INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial country. With a population of about 25 million, 60% are of the Malay or indigenous descent, about 25% are Chinese, some 10% are Indians, while the remaining 5% are others. In East Malaysia, where the states of Sabah and Sarawak are located, there are about 60 ethnic races.

With a diverse population and so is the culture. A multiracial ethnic produces a unique amalgamation of values and practices. Each ethnic race has its own distinctive culture which is deep-rooted generations to generations, and each ethnic race too is free to pursue its own culture, values and practices.

The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (or in short, KeKKWa) has been entrusted to formulate cultural heritage policies and programs with the objectives and visions of safeguarding Malaysian heritages. Although established on March 27, 2004, the Culture Division of the Ministry has long been in existence since 1969 under various ministries. However, with the establishment of KeKKWa heritage is emphasized thus reinforcing the government’s serious commitment in safeguarding the country’s heritage, be it tangible or intangible.

MECHANISM FOR SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

To date the following are the government’s mechanism for safeguarding Malaysia’s intangible cultural heritage:

1. **Formulation of Laws, Rules and Regulations:**

   1.1. **Formulation of the Heritage Act**
   
   The establishment of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage in the year 2004 paves the way for the formulation of the Heritage Act 2005. Such act was formulated after a study of the Antiquities Act 1978, the Cultural Properties Bill 2002 and other related acts. These acts and bill cover only the tangible heritage aspect without any mention of the intangible heritage. The Heritage Act of 2005 thus looks at the legal aspect of both heritages emphasizing the need for safeguarding such heritages.

   1.2. **Criteria for Hotel Star Rating**
   
   In 1996 the government introduced the Malaysian Identity Program for the hotel industry as a criterion for the star rating award for hotels. Such identities made compulsory are traditional cultural performance, and landscape and interior decoration...
using Malaysian facades such as handicrafts and paintings, with bonus points for Malaysian songs played through pipe-in music.

1.3. **Compulsory Usage of the National Language and the Teaching of Ethnic Languages in Schools**

The Bahasa Melayu or the Malay language has been the main medium of instruction in schools at primary and secondary levels. However, to safeguard the local languages from being eroded through the passage of time, the government has introduced the teaching of the Kadazandusun language and the Iban language to primary schools in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak respectively where both languages are predominant.

1.4. **Registration of Traditional Medicine Practitioners**

The Ministry of Health has now made it compulsory for traditional medicine practitioners to be registered with the ministry. Such move not only helps the government to keep tab on such practice but also paves the way for proper inventorization of the practice, thereby safeguarding it from extinction.

2. **Research, Documentation and Publication:**

In 1986 the Office of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports caught fire thereby causing a massive loss of years of research, documentation and publication works. The ill-fate however does not deter the willpower of ministry cultural officials to further pursue such works.

Grants are disbursed to institutions of higher learning as well as individual experts to embark on research works not only for documentation purposes but to seek new as well as enlighten previous findings. Documentations are in the form of written works and audio-visuals where applicable. These are then publicized and distributed to the public, institutions of higher learning and public libraries.

As an effort to further documentate the vast intangible heritages of this country, the Ministry embarks on a continuous cultural-mapping exercise as a prelude to inventory-making of such heritages. It is hoped that such exercise, though time-consuming, will set the path for the right direction towards safeguarding the intangible cultural heritages.

3. **Promotion:**

3.1. **Arts Acculturalization Program for the Masses**

To create awareness of Malaysia’s intangible heritages among the Malaysian public, such promotion activities meant bringing the traditional arts to the public, wherever they may be. Traditional cultural performances, visual arts exhibitions and handicraft-making demonstrations are scheduled throughout the year not only at larger and well-equipped halls in the cities but also at smaller premises and at open spaces further away from the state capitals. With the exception of certain cultural performances in the cities, most of such activities in the rural areas are free to the public.
3.2. **Competition**

Competitions are organized at school, state and national levels as avenues to inculcate the intangible heritages in the minds and souls of the Malaysian public, especially the younger generations. Such competitions include traditional songs, past-time games, lullabies, story-telling, as well as dance and drama.

3.3. **Campaign**

Malaysia held her inaugural Heritage Week on the first week of December this year. Such campaign which is going to be an annual affair, is hoped to garner the public into arts appreciation beyond arts awareness through exhibitions, demonstrations, competitions and traditional cultural performances held at various premises of the agencies under the umbrella of KeKKWa.

Under the same mechanism, the government rolled a five-year campaign early this year to inculcate courtesy and noble values among the Malaysian citizens. Termed as the Courtesy and Noble Values Campaign, such campaign aims at re-instilling and re-inculcating into the daily lives of the Malaysian citizens the two said heritages that are synonymous to the eastern culture.

3.4. **Arts Market**

The Kuala Lumpur Arts Market was launched in August last year. Held on the first Saturday of each month, this project aims to popularize the country’s intangible heritages through the sale of cultural and arts products. Traditional cultural performances, past-time games, handicraft and visual arts painting workshops are held where patrons can try and nurture their talent. Such markets are also held at various parts of the country though at smaller scale.

4. **Capacity Building:**

Realizing the invaluability of the role of people in determining the continuous effort in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage, it is important that the people themselves be exposed to and their artistic talent be nurtured with such heritages. Thus the government outlines various programs as follows:

4.1. **The Young Sprouts Program**

This program is targeted to the young generation between the ages of five and 12. With the cooperation of the Ministry of Education, primary school children of these ages are taught the fundamentals of traditional dance, music, theatre and the visual arts in their school curriculum. These children are occasionally invited to perform at official functions be it at their own premises or at other occasions. Their activities culminate at an annual festival whereby each of the 14 Malaysian states sends a cultural troupe comprising these talents to perform at the festival.

4.2. **The School Cultural Club Program**

Established as an extra-curricular activity for secondary schools, this program is a continuity of the Young Sprouts Program. Such establishment of cultural clubs forges a continuous nurturing of talent and as a preparation for these culturally artistic students,
should they decide to pursue their careers in the performing or visual arts fields upon leaving school.

4.3. **The Youth Cultural Club Program**  
This is a specific program for youth aged 18 and above and those who have left school. Youth within this age range are encouraged to be members of cultural club where they can intermingle with other youth and participate in cultural activities organized by their clubs. The members also act as catalysts for the dissemination of cultural activities to the masses organized by the government.

4.4. **The Self Defence (or Martial Arts) Program**  
The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage works closely with the Ministry of Youth and Sports for the promotion of the traditional Malay form of self defence called the *seni silat*. For this program masters of the martial arts are sent to teach the youth the fine art of this self defence.

4.5. **Compulsory Education of Traditional Theatres**  
Students enrolled on whatever areas of studies at the National Arts Academy (or ASK), a performing arts institution under KeKKWa, must undertake and pass the three forms of traditional Malay theatres; the *Mak Yong*, the *Bangsawan* or Malay Opera, and *Wayang Kulit* or Shadow Play. Other institutions of higher learning that offer the performing arts as a major also emphasize the need for performing arts students to be enrolled and knowledgeable in these traditional Malay theatres.

5. **Infrastructure:**

5.1. **Building of Cultural Centres**  
At present only nine out of the 14 Malaysian states have cultural centres under the purview of KeKKWa. These centres act as the focal points for the development and promotion of performing arts activities. Plans are underway to build the other five centres under the Ninth Malaysia Plan period from the year 2006 to 2010.

5.2. **Establishment of Museums**  
It is said that a museum is a window to a civilization. Keeping this in mind, the government plans to establish more museums each with specific function, in addition to the variety of museums now found all over the country. The latest addition is the Textile Museum to be in operation by early 2006. The Forest Research Institute has just established a Traditional Herbs Museum, while a traditional herbs garden has been the attraction of the state of Perlis at the northern tip of West Malaysia.

5.3. **Building of Craft Centres**  
Just as cultural centres are for the development and promotion for the performing arts, and so are craft centres for handicrafts. The government plans to build more centres as training schools for talented and aspiring craftsmen in addition to and to complement the existing ones. Each centre is to be specialized according to the area of specialization in handcraft making of each location. These centres also handle occasional crafts exhibition and sale.
6. **Funding:**

The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (KeKKWa) provides funding to Non-Governmental Organizations, institutions of higher learning and private performing arts companies in the organization of cultural and arts activities. Such funding, though quite limited, nevertheless complements the government effort in the development and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helps safeguarding the heritages.

7. **National Arts Awards:**

Since 1993 the government, through KeKKWa, awards a person who is knowledgeable in, and has made invaluable contributions to the development, preservation and promotion of the arts. The sole recipient, selected biannually through nominations, receives various accolades as befitting to a National Arts Laureate. Beginning the year 2004 three smaller awards were introduced namely the Creative Award, the Supporting Award, and the Youth Award. These awards are honoured to the younger generation as compared to the National Arts Award, with the intention not only to acknowledge the recipients’ contributions but also to spur them to pursue further and higher in their respective arts fields.

8. **Other Mechanisms:**

The Malay language is the official language of Malaysia. However, with at least 60 ethnic races and each with its own distinctive culture including language, there is a possibility that such ethnic language may be diminished in its usage due to the profound effect of the Malay language as the main medium of instruction in schools. To safeguard the ethnic languages from near extinction and, conforming to the standard practice of language borrowing, more and more vocabularies of the ethnic languages are being assimilated to the Malay language so as to enrich the said language, and thus preventing the ethnic languages from dying or being forgotten.

**CHALLENGES IN SAFEGUARDING THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

With the numerous ethnic cultures it is no easy feat, though not impossible, for Malaysia to safeguard her intangible cultural heritage. Although Malaysia has just embarked on cultural mapping as a prelude to inventorization, this exercise is time consuming. Secondly, age for most of the elderly and knowledgeable practitioners is a factor to be reckoned with as they may not be around any more at the time they are needed for this exercise. To rectify this matter, KeKKWa embarks on a five-year action plan to identify the intangible heritages to be safeguarded and draw programs for development as well as for inventorization purposes.

Inventory-making methodologies are another area to be addressed as each intangible heritage is different and therefore needs distinctive treatment. Appropriate methodologies have to be invented, developed and adapted to suit the situation as and are. Though such exercise may be lengthy and of time factor, it is always never too late to begin as compared to the immense values brought about to mankind by such effort in the preservation of our vast intangible cultural heritage.