Community Mechanism for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)  
– With Reference to the Policies and Strategies for the Promotion of Arts Education at the National Level

Mr. Mohd Sukarno Abd. Wahab  
Assistant Director  
National Arts Academy  
Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia

Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a valuable gift passed down from generation to generation for years and often regarded as a foundation of people’s cultural identity and a source of creativity. Intangible Cultural heritage is manifested in the domains of ‘oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship.’ It includes folklore and legend, traditional music, theatre and dance, life-cycle ceremonies and festivals, traditional healing arts such as herbal therapy, and traditional handicrafts such as wood carving, pottery, dyeing and weaving. (Ref: Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage - 2003).

The Situation of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Malaysia

As a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, the subject of intangible cultural heritage in Malaysia is not only diverse but complicated. To date, there is no specific centralized inventory system of intangible heritages being done in Malaysia. The available materials on ICH are only in the form of a directory and documentation of several and limited ICH resources such as performing arts, craft-making techniques, folk custom and ritual rites as well as language and literature.

Documentation works were carried out by the then Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (especially the Cultural Division), Department of Museums and Antiquities, and Malaysia’s Handicrafts Development Corporation. Several local universities too carried out activities concerning ICH as part of their academic program. For example, in 1977 Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang through the Performing Arts Programme of the School of Humanities offered a course on ‘wayang kulit’ (the Malay Shadow Play), and during the period between 1977 to 1995 the late Hamzah Awang Amat, the most outstanding of Malaysian shadow puppeteers became involved in teaching wayang kulit siam and puppetry techniques.

Several non-governmental organizations such as the Heritage of Malaysia Trust and Penang Heritage Trust also organize various workshops and talks for the purpose of documenting the ICH subjects. Some state level museums especially Malacca Museums Corporation, Sarawak Museum, and Sabah Museum are very active in conducting surveys and studies to document endangered heritages at their respective states.
However, after the establishment of a new ministry that is the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, more serious commitment has been given by the government to compile all relevant material concerning ICH. The Ministry is now collecting available study materials on intangible heritages from various sources including universities, libraries and agencies, to establish a comprehensive database and the formation of research center on ICH. A special and more focused division namely Heritage Division, once fully operational, will embark on the inventorization process on ICH.

The Current Situation of Arts Education in Malaysia

The development of education in Malaysia is further enhanced through the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) established in 1988 and the policy statement of the National Development Plan (NDP) in 1991. The essence of the NPE is to develop the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce citizens who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious. The NPE is regarded as a statement of vision for the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the pursuit of educational excellence. The NDP, on the other hand, forms a basis in the development of education vis-à-vis the nation’s goal to become an industrialized country by the year 2020.

The government’s commitment towards education is contained in the Federal Constitution and the Education Act of 1996. It was in this year that the subjects on visual arts and music was implemented in primary as well as secondary schools as compulsory subjects.

The Education Structure

According to the National Education System, formal education in Malaysia is provided at four levels, that is primary, secondary (lower and upper), post-secondary and tertiary level. The admission age to the first year of primary education is six years old. At the end of each level, students sit for common public examinations. Successful completion of secondary education can lead to a number of opportunities for further study and training at post-secondary and tertiary levels, both in the academic and professional fields provided by universities, colleges and other educational training institutions. Subject on visual arts and performing arts (mostly music) are being taught as part of the curriculum and co-curriculum at primary, secondary and even at the pre-school.

The Pre-School and Arts Education

Basically arts education begins at the pre-school even though on a very minimum capacity. This is implemented under the component of aesthetic and creativity learning of the pre-school curriculum. The pre-school is a non-formal and flexible programme for young children aged 4 through 5 years old and the programme runs for a duration of one to two years. The curriculum, which is in line with the National Philosophy of Education (NEP), enables pre-school children to acquire basic communication, social and other positive skills in preparation for primary schooling. Specifically, the aim of pre-school education is to develop children’s skills in the social, intellectual, physical, spiritual and aesthetical aspects and values, both on creativity and arts appreciation.
Arts Education at the Primary and Secondary Levels

Subjects on visual arts and music as part of the new primary school curriculum (Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah – KBSR) were introduced at primary schools in the year 1996 in line with the establishment of the Education Act of 1966. However, the subjects are not assessed at the Year Six National Assessment of primary education (Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah – UPSR). This national assessment in Year Six is to evaluate student’s performance at the end of the primary education before entering lower secondary education. Subject under the performing arts at this level is basically music.

Formal primary education in Malaysia emphasizes on acquiring strong reading and writing skills as well as building solid foundation in mathematics and basic sciences. The six years of schooling at this level admits children between the ages of 6 through 11 years. Under the primary school programme, access to and equal opportunity for education is provided to every child.

In the year 1966 too music education for secondary school was introduced and implemented in 20 pioneer schools. Until the year 2004, 120 schools offer music education at lower secondary level and 18 schools at the upper secondary level.

At the end of the lower secondary, students sit for the Lower Secondary Assessment or Penilaian Menengah Rendah – PMR. Subject on arts, however, are not included in the examination. At the end of the upper secondary level, students sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia – SPM. Successful students can enroll into post-secondary programmes. After the post-secondary programme students can enter institutions of higher learning to pursue their degree programmes.

Arts Education at the Tertiary Level

The National Arts Academy (ASK)

The National Arts Academy (or in short, ASK) was set up by the Government in 1994. The main objective is to provide an opportunity and platform for Malaysians to obtain formal training in the arts and to serve as a center for research and creative work in the country. It offers full time programs leading to a Diploma in Performing Arts in Music, Theatre, Dance, Writing and Film. Besides its commitment to the preservation of the arts, the ASK encourages new and innovative direction in these areas.

The establishment of the ASK is important to the country in producing creative performers, nurturing artistic talents and developing leaders in the arts.

Universities Offering Arts Courses

Besides the ASK, a total of six universities in Malaysia also offer other courses in the field of arts, either through their arts faculties or arts learning centers. The Science University of Malaysia (or in short, USM) through its Arts Centre started a degree course in performing arts in the 1980s. At present USM conducts courses in music, drama and fine arts. MARA University of Technology (UiTM) introduced music studies at diploma level in 1984. At present UiTM offers
courses on theatre, music and screen (film) under the Faculty of Performing Arts, and also courses on art and design under the Faculty of Art and Design. University of Malaya (UM) under its Cultural Centre also offers studies in the field of drama, music and dance at degree level. Other higher learning institutions offering arts education are Sultan Idris Teachers University (UPSI) which focuses on music education, Sarawak University of Malaysia (UNIMAS) which focuses on music technology, and Sabah University of Malaysia (UMS).

**Policies and Strategies**

The future of the country depends very much on the knowledge and skills acquired by the nation’s youth of today to face an increasingly competitive and challenging world of tomorrow. As such, the government has accorded high priority to arts education and arts skills training for youth.

At the national level, there are three Ministries responsible for the development of arts education, namely the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Learning, and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage.

There are two positive efforts currently undertaken by the government of Malaysia. First, the establishment of Arts School in the country, the school that focuses on the arts as the main curriculum. Second, the upgrading of the National Arts Academy to a university status offering degree programmes.

**The Establishment of Arts School (Sekolah Seni) at Secondary Level**

The government, through the Ministry of Education, has decided to establish arts school in the year 2006 at the lower and upper secondary levels. The objective is to provide a suitable and conducive learning place for students with talents and potentials in the field of arts. Secondly, to upgrade the knowledge, skill and ability of students in the field of arts to the highest level and, at the same time, be able to maintain academic excellence. Third, to produce students specializing in the arts and making it as a career.

**The Upgrading of the National Arts Academy (ASK) to the Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage (ASWARA) With a University Status Through Parliamentary Act**

The government, through the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, is planning to upgrade the present National Arts Academy to the status of a university focusing and specializing on arts education. It has been approved by the Malaysian Cabinet in July 2005. The upgrading will enable the academy to conduct courses at degree level besides diploma level. The academy will provide studies and training in the fields of theatre, dance, music, cinematography, creative-writing, and heritage.

The academy will become the first ‘Malaysian National University of the Arts’ focusing on arts studies, with an emphasis on the traditional arts of Malaysia. Besides the commitment to preservation of the arts, this academy will also encourage new and innovative direction in the performing arts. The establishment also is to ensure that Malaysia’s rich cultural heritage will continue to flourish from one generation to the next. The new academy provides formal training
in various fields of the performing arts. It will become an institution of higher learning that strives to produce skilled, knowledgeable and creative practitioners, managers and scholars with strong foundation in traditional arts, achieved through a formal and systematic learning programme encompassing intensive lecture, studio work, research, documentation and performances.