



Archiving Malayness in Museums, Power and Knowledge: Malay Ethnicity in the Nusantara Malay Archipelago

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of museums in shaping Malay identity in post-World War II Malaysia, a nation grappling with rapid decolonization and the complexities of nation-building. It argues that national museums serve as microcosms for constructing Malaysian Malay identity within a nation-state framework, acting as public institutions that preserve ethnic memories and facilitate identity formation at both national and local levels. By analyzing the museumization process—where artifacts are stored and displayed as symbols of "Malayness"—the research highlights how museum spaces influence community perceptions and discourse around Malay identity. Utilizing Foucault's theories, the study explores the arrangement of objects within museum exhibition halls and dioramas to uncover the dynamics of power, knowledge, and identity preservation. Ultimately, this investigation positions museums as critical sites for understanding the intersection of Malay ethnic identities and the broader narratives of nationalism in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: *National Museum; Power; Malayness; Nusantara; Malay Archipelago*

Introduction

As an independent nation emergence after the Second World War, Malaysia had two major challenges. On the one hand, there was the need for rapid decolonisation within the framework of the Cold War, and on the other hand, the element of nation building was a very challenging task. Like all nation-state in the world, nation-building is an ongoing process. One of the important sources as the substance of nation building includes the construction of Malay identity. This paper investigates museum as an exhibition site that preserved and storage Malay identity in Malaysia.

National museums represented as a microcosm that constructs Malaysian Malay Identity in a nation state framework. A national museum is a public institution acting as a site in the formulation of national identity. In a cultural institution such as museum it also shares the memories of the ethnicity.

Besides, it serves as an important site of exposure to pave the way for the construction of identity formation on both national and local levels of a country. The archival materials (museum depository) of a museum construct and legitimize accepted knowledge on the ethnic identity in a nation state framework.

Museumization process involves storages of artefacts as museum objects that can signify Malayness in Malaysia. The museum space and object will be a space in shaping the community about the discourse of Malay identity in Malaysia.

The researchers seek to develop a binding an intersection investigation between Malay ethnic identities, national museum and power, the thesis began with its core: the museum. There are several explanations on museums. The researcher hopes that investigate museum in a postcolonial state context, thus, the niche of discussion of museum will began with the European and the western world conceptualizations on museum.

The Orders of the Museum Objects: Museum objects and Power

Meanings are always changing along the way. Foucault and Miskowiec's ideas provide a strong foundation for the researchers to interpret museums and their objects. Foucault specifically discusses the concept of the microcosm in his work. Part of his work on the academic essay "*Of Other Spaces*" can be very down-to-earth in explaining and exploring the combination of space, objects, and power. Heterotopia as the concept mentioned by Foucault and Miskowiec. Heterotopia, like Kaleidoscope, a particular site and space, but interpretation with different meaning.

Foucault and Miskowiec (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986) core principles on Heterotopia could best be able on few assumptions: First, the functions of spaces and objects change over time: in the case of cemeteries in Europe, before the end of the 18th century they were located in the centre of busy cities next to Christian churches, whereas before the 19th century they were located in the suburbs to tell people grave are there, but soul is eternal and beautiful. But in the 19th century such remembrance began to fade, along with representation of sadness and death, and slowly turned into an ominous place. Secondly, although there is no mention of museums, there is a reference to the microcosm. Although Foucault mentions gardens or cinemas, what is more important is that Foucault mentions a multiplicity of spaces. The existence of these parks, both contrived and elaborate, shows a contradiction to the space of the real world. But they are compatible with each other. Thirdly, the elaborate space analogically looks like a kaleidoscope that allowed multiple interpretations.

Part of the heterotopia criterion mentioned by both scholars can be applied to the study of museums. Foucault idea could be applied in museums, as museums are archival institutions, a site of multiple interpretations overtimes and its social context. Selected museum displays linked together with certain historical moments; museum cumulates historical moments that tried to affiliating it with the artefacts itself. It attempts to made time as permanent or temporary. It manifested into permanent exhibition and temporary exhibitions in the museums.

Values Are the Core That Guided the Arrangement of Museum Exhibitions

The arrangement of artifacts are the manifestations of power. Power becomes the motivation on the selections whether certain artifacts that made into museum display to represents certain value. Power is the motive how museum artefacts are made into display in museum, as a microcosm that represented certain values in the society. Thus, the order of things in the museum, locations of the museum displays, are the reflections of the motivations why these artifacts are made to importunateness.

The Origins of Contemporary Public Museums and Its Relations with Power

Museum institution meets its limits in its physical exhibition, universally it applied to all the museums in the world. Limitation of space means categorizations and most important selections is needed for the exhibition. Selections and categorizations of artifacts involved the idea of power. Those museum displays who selected for display are set to be significantly a representation of importance, those museum displays who keep and not for displays also brings a meaning. But here the research would base on the display that exposed to the public. Next paragraph would demonstrate how the ascendancy of power are manifested on categorization, selection, and exhibition in the public museums.

To start a back group of the public museum, which is relevant to traced the ascendancy and relevant of museum in a postcolonial state, I'll start from the European experience traced back to the pieces of thoughts of the enlightenment inquiries and to the heyday of European colonialism.

Museum collections categorizations that involve power, the setting of Europe and American museums by referring to its ethnographic collection in the late 19th century could be a sum of colonial power. During the days of high colonialism in the 19th century, the label of exotic artifacts was collected from each corner of colonial territories. The ethnological categorization is institutionalized as the "others." These exotic artifacts reflect colonial ideologies, values, and policies. It was aggressive, systematic, and encouraging for collection for research purposes. The purposed of the research serves the climax of imperial power to systematically ethnological information on the colonial domains (Shelton, 2006, pp. 64-65).

The sources on the origins of public museums could be traced back over two thousand years ago, the evolutions of public museums meet with different sort of social needs. However, it is until the end of 19th century, professional standards and norms on museum are set by credentialed by standards set by conferences, meetings and disciplinary journal that set an idealistic criterion for "public museum" that distinguishes from private institution or individual ownerships. However, dynamics of social changes influences museum institutions to be continue relevant with its contemporary society. The said changes might be manifested in its exhibitions of museum displays, as the public museum after France revolution severe the republic. To serve the people centric republic, the fashion of museum narratives had been formulated, and brand as the ancient regime. The exhibitions represented the feudal past which is decadent and tyrannic before the France revolution to the so-called public of its time (Abt, 2006, p. 132).

A nation is not a static entity, it is a product of constant negotiations, these negotiations between the people and the ruling institutions have been done by its cultural institutions such as national galleries, museums, public exhibition complexes. As a matter of fact, the displays of public galleries act as a kind of continuity of the nation state by connecting itself to the old monarchies. As refer to (Knell, 2016, pp. 91-92) Nations are not static entities, they are the product of constant negotiation, and this means that even the most stable may be subject to radical transformation in their political utility, internal cohesion, and international outlook. While national museums possess treasures that assure citizens of the historical and cultural depth of the nation and its continuity, these are among the most adaptable of museum types. The nation state will use public galleries and museums to legitimize its position as the continuity of political system and social structure that inherited the heritage of an old empire. As a rule, exhibitions in public galleries tend to be based on important incidents such as war, colonization, nationalism to act as a constant negotiation to the people of a polity.

Malay and Malayness in the Museum

The researchers explore the arrangement of objects as a signifier of their meaning within museum exhibition halls and dioramas. In this analysis, Foucault's theories will be employed to examine the role of museums, the Malay nation, and the characteristics associated with the preservation of Malay identity.

In an intellectual discussion of Malay, sociologically or anthropologically, it should gravitate more to the discussion of Malayness as a whole. The realm of Malayness would be more inclusive compared to the limits of nation state realm of the Malay identity. Scholarly work did highlight the importance to put Malayness as the focus point of the discussion which could be applied to the maritime Southeast Asia, or the Malay Archipelago, with reference to (Milner, 2008, p. 17):

Focusing on ‘Malayness’ (at least as much as on ‘the Malays’) provides a perspective on the nation state as well as religion. ‘Malayness’ is shaped in one way or another by experience in different territorial states – Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand and numerous others – just as it has been by contrasting experiences of colonial rule. As I have suggested, however, it is also to some extent an active agent. In practical ways a transnational ‘Malay’ consciousness continues to foster ambiguities and sometimes tension in border areas. The fate of southern Thailand – in the opening years of the twenty-first century perceived to be one of the most serious terrorist fronts in Southeast Asia – is at least partly bound up with such a consciousness. There is also the possibility – depending on the long-term resilience of the Archipelago nation states – that ‘Malay’ aspirations will make a contribution to some future reconfiguring of Southeast Asia.

National Museum functions as a microcosm in historical telling of her national memories. The point that started the Malacca sultanate was highlighted in relating it to the romance of a glorified Malay past. No quarrels if it is measured from the sultanate involvement in maritime based economic activities. Nevertheless, the glorified years as a romance memory functions in a need of a nation state: Malaysia. The glorified sultanate had been used as a legitimate successor to bid the needs of Malay identity in Malaysia. Nonetheless, we might not neglect the ongoing changes on the value of the ruling institution in the construction and legitimization of reality. These constructions of Malay ideas change from time to time, for example, the emphasis on the Malay Annals as one of the very important texts in studying the Malay world:

“The *Sejarah Melayu* or the Malay Annals are unique in that they constitute the only available account of the history of the Malay Sultanate in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. They are in the nature of what may be termed as historical literature conveying a historical narration of the origins, evolution and demise of a great Malay maritime empire, with its unique system of government administration and politics. The Annals have universal appeal as they relate to a major transformation in the lives of the people of the Malay Archipelago from a Hindu-Malay matrix to an Islamic-Malay culture. Being an entreport, Melaka made rapid progress on account of its cosmopolitan population comprising merchants from India, China, Arabia, Portugal and various other nations of the world. They contributed to the social, economic and political evolution of the Malay Kingdom. The Annals are therefore a vital source of information for scholars in various fields including sociology, anthropology, economics, politics, international relations, linguistics and literature.” (Memory of The World-Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals), 2019).

The Malay Annals, with its accounts of feudalism politics, is no accessible information and knowledge. In reality, its various versions are kept as the possible reading for the royal family members and the aristocracy group. As a matter of fact, the Malay Annals acts as materials in nurturing the pre-colonial ruling class the ideas of ruling their subjects, it archived and preserved in the hands of the ruling class. Malay manuscripts had the function as written royal genealogy, diplomatic, tactical and myths in running a state. Sometimes, the handing over of a manuscript is a high political and diplomatic appreciation in pre-colonial Malay political system (Warnk, 2009). Thus, this knowledge that passes down by Malay manuscripts is archived and monopolized by the pre-colonial ruling class in the Malay world.

Unlike now, The Malay Annals can be found in the hands of ordinary people elsewhere. However, the stories in the Malay Annals did not fade away after the colonial period. They have been stored and preserved as important materials. But in today's Europe, today they have been labelled and used in generating knowledge and discourse in systematic fields of study such as anthropology & sociology, history, economic, linguistics, philosophy etc. Like the needs of a nation state, these Malay manuscripts, artefacts that are related to the time of the old empire have a represented space called national museum and other cultural institutions in Malaysia. Before discussing the Malaysian national museum, it is important to understand the context on European construction of the Malay identities that will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Malay annals itself is a production world of court chronicles, arguable now that it has been labeled as a form of literature. But on the culture and anthropological point of view, it is crucial to trace the so-called origins and the initial pieces of information about a particular civilization. Universally it applies to all civilizations. In the early phase of feudal society, civilization starts from myth. According to (Whitt, 2009) genealogies deliver the roots of origins, binding people who shared the family, community symbols of the origins. It also creates a boundary of us and others in a particular civilization (p. 39).

Colonial Construction of the Malay Identity

The Dutch (Ferringhis) came; intact with the rise of capitalism and imperialism based economic system, but with the needs of a nation state the fall of the Malacca sultanate had acted as a needed scene that carried a value to bind as a memory of current nation state, at least in the hearts and mind of the Malaysian Malay descent: a tragic memory of the fall of the glories of a Malay civilization, reminded as the Ferringhis came, colonization and the destruction of the Malay glorious years. So that it would be a reminder as a need of watersheds in the Malay history. Almost without exception, nation state uses a moment in history to recall a tragic moment, or glorified years as a reminder to bind its people together in needs of securing an imagined community, as an overwhelming phenomenon in museum imagination (Anderson, 2006). The memories of the Malacca sultanate recovered a big portion is Malaysia as a nation state abstracting elements on culture and religions in the construction of the Malaysian Malay Identity (Barbara Watson Andaya, 2017, p. 337):

The term 'Malay' assumed a different dimension in the colonial period when it was formalized by the British to distinguish Malay-speaking Muslims residing in the peninsula, the offshore islands, and Borneo from other indigenous groups and the increasing number of Indians and Chinese. Migrant Indonesians who could speak some form of Malay and were Muslims were incorporated into the Malay category because the British viewed local society in terms of broad ethnic division. In the interwar period the anti-foreign attitudes of some Malays led to an expansion of the definition of 'Malay' to include all the indigenous peoples of the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago. Generally, however, the colonial categorization of Malay was retained until discussions preceding the independence of Malaya in 1957, when it was suggested that 'Melayu' be used to designate all those who wished to become citizens of the new nation.

The history of British colonization contributed to the storages of the memories of the Malay world. However, in terms of colonial imprints, the record, studies on the Malay world were based on the needs of imperialism and conquest. These needs in the collection of Malay based material culture are also required in the Malay world; usually for trade and conquest. That is why the earliest British records of the Malay world are the initiative of East India Company. These initiatives took into account important geographical areas, establishment of names of economic based territories, names of the flora and fauna. The motive of The East India Company comes with the smell of trades and imperialism is profound on the collections of the Malay world. (Martland, 2009). However, these records of the Malay world continue in historical writings in the discourse of the Malay world.

Race is a relatively modern concept that used as categorizations on the colonial subjects in the colonial era. However, the construction of race manipulated. The manipulation is by convenience manipulations to maintaining the political power and the colonial capitalist economic system. Racial ideologies on identifications are based on a measurement on the colonial division of labour in a captured colonial economic system. These colonial racial policies impacted the categorization in modern nation state mainly on Malaysia and Singapore that was part of colonial Malaya. According to (Hirschman, 1986). The construction of races in colonial Malaya is blended with the ideas based on the assumptions of white superiority and stereotypes. The divisions of resources, colonial ruling system, management of colonial subjects are the main motifs of colonial constructions of Malay identity. Of course, this construction is by conveniences to made the plural society much more manageable for colonial modernity in the period of British Malaya. However, the colonial ascendancy on the categorizations is internalized by the colonial subjects. Its colonial imprint is remaining in the local ethnic community.

Discovering The Poetics and Political Use of Nusantara

Museum narratives not only stored museum artifacts. Importantly also its content to formulate narrative to exhibit Malayness that the museum institution tries to preserve it. Meaning evolved and changes over time in civilization, it is important to trace the meaning of Nusantara. Nusantara seems to have the synonyms with the boundaries of Malay Archipelago enclave.

The term Nusantara had been associated with Majapahit Empire. It carried a meaning of outer enclave from the kingdom itself. If we combine with the concept of Kerajaan State to the Majapahit empire, it tried to represented on a layer of its centre of empire, its vassal state or much more obvious on its domain. Much more important, in the area, the meaning of Nusantara refers to the age of empire, and by nature of Malay Archipelago on the mapping of the domains of empire that geographically connected with each other by sea. Original words of Nusantara are said to be derived from Sanskrit. "Nusa" means the Island and "antara" means in between or including. The term Nusantara also can be trace on the Pararaton manuscript in Jawa, from a nation founding story that the King of Majapahit on a solemn oath of Sumpah Palapa (year 1334), the king would not use spices until the territory of Nusantara had been conquest. Thus, from a geographical imaginary, Nusantara referred to places outside of geographical territory of Jawa Island. However, meaning changes overtime. The term Nusantara, had been re-emerged as commercial usage and political used dating back to the 1980s. Since then, Nusantara was use in for politics, geographical location, nationalism, businesses, and popular culture (Evers, 2016).

The quest of searching unity in a multiculturalism society is something new, but often happens. In the case of Indonesia, the colonial dutch record of Nusantara or The Nusantara Vision (Wawasan Nusantara) had been used by Mochtar Kusumaatmaja on his proposal on the expansion on state bouderies to the sea to the United Nation and possible it extended the goal of Nusantara to a cultural sphere. When it comes to provision museum Negeri Siwa Lima Ambon, Moluccas, Nusantara was use a concept to create an imaginary of "Pan" or all-encompassing as a sphere in included Moluccas as part inside Indonesia (Taylor, 1994, p. 83).

Discovering and Rediscovering Nusantara Narrative for Museum

To understood the exhibition on ethnicity in museum, it is important to understand on the formations of Malay identities and the concept of Nusantara. Formation of Malay identities are a diverts and dynamic concept. scholarly work (Sutherland, 2003) discuss on the possible by inspired by Fernand Braudel idea of historical narrative writing. The work mentions ancient economic trade, travel records, Geographical terrain contributes to identified the kind of encounter, changes of the quantities of goods, records of trade route, rise and fall of the empires in other regions contributed to the changes of interdependent trade which is interconnected to each other's. in the cold war period, Maritime Southeast Asia history quickly adopt a mainstream historical narrative that based on western modernity and the idea

of progress. This wave influenced the historical narratives based on this trajectory during the turbulence years of decolonial after second World War two which quickly drack cold war. The post-cold war period as saw the decline of area studies and rise of globalization force the local scholars to rethink the narrative of Southeast Asia.

After the researchers discuss on the political, economic, and ancient usage of the term Nusantara. The nature of the geographical terrain in Malay Archipelago consisted vast regions of Island. Strategically it is important from the aspect of trade, diplomatic, religious activities from the ancient time that continues until today. Here the researchers see a potential use of Nusantara as a representation or imagined community that represents Nusantara as synonymic to a cosmopolitical by its own: a land of full of diversities and cultural encounters. The researches wish to emphasise that Nusantara is not a homogenous single unit, a diversified place with meaning. Different geographical boundaries in Nusantara would provide the research with different meaning of cultural diversities based on its cultural encounters. The following statements are some of the key findings:

1. Malay identities are complex and shaped by historical trade and interactions.
2. The narrative of Maritime Southeast Asia has been influenced by Western ideologies, particularly during the Cold War.
3. Nusantara serves as a significant representation of diversity and cultural encounters, rejecting the notion of a homogeneous identity.
4. Different geographical contexts within Nusantara contribute unique meanings to cultural diversity.

Conclusion: Modern Museum, Power, and Knowledge

Civilization archived precious pieced of information and it preserved the information. Sooner or later, the practices became institutionalized on the storages of information. These institutionalized storages transform into libraries, exhibitions galleries and national museums in our contemporary society. In this article, the researchers picked national museums as the centre to discuss its relations on power, Malayness and national museum.

National museums inherited the ethos of western modernity. The beacons of progresses shape the ethos of so-called modern museum in the contemporary context. Thus, the substances of western modernity had influenced the orders of museum exhibition entities. These exhibitions included permanents displays in the museum dioramas.

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