INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE:
SAFEGUARDING THE TRADITIONAL SONGS OF MALAYSIA

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Traditional song is one of the intangible cultural heritages that are undergoing preservation in Malaysia. These songs, normally merrily sung at occasions and functions be it at family or social gatherings, are slowly fading off due to the influence of popular modern songs as well as the dwindling number of traditional song singers or penglipur lara as they are known of.

Traditional songs are also popular choice among mothers and grandmothers to lullaby their babies and small grandchildren to sleep. However, with the introduction of popular western children songs at kindergartens like Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star, London Bridge Is Falling Down, and Mary Has A Little Lamb, traditional songs are fast being forgotten even by the senior citizens themselves.

Malaysia’s traditional songs such as Anak Ayam Turun Sepuluh (Ten Little Chicks), Burung Kecil (Tiny Bird), Indung-Indung, and Walinung Sari function not only for merriment but also act to educate the community about life. By using a simple musical instrument such as the rebana (traditional drum), the penglipur lara sings the songs to the audience.

Malaysia’s traditional songs are divided into three categories. They are:

i) **Songs for children:**
These songs are normally to cheer young children or to put them to sleep. The lyrics are either about advice, human values, and love and respect for mankind and humanity.

ii) **Songs for the young:**
These songs are geared for the young ones and contain lyrics of patriotism, motivation as well as passionate love.

iii) **The “Story” Songs:**
These songs contain stories told in ballad form.

At present Malaysia is still in the verge of preserving these traditional songs by doing research, documentation and publication works as well as promotion. Recent efforts by a private milk company in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage in popularizing traditional lullabies through performances by famous Malaysian artistes who are mothers themselves received overwhelming response from the public. The very same milk company also did a compilation of these songs and distributed the compact discs free of charge to the milk brand consumers.

In the year 2003, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism assigned me to embark on a pioneer project documenting the traditional songs in CD form, complete with research write-ups and explanations for each song. Although the objective of such project was then more for tourism purposes, the outcome was far reaching as it sets the ball rolling for more and more research, documentation and publication works being done, including the one by the milk company mentioned in the above paragraph.
As far as print documentation is concerned, there are few books been published on materials about traditional songs. These books are mainly for primary school children and are more for learning the melodies and lyrics rather than for academic research purposes.

To safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of traditional songs, it is suggested that an inventory methodology using information technology be adopted. Traditional songs are more attractive if documented and presented using computer technology. As more children nowadays are computer-literate, and added with the nature of children being easily attracted to anything that is sophisticated, it is not an exaggeration to mention that getting the children to enjoy and love traditional songs is much easier this way. Information technology too paves the way for an easier exchange of information on traditional songs material between Asian countries.