

## Editor's Introduction

In recent years, there has been much discussion on heritage and its management by various bodies including federal governments, state governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities and individuals while the word sustainability has become extremely popular but quite often misunderstood. In Malaysia, the National Heritage Act of 2005 covers both natural and cultural heritage (A Ghafar Ahmad 2010). Following this act, efforts have been made to identify buildings, objects, cultural heritage, archaeological sites and living persons that are of heritage value in the country. Since then many edifices have been marked as national heritage, such as the Lembah Bujang archaeological sites; the limestone hills of Perlis; the house where Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was born; the Merdeka Stadium the Malay College Kuala Kangsar; and Vatsala d/o G. R. Kurup, the well-known Indian dance choreographer. Even Malaysian favourite foods like *nasi lemak*, *roti canai* and *maruku* are classified as national heritage. Despite being understaffed, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan is offering a degree programme on heritage studies while the word "heritage" (*warisan*) is added to an existing faculty in Universiti Malaysia Sabah to become the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage. Elsewhere, various groups including NGOs have deliberated on proper heritage management. They have also highlighted the need to preserve Malaysia's physical and cultural heritage, although the destructive flood in December 2014 that affected the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia, notably Kelantan, put into question the efficacy and seriousness of the country's heritage management.

The essays in this volume cover various aspects of the natural and cultural heritage of the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, i.e., the states of Kedah, Penang, Perlis and northern Perak, which are part of the country's Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER). In line with common usage, the state of Kelantan is excluded from the discussion. Physically, the northern region is well known for the rock formation of Langkawi and the Lenggong valley and the rice fields of Kedah-Perlis. The region is inhabited by Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Siamese, Samsams, the Orang Asli and other ethnic groups. These groups are further subdivided into subgroups although culturally there is little difference between them. Ethnically the population of Penang is evenly balanced between the Malays and Chinese although for Kedah, Perlis and northern Perak, the Malays predominate. The 2003 population of Penang and Kedah support this argument. In 2003, the Penang population based on ethnic composition were as follows: Chinese 626,400; Malays 592,400; Indians 195,000; and others including Eurasians 78,700. In Kedah, during the same period the Malays totalled 1,336,352; Chinese 252,987; Indians 122,911; non-citizens 35,292; and others including the Siamese 27,532. The cultural diversity of Kedah and Penang is exemplified by the racially mixed groups of Baba Nyonya, Jawi Peranakan and

Samsams that had evolved since the late 18th and 19th centuries. The Jawi Peranakan and Samsams are associated with cultural art forms like the *boria* and *mek mulong* which are covered in the present volume.

The six essays presented here are a variegated lot covering oceanography, physical geography, linguistics, culture, literature and folklore. These essays make a passionate case for the preservation of the region's coral reefs, rivers or cultural forms like *boria* and *mek mulong* through their proper management. The first four essays focus on the region's selected cultural heritage and their preservation. Noriah Mohamed discusses the identity and language of three groups that are found predominantly in the northern region which display hybrid characteristics namely the Samsams, Baba Nyonya (Chinese Peranakan) and the Jawi Peranakan. The identity and language of these three groups illustrate some form of fusion although over the years this fusion had watered down. While the Baba Nyonya have become more Chinese, the other two hybrid languages have become more Malay. Unlike other scholars, Noriah classifies the language system of the Samsams and Jawi Peranakan as dialect whereas the speech system of the Baba Nyonya as creole.

Shakila Abdul Manan focuses on the *boria* which had become the Penang Malay-Muslim's unique cultural heritage. She traces *boria*'s etymology, its origin and the socio-cultural factors that have moulded it into a ritualistic form of theatre, its specific Malay-Muslim identity through the language of the comic sketches and songs, the transmission of cultural, religious and Malay political values. Shakila also discusses the factors that threatened the continued existence of this cultural art form and the measures that have been taken to revive it.

Mohamad Rashidi revisits the writings of British imperial functionaries who were from the same family namely Sir P. B. Maxwell who served in the judiciary of the Straits Settlements in the second half of the 19th century and his grandson George William Maxwell who was British Advisor to Kedah at the turn of the 20th century. Both Maxwells had left their writings on Malaya which Mohamad Rashidi had scrutinised. Both Maxwells appreciated and valued the Malays and their customs in Perak and Kedah. Both aimed to foster togetherness and bring justice to the northern Malays.

As a researcher in Malay folklore, Mohamad Luthfi examines the well-known Kedah folk performance *mek mulong* that still thrives in Kampung Baru Wang Tepus in Jitra. The essay analyses *mek mulong*—its performance as well as healing ritual which is only shown in Wang Tepus. Based on first hand observation of a *mek mulong* performance and interviews with its practitioners, the essay is an important contribution towards the preservation of folk traditions

like the *mek mulong* which is under threat from modernisation and Islamic revivalism.

The following two essays are contributed by academics and researchers from the discipline of geography. Both highlight the need for the proper management of the region's physical heritage that are under threat from myriad human activities notably agriculture and urbanisation. Anisah Lee Abdullah et al. discuss the preservation of corals in the northern region although popular attention is very much directed to other marine parks like Bodgaya Island Marine Park, Sipadan Marine Park, Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park and the Pulau Tioman Marine Park besides the corals of Pulau Redang in Terengganu. In the northern region, such coral formations are found in the Pulau Payar Marine Park off the coast of Kedah located between Penang and Langkawi which form the main focus of Anisah Lee's discussion. The park consists of four islands with the largest being the 31.4-hectare Pulau Payar. To manage these corals, Anisah Lee et al. suggest an integrated strategy based on a system called Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) and hydroacoustic technique to map a wide variety of sea bed to determine the distribution of coral habitats. The application of optically-derived water quality models on satellite imagery is used to map the distribution of total suspended solids and chlorophyll-a to measure water turbidity. The combination of various scientific techniques would help in the conservation of the coral reefs in the long term.

Rivers and lakes are important natural heritage although their water quality is already affected by development activities. Zullyadini et al. look at major rivers, lakes and dams in Perlis, Kedah and Penang. Water samples were taken at sampling stations located in the upstream, midstream and downstream areas with their readings tabulated based on hydrological and physicochemical parameters. The water quality was classified under the Interim National Water Quality Standards (INWQS) that tabulated six levels of pollution ranging from moderates to being extremely polluted. The essay highlights that most rivers in Kedah and Penang show moderate pollution level although the downstream of one river in Perlis was described as polluted.

All the essays are part of the research on the "Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia (Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Northern Perak)" which was funded by a Universiti Sains Malaysia research grant throughout 2007–2010. The multidisciplinary research involved 39 academic staff from the School of Humanities and one researcher from outside the school, each working in their specific discipline covering linguistic, literature, history, geography, philosophy and Islamic studies with the common aim of highlighting the uniqueness of the northern region in terms of its physical features, culture and history.

Following this research, more than 40 papers were presented in various seminars within the university, nationally and regionally. Many of the papers were later published in various journals such as *Sari the International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation*, *JMBRAS*, *Sosiohumanika Jurnal Pendidikan Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan*, and the *Malaysian Journal of Environmental Management*, a journal associated with the Environmental Management Society Malaysia. The research also managed to publish five books namely Mahani (2011), Jelani (2011), Abu Talib (2012), Ooi (2012) and Abu Talib (2015). Two of them were published by Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM Press), two by the National Archives of Malaysia and one by the NUS Press in Singapore.

Four of the essays (Noriah, Shakila, Mohamad Rashidi and Mohamad Luthfi) had appeared in Malay in Abu Talib (2012) and Ooi (2012). Many felt these essays should be translated into English to benefit a wider reading public. Different versions for two of them had also appeared in the Indonesian journal *Sosio Humanika: Jurnal Pendidikan Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan* (Mohamad Luthfi 2011) and the *Malaysian Journal of Environmental Management* (Anisah Lee Abdullah 2011). I am thankful to the USM Press and the editor of both journals for providing permission to adapt these essays into English or to revise them. These essays might cover selective aspects of the region's physical and cultural heritage or accord too much focus on the Malays. They nevertheless highlight the cultural and physical uniqueness of Kedah-Perlis-Penang in relation to other parts of the country while emphasising concern over their preservation and conservation.

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