

# The National Museum of Malaysia: A Case Study in the Representation of National Identity

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*This is the fourth in a series of case studies exploring the relationship between national identity and its display in national museums.*

Malaysia's National Museum, the *Muzium Negara* as it is often referred to even in English publications, is only slightly younger than the country itself, having first opened its doors in 1963. It is very closely identified with the Prime Minister of the time, Malaysia's first, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and the construction of the museum was very much his personal project. Other state-run museums exist, such as the National Museum of History, founded in 1991, but the *Muzium Negara* is the only institution unambiguously styled the National Museum, and Malaysia's Minister of Culture and Tourism, Dato' Sabbaruddin Chik, has written that the museum is "a microcosm of this unique and fascinating country of ours" (cited in Harris, 1990, p.5). It is clearly unchallenged in its pre-eminence among the country's museums, and will be the only focus for this study.

## The History of the Nation-State.

There is no more powerful force in Malaysian society than communalism:

division of the country into ethnic communities, 48 percent Malay, 36 percent Chinese, 9 percent Indian, and the rest smaller minorities (Neher, 1991, p.103).

The attempt to incorporate migrant groups into local society is another recognizable theme in the history of Malaysia and of vital importance today. Whether Malaysia survives as a political entity may depend on its ability to make ethnic identifications redundant and to create an acceptable new identity (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.303).

Geographically, Malaysia is something of an anomaly. Although West Malaysia, the southern part of the Malay peninsula, is a continuous land mass with a reasonable degree of cultural, linguistic and historical coherence, the incorporation into the nation-state of the two provinces of East Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, in the north of the island of Borneo, is arguably arbitrary, an accident of history. The two parts of the country have different geological provenance, and were originally settled by humans from unrelated ethnolinguistic groups. The editor for the "Early History" volume of the *Encyclopedia of Malaysia* is very clear about the distinctions: "All the indigenous Borneans today are Austronesians, who perhaps first colonized Borneo 3,500 years ago . . . Peninsular Malaysia is quite different, and much more diverse ethnically" (Shuhaimi & Rahman, 1998, p.11). Dates of the earliest human habitation in Malaysia "remain largely conjectural" (Harris, 1990, p.8), but stone tools have been found in Sarawak and on the peninsula dating back to early Paleolithic times.

"By perhaps 200 BCE, both the Malay Peninsula and Borneo were coming within the orbit of cultures capable of manufacturing items of bronze and iron" (Shuhaimi & Rahman, 1998, p.29), and traders began to visit the region from India and China. Maritime Southeast Asia, between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, was ideally placed to serve as a trading base, and many small kingdoms emerged to control this trade, Indian and other cultural influences blending with indigenous patterns. Over the succeeding centuries, traders from Sri Lanka brought Buddhism, while mainland Indians introduced Brahminism, both creeds often mixing with indigenous animist beliefs to give rise to syncretic, eclectic belief systems, traces of which can still be seen in parts of the archipelago such as Bali. "Archaeological evidence of an ancient Malay

kingdom . . . suggests that a flourishing economy existed based on the commercial exchange of locally produced products and minerals . . . for trade goods brought by foreign merchants” (Harris, 1990, pp.10-11). It is likely that the Malay language developed around this time as a market tongue, a way for Indian and Chinese traders to make themselves understood all over the archipelago. “The roots of Srivijayan domination of the region were laid, together with the roots of the whole region today by the Malay language” (Shuhaimi & Rahman, 1998, p.29).

Although other kingdoms and confederacies almost certainly predated and, for a time, rivalled it as the most powerful state in the region, the historical record of the emergence of Sumatran Srivijaya in the late seventh century “conveys the impression of a state determined to dominate its neighbours” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.20). Consolidating its early successes by means of an adroit mix of force and diplomacy, the Srivijayan state, centred on its strategically placed port of Palembang, sustained its leading commercial and political position in the archipelago for over six centuries. Ruled by Maharajahs professing Hindu beliefs, Srivijaya nevertheless remained open to all faiths, becoming in particular a renowned centre for various schools of Buddhist learning and constructing the great Buddhist temple of Borobudur, on Java. Respected even in China for its artistic and scientific sophistication, Srivijaya and its rulers initiated a number of enduring cultural practices including, suggests Andaya, “the idea of the devoted subject willing to die for his lord, which is frequently found in later classical Malay texts” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.26).

From around the twelfth century, Srivijaya’s hold on its vassals became progressively weaker as independent trade, particularly with China, became both easier and more lucrative. Crucially also, the *orang laut*, the piratical sea gypsies on whose loyalty Srivijaya had formerly been able to count, were beginning to trade for themselves or hire out their unmatched seafaring skills to rival kingdoms in the archipelago. Some of these kingdoms, furthermore, were converting to Islam by the 14th century, a development that obviously weakened their allegiance to Srivijaya’s Hindu-Buddhist rulers.<sup>1</sup> The Javanese kingdom of Majapahit threatened Srivijaya in the south, while the newly-formed Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya was extending its influence in the north, and by the end of the 14th century Srivijaya’s “long history of maritime dominance” (Osborne, 1988, p.30) was over.

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<sup>1</sup> Marco Polo visited a Moslem town in northern Sumatra in 1292.

Malay historiography tends to designate anything before the 15th century as “protohistory,” asserting that “the historic period began with the emergence of Melaka” (Shuhaimi & Rahman, 1998, p.63) in about 1400. Although undoubtedly a prosperous, renowned trading centre in the 15th century, the importance of the Sultanate of Melaka to the Malay imagination is more symbolic than actual. Melaka is both a high point and a bridge, linking the illustrious heritage of Srivijaya to succeeding Malay kingdoms, which strove to emulate Melaka’s lustre as a source of Malay custom and achievement. As Andaya sums up: “So imposing was the reputation of Melaka that its successors were in a sense condemned to the awesome task of attempting to revive the glory of the Malay past” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.37). In the *Sejarah Melayu*, the compilation of Malay histories and traditions put together in the early 17th century (but obviously predating that period), the founding of Melaka is attributed to a Prince from Palembang, Paramesvara, who converted to Islam, took the name Iskander Shah, and was said to be descended from Alexander the Great.<sup>2</sup> According to *the Sejarah Melayu* Paramesvara first sailed to the island of Temasek, where he founded the city of Singapore, before moving up the peninsula to a site that he named Melaka. Having “a pleasant climate and an abundant supply of fresh water” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.40), as well as occupying a natural defensive position, Melaka was well situated to become an important trading centre, the successor to Palembang in that part of the strait. A fortuitous visit from a Chinese delegation in 1404 enabled the new settlement to initiate a special relationship with the Ming dynasty, and by acknowledging itself as a vassal state to both Ayutthaya and Majapahit, Melaka avoided the depredations that had so fatally weakened Srivijaya.

Melaka’s commercial success and subsequent territorial expansion during the 15th century were “the most significant factors in the spread of Islam throughout the peninsula” (Harris, 1990, p.15), and the Malay language of the Melaka court similarly became “the main language for trade throughout Southeast Asia” (Reid, 1988, p.7). In short, “Melaka’s reputation as a commercial and religious centre established it as the yardstick by which other Moslem kingdoms in the archipelago were measured” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.54). Reports of the wealth and prestige of Melaka spread beyond the Malay peninsula, however, and a newly expansionist Portugal sailed east with the simultaneously Christian and commercial motives of wresting control of the spice trade

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<sup>2</sup> “who assumes in the text the status of a glorious Moslem king” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.33).

from the Moslems. Alfonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese commander in the east, personally led the expedition to Melaka that captured the city after a month-long siege in 1511. The Sultan escaped into the interior and re-established his court on the island of Bentan, but his efforts to oust the Portuguese from Melaka were in vain. On his death, his son moved to the south of the peninsula, where he became the first Sultan of the new state of Johore sometime in the 1530s.

The conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese was “a considerable shock to Malays” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.57), but other states in the archipelago, such as Brunei, Aceh, Perak and Johore, were soon competing with the Portuguese for territorial and trading advantages. A decisive factor was the arrival of the Dutch into the region, however, and as the power of the European newcomers grew steadily during the 17th century, the Johore sultanate saw an opportunity to increase its own influence. An alliance between Johore and the Dutch drove the Portuguese out of Melaka in 1641, and although the Dutch tried to revive its former eminence as a trading entrepôt, the port was in irreversible decline relative to Johore, which “succeeded in attracting an ever increasing number of merchants to its port at the expense of Melaka” (Harris, 1990, p.17).

Migrations into the south of the Malay peninsula by Minangkabau people from Sumatra and particularly Bugis from Sulawesi eroded the authority of the Johore Sultanate over the course of the 18th century, and the ongoing enmity between the Dutch and the ascendant Bugis contributed to the decline of both states. The main beneficiaries of this decline were the British, who by 1826 had almost complete control over trade in the region through the strategically located Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka and Singapore. In 1874 the Pangkor Treaty established British Residents in the courts of the Malay Sultans, ostensibly to act as advisors, but in practice to act as administrators. Religious and traditional matters were explicitly excluded from the Residents’ mandates, although this “division of the secular and the religious was a concept totally alien to Muslim Malays” (Harris, 1990, p.21). In 1896 the four states of Perak, Negri Sembilan, Pahang and Selangor were combined as the Federated Malay States, with Kuala Lumpur as the capital; Johore and the four northern states were known as the Unfederated Malay States, but the system of indirect rule through Residents was complete. The two Borneo states that were later to become the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak were made British protectorates in 1888 but were still under the control of their respective

rulers, the British North Borneo Company and the 'White Rajas' of the Brooke family.

Colonial rule in the peninsula during the 19th century was to a large extent "a rule by consensus and persuasion, since forceful opposition from either the British official or the Malay Sultan could ultimately render any one-sided policy ineffective" (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.240). The large migrant Chinese population was treated as a separate administrative unit, the Chinese Protectorate. This neat arrangement was disrupted by the development of the rubber industry, which brought large numbers of Indian workers to the peninsula, effectively making them wards of the plantation owners, whose attitude was "at best paternalistic and at worst exploitative" (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.240). By 1939, peninsular Malaya's population had reached about five and a half million people, of whom "43 per cent were Chinese and 41 percent Malay. The rest of the population was mostly Indian, or European and Eurasian. Aboriginal people lived in the deep jungle of the central ranges" (Warren, 2002, p.8). Given these new demographics, government intervention was clearly necessary to standardise rules and procedures for the treatment of non-Malays, but centralisation would further diminish the authority of the Malay Sultans. The tension inherent in this situation is still a factor in Malaysian politics today, where Bumiputra policies ('land-born' — as opposed to 'Malay', which would exclude the non-Malay indigenes of East Malaysia) confer economic, educational and political advantages on — effectively — non-Chinese and non-Indian Malaysians. Debate on these issues, however, was interrupted by the devastating Japanese invasion of 1941, in which "the British Empire's illusion of permanence and strength was brought crashing down in a matter of weeks" (Warren, 2002, p.295).

"British rule in Malaysia created a modern state, but the idea of a common citizenship came only after World War II" (Cheah, 2001, p.111). Over the course of the Japanese occupation, in part as a result of deliberate Japanese policies, "Malays increasingly began to see themselves as belonging to a Malaya-wide entity, rather than to their individual states" (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.248). This nascent nationalism was to take different forms following the British return after the war. Publicly committed to a unified Malaya, the British government made several false starts before agreeing with the Malay Sultans and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) on a Federation of Malaya in 1948. The Malayan Communist Party immediately went into open revolt, prompting the declaration of a state of emergency. The state of emergency lasted until

1960, although the situation had been under control for many years before that, as the insurgents' support diminished rapidly after 1952, when "the announcement of Britain's intention to quit Malaya and grant full independence was made public" (Harris, 1990, p.23).

Independence was declared in 1957, and in 1961 the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, put forward the plan for a Federation of Malaysia, to include Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. The Sultan of Brunei decided against merger, and the history of Singapore's association with the Federation has been related above in the section dealing with that country's National Museum. The resulting Federation of Malaysia has proved to be a successful, stable entity, presided over since 1981 by the country's fourth Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohammad. Ethnic tensions still exist below the surface, particularly with regard to the *Bumiputra* policies that effectively guarantee Malay political dominance in exchange for non-Malay economic dominance. Islam is the state religion, and "all Malays are Muslim by legal definition" (Neher, 1991, p.111), which adds a mandatory religious component to the national idea. The rise to political power of Islamic parties in (as of 2002) two of the states of the Federation is a worrying development for non-Moslems, as Islam does not traditionally separate the secular from the religious. Malaysia's government has had for some time an official policy ideal of 'the new Malaysian' as a citizen transcending ethnic background, religion or socioeconomic status, and who is committed instead to the idea of the country as a whole, but the achievement of this goal — or even the avoidance of interethnic strife — is likely to require a very delicate political balancing act.

## The History of the National Museum.

The first public museum in Malaya was the Perak Museum, founded by the British in the tin mining town of Taiping in 1883. Five years later, the Sarawak Museum was founded in Kuching by Sir Charles Brooke, the second 'White Raja' of Sarawak. Both of these institutions were devoted mainly to natural history specimens and ethnographic artefacts. In 1907 the Selangor Museum was established in a large Victorian edifice modelled on the architecture of the London museums. The Perak and Selangor Museums collaborated on various research projects, and were merged in 1910 to form the Federated Malay States Museums, the first attempt at a national museum

system, but were separated again in 1930 as part of the British government's decentralisation programme. Joint research continued, and was published in the Journal of the Federated States Museums until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

The Selangor Museum had become the larger, more prestigious of the two institutions by the time of the war, but was very badly damaged by a stray allied bomb early in 1945, and its collections were almost totally destroyed. The post-war struggle with the Communist insurgents prevented any rebuilding until 1952, when a small, temporary museum was erected on the site and named as the first National Museum. In 1959, two years after independence, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, commissioned the design of a new National Museum to be erected on the same site, and the temporary structure was demolished. Four years later, on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1963, the King of Malaysia opened the new National Museum, which was administered by the newly formed Department of Museums under the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The contents were described as "a comprehensive collection of ethnological and archaeological objects as well as natural history specimens" (Kelly, 2001, p.36). In 1978 the National Museum was briefly attached to the Ministry of Local Government and Environment, but reverted to its former affiliation until 1987. In that year the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (later renamed the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) was formed and took over the administration of what was now the Department of Museums and Antiquities, which also had responsibility for the National History Museum, the Perak Museum, and "various historical sites and monuments gazetted under the Antiquities Act, 1976" (Taha, 1997, p.2). In 1992 yet another reorganisation created the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, which has asked the Department to create a number of new museums including a Museum of the Ethnology of the Malay World, a Natural History Museum and an Educational Museum.

## The Building and its Physical Setting.

"Situated at the south end of the Lake Gardens, the museum with its high, sloping roofs and two large mosaic murals looms up suddenly along Jalan Travers, the main thoroughfare leading into the capital. A visitor cannot miss it" (Stephens et al., 1981, p.112). Incorporating elements of traditional Malay palace architecture into its modern concrete structure, the *Muzium Negara* is certainly a striking edifice, boldly

asserting its ethnic heritage. Even the gate leading into the entry courtyard is a replica of the 18th century Malim Gate of Kota Kuala Kedah, the only surviving brick-built Malay fort in the country. The museum is simple in plan: a steeply pitched stepped roof soars above the central entrance block, and a long, two-storey wing stretches out on either side. Three tall glass windows tower above the three recessed doorways in the entrance block, and these are surmounted by a circular lozenge with an Arabic inscription from the Koran in the lower part of the gable. Each of the white walls of the two wings is covered for about two thirds of its length by a mosaic mural illustrating, on the right of the entrance, key events from the history of Malaysia and, on the left, scenes from Malaysian cultural life. The grounds are nicely landscaped and well maintained, with objects of historical and archaeological interest placed among pleasant trees and shrubbery. The main entry courtyard is in fact an extension of the museum, displaying various forms of land transport used in the peninsula and a traditional Malay house, raised above the ground and divided into eating and sleeping sections. At one end of the courtyard is a single-story annex used for temporary exhibitions.

The defiantly Malay references in the building's design were apparently at the insistence of Tunku Abdul Rahman<sup>3</sup> and are in keeping with his directly expressed preference for a 'Malay Malaysia' as opposed to a more multicultural conception.<sup>4</sup> As a symbolic statement, the building has an undeniable impact, but it is perhaps less successful in an artistic sense, the emphatic verticality of the entrance block seeming unrelated to the long horizontals of the wings. To this observer, at least, the effect is inescapably reminiscent of an ungainly fowl vainly attempting to take off. The design also means that the interior space of the museum is difficult to use efficiently, and the huge volume of the central entrance block is almost empty, only the walls beside the stairways being available for display purposes. The staircase is impressive, however, and the floor of the entrance atrium is paved with superb blue and white floor tiles in the strait ceramic tradition. Unfortunately, the closed roof and blank walls mean that little natural light is available, and many exhibits are poorly lit.

The *Muzium Negara* is some way outside Kuala Lumpur city centre on a busy

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<sup>3</sup> A plaque inside the museum announces, in Malay and English, that: "This museum was built on the personal instructions of Yang Teramat Mulia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj K.O.M."

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to speculate on what kind of eclectic structure might have resulted from a decision to incorporate traditional elements of Malay, Chinese and Indian architecture in a National Museum building.

major road, but is easily reached by bus or taxi, and is a short walk from the light rail line completed in 2002. An imaginatively laid out urban walking trail connects the museum to other landmarks in the city, and a footbridge across the main road facilitates access for pedestrians. It seems to be a well-known, popular destination for locals, and the provision of a snack bar, a gift shop and a children's discovery area no doubt augment its appeal. Whether its distinctively Malay appearance is equally appealing to Chinese and Indian Malaysians is perhaps an open question.

## The Stated Mission of the Museum.

The Department of Museums and Antiquities, the federal agency that runs the *Muzium Negara*, is officially "responsible for co-ordinating activities dealing with the protection, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge of the country's rich heritage" (Taha, 1997, p.4). In turn, the *Muzium Negara* itself states as its objective to be "a repository of Malaysia's rich cultural heritage and the focal point for imparting knowledge on the country's rich historical and national heritage" (cited in Kelly, 2001, p.36). The emphasis on education is apparent in the citations above, and the target visitor is a Malaysian rather than a tourist, as the Education Services division of the museum makes clear in its stated objective, which is "to encourage students to appreciate the culture, history, flora and fauna of the country more closely" (Taha, 1997, p.9). In addition to its in-house facilities, which include lectures, special tours and a children's discovery gallery, the *Muzium Negara* also mounts mobile exhibitions which travel "throughout Peninsular Malaysia with the aim of educating school children and the rural population" (Taha, 1997, p.7). The one-ringgit entrance fee is also calculated to encourage visitors, being very cheap by local standards.

The socially ameliorative purpose behind this educational emphasis is openly professed in the Department's list of objectives, by which it "hopes to contribute toward the establishment of a harmonious society with the aim of achieving high moral standard" (Taha, 1997, p.4). A practical demonstration of how the Department pursues this aim was exemplified by a 1997-1999 special exhibition at the *Muzium Negara* on *Infidelity: A Violation of Family Values*. Other special and temporary exhibitions on similar social themes have been sponsored by the Department in the *Muzium Negara* and its regional member institutions. As Kristin Kelly sums up in her book on Southeast

Asian museums, “this museum is a teaching and educational institution that presents an excellent — and eclectic — overview of the world of Malaysia” (Kelly, 2001, p.36).

Research is also an important function of the *Muzium Negara*, and four different departments organise and conduct research in the fields of ethnology, natural history, history, and archaeology. An impressive number of reports has been published by the various research teams, and the discovery by museum researchers of ‘Pérak Man,’ the earliest humanoid yet found in the region, “has created history in the nation’s archaeological excavation” (Taha, 1997, p.12). The *Muzium Negara* houses a comprehensive research library for its scholars, and although this facility is normally closed to the public, “permission to use the facilities can be obtained from the curator” (Stephens et al., 1981, p.113). Tourism is mentioned in the official publications, but not as a central focus of the Department of Museums and Antiquities, perhaps a surprising omission in view of the Department’s affiliation to the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, and in view of the fact that around half of the *Muzium Negara*’s visitors in 1997 were designated as “Foreign” (Taha, 1997, p.17). Almost as an afterthought the Department claims that it “plays its part in helping to promote the tourism industry of the country” (Taha, 1997, p.2).

## Political and Financial Control.

Given the focus on socially ameliorative educational programmes in the *Muzium Negara*’s mission, it is perhaps no surprise to find that the institution comes under clear government control. The Department of Museums and Antiquities is, as the official report proclaims, “a full federal government agency” (Taha, 1997, p.2) and operates directly the museums for which it is responsible. The staff of all the Department’s institutions, including the *Muzium Negara*, are civil servants who work either in administrative or professional capacities. “From time to time officers and staff members of the department are given the opportunity to attend courses at certificate, degree or postgraduate level locally or in foreign institutions of higher learning” (Taha, 1997, p.16), although most training in museum practices is carried out either by the Department or by the institutions themselves. “Among the courses conducted by the department are museology, personnel administration, computer, customer service, special and general induction, and tourist information guide” (Taha, 1997, p.16). The budget is decided at

cabinet level, and administered through the Department, although private financial support is sought for certain “special exhibitions” which are “usually sponsored by a commercial company/corporation” (Taha, 1997, p.6).

Research by foreign scholars is also subject to strict government supervision, requiring a special permit from the Research Promotion and Co-Ordination Committee of the Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister’s Department. Application is a lengthy procedure, requiring copious details as to the nature of the research and the applicant’s academic and personal credentials. Following this background check, permission is only finally granted if the applicant agrees to “adhere to the conditions stated by the code of conduct for foreign researchers,” which requires that “the study should avoid sensitive issues pertaining to local values and norms as well as political elements” (personal correspondence from Economic Planning Unit, dated 28<sup>th</sup> May 2002). Researchers are further required to submit summaries of research findings before leaving Malaysia, and four copies of the final paper or publication. These are not unreasonable requirements perhaps, but they do indicate the degree to which the Malaysian government feels it necessary to monitor and control its image overseas.

## Divisions and Themes.

Visitors to the *Muzium Negara* ascend a wide staircase to enter through the recessed triple doorway in the centre of the building on the middle floor of three. To the right of this entrance block, a large mosaic mural depicts in a kind of strip cartoon form the history of Malaysia from right to left, culminating in independence in 1957. The bronze and gold colours of the mural, as well as the stylistic elements, bring to mind traditional Malay Batik. At the extreme right of the mural a Hindu deity is shown, perhaps indicating Malaysia’s ‘proto-historic’ Srivijayan past.<sup>5</sup> The first date to appear is 1409, beside which a Chinese delegation is shown, their ships in the background, offering trade goods (or tribute) to a seated Malay. The reference is clearly to the founding of Melaka and its monopoly of the Chinese trade, but there is a strong visual hint that the vassal relationship is reversed in the favour of Melaka. The next date, 1475, shows two Malays dancing with traditional *keris* knives, and a Chinese dragon dance

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<sup>5</sup> I have not been able to track down an interpretative key to the mural, and while most of the references are unmistakable, an educated guess must be made with regard to some of the scenes.

performed by dancers apparently wearing Malay headgear. The reference here is presumably to the emergence of elements of Malay culture, including the assimilation of external customs.

1511 depicts Malays mounted on elephants attempting to repel invaders from the sea — obviously the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in that year. 1720 shows Malays waving guns to no clear purpose, although the scene may refer to the skirmishes between the Bugis and the Malays at that time. 1840 shows a Thai temple complex, alluding to the conflict with the Siamese ruler over the northern Malay states. 1874 shows the signing of the Pangkor Treaty with the British, and 1886 features a British Resident with his Lady, as well as a steam locomotive, and a huge mosque. 1900 is a scene of tree planting, presumably rubber, and 1941 shows kneeling Malays being marched over by uniformed soldiers with a Japanese flag. The final scene, 1957, depicts various Malaysian symbols of independence, including the flag, the King, the national flower and cheering people. The mural to the left of the door is of similar size, but shows various aspects of Malay traditional culture, including weaving, basketry, *keris*-making, pottery, shipbuilding, woodwork, puppetry, batik and kites. A text worked into the mural in Malay and English identifies it as having been presented by Dato Lee Kong Chian, a Chinese name but a Malay honorific.

Inside the building the left wing houses the Cultural Gallery, offering, as the guide reports, “an insight into the various aspects of the diverse Malaysian culture.” Display cases around the walls contain costumes footwear<sup>6</sup>, furniture, puppetry (mostly non-Malaysian) “and other customary apparatus that are becoming rare today.” Large dioramas illustrate a Malay wedding, an Indian wedding, a dance from Sabah, a royal circumcision ceremony, a Baba (Straits Chinese) bridal chamber, a Baba altar and an unidentified scene from a Malay household in which a father appears to be blessing a son. Two weaving looms and a Baba travel hammock also occupy the central area of the gallery. A video monitor in one corner shows continuous loop videos, in English and Malay alternately, of festivals and other cultural events, culminating in Independence Day scenes and stressing the theme of unity in diversity.

The gallery to the right of the entrance is used for special exhibitions, which in the 1990s included themes such as ‘Treasures from the Grave’ (which became something

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<sup>6</sup> Kristin Kelly finds this display in particular “amusing and informative” (Kelly, 2001, p.37), though it is hard to see why.

of a national event by bringing a Pharaoh's mummy to Malaysia for the first time), 'The Head and Skull in Human History and Culture' and 'Infidelity: A Violation of Family Values.' Special exhibitions usually have outside sponsorship, but the one on infidelity, which ran from March 1997 to March 1999, was a government initiative. The gallery is empty at present, but it is clearly a useful space for the Department of Museums and Antiquities to pursue its social agenda.

An elegant staircase leads from the back of the entrance hall up to the next level, with displays of Sarawak textiles set into the wall. A balcony runs around the central atrium at the second floor level, affording access to the galleries, but this entire central space of the museum is effectively empty of exhibits. A large, unlabelled painting of Malaysian badminton heroes fills one end of the balcony, probably thematically connected to the large drum below which commemorates the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. The wing above the Culture Gallery holds the Natural History Gallery, and a display case at the entrance purports to show 'Malaysian Fauna' but merely contains arbitrary commercial posters of animals, one with illustrations of polar bears and giraffes. Just inside the gallery a large wall map shows iconically the 'Animals of Land and Sea in Southeast Asia' but is very incomplete. Bird and animal dioramas of varying quality take up most of the gallery space, accompanied by piped birdsong, and there are displays devoted to insect life, marine life and geology.<sup>7</sup> "The top visitor attraction here is a fiberglass model of the Puchong crocodile that died in 1997 in Melaka" (Kelly, 2001, p.42).

The opposite wing on this level is divided between the Ceramics Gallery and the Weaponry and Musical Instruments Gallery. Few of the ceramics exhibited are Malaysian, those that are being labelled 'pre-historic' without dates. Pottery from the Middle East, Asia and Southeast Asia is both better represented and more precisely labelled. The musical instruments on display are similarly eclectic in origin, with more Indian, Chinese and Thai instruments exhibited than indigenous Malay ones. The *keris* is the central feature of the Weapons Gallery, with exhibits on its making and its history, but there are also displays of Islamic weapons and 'weapons of everyday use' such as sickles. A large drum formerly used to celebrate successful headhunts is a striking feature, and there are oddly placed and unexplained paintings of Malay warriors wielding

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<sup>7</sup> Unexpectedly, one case contains a Malaysian flag taken to the moon and back by Apollo 11 and a moon rock, presented by President Nixon.

the *keris* against British soldiers.

The exit from the museum building is on the ground floor, below and on the opposite side from the entrance. Most of this floor is used by museum staff, but there is a small gift shop and a Children's Discovery Gallery, where museum staff work with schoolchildren on educational projects. The exit leads into a courtyard containing a display of various types of land transportation, including a locomotive, several automobiles and horse carts. A traditional Malay house occupies another corner of the courtyard, near a small snack bar and rest rooms. A small building at the back of the courtyard serves as a gallery space for temporary exhibitions such as one in 2000 devoted to the significance of the dragon in Asian culture or, in 2002, the recreation of the interior of a Straits Chinese house. On a more exotic theme, an exhibition devoted to 'Society and the Snake' featured a section in which certain traditional 'Snake Kings' attempted (successfully) to break a world record by living inside a room with 100 poisonous snakes for a period of time. This exhibition "created history for the museum had to remain open for 24 hours to enable the public to see" (Taha, 1997, p.6).

Other objects in the compound surrounding the museum include a bronze bust of Edward VII ("erected by public subscription"), an unidentified bronze statue of a British Resident and many cannon. A museum-run archaeological excavation is illustrated by a pair of megaliths from Negeri Sembilan, and various anthropological items such as Sarawak burial poles and Martaban jars are evocatively disposed around the compound. Grave markers from Batu Aceh are said to exemplify a "combination of pre-islamic art and islamic significance." Dated between the 15th and 19th centuries, these grave markers are accompanied by a plaque proclaiming that: "The effort made by the Department of Museums and Antiquities is to preserve the heritage of Malay civilization. They symbolize Malay creativity, inventiveness, artistry and way of life in bygone days." Another plaque near the front of the compound explains the significance of the design of the Malaysian flag.

## Exhibition Strategies.

In its official report the *Muzium Negara* stresses exhibition as one of its main functions in its "aim to disseminate knowledge on the historical, cultural and natural history legacies of the nation" (Taha, 1997, p.6). The museum divides its displays into

four kinds of exhibition, permanent, temporary, special and mobile, and claims to present the material “in several forms: Three-dimensional, tablo, miniature, artefacts, replica, audio-visual, and graphic presentations. Each one is accompanied by appropriate and attractive arrangement and proper lighting which conform to international standards” (Taha, 1997, p.6). In fact, the exhibition styles are wildly uneven in concept and quality, so much so that even Kristin Kelly, author of *The Extraordinary Museums of Southeast Asia*, and who rarely has a bad word to say about any of the museums she covers, is moved to mention the “slightly loopy dioramas” (Kelly, 2001, p.42) in the Cultural Gallery.

One of these, for instance, is a richly detailed and lovingly crafted scene of the interior of a Moslem household, in which a seated older gentleman seems to be blessing the kneeling youngster before him while other members of the family look on. Unfortunately, this intriguing scene is rendered almost empty of meaning, except perhaps to Malay visitors, by the failure to furnish any explanatory label at all. In another diorama a depiction of a traditional dance from Sarawak is rendered faintly risible by the use of European mannequins posed stiffly on a red velveteen carpet. The overall effect is that of a second-rate department store window display, which is also the case for the displays of traditional costume, many of which are unidentified as to origin. Still in the Cultural Gallery, an Indian wedding diorama and the recreation of a Straits Chinese house interior provide some representation for the other major ethnic groups of Malaysia, but the bulk of the display in this gallery concentrates on Malay culture. A Malay royal wedding is the first exhibit seen on entering the gallery, and then an elaborate diorama presents a royal circumcision ceremony, with detailed explanations, including cartoon illustrations, in Malay and English, the only labelling languages used in the permanent exhibition.<sup>8</sup> The repeating video programmes on Malaysian festivals and customs pays more attention to Chinese and Indian traditions, but the commentary alternates between English and Malay, and the soundtrack is disconcertingly inappropriate western ‘cocktail hour’ music. A display of shadow puppet traditions from different parts of the world is excellently presented and very informative, but has little to do with Malaysia, which does not have any such tradition.

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<sup>8</sup> Some exhibits, such as the one on Malay headgear, carry a main label in both languages but individual descriptors in Malay only.

The Natural History Gallery is of similarly uneven quality. Many of the dioramas are excellent in conception and design, but are missing animals or birds, and some of those that remain are distinctly moth-eaten. Other exhibits, such as the giant model crocodile and the display of Goliath beetles, the biggest in the world (but which do not exist in Malaysia), seem to be included for little more than sensationalist interest, considering that the presentation of Malaysian ecology is incomplete in so many respects. The Ceramics Gallery is generally better arranged, with nicely labelled displays of pottery from a number of Asian countries, but the lack of dates (other than the meaningless “pre-historic”) for the only Malaysian pottery on show is a surprising oversight. The Musical Instruments Gallery again has more instruments from surrounding countries, including China and India, than it does from Malaysia, and even these are from Sabah and Sarawak rather than the peninsula, except for some *Orang Asli* (traditional peoples) artefacts.

The Weaponry Gallery features a lovingly crafted display of the *keris*, its history and manufacture, but also contains many articles that would normally be classified as tools or agricultural implements. A signboard for the gallery asserts that its purpose is to “demonstrate Malay identity and craftsmanship [*sic*]” and goes on to extol (in the worst English to be found in the museum) the artistic virtues of ancient Malays and “other indigenous [*sic*] groups of Malaysia.” The oddest aspect of the gallery is that it contains a number of rather crude paintings of Malays fighting either other Malays or British soldiers. These are completely unidentified, and often included in cases containing totally disparate items. It is possible, though I was unable to verify this supposition, that the pictures refer to episodes from the Pahang War of the 1890s, a Malay rebellion against the extension of British control into Pahang. Although a fairly minor incident historically, “for modern Malays the Pahang War . . . has come to symbolize the struggle to safeguard Malay tradition, Malay values, the sense of Malay independence, against outside intrusion” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.169).

The same fierce warrior recurs in many of the museum pictures, and may represent Mat Kilau, “whose exploits in the Pahang War gained him a place in popular memory as one of the heroes of Malay nationalism” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p.169).

The exterior compound of the *Muzium Negara* is imaginatively used for the display of a variety of historic and cultural artefacts, and the labelling is generally of a

higher quality than that found in many of the interior galleries. Mature trees and simply-built sheds afford shade, and the grounds provide a pleasant contrast with the inside of the building, which is in some places poorly lit and somewhat oppressive. The temporary exhibition hall is a utilitarian structure, but two exhibitions mounted since 2000, one on the cultural significance of the dragon and one on a Straits Chinese house, were put together with great flair and imagination.

## Overall Impression.

Kristin Kelly concludes her survey of the *Muzium Negara* thus: “The National Museum is a multi-pronged institution with something for everyone. Its well-organized and thoughtful exhibits and interpretive materials provide the visitor with a broad and stimulating overview, as well as an excellent introduction to the country and people of Malaysia” (Kelly, 2001, p.42). In fact, the overwhelming impression received by a more critical visitor is that the museum is not well organized. Its wide range of exhibits, some of which are indeed excellent, fails overall to add up to anything resembling a coherent narrative of Malaysian history or culture. From its external appearance down to the language of its labels and signboards, the museum is heavily weighted in favour of the representation of Malay culture at the expense of Chinese and Indian tradition, notwithstanding the historic and demographic significance of these communities.

Given its restricted space, the museum certainly attempts to cover too much in its thematic arrangement, and with some exceptions deals with none of its themes adequately. The Cultural Gallery takes an arbitrary, snapshot approach to its displays, and while many of the individual exhibits are fascinating, there is little attempt to fit these cultural glimpses into a comprehensive overview of Malaysian society. An informed guide could supply a great deal of this background, but given its educational focus the national museum should surely be accessible to self-guided exploration. The lack of dates or any historical perspective is confusing, and many of the displays deal solely with artefacts and traditions of Malay royalty, ignoring the cultural heritage of other sectors of the nation. There exists a separate National History Museum, which deals more thoroughly with the chronological development of Malaysian society, and regional museums may fill some of the gaps in the cultural record, but Kelly’s conclusion cited above, that the displays serve as an excellent introduction to the country and its people, is

very misleading. The only place in the museum where the three main races are shown together is in the huge but unidentified painting of sports heroes.

The Natural History Gallery is similarly incomplete, and suffers from the tendency seen all over the museum to put everything in the vaults on display, whether the item makes narrative sense or not. An exhibition on Malaysian Fauna can surely find something better than a cheap 'Animals of the World' poster showing polar bears and giraffes to introduce its display. African beetles, however fascinating, have no place in an exhibit of Malaysian entomology. The wildlife dioramas are beautiful and effective, but must be labelled and interpreted properly, and their contents must be maintained, if they are to have the intended impact. A dusty fiberglass model of an 18-foot crocodile takes up a lot of space when photographs might accomplish the same curatorial end, except that the exhibit is so popular. Two small showcases are not enough to explicate the fascinating complexity of Malaysian geology, especially as nowhere in the museum, astonishingly, is there a map of the country showing its component regions, its political boundaries, its topography or climatic zones.

The most striking impression left by the museum is perhaps that of its apparently confused attitude toward nationalist sentiment. The building style is assertively Malay, and the Koranic inscription in the gable links Islam to the Malay nation in a visual echo of the constitution. Many of the exhibits are either openly pro-Malay, or suggestively so, as in the presumed visual references to Mat Kilau, the 'first nationalist.' Items belonging to the Malay royal households, the Sultanates, link religion, state and political power in unambiguous displays, and signboards throughout the museum stress the enduring strength and vitality of Malay tradition. At the same time, there is little obvious demonstration of Malaysian nationalism vis-à-vis other nation-states. Few if any of the artefacts displayed in the Ceramics and Musical Instruments Galleries are from Malaysia, and the excellent display of shadow puppets from other countries seems oddly out of place in the national museum of a country that has no such tradition, except as a cultural borrowing in one northern state. It might be more reasonable to expect a comparative exhibit on kite flying, for instance, a tradition which Malaysia, or specifically, the Malays, share with Thailand. Opportunities abound for the museum to demonstrate the strength, creativity and vigour of a multiethnic, multicultural Malaysia, but they are not being exploited.

Official proclamations to the contrary, the *Muzium Negara* seems much more interested in the assertion of Malay cultural tradition than in raising the awareness of Malaysian identity. If the Department of Museums and Antiquities goes ahead with its published intention of establishing separate National Museums of Natural History and of Malay Ethnology, it will be both a challenge and an opportunity for the *Muzium Negara*, as much of its present collection will presumably be relocated. The space thus freed could be used to present a much more systematically selective introduction to Malaysia, and at the same time an exhibition much more inclusive in character than the present unbalanced confusion.

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