

## Museums in the Northern Region of Peninsula Malaysia and Cultural Heritage<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Museums in Malaysia, including those in the northern region, have become closely associated with nation building seeking to project commonly shared experiences besides their increasing attachment to the tourism industry. The cultural displays in these museums are done in line with the national culture policy that favours Malay and other indigenous cultures that were not contradictory to Islamic precepts. This essay scrutinises 28 general and specialised museums located in the northern region of peninsula Malaysia, covering the states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang and northern Perak. These museums are under the administration of the Department of Museums, state governments and other government departments, besides private organisations and individuals. A few of the more important ones are discussed in details while the natures of their main exhibits are tabulated for easy reference. The discussion looks at the visitor numbers to these museums and provides possible reasons for museum attractions to visitors. The more substantiated discussion focuses on the region's distinctive performing arts like *boria*, *mek mulong*, *hadrah*, the cultural side of the Perak Man and paddy cultivation, and Chinese Peranakan culture in the museums.

**Keywords and phrases:** general museums, specialised museums, northern region, visitor numbers, distinctive performing arts

### Introduction

The northern region of Peninsular Malaysia is well known for its physical features that are not replicated elsewhere in the country. These include the Kilim Karst Geoforest Park in Langkawi, the limestone caves of Perlis which had traces of human habitation and Neolithic culture dating back 3,000–4,000 years ago, and the archaeological sites of the Bujang Valley and Lenggong Valley. Culturally, the region is known for its distinctive performing arts represented by the *boria*, *mek mulong* and *hadrah*, besides the Kedah *nobat* and the heritage enclave of George Town where major places of worship—the Kapitan Keling mosque, Kuan Yin temple, St. George's church, Sri Mahariamman temple, Cathedral of Assumption and the Khoo Kongsi—are located along Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling described as the "Street of Harmony" in tourist brochures.

However, developments have put the region's unique physical landscape under threat while rapid social change had rendered some of the cultural forms obsolete or irrelevant. Some of the latter could still be found in museums, the result of selective official attempts in the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. The essay scrutinises general and specialised museums located in the northern region and their foregrounding of cultural features that are unique to the area, an aspect that had received little coverage in previous studies (Abu Talib Ahmad 2010, 2012; Carstens 1986). The study is based on official museum reports, site visits, conversation with museum officials and related studies on culture and museums.

### **Museums in the Northern Region**

The northern region has the distinction of having the oldest museum in the country through the Perak Museum which was opened in 1883. Located in Taiping, this is a general museum focusing on natural history, ethnography, archaeology and culture. The number of museums remained very small until the late 1970s. In the 1980s, many museums were established by the states, government departments and private concerns. By 2013, there were 189 museums in Malaysia (Mohd Azmi Mohd Yusof 2013) with almost 80 percent located in Kedah, Penang, Perak, Melaka, Kelantan, Selangor, Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur and Johor. These museums are under the administration of the federal Department of Museums (previously Department of Museums and Antiquities), other government departments, state governments including a university, public and private organisations, as well as individuals.

The Perak Museum started with zoological specimens and herbarium besides the ethnology of the Perak Malays and the Chinese, whom, by the 1880s, had formed a significant group in Taiping or even Perak. The idea for the museum's establishment came from Sir Hugh Low, the third British resident of Perak. For the Perak colonial authority, the museum was meant to be part of official research on material culture, so as to facilitate control of the state and its population (Jabatan Muzium Malaysia 2012, 33–34). This urgency was real. Less than a decade earlier, Low's predecessor J. W. W. Birch, the first British resident, was murdered in Pasir Salak in September 1875 (Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali 1997). Birch had overstepped his duty as resident and misunderstood Malay customs notably the practice of slavery among the Malay feudal chiefs, a weakness which Low intended to address indirectly through the Perak Museum. By the 20th century, museums like the Perak Museum had become an intrinsic part of colonial aggrandisement efforts, the way it "imagined" its dominion and enforcing this imagination on the conquered natives (Anderson 1991, 165–185).

In the post-independence period, colonial museums in Southeast Asia have undergone changes like the Batavia Museum and its successor Indonesia National Museum which aimed the same exhibits at different audiences but with very different messages (McGregor 2004, 15–29). So was the Perak Museum after 1957, although it still keeps natural history, ethnography, archaeology and culture. Presently, under the Department of Museum, the Perak Museum is divided into four main galleries: Gallery A for special exhibitions; Gallery B for natural history; Gallery C for culture and ethnography; and Gallery D for the culture of the *orang asli* (indigenous) and ceramics (Jabatan Muzium Malaysia 2012, 33–45). Another museum located in Ipoh—the Darul Ridzuan Museum—complements the Perak Museum. It was established in 1992 and placed under the control of the Perak State Government. This museum displays artefacts and historical activities of the tin mining industry and forestry of Perak state and on Ipoh, the city that flourished as a result of tin mining (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism 2004, 58–59).

After 1957, museums in Malaya (Malaysia after September 1963) had become closely associated with nation building. They seek to project commonly shared experiences besides their increasing attachment to the tourism industry (Adi Haji Taha 2004). Most of these museums were established for the purpose of storing and preserving the country's historical legacy and national culture, to enable future generations developing and enhancing their national identity. As for culture, these were displayed within the context of the national culture policy which was promulgated in 1971. This policy favours the Malay and other indigenous cultures that were not contradictory to Islamic precepts. Other museums like the Penang State Museum seek to balance contending interests among the various races and within the major ethnic groups through multiculturalism or the "Penang Story". However, other museums, notably the private ones, have their own specific stories and agenda that are different or even in contradiction with the national or state museums. Table 1 highlights 28 of the museums and galleries located in the northern region. Details of their featured exhibits are provided by official publications on museums (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism 2004; Jabatan Muzium Malaysia 2012) and site visits in the last five years.

**Table 1.** Selected museums in the northern region

<b>Name of museum</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Featured exhibits</b>
Kangar Museum (1995)	Kangar, Perlis	Ethnography, social, culture, politics and history of Perlis, while the Royal Hall displays the state's royal collection
Kota Kayang Museum (2000)	Kuala Perlis, Perlis	Prehistory, weapons, royal regalia and modern history of Perlis including the Bunga Mas
Kuala Kedah Fort Museum (1998)	Kuala Kedah, Kedah	Exhibits on Kuala Kedah indicating the area as the administrative centre of Kedah sultans, centre for international commerce and the Kedah fort that formed the bulwark of the state's defence from the 16th century until the early 19th century
Lembah Bujang Archaeology Museum (1980)	Merbok, Kedah	Archaeological artefacts – porcelains, ceramics, Islamic glass, beads, pottery, celadon, weaponry, glass splinters, Budhagupta stone inscription, temple utensils, yoni, somasutra, linga, votive tables and peripih
Galeria Perdana (1995)	Langkawi, Kedah	Gifts, souvenirs and awards presented to former premier Tun Mahathir Mohamed and his wife – ceramics, textiles, Islamic arts/works, academic awards, musical instruments, paintings, glass, weapons, games and automobiles
Kedah State Museum (1957)	Alor Setar, Kedah	The Kedah Darul Aman gallery, ethnography gallery, history gallery, personality gallery, gallery for manuscripts, transportation in Kedah and weapons
Kedah Royal Museum (1983)	Alor Setar, Kedah	The Kedah sultanate, royal genealogy of Kedah, court ceremonies, photographs of members of the royal family, royal attire, royal wedding and the Sultan Abdul Hamid collection
Kedah State Art Gallery (1983)	Alor Setar, Kedah	Paintings, photographs, musical instruments, handicraft and traditional headgears for the royalty and state officials
Paddy Museum (1999)	Gunung Keriang, Kedah	History of paddy cultivation in Kedah, types of paddy farming, farming tools from Kedah and outside Malaysia including those used in the processing of paddy and products made from paddy

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**Table 1.** (continued)

Name of museum	Location	Featured exhibits
Langkawi Craft Complex (covers three museums) (1996)	Langkawi, Kedah	Heritage Museum – local craft and their relevance in daily life, tools of trade, puppets, traditional kite making, rattan weaving, weapons, carvings and musical instruments Langkawi Legend and Historical Museum – revolves around Mahsuri, Langkawi's folk legend Weddings and Custom Museum – traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian wedding costumes as well as traditions of the Kadazans, Bugis, Ibans and Orang Ulu of Sarawak
Sultan Abdul Halim Gallery (2009)	Alor Setar, Kedah	Exhibits on the present ruler of Kedah Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah
Penang State Museum and Art Gallery (1965)	Lebuh Farquhar, George Town, Penang	Social and cultural history of the major races of Penang including the Chinese Peranakan, Penang history and the island's transformation into an international port besides 19th century paintings of Penang
Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah (1982)	Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang	Art pieces, ethnography gallery, archaeology gallery, technology gallery and astronomy
Galeri Arkeologi (2012)	Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang	Archaeological research in Malaysia notably those helmed by academics from Universiti Sains Malaysia at the Sungai Batu site, Bukit Bunuh and the Perak Man
Penang Islamic Museum (1995)	Lebuh Aceh, George Town, Penang	Islam and Islamic culture, Muslim personalities, architecture, decorative styles, mode of religious teaching ( <i>pondok</i> school), Islam in Penang, Islam in the Malay peninsula and the spread of Islam through trade
One East Museum (2011)	Jalan Dunlop, George Town, Penang	Culture of the Chinese and the Straits Chinese, paintings and artworks of renowned artists from Southeast Asia, rare Chinese famille rose figurines, Chinese porcelain, furniture and Chinese Peranakan wares from the later part of the 19th century to the pre-Chinese Cultural revolution era

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**Table 1.** *(continued)*

<b>Name of museum</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Featured exhibits</b>
Penang War Museum (2002)	Batu Maung, Penang	Outdoor museum based on a former British military base with gun emplacements, empty shells, military motorcycle, intelligence room, living quarters of the servicemen, torture chamber used by the Japanese, images of malnourished prisoners of war (POWs), the Siam-Burma death railway, torture tools, images of tortured victims, a war memorial, trials and execution of senior Japanese military officers and replica of the gallows used in the hanging of convicted Japanese war criminals and pictures of British re-entry in September 1945
Pinang Peranakan Mansion (2010)	Church Street, George Town, Penang	Antiques, kitchen tools, ceramics and porcelain of the Penang Chinese Peranakan —the heyday of Peranakan culture in the 1930s
Penang Forestry Museum (1983)	Telok Bahang, Penang	Flora and fauna of Penang, information on jungles and the types of wood found in mangrove swamp forest, mangrove forest, coastal hills and highland forest beside the wood industry and the uses of wood in the everyday life of Malaysians
P. Ramlee Gallery (2002)	Perak Road, George Town, Penang	The life of P. Ramlee and his mates in Penang, his musical and film career, his movies' leading ladies and cartoons on Ramlee that had appeared in local magazines
Malay Museum (2010)	Hutton Lane, George Town, Penang	Way and life of the Malay-Muslims notably the Jawi-Peranakan including household utensils, cultural life and musical instruments
Ben's Vintage Toy Museum (2011)	Lebuh Aceh, George Town, Penang	10,000 toys including wind-up toys, battery powered and celluloid which include toys of the pre-war die-cast era, dinky toys, German doll of 1920 and Victorian toys of 1860

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<b>Name of museum</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Featured exhibits</b>
Perak Museum (1883)	Taiping, Perak	Specimens on anthropology, zoology, culture and local history including weapons, ornaments, dress, household articles and musical instruments
Lenggong Archaeology Gallery (2001)	Lenggong, Perak	Palaeolithic stone tools/utensils, the Perak Man, Neolithic porcelain pieces, funerary items of the bronze age and sea shells
Perak Royal Museum (1986)	Kuala Kangsar, Perak	The Perak sultanate, Perak royal genealogy and royal customs
Matang Museum, previously known as The Kota Ngah Ibrahim Historical Complex (1987)	Matang, Perak	In-situ museum based on the residence of Ngah Ibrahim, the Menteri of Larut in the mid-19th century that covers traditional agricultural implements, British administration, the Larut Wars, the Japanese Occupation, mining, the office of Ngah Ibrahim and his bedroom, and Ngah Ibrahim's genealogy

Besides the Perak Museum, there are five other museums shown in Table 1 that are run by the Department of Museums. They are the Kota Kayang Museum, the Kuala Kedah Fort Museum, Galeria Perdana, Lembah Bujang Archaeology Museum and the Matang Museum. Originally under the same department, the Lenggong Archaeology Museum was placed under the Department of Heritage in August 2012 and subsequently renamed the Lenggong Archaeology Gallery. Visitors have already raised concern of this move which many see as a downgrade. The new custodian, however, has already come up with various plans to attract more visitors (in 2002 it attracted 16,112 visitors) by siting the UNESCO heritage office within the gallery. There were plans to include a visitor centre, show room and special exhibition (Mingguan Malaysia 11 November 2012) but these plans take time to be implemented. In February 2014 the celebrated Perak Man was brought home to this gallery (Sunday Star 16 February 2014). With adequate publicity, this might serve as a strong attraction for the museum although Islamic purists and older museum visitors among Malay-Muslims might find it difficult to reconcile the existence of the Bukit Bunuh findings with Quranic revelation on the origin of man.

Both Kedah and Penang have state museums, both of which are general museums. The Kedah State Museum began in 1957 at the Balai Besar, but in 1961 the museum was moved to another building located in Bakar Bata. In 1993, construction of the present building was started (Kedah Darul Aman State

Museum Board 1993, 10) while the present museum set up which focuses on history, ethnography, transport as well as print and literary development in the state was completed two years later. The Penang State Museum started in 1965 as a general museum covering ethnography, archaeology and natural history. It shared the same building with the art gallery which was located on the first floor. The museum followed closely the format of the National Museum which opened earlier in 1963. In fact, the National Museum had provided crucial technical support and advice before its opening (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery 1965a, 12) and until the early 1970s. However, in 1991 it discarded natural history (Penang State Museum Board 1991, 10) and concentrated on ethnography notably the Penang Story—the story of inter-ethnic mingling since the early 18th century that resulted in the unique cultural phenomenon of the Peranakan culture (Jawi Peranakan, Arab Peranakan and Chinese Peranakan) and associated cultural forms (Penang State Museum Pamphlet n.d).

The Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah was established in 1982 at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)'s main campus on Penang island. It began as a teaching museum to complement courses on museum studies which were offered by the School of Housing, Building and Planning. Although the museum studies are no longer taught, the museum's original emphasis remained, while the combination of the arts and the sciences in museum displays is scrupulously maintained. Over the years, the museum had organised regular exhibitions such as *batek* and Japanese *manga* (cartoon) which were well received by the general public from outside of the university.

For many visitors, the Kota Kayang Museum is Perlis' de facto state museum although it is run by the Department of Museums, while the Kangar Museum is placed under the State Museum Unit. During the Kota Kayang Museum's ground breaking ceremony in 1999 which was officiated by the state's *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister), the audience was reminded not to forget their history as through history the people could appreciate the state's historical and cultural heritage (Kota Kayang Museum). The museum was opened in September 2000 with its unique architecture based on the long-roof Perlis Malay house but with an unmistakable dose of Siamese influence. It has three separate blocks with the entire floor covering 5,400 square feet. The museum emphasises both culture and history. It accepts past cultural changes that include the Hindu-Budhist phase which had contributed immensely to the evolution of the state's history. In Penang and Langkawi, private organisations and individuals are involved in the running of museums although an air of uncertainty hangs over one of them.



### **Museum Visitors**

In recent years, the Department of Museums had sought visitors' feedbacks through questionnaires distributed at the end of their museum tour ostensibly to improve presentation of exhibits and other museumising aspects. However, not all museums including those under the department's jurisdiction have undertaken such exercise. In the last five years, the author knew of only three museums—the Textiles Museum (Kuala Lumpur), the Galleria Perdana and the Melaka Sultanate Palace Museum (Bandar Hilir, Melaka)—which had done so. The last museum is under the Melaka state government. To what extent the museum authorities have taken the visitors' comments into consideration and implementation remains questionable. Others like the Galeri Arkeologi of USM and the Tun Hussein Onn Memorial (Kuala Lumpur) distribute a single-page questionnaire to assess visitors especially school children on their awareness of museum exhibits.

On the other hand, the Penang State Museum printed comments from local and overseas visitors regarding museum exhibits and services in its annual report from 1965 until 1976. A year after its opening, the following rave comments were recorded: "A most interesting collection and very well presented" (New York); "An infant museum, very healthy and promising under intelligent and loving care" (Ceylon); "Fabulous, clean and well-tended" (Virginia, USA); and "It is very interesting to see it" (Germany) (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery 1966, np). In 1976, the final year the museum printed such comments, museum visitors still recorded their favourable impressions: "A unique exhibition, breathtaking" (New York); "Too much richness, from such a little place" (France); "A fine review of Penang's history" (England); and "A living picture of Penang" (Melbourne) (Penang State Museum Board 1976, 12). Visitors did complain of the diminishing space in the museum that made it difficult for them to enjoy the exhibits. The latter comments were given due attention by the State Museum Board (Penang State Museum Board 1991). To secure more space the art gallery was moved to a new location at the Dewan Sri Pinang in 1994. Currently, it has additional space in the form of a renovated former maternity hospital in Macalister Road but the museum's base remains at Farquhar Street.

Visitors to the Penang State Museum ranged from a low 70,294 in 1965 (the figures were from April to December) to a high 121,871 in 1971. The 1971 figures have never been surpassed since, even if the visitor numbers for both the museum and the art gallery were combined (Penang State Museum Board and Art Gallery 2010, 44–45). In 1991 and 1993, the museum differentiated domestic and foreign visitors and the months the latter dominated the museum—March, April, May and July (Penang State Museum Board 1993). Like other major museums in

the northern region, visitors were made up of local residents, students and tourists from interstate besides foreign tourists. The author has not seen all the museum annual reports, but those in Kedah, Terengganu and Melaka never printed visitors' comments, while Penang stopped the practice since 1977. Table 2 provides visitor numbers for selected museums in the northern region (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism 2004).

**Table 2.** Visitors to selected museums

<b>Museums</b>	<b>Visitors in 2002</b>
State Museum Unit	4,515 (1995–2001)
Kuala Kedah Fort Museum	78,836
Lembah Bujang Archaeology Museum	225,545
Galeria Perdana	276,791 (2001)
Kedah Royal Museum	150,00 (average)
Kedah State Art Gallery	50,000 (average)
Langkawi Craft Complex	98,381
Penang State Museum and Art Gallery	500 visitors daily
Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah	40,000 (average)
Penang Forestry Museum	3,000–5,000
Perak Museum	344,778
Lenggong Valley Archaeology Gallery	16,112
Perak Royal Museum	10,000 (average)
Matang Museum	2,850

Museums in the northern region are scattered over a wide area, with transport a vexing problem for tourists who do not have their own transportation. For these visitors, access to public transportation like buses and taxis is crucial. The 2004 Directory of Museums in Malaysia provides information on museum accessibility through public transport, although moving from one locality to another can be a daunting task. The Lembah Bujang Archaeology Museum is located 74.2 km from George Town while the Matang Museum is located 75 km from Ipoh; yet the former still attracts a large number of visitors. Undoubtedly, the main attraction of the Lembah Bujang Archaeology Museum is the Hindu-Buddhist heritage that is found inside and outside the museum. It was never easy for this museum since its opening in 1980. The Kedah fatwa committee was against the preservation or the reconstruction of ancient temples in the area. Only the intervention of the present Kedah ruler saved the day for the museum (Abdul Rahman Abdullah 2003, 209–211) while placing it under the Department of Museums spared it from becoming a victim of internecine political squabbles at the local level. In late 2013, one of the ancient temples was demolished by a

housing developer which led to widespread condemnation by the Malaysian public who were alarmed at such wanton destruction of invaluable cultural heritage.

Elsewhere, the author has highlighted some of the weaknesses of these museums, notably grammatical errors in the English captions at the Kota Kayang Museum and the Kedah State Museum (Abu Talib Ahmad 2008, 45–70). Despite these drawbacks and the accessibility issue, Table 2 shows that some of these museums have been attracting a reasonably large crowd, especially among school children who came through organised school excursions. The Matang Museum which celebrates one of the anti-British protagonists in the Perak wars of the 1870s drew a paltry 2,850 visitors, unlike the Pasir Salak Historical Complex. Located in Kampong Gajah, central Perak, the Pasir Salak Historical Complex foregrounds "the history of British intervention and the Malay uprising in Pasir Salak and its significance to Malaysia" (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism 2004, 60). It managed to attract 44,828 visitors in 2002 although in recent years visitors have complained of official neglect of the premises. Tun Mahathir's name still commands respect from the Malaysian public; hence the popularity of the Galeria Perdana although its location in the popular tourist destination of Langkawi is an added factor. The Perak Museum remains the most popular museum in the northern region with its natural history being an exciting drawcard. It is one of the few general museums in peninsular Malaysia that foregrounds natural history. Even the National Museum had discarded both culture and natural history in 2007 after which it focused only on national history. The natural history specimens were sent to the storeroom (Planning Department 2008, 119–120) before making their entry into the Natural History Museum which opened in February 2010 (Jabatan Muzium Malaysia 2012, 127–131). This new museum is located in Putrajaya.

### **Northern Museums and their Representation of the Region's Unique Cultural Heritage**

This section highlights cultural forms that are unique to the region as represented in museums located in the northern region—*boria*, *hadrah*, *mek mulong*, Kedah *nobat*, the cultural aspect of paddy cultivation and of the Perak Man and Chinese Peranakan culture. These unique cultural forms are displayed within the context of the national culture policy that came into being in 1971. This national culture policy accords prominence to Malay and indigenous cultures although the Penang State Museum seeks to balance cultural representations to reflect the major ethnic composition in the state.

Museums, notably state museums, foreground the many types of musical instruments, including those of the Malays, Chinese and Indians or those that originated from other parts of Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Museums display the different types of drums (*rebana ubi*, *kompang* and *gendang ibu*) as well as the various types of string (*gambus*, mandolin and *erhu*) and wind instruments (trumpet and flute). These musical instruments might be found in museums located in other parts of the country although the northern region is well known for its *boria*, *hadrah*, *mek mulong* and the Kedah *nobat*. The first three are only found in the northern region while the Kedah *nobat* is known for its unique sound.

The *boria* forms a crucial component of cultural displays in the Malay section of the Penang State Museum. It is a form of theatre consisting of a comedy sketch that involves 5–6 people and a singing part performed by a leader and 12 followers (Shakila Abdul Manan 2012, 161–162). The synchronised dance moves are a spectacle to watch. However, younger Malays find it less attractive despite a degree of similarity between *boria* and the presently popular K-pop dance moves. These days, *boria* performances can be hardly seen, even in Penang, with the Malays showing little interest in this art form. Many Malays see *boria* as an official tool to impart certain messages to the masses. *Boria* groups were known for their colourful costumes. The Penang State Museum displays *boria* costumes, and a picture of *boria* troupe most probably taken in the early 20th century besides the instruments that accompany *boria* performance like violin, tambourine, harmonica, maracas, flute and baton used by the troupe leader.

*Boria* started as a Shiites ritual in Persia and northern India commemorating the death of Ali (son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad) and his two sons (one of them was killed in Karbala in 610 AD) during the first 10 days of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) before it evolved into an art form towards the end of the 19th century (Shakila Abdul Manan 2012, 153–159). *Boria* was brought to Penang by sepoys of the Madras 21st Regiment in 1845 and replicated annually during the Muharram festival. *Boria* performance was popular among the Jawi Peranakan who dominated Penang's urban and semi urban enclaves like Jelutong, Perak Road and Datuk Keramat and Malays in these areas. By the second half of the 19th century, *boria* had become associated with secret society rivalries that involved both Malays and Jawi Peranakans. These societies, the White and Red Flags, were affiliated with the Chinese secret societies. They were later involved in the Penang Riots of 1867 (Mahani Musa 2006, 65–86). By the end of the 19th century, *boria* was transformed into a secular art form although the violent and aggressive side only came to an end in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By then, *boria* performance was no longer associated with the month of Muharram. In the immediate post-war period, *boria* was associated with Malay

opposition to the Malayan Union but in the 1960s and 1970s, it became a tool of the ruling government (Shakila Abdul Manan 2012, 160).

*Hadrah* is a form of stage singing and dancing that has a strong influence from Arabia. *Hadrah* was performed during marriage ceremonies and rites of passage such as circumcision not only in Kedah but also in certain areas of Seberang Perai which was populated by migrants from Kedah. The Kedah State Museum foregrounds the *hadrah* troupe that includes four dancers (played by males who dressed as princess) and another male who played the disturber (*rasuk*). This disturber provided humour to the performance by imitating the princess so as to throw the performance out of step. *Hadrah* was also performed with short dramatic sketches to enliven various local festivities. The musical instruments involved include *kompang*, *gendang besar*, *rebana ubi*, *rebana anak*, tambourine and violin. These are deployed in the Kedah State Museum.

*Mek mulong* is closely associated with the Samsam of Kedah who are Malaysians of Thai-Malay ancestry. *Mek mulong* is a form of traditional theatre that combines singing, acting and music playing. *Mek mulong* performance, as described by the Kedah State Museum, involved the raja, the princess (*mek mulong*) and musicians. On display are the masks worn by these performers, related instruments (*gendang*, *gendang pengarok*, *serunai*), *golok arang*, *tongkat Tok Wan* (stick used by the leader), gong, *kaus*, *selendang* and *tengkolok* (headgear). The museum describes that *mek mulong* is still performed in Wang Tepus, Jitra which takes place on a specially created stage. Before the start of each performance, offerings to the spirits are prepared and tribute paid to the *guru*. For its practitioners, the spirits have to be appeased so that they do not cause disruption to the performance. The other aspect of *mek mulong* is its relationship to traditional healing which many see as unIslamic. This aspect is not highlighted in any of the Kedah museums but is very much alive in Wang Tepus. According to one account, this healing aspect would appear towards the end of the performance (Mohammad Luthfi et al. 2012). Undeniably, this last aspect is related to the Thais of the northern region who are well known for their "magical prowess" in the local rural society (Golomb 1986, 47–54).

The Kedah *nobat* is well described by the Kedah State Museum and the Royal Kedah Museum. The *nobat* consists of seven instruments which are put on display—*nohara* (kettle drum), *gendang ibu* (big drum), *gendang anak* (small drum), *nafiri* (trumpet), *serunai* (flute), gong and *semambu* (rattan). The *nohara* is made from selected wood and deer skin and beaten with a one-foot rattan. The selected wood went into the making of the big and small drums. Their surface is covered respectively with tiger and goat skins. Made from pure silver, the *nafiri* is 88.8 cm in length while the gong was made from brass. The 43-cm-long flute

was made from the trunk of the chilly plant. The *mahaguru* or band leader used the 180.3-cm-long *semambu* to conduct the *nobat*, which is played on formal or ceremonial occasions such as the installation of the sultan, royal funeral and other state ceremonies graced by the ruler. The Kedah State Museum foregrounds the seven *nobat* players resplendent in traditional costume—headgear, coat, and white Malay *baju*.

The *nobat* was found in many Malay courts including the Patani sultanate. Its basic instruments were the same but each royal court had its own repertoire of melodies (Mohd Taib Osman 1984, 208–211). In Kedah, there was a *balai nobat* (nobat hall) which was used to house the instruments. Constructed in 1912, this *balai* is still standing in Alor Setar. In 2013, the Kedah *nobat* was performed during the installation of the present Kedah ruler as the Yang DiPertuan Agong playing melodies like "Arak-arak" (Marching). A pamphlet on the *Royal Kedah Nobat* listed eight melodies including "Raja Burung" (Royal Bird), "Belayar" (Sailing), "Gendang Perang" (War Drum), "Mambang Berkayuh" (Rowing Fairies), "Arak-Arak" and "Dewa Raja" (King of Fairies). "Gendang Perang" is usually played when the sultan is about to leave the palace for visits abroad and is again played upon his return.

The *nobat's* origin remains contested. The *Sejarah Melayu* which records the greatness of the Melaka sultanate claims that both the Perak and Kedah *nobat* originated from Melaka in the 15th century (Jelani Harun 2010, 94) while Kedah traditional texts like the *Al-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* (History of Kedah state) of the early 20th century claims that the *nobat* was brought from Persia in the 17th century in the form of the *semambu*, *nohara* and *nafiri* (Mahani Musa 2012, 58–59). Associated with the institution of the royalty, they were played on certain occasions deemed suitable by the ruler. Other instruments were added later including two drums and two flutes from India while from Java came two gongs to complete the nine instruments of the royal ensemble although the present Kedah *nobat* has only seven instruments. In the past, the *nobat* was used to support the legitimacy and authority of the ruling class. Its sacred aura was maintained by the status accorded to it and the belief that the instruments were of extraordinary nature. They may not be part of the royal regalia but according to Mohd Taib, were looked upon with awe "as they were supposed to possess certain sacred qualities and were believed to be possessed by spirits" (Mohd Taib Osman 1984, 209). This aspect, however, does not appear in the museums.

The Chinese Peranakan culture is well represented in the Penang State Museum and the Pinang Peranakan Mansion. In the former, it is deployed in the "Chinese Room" and the "Wedding Room" located on the ground floor and another room on the first floor. Also deployed are *tepak sireh* in the form of round lacquer

boxes, one for the areca nut and betel leaves while the other to keep lime, gambier and tobacco. Betel chewing came from Malay culture. In other parts of the museum, Chinese Peranakan and non-Peranakan cultural items are quite indistinguishable. In the "Chinese traditional hall", finely crafted chairs, opium bed, opium pipe, wedding bed, cupboard, dowry chest, wash basin stand and marriage costumes are exhibited.

There is much more of the Peranakan culture in the Pinang Peranakan Mansion. This building was originally the residence of a well-known Chinese *towkay* who was not a Peranakan himself. His name was Lim Keh Chuan (1858–1907) who was the founding president of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The mansion has four large rooms upstairs and another four downstairs with two large courtyards. There are two large dining rooms that could accommodate 16 and 14 guests respectively. The mansion represents Peranakan opulence until the early 1930s when the depression began to impact considerably on their life style while the subsequent Japanese Occupation brought the opulent lifestyle to an end. In the master bedroom, are displayed intricately crafted bed, beaded slippers, *kebayas* and *kain batek lepas*. Opium smoking paraphernalia are also found here. In another bedroom, one finds intricately crafted furniture and bed while in the bridal chamber, there is a wedding crown (used between 1890 and 1930) and gilded brass panels ornamented with kingfisher feathers. Perhaps the most impressive display is the colourful ceramics—dining sets, tea sets, plates and *kamcheng*. These were imported from China and were used during festive occasions like wedding, birthday and the lunar new-year celebration. English table wares which were associated with wealthy Peranakan households are also on display.

The Peranakan ladies were closely associated with slippers, beads and embroidery: these items are displayed in the museum. Other items include bridal necklace, buckle, curtain holds and silver-gilt hairpins. There are tiffin boxes including lacquered ones. At the back of the mansion is a large kitchen. Here, an assortment of kitchen wares used by Peranakan households, including moulds used in the making of sweets like *kueh baulu* and *kueh kapit* are displayed. Adjoining the main building is an ancestral temple. It was built in 1899 and restored by skilled craftsmen from China in the late 1990s. The temple is "ornately decorated with intricate Chinese wood carvings embellished with gold leaf while on the walls above, tableaux casting dramatic scenes from Chinese legends peer down on the visitor" (Pinang Peranakan Museum Pamphlet). These displays are unique and as exciting as the Melaka Peranakan Mansion.

The importance of the Perak Man is both historical and cultural. These aspects are well covered by the Lenggong Archaeology Gallery. The Perak Man was the

first complete prehistoric human skeleton discovered in 1990 in the Lenggong Valley which according to archaeologists is a vast outdoor museum that encompassed the entire prehistoric period. It was declared a UNESCO heritage site in 2010. Research on the Perak Man was led by Profesor Zuraina Majid who was formerly with USM.

The Perak Man is the most complete skeleton in Southeast Asia that had been found thus far. It was dated between 10,000 and 11,000 years old. In 1994, the comprehensive findings were published by the Department of Museums (Zuraina Majid 1994). The Perak Man was later exhibited in Penang and Japan. In 2006 it was displayed at the National Museum. The exhibition was well received by the public. In February 2014, it was brought to its permanent home in the Lenggong Archaeology Gallery (Sunday Star 16 February 2014).

Considerable information was extracted on the Perak Man's indigenous belief system. The Perak Man was given a burial that fits into the animistic mould. Zuraina summarises the importance of the Perak Man: "There is no evidence of death through violent means. He could have died of old age or an illness or near the cave. The Perak Man died at a relatively ripe age of 40–45 years. His lower jaw and teeth showed severe tooth wear suggesting a highly abrasive diet. Despite born with a physical handicap, he survived well in a nomadic hunting and gathering life, probably due to much care given to him. In a community where the human life span averaged 20–30 years, he could have enjoyed many years of being in the position of an elder of the group, and perhaps was also the shaman and the person with the most knowledge on survival, hunting and gathering and other aspects of Palaeolithic way of life" (Zuraina Majid 1994, 42). Animism and the pre-Islamic past is similarly foregrounded in the Kota Kayang Museum which had accepted the importance of this period in the cultural evolution of Perlis before the arrival of Islam.

The Lenggong Archaeology Gallery is also associated with Bukit Bunuh which was used as a tool making site and the discovery of the oldest hand axes that were 1.83 million years old (Mokhtar Saidin 2012, 1–2). Archaeologists believe the Lenggong Valley provides crucial insights into early life on the Malay peninsula almost two million years ago and holds the key to the culture, material and technology of the Palaeolithic period (Mingguan Malaysia 11 November 2012). Archaeologists have connected the site with migrations from Bukit Bunuh to China in the north and Australia in the south in tandem with the "out of Africa theory" which traced the migration of homo sapiens from Africa to the Arabian peninsular, the Indian subcontinent, the Malay peninsula and Australia. A more recent study on genetic diversity corroborated the movement of gene from Southeast Asia to China and Japan (The Hugo Pan-Asian SNP Consortium et al.).



The Kedah-Perlis region is known as the rice bowl of Malaysia because of its paddy production. Located in the paddy belt of Gunung Keriang, the Paddy Museum visually summarised paddy cultivation and agricultural life in Kedah—starting with the origin of paddy, the stages in its cultivation (ploughing, raking, planting, harvesting, pounding and grinding of paddy), food products made from rice, Kedah's development personality notably Wan Muhammad Saman, the Wan Muhammad Saman Canal, the 1650 Kedah laws and the port laws pertaining to agriculture, bull fighting which formed part of the rural landscape after the harvest, a summary of paddy cultivation through a moving circular diorama and another diorama of village life and post-harvest entertainment in the Gunung Keriang area. The museum's basement keeps myriad of tools that were used in paddy cultivation like *lesung*, *tempayan* and *kepok*, methods used to catch fish in the paddy fields and canals, as well as associated tools like *nyiru*, *penampi*, *pengisar batu* (grinder), *pengangin padi*, *anok rodi*, *kuku kambing*, *sisir kayu*, *tajak besi* and *pisau pengerat padi*. With increasing mechanisation, these tools are no longer used, hence the importance of their preservation in museums.

According to the museum paddy cultivation on a large scale began between the 14th and 17th centuries. In 1664, the Sungai Korok irrigation canal was constructed to link the Perlis river with the Kedah river, that subsequently increased rice production. The Wan Muhammad Saman Canal was constructed in the late 19th century. It traversed a distance of 22 miles from the Kedah river to the foot of Gunung Jerai (Kedah Peak). The canal resulted in an additional 160 square km of land for paddy cultivation and the emergence of new townships like Tandop, Simpang Empat, Kota Sarang Semut, Sungai Limau, Guar Chempedak and Gurun. However, the difficulties of its construction and other aspects including problem of financing (Khoo 1990) are never highlighted by the museum.

We are more interested in the cultural aspect of paddy cultivation. The museum does not foreground any of the traditional ceremonies connected with paddy cultivation as these are unIslamic. It does display popular post-harvest past times. Two of them were cock and bull fighting. According to the museum, Anak Bukit used to host a large double storey arena for bull fighting that could accommodate 4,000 spectators. It was the only traditional past time in Kedah that had both elements of culture and entertainment. According to the museum, four months before the actual competition, village headmen would register those interested to take part according to the size and age of their bulls. The *bomoh* played an important role in determining the success or defeat of a particular contestant. A day before the competition, the bull's horns were sharpened by the *bomoh* with poisonous concoctions while the bull's body was smeared with a certain type of oil to render a shiny appearance.

On the day of the competition, the headman and the owner, both in colourful dresses, paraded their bull around the arena. The fight commenced immediately when the umpire sounded the gong. The rules were quite simple: the fallen bull, the one that was unable to stand up, or the bull that ran berserk across the arena would be declared the loser. In 1936, both cock and bull fighting were banned by the state government because of its inhumane nature. Both had contributed to farmers losing their land through gambling and betting, besides the high incidence of rural theft which the museum does not mention (Cheah 1988).

### **Conclusion**

Museum foregrounding of culture is very much impacted by the national culture policy that was instituted in 1971. This policy was closely related to the official assumption that a common culture could form the basis for national unity in Malaysia which was then embarking on a rapid development under the premiership of Tun Abdul Razak (1970–1976). Consequently, indigenous culture that did not hinder the development process was promoted while other forms that impinged on material progress were marginalised. Similarly, the non-Islamic elements that were found in indigenous and other cultures were marginalised. As a result, there was very little on the *bomoh* who only appeared through the bull fighting at Anak Bukit. In the case of the *boria*, there is no mention of its close relationship with Malay secret societies which actually fulfilled certain socio-political functions for the Penang Malays in the second half of the 19th century.

The other aspect is the kind of inter-ethnic competition and competition within each ethnic group that have become intrinsic part of museumising activities. There is much on the Chinese Peranakan culture which contributes to its preservation but less on the other Chinese. Similarly, there is little on the Indian-Muslims or the Jawi Peranakan in the Penang State Museum and Penang Islamic Museum. The new Malay Museum in Hutton Lane is actually devoted to the Jawi Peranakan who had identified themselves as Malays. The Jawi Peranakan had dominated the area in the 19th and early 20th century. Known as the Malay Museum, there are dissenting voices that prefer to call it the Jawi Peranakan Museum which is historically a sensible move.

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**Glossary**

anok rodi	ploughing tool attached to the buffalo
baju (Melayu)	Malay traditional dress for male
bengkong	corset
bomoh	traditional healer/medicine man
boria	Malay theatre and dance from Penang
erhu	three-string Chinese musical instrument
gambus	six-string musical instrument of Middle Eastern origin
gendang	drum
gendang anak	small drum
gendang ibu	big drum
gendang pengaruk	long drum
golok arang	small knife
guru	teacher/mentor
hadrah	song and dance performance originating from the Arabian peninsula that includes musicians and males masquerading as female dancers
kain batek lepas	unsewn sarong made from batek
kamcheng	food container used by the Chinese Peranakan
kaus	coat
kebaya	female dress used by Malays and Chinese Peranakan
kepok	place to store unhusked paddy
kompang	small drum
kueh baulu	Malay and Chinese Peranakan sweet
kueh kapit	Chinese Peranakan sweet
kuku kambing	tool used to plant paddy
lesung	tool to grind padi either using both hands or feet
lingga	male reproductive organ
manga	Japanese cartoon
mek mulong	folk theatre popular among Malaysians of Siamese origin found in Kedah
merdeka	independence
nafiri	flute
nobat	traditional Malay orchestra played during royal ceremonies notably the installation of rulers
nohara	kettle drum

nyiru	bamboo tray
pisau pengerat padi	sickle
pengangin padi	paddy winnowing tool
pengisar batu	grinder
peripih	venerated objects made from metal, gold and precious stones that are found in temple reliquary
rasuk	disturber in Hadrah performance
rebana	drum
rebana ubi	big drum
Samsam	Malaysians of mixed Thai-Malay ancestry who are either Muslims or Buddhists
selendang	light cloth to cover female dress around the upper part of the body
semambu	rattan rod
serunai	flute
sisir kayu	tool to loosen the earth before planting paddy
somasutra	conduit found in temple to allow water out of the temple
tajak besi	iron plough
tempayan	large container made from ceramic and used to store rice or water
tengkolok	headgear
tepak sireh	betel chewing set
tongkat Tok Wan	baton used by leader in <i>mek mulong</i> performance
yoni	female reproductive organ

### Notes

1. Different versions of the essay had appeared in *Sari International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation* 28(2): 3–34 and in *Utara Semenanjung Malaysia: Esei-Esei Warisan*, ed. Abu Talib Ahmad. Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.

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