 1995; Ab. Aziz Shuaib and Raja Iskandar Raja Halid 2011 and Shuaib and Olalere 2013;). As a result, Mak Yong has become a less popular cultural performing art and exposed to degradation due to the prohibition, especially in the documentation of the information regarding the Mak Yong stories. Currently, Mak Yong reappears in Kelantan after 28 years. It has been acknowledged by the state government letter dated 24th May 2019 by Kelantan Mufti. This allowed Mak Yong Theatre, which follows Islamic law compliance, to perform in Kelantan. There is a significant need to safeguard this ancient theatre to keep them alive. This research overcomes the issues of safeguarding ICH as it affects the livelihood of social and sustaining cultural heritage among the community, especially for the new generation. Understanding the preservation and documentation of Mak Yong Theatre in sustaining ICH is essential. It is important to strengthen the local people's identity, build self-esteem, and as a source of income from the tourism industry to the artists.

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ICH provides a community with a unique selling point in the globally competitive tourism industry. According to Sharafina Zaky Nublan Zaky & Madieha Abdul Ghani Azmi, 2017, Malaysia has great potential for cultural tourism products. The protection and transmission of Mak Yong theatre elements assist the community in understanding ICH's value. Increasing appreciation of the heritage value enhances the quality of life in the community.

1.1 Research Objective

- a) To identify the undocumented stories of Mak Yong performing art theatre in Malaysia
- b) To publish proper documentation of untold stories of Mak Yong as national information references

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The enfranchisement of the cultural heritage is the main agenda of all countries in ensuring the nation's dignity and culture remain preserved for future generations. Many efforts and practices have been applied in ensuring the sustainability of cultural heritage, either tangible or intangible, in various countries. It includes developing diverse principles or guidelines promulgated as charters, conventions, policies, recommendations, declarations, or statements. It was drafted and adopted mainly by international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) concerned with safeguarding cultural heritage (Ahmad, 2006). This enactment is undertaken to clarify the challenges in protecting and maintaining all types of cultural heritage.

There are two (2) main categories of cultural heritage. Tangible heritage is also a physical 'object' that concerns a piece of property, a building, or a place that can be owned and passed on to someone else. There are two categories which are movable and immovable heritage. Movable heritage refers to any portable natural or manufactured object of heritage significance, such as cultural groups, communities, artworks, ancient books, and valuable documents. Meanwhile, immovable heritage is a built physical structure significant to the heritage, including monuments, groups of buildings, and sites. National Heritage authority body from government and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is responsible for exploring, conserving, and preserving its heritage towards its sustainable development to stand out on the world stage such National Heritage Department, Centre of Study for Building Housing and Planning, Badan Warisan Heritage Services Sdn Bhd and others.

Other types of cultural heritage are known as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). It indicates 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated in addition to that – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognized as part of their Cultural Heritage' (Kurin, 2004b; Z. Liu, 2015). Examples of intangible heritage are oral traditions, performing arts, local knowledge, and traditional skills. Each country manages the cultural heritage, including restoration, preservation, and conservation, providing exhibitions, education, support research services, and more to ensure that the cultural heritage listed is always valued and dignified by the public. Archives, museums, galleries, and libraries are the prominent institutions responsible for collecting collections and information from primary sources, preserving and preserving these collections so that the public can access them while delivering legacy information to future generations. However, the publication of professional papers discussing how these institutions are implementing the initiative is minimal, especially in the heritage collection documentation. Collecting collections from primary sources such as documents and artifacts that tell a legacy, ethnicity, society, or culture is very important. These agencies manage unique and exposed materials with the stress factor. Many legacy materials, especially the ICH-related collections, are still incomplete and are in private hands, at risk of damage and loss forever.

2.2 Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Documentation

Since adopting the UNESCO 2003 declaration, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage has become more efficient and vigorous. The role of local communities, supported by more local governments worldwide, and participation of cultural heritage institutions now actively contribute to safeguarding, documenting, and promoting their local intangible culture for various purposes. Moreover, Arantes (2012) adds that documentation and promotion, which have proven to be valuable tools for safeguarding ICH, can also be interpreted as ways of staging or enacting heritage in the world media (photography, film, audiovisual recordings).

2.3 ICH Documentation Program

Cultural heritage institutions have carried out numerous ICH documentation projects for various ICH elements, for example, a project led by the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization to document traditional Egyptian culture (Crofts, 2010). This project, a collaboration with Folk Creativity Centre (FCC), implemented an analysis of the collection, which includes five main topics covering different aspects of Egyptian culture. Furthermore, a project documenting and archiving musical traditions in Western India (Chaudhuri, 2012) embraces the community involvement in strengthening audiovisual recording collection in Langas Manganiars and Mandolin traditional music. Likewise, another project for documenting the Mangyan heritage of Mindoro, Philippines was conducted by the heritage center (Templanza & Templanza, 2015). They analyzed the whole Mangyan collection at Mangyan Heritage Center and Center for Mindoro Studies.

2.4 Documentation of Mak Yong Performing Art

Mak Yong is recognized as an ancient theatre since the 18th century in Kelantan with forms and features of ritual, stylized acting and dance, vocal and instrumental music, song, creativeness of storyline, and formal as well as spontaneous dialogue (Sheppard 1960; Yousof 1979). It was presented as a royal theatre under the direct benefaction of the Kelantan Sultanate until the 1920s (Kvam, 2011). However, at present Mak Yong has become an unpopular cultural performing art due to its prohibition by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) in the year 1991 since the political party took control of the state due to being resistance to Islamic teachings (Shamsul Akmar 1991; Tang 1991; New Straits Times 1995; New Straits Times 1996; Ab. Aziz Shuaib and Raja Iskandar Raja Halid 2011 and Shuaib and Olalere 2013;). This situation worsened when the country lost a few Mak Yong artists and practitioners, such as the primadonna Khatijah Awang. This progressively dimmed this traditional performance since no more heir is an expert in sustaining this heritage at the national and international levels.

Besides safeguarding ICH by performing it to the public such as by, using intellectual writing and discussion in seminars and, educational programs for youngsters, Mak Yong also needs to be documented as part of the heritage conservation for education support, research, and access to the originalities of this performance art. According to Matusky (2002), McCulloch (2004), and Chaudhuri (2012). In Mak Yong's, various approaches can be applied in documenting ICH involving high-technology audio and video recording, visual, movement, presentation, and audience expression in real-time. In the meantime, this recording can be stored and preserved at the cultural heritage institution for future reference. However, to engage an authentic and reliable collection or recording of Mak Yong's performing arts or other ICH elements, good documentation strategies of ICH are required to ensure the originality and trustworthiness of the content and information of the resources. In the year 1967, the first documentation of Mak Yong took place when Mubin Sheppard was the Museum Director at the time. He brought an Asian music specialist, Professor William Malm from Michigan University of United States of America, to compile, record, and document 11 of Mak Yong's stories, consisting of 90 hours of monochrome videotape that took 32 nights (Sheppard, 1969). This recording collection was also made a copy to be kept in the national museum. Nonetheless, referring Mubin Sheppard's letter found in the national archive shows that he requested the recording for a recopy because the original collection was damaged in a fire disaster at the national museum which almost destroyed all museum collections at the time (Sheppard, n.d.). Unfortunately, no response was received.

To date, researchers found that there are no single information reference sources that are fully documented on Mak Yong's performing art stories and are being kept in any repositories in this country. This article will discuss the roles of cultural heritage institutions in documenting heritage information management through strategies that can be done to achieve a successful documentation project for ICH collection.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study adopts a case study research which to explore the stories of Mak Yong performing art that have not been presented or documented on any platform. For the first research objective, researchers consider executing a document analysis of the Mak Yong collection in the National Archives of Malaysia repository. For this research, there will be five (5) undocumented Mak Yong stories will be identified. The data will be analyzed according to the Principles of Aristotle Elements of Performance art and appropriate information management metadata scheme to identify the structure of Mak Yong's stories. Aristotle elements is significant for this study in order to guide the researcher to explore the whole information on Mak Yong. Next, for the second research objective, the method of data collection implemented was semi-structured interviews conducted through a series of 5 respondents (Mak Yong activists) in exploring and validating those undocumented Mak Yong stories that were analyzed by using Aristotle's Elements of Performance Art and Information Management Metadata.

4.0 Conceptual Framework



Fig 1: The Conceptual Framework

Fig. 1 shows the conceptual framework for the untold story of Mak Yong's documentation. This study drew on previously published literature. Fazilah Husin (2007), has used Aristotle's Performance Analysis in her study of the form and structures of the dramatic text of Malay Experimental Theater (TEM). The author proposed a conceptual framework that defines (6) Aristotle's elements in studying a theatrical performance.

4.1 Story

Documents related to the storytelling sequence in Mak Yong's performance consist of chronological details related to the characters in the story that takes place in stages. The storytelling must have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Mak Yong's stories are derived from pure Malay sources that have never been plated, adapted, or originated from India, Indonesia, or Thailand (Sheppard, 1985). Each of these stories will be acted out spontaneously and according to the creativity of each character based on the core of Mak Yong's story

4.2 Character

Documents related to the character portrayed the actor to play a role in Mak Yong's performance. Characters consist of individuals who are directly involved in the performance and have character traits such as personality, appearance, beliefs, socioeconomic background, and language. In Mak Yong's performing arts, there are several main characters and side characters that have been identified such as Pak Yong, Mak Yong, Permaisuri/Tuan Puteri, Peran (Old & Young), Inang, and also various characters who play evil characters such as jinn, giants, shamans or sorcerers, monsters, and other evil beings (Rahimin Zahari & Sutung Umar RS, 2011). This study examines each content of Mak Yong's collection in various forms of material in identifying information about each character in Mak Yong's performing arts.

4.3 Thought

Documents related to the path of ideas and meanings to be conveyed in Mak Yong's storytelling and performance. Thought also plays a role in highlighting teaching, morality, innovation, development, discussion of current issues, and so on in Mak Yong's performing arts. Thought plays a role in highlighting teaching, morality, innovation, development, discussion of current issues, and so on in Mak Yong's performing arts. As a result of this study, only collections in libraries and archives have information on thinking related to Mak Yong's performing arts which can be obtained through writing papers in the form of books, journal articles, proceedings, magazines, and so on.

4.4 Dialogue/script

The diction aspect includes a collection related to the language, dialogue, and script used by each character in each narration of Mak Yong's performance. The use of language also determines the character of difference of each character in Mak Yong's performance. As a result of the content analysis of Mak Yong's collection, information on diction aspects in Mak Yong is not widely presented because the collection of information that can be referenced consists of video sources, audio, proceedings, and some journal articles available in libraries and archives.

4.5 Music

The collection related to the music aspect includes the rhythm of singing and the melody of instruments in a Mak Yong performance. Apart from that, the sound collection element can also be extended to the musical instruments used in Mak Yong's performance, the lyrics of the songs sung by the characters, and the sound effects played in the success of Mak Yong's performance. According to Nasuruddin (2003), Mak Yong has many songs (repertoire) of about 30 songs that are still in use. Among the songs such as Lagu Mengadap Rebab, Lagu Kijang Emas, Lagu Sindung, Lagu Sendayang and many more. Apart from the songs sung in Mak Yong's performance, the researchers used to identify the musical instruments used by the Mak Yong group such as Rebab, Serunai, Gendang, and Tetawak as well as several larger musical instruments by including Wayang Kulit instruments such as Geduk, Gedumbak, Canang, and Kesi.

4.6 Spectacle

Documents related to visual elements such as sets, costumes, special effects, and others in Mak Yong's performance. The quality of the elements created in Mak Yong's performance can be translated through the sight of the audience.

5.0 Conclusion

Archives, museums, and libraries are the parent institutions responsible for collecting collections and information from primary sources, preserving and conserving these collections so that they can be accessed by the public and at the same time can pass on heritage information to future generations. However, the publication of professional papers discussing how these institutions implement such initiatives is very limited, especially in documenting heritage collections. The collection of collections from primary sources such as documents and artefacts that narrate a heritage, ethnicity, society, or culture is particularly important as these agencies manage materials that are unique and vulnerable to extinction factors. The limitation of the study is reflects only reflect to the archival materials that have been deposited into the national archive. Yet many of the heritage materials especially the collections related to Mak Yong are still incomplete and in private hands facing the risk of damage and loss forever.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research paper contributes to the field of Library and Information Management.

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