

Menempa Tari Tradisi: A Case Study on Preservation and Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Traditional Malaysian Dances

Joseph Gonzales

School of Dance

The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Hong Kong

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Abstract: This critical review paper will analyze the dance project *Menempa Tari Tradisi*, focused on the preservation and transmission of the intangible cultural heritage of traditional dances of Malaysia, conducted by an independent arts organization, the ASK Dance Company. Intangible cultural heritage is defined in the UNESCO Declaration for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage as "...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated in addition to that – that communities, groups, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." Drawing from relevant literature, the paper investigates how critical issues were navigated within the framework of the project. It identifies three fundamental factors of authenticity, preservation and transmission, complimented with integrated conservation with key collaborators, as vital for successful heritage projects. The paper will document the planning and implementation of the project, and finally analyse its effectiveness. *Menempa Tari Tradisi* may serve as a model and template for the future preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage projects.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Traditional Dances of Malaysia, Authenticity, Preservation, Transmission, Integrated Conservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dance has historically been a part of the social and cultural fabric of the diverse peoples of Malaysia that comprises Malays (57.8%), Bumiputera¹ (12.2%), Chinese (22.7%), Indian (6.6%) and others (0.7%).² Traditional practices belonging to the indigenous peoples have been in existence for centuries, while others were brought into Malaysia by immigrant diasporic communities from the Middle East, India and Indonesia to the west, and China to the east since the 1600s. Music and dance were held as important symbols and signifiers of cultural identity. Auspicious communal events such as births, puberty, engagements, marriage, prayers for special intentions, aversion of catastrophes, offerings and thanksgiving for the harvest or the bounty of the sea, healing, and death, were marked by specific rituals. Often, these rituals incorporated ceremonial music and dances according to the customs, traditions, and religious or animistic beliefs of these ethnic groups. It was an expression of integration, identity, and solidarity during these significant occasions.

¹ A collective term that refers to the Malays as well as various indigenous communities and people who have been awarded special rights, and privileges under the constitution.

² <https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/6f55f6d9-8b7c-11ed-96a6-1866daa77ef9>

Today, Malaysians in general, have less access to, and experience of these traditional dances. Various factors have led to this present situation include the impact of colonization, urbanization, diminishing interest, lack of opportunities for learning and practice, Islamization, and a dearth of learned teachers. The urban population of Malaysia rose to 71.0 per cent in 2010, compared to 62.0 per cent in 2000.³ Understandably, there has been greater focus on social and economic mobility which has left the arts in the backseat of priorities and consciousness. Egorov, Neustroeva et al (2019) state that “the active processes of globalization also lead to the loss of priceless elements of the ethnic culture of the people therefore, the preservation and development of the native language and national culture becomes especially relevant in the process of educating the modern young generation.” The arts are not a part of the 21st century social milieu, and when it is practiced, it is generally for the more affluent social strata as reflected in Maslow’s “heirarchy of needs”. Scholars Aruma and Hanachor (2017) observe that Maslow’s Theory “explores how people’s attitude is stimulated by human desire to meet certain human needs in various communities in the society.” The arts are aesthetic experiences, and only indulged in when and after the fundamental needs of food, shelter and education, are met.

Nevertheless, in urban centres in Malaysia, cultural parameters are expanding. There is increasing evidence that the arts are being experienced and practiced, through new cultural spheres of private theatre companies such as the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, Damansara Performing Arts Centre, Petaling Jaya Performing Arts Centre, The Temple of Fine Arts, Sutra Dance Theatre, Penang Performing Arts Centre, Dua Space Dance Theatre, as well as public and private universities such as SUNWAY University, ASWARA, University of Malaya, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris, University Science Malaysia, and Taylor’s University among others, offering music, dance, media, and theatre programs. However, it is Western art forms of classical ballet, music, musical theatre and English-language plays that receive the biggest audiences, charge the highest prices for tickets and receive the lion’s share of funding. The engagement in these art forms is often associated with the colonized mindsets and reflects the higher socio-economic status of the individual or the family. Thus, traditional art forms are further marginalized.

2. THE PRACTICE OF MALAYSIAN TRADITIONAL DANCES

2.1 Custodianship

In Malaysia, the Department of Culture and Arts (JKKN - *Jabatan Kebudayaan and Kesenian Negara*), Ministry of Culture⁴ is the government gatekeeper of traditional art forms including dance. Within JKKN, there are specific departments entrusted with the responsibility for documentation and promotion, employing thousands of officers, and arts workers (choreographers, composers, dancers and musicians) on full-time contracts. However, there has been very little concerted or sustained efforts for the preservation and promotion of traditional dance forms, rather the organization has become geared towards the tourism industry, and to serve government agendas. Nevertheless, over the years, booklets, books and digital recordings of traditional dances have been made. Unfortunately, the second and important aspect in keeping these forms alive involve sharing this knowledge with the wider public through systematic programs or projects, has hardly happened. The 2003 UNESCO declaration recommends “inventorying and making those inventories accessible” as a fundamental task of governments. Artese and Gagliardi (2017) write about data bases, and the “collection of cultural heritage that can be accessed in total or with specific requirements such as music or recordings at a carnival”. This project in Italy has created a search engine for the intangible cultural heritage in a specific region. Meanwhile, Ha states that “on-the-spot observation” and competitions are also valuable strategies in sustaining traditional dance practices. However, on-site observation is already a challenge for preservation of Malaysian dance forms as they are seldom practiced even in the native spaces of origin. As an example, the traditional theatre of Makyung⁵ was actively practiced until 50 years ago when PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) became the ruling state government and banned all performing arts as it “was deemed un-Islamic” (Gonzales, 2021).⁶ The mantle for preservation within authentic spaces for Makyung has largely been championed by passionate advocates such as Eddin Khoo, the founder of Pusaka,⁷ a non-governmental organization working with

3

https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthem&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&ul_id=MDMxdHZjWTK1SjFzTzNkRXYzcVZjdz09

⁴ <https://www.motac.gov.my/en/>

⁵ UNESCO World Oral and Intangible Heritage theatre form.

⁶ “Makyung in Contemporary Malaysia: Strategies for Proliferation and Propagation” *Journal of Dance Education* 2021, VOL. 21, NO. 2, 82; <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2019.1683564> © 2019 National Dance Education Organization

⁷ <https://www.pusaka.org/about>

traditional art forms. Pusaka aspires is “to strive for greater authenticity by promoting and encouraging growth within the space of the traditional practitioner and within the realm of the keepers of the tradition.”

2.2 Traditional Dances as Intangible Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage is defined in the UNESCO Declaration for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage as:

...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, in in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.⁸

Traditional theatre *Makyung* of Malaysia was proclaimed as an Oral and Intangible Heritage by UNESCO in 2005. This proclamation uplifted the art form by providing incentives to practitioners to engage more actively in its preservation and propagation. Dance was included in the category of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Performing Arts) in the Mexico Declaration (1982). Unfortunately, for reasons yet to be explored, traditional dances have not been elevated to this status in Malaysia, and thus the work to preserve and promote it falls on individual and organizations with comparable artistic missions.

2.3 Problem Statement and Research Questions

As traditional dances become increasingly less performed in Malaysia, the knowledge, exposure and practice of these dances are fading from the collective memory of the community. Urban dwellers in Malaysian are unaware of these traditional dances that were an integral part of earlier society. As such the project *Menempa Tari Tradisi* was designed with reconstruction, revival and transmission at its heart. The genesis of the project and its subsequent implementation were driven by the following research questions:

1. What are effective strategies to preserve and transmit Intangible Cultural Heritage of dances of Malaysia?
2. How can Malaysians have greater direct and visceral experiences of its traditional dances?
3. Is there a role for dance in nation-building?

ASK Dance Company proposed to stage a production *Menempa Tari Tradisi* in 2022, to complement the ongoing *Forging Traditions*⁹ project that was a workshop outreach project launched in 2011 with the same intentions and aspirations.

3. MENEMPA TARI TRADISI - THE CASE STUDY

3.1 Overview

The project *Menempa Tari Tradisi: Preservation and Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Traditional Malaysian Dances* conducted from July to December 2022 by ASK Dance Company,¹⁰ (see Appendix 1) focused on the transmission and preservation of traditional cultural dances of Malaysia culminating in the performance presentation. The content of the project – namely the dances taught and performed, was supported by the on-going *Forging Traditions* workshops series that was implemented in 2011. Although there is no formal recognition of these dances as intangible cultural heritage of the different communities in Malaysia, they were all regularly performed in past.

The project objectives were to expand the experience, provide exposure as well as to share the practices and knowledge of selected dances. *Menempa Tari Tradisi* aimed to give Malaysians an opportunity to experience dance via multiple entry points – as workshop participants, as performers, or as members of the audience. Importantly the project objectives employed dance to build bridges of understanding across racial barriers. The project also highlights the importance of the embodied knowledge of the traditional dance masters in the process of transmission of dances – paying homage to the work done before. As such, it was decided that the performance would open with the scene featuring 3 senior dance masters Mohd Seth Hamzah, Wong Kit Yaw and Joseph Gonzales. These senior artists used improvised movements drawing from basic

⁸ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention#:~:text=1..part%20of%20their%20cultural%20heritage.>

⁹ <https://communityarts.crs.cuhk.edu.hk/978-988-79285-2-2-chapter-4/>

¹⁰ <https://askdancecompany.com/>

silat, Malay martial art vocabulary that forms much of the foundation for Malay dances, in 3 individual solos which then merged into a few choreographed dance phrases. This gradually segued into young artists appearing onstage for the next piece. This simple tableau allowed the audience to understand and appreciate, that traditional dance has a history, but is ongoing, and that the torch was being passed.



Fig. 1: Artistic Director/Researcher (extreme left) opened *Menempa Tari Tradisi* with senior artists Mohd Seth Hamzah (Malay Folk Dance Master Teacher), and Wong Kit Yaw (Chinese Dance Master Teacher); Photo: James Quah.

3.2 Objectives of *Menempa Tari Tradisi*

This project aims to:

- preserve and propagate the country's cultural treasures that are rarely practiced or staged.
- utilize dance as a tool to unite Malaysian society, to bridge the divide between different ethnic communities.
- increase exposure, appreciation and visceral experience of the diversity of traditional dances.
- increase audienceship for traditional dances.

Driven by the above objectives, the project identified several key areas for consideration. To elevate the cultural value of these traditional dances of Malaysia, which are its intangible cultural heritage, the three most important issues that must be ensured are:

- a. Authenticity.
- b. Preservation and transmission.
- c. Integrated conservation.

4. CRITICAL ISSUES IN PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION

This paper will elucidate the key issues of cultural heritage as a concept, its core principles and what strategies can be used to evaluate, capture and propagate cultural heritage. The fundamental issues identified and discussed within the framework of this project are:

4.1 Authenticity

One of the most important aspects of transmission is authenticity. There are less problematic when old artifacts such as paintings or sculptures are involved since they are tangible, and there are clear testing mechanisms such as carbon dating and so on. However, when dealing with intangible traditional materials such as dance which is ephemeral and transient, that disappears as soon as it is completed and cannot be repeated exactly as it was (Siegel, 1973; Stamp, 2022), challenges will arise. Dance remains in the minds of the audience, and in the bodies of the performers. It is remembered and experienced in unique and individual ways.

Malaysian traditional dance suffers the above fate primarily because there is very little if any, documentation of dances as it was performed in yesteryears. The oldest recorded movement sketches belong to the *Joget Gamelan* genre (Mat Piah and Ismail, 1986), while dances from the traditional theatre of *Makyung* (Din @ Sutung Umar RS et al., 2011; Yousof, 2004; 2011; 2018) have references that are academic speculation based on similarity of literary descriptions, drawings, and historical evidence of dances that *may* have been the forerunner of what we see today.

The Venice Charter¹¹ states “the common responsibility to safeguard them (intangible heritage) for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity.” Thus, the documentation and recordings of the cultural heritage of the traditional dances are of supreme importance. Sarawak, a state in East Malaysia on the island of Borneo, has been at the forefront of placing value on their cultural heritage, launching the Sarawak Cultural Village¹² in 1989 and instituting the Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance¹³ in 1993. It recognizes the challenges faced in preservation of cultural monuments, sites, arts and crafts, and works towards this goal. A few state-funded organizations such as the Johor Heritage Foundation (*Yayasan Warisan Johor*) and the Sabah Cultural Board (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Sabah*) have also been pro-active in the work of cultural heritage. However, on a national level, there has been limited documentation of dances in its “original context” of village art. It is only since the late 1980s and early 1990s through the work of scholars such as the late Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, Mohd Ghouse Nasuruddin and Mohd Anis Md Nor, that the intense work of research began in earnest. Sarwar-Yousof graduated with a doctoral degree with his thesis on *Makyung*, while Mohd Ghouse studied and researched theatre and dance. Mohd Anis researched *Zapin* folk dance, and traditional theatre of *Randai*. Sarwar-Yousof and Mohd Ghouse relied mainly on descriptions, musical and video recordings, as well as photography accompanied by interviews with the traditional masters while Mohd Anis added another layer to his documentation with the inclusion of labanotation of the movement sequences. All their documentation, restaging and revivals relied on the expertise and knowledge of the traditional masters, leaving substantial archival material for subsequent scholarship.

The work of revitalization, documentation and education was given a timely boost with the establishment of the National Academy of Culture, Arts and Heritage (*Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan Malaysia* known by its acronym ASWARA) in 1994. Traditional Malay theatre *Makyung*, *Bangsawan*, *Randai* and shadow puppet play *Wayang Kulit*, were at the core of the curriculum of this institution. Therefore, every student enrolled, irrespective of the major studies, would be introduced to these art forms. Understanding the educational philosophy of ASWARA, the Faculty of Dance implemented a strong core of traditional dances of the various ethnicities in the country – Malay, Chinese, Indian, and peoples of Sarawak and Sabah as compulsory studies for the dance majors alongside ballet, contemporary dance and choreography in their 3-year Diploma program.



Fig 2: Terinai assessment at ASWARA; Dancer: Wong Chi Ying; Photo: James Gabriel Fernandez

¹¹ <https://www.icomos.org/en/participer/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/157-thevenice-charter>

¹² <https://scv.com.my/>

¹³ https://lawnet.sarawak.gov.my/lawnet_file/Ordinance/ORD_CAP6hwm.pdf

Through fieldwork research at the locales of dance, and reciprocal visits by the masters to the institution, many traditional dances were revived between 1998-2015. Among notable cases were the *Tari Inai* from Kelantan, *Terinai* from Perlis, *Joget Gamelan* from Pahang and Terengganu, *Tari Piring* of Negeri Sembilan, and well as a multitude of folk dances including the *Zapin* dances from across the country (Gonzales, 2008). The dance arrangers, choreographers and trainers for the *Menempa Tari Tradisi* project, as well as the *Forging Traditions* workshops are all graduates of ASWARA. Through the study programs at the institution, they acquired the knowledge of theory, history, and practice of the dances in as authentic a form as possible.

4.2 Transmission

The second component of the project focusses on the transmission of these traditional dances. This paper references the preservation and transmission of the Korean Mask Dance, where the South Korean government has played a vital role in creating structures and systems for documentation, research, and promotion. In her research study entitled “Cultural Heritage Preservation Methodology: Korean Mask Dance Drama”,¹⁴ Sangwoo Ha analyses the South Korean government project launched in 1962. In the process, “57 kinds of intangible cultural properties” were identified to be preserved. This demonstrates the effectiveness of cultural policy and political that established structures and systems for preservation and transmission supported by considerable financial commitment. The Cultural Heritage Protection System reconstructed live performances classified as *Wonhyeong* (original form), giving it a seal of approval, and validation. A special “task force” called the *Hanguk Minsok Jonghap Josa* (Korean National Total Investigation) was created in 1968, comprising scholars and village folkloric practitioners of the Mask Dance. This was very forward thinking. This systematic program required the researchers and scholars to document the dances through digital recordings, photographs, interviews, surveys and questionnaires. This comprehensive collection of data is vital for the preservation and documentation of disappearing art forms. Many of these were published through books, journals, visual and digital formats for dissemination to the public. This holistic program included establishing competitions in various districts to encourage participation of the young Koreans to educate and popularize these traditional forms.

In Malaysia, the *Yayasan Warisan Johor Zapin* revival projects included all the above strategies, and the competitions were raptously participated by a multitude of village groups, as well as primary and high schools proving the South Korean model to be appropriate and valid. However, on a national scale in Malaysia, competitions as a means of preserving cultural heritage has become a slippery slope. The National Dance Festival (*Festival Tari Kebangsaan*) is a competition with two sections, one for traditional dance, and the other for “new creations”, that has spawned many debates on authenticity. The national folk-dance teams from across the country, generally include spectacular moments that they imagine could wow the audiences. This directly affects authenticity as village art is often utilizes basic movements as the main intention is participatory. This raises many questions of how and what changes can be made to the dances, the costumes, music and properties, and whose authority is it to make these decisions?

At present, ASK Dance Company’s revival work does not incorporate competitions, rather, the efforts to transmit folk dances of Malaysia builds on the work of Malaysian tertiary institutions. Since 2011, the *Forging Traditions* workshop series has taught more than 25,000 participants, making it the most impactful outreach program in Malaysia (Gonzales and Mohd Affandi, 2021). *Forging Traditions* engages the participants in learning traditional dances of Malaysia with a holistic, comprehensive approach that includes the movement techniques as well as theory, history and ethnography. The program provides detailed analysis of the forms, movement and structure providing substantive contextual understanding of the functions of the dance, history of its development and elements of choreography.

Egorov et al (2019) states that:

In the process of implementing this program, the ensemble members will learn the history of the people, its traditions and customs, the essence and content of national patterns and ornaments, the terminology of folk, folk-stage dances, will possess a culture of performance, technique of the movement, scenic culture, will be able to dance traditional folk dances, develop their aesthetic culture in general.

¹⁴ International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences 2017, Vol. 7, No. 8 ISSN: 2222-6990

Egorov et al highlights the importance of a contextual and ethnographic understanding of dance. This is one of the strengths of *Menempa Tari Tradisi* and *Forging Traditions*. The company produced a guidebook that contains the information about the history and development of the dances. It will be a tangible reference book for the long-term and includes details of style, terminology, suggested floor patterns for choreography and arrangements for the dance.



Fig. 3: Forging Traditions includes both online and physical classes.

When Covid-19 struck in 2020, the company responded immediately by moving the program online. It was one of the first companies to do so with *Forging Traditions Beyond Borders* which was also offered to international participants. This was an example of how artists need to think quickly, innovate, to keep sustainable, turning challenges into opportunities. The program drew from blended learning models where tutorial videos were filmed and archived in a specially built website <https://forgingtraditions.com.my/>. This was accompanied by live online classes and detailed corrections, suggestions and feedback.



Fig. 4: E-learning of Malay dance

4.3 Integrated Conservation

In the paper “Conservation of Cultural Heritage: from participation to collaboration” by Spiridon and Sandu (2013) which states “conservation science is interdisciplinary, complex and global, and it adopts the modern concept of integrated conservation.” The integrated methods for preservation and dissemination of knowledge in this article is concerned with tangible artifacts and monuments but can be applied to intangible heritage of performing arts such as dance. The main theme and strategies are collaborative and participatory. It calls for the conservator to work with renowned specialists, as well as specialists from art history and technology. Spiridon and Sandu further stated that:

policies on the approach to cultural heritage consider the safeguarding and inclusion of cultural heritage assets within a global system of values, the development of cultural tourism as a way of guaranteeing the right of access to culture and the integration of active participation of the population in cultural heritage conservation policy.¹⁵

The concept of integrated conservation as collective responsibility towards the preservation and propagation of cultural heritage was implemented in the project *Menempa Tari Tradisi* through soliciting the involvement of multiple stakeholders and utilizing different pathways.

In Malaysia, the governmental strategies for providing access for the public to encounter traditional art forms is very similar to that in countries such as Indonesia where one immediately thinks of witnessing a *kecak* performance, or in Thailand to watch the *Ramakien*. The best that Malaysia has been able to do is package the traditional dance forms into the ubiquitous *Malaysia Truly Asia* tourist performances in cultural centres, theme parks, restaurants, and at international fairs to promote cultural tourism. This specially crafted performance showed little of the powerful narratives available in grassroots Malaysia where the arts has developed organically. Arts practitioners have attempted to convince political powers to focus on *Makyung*, *Bangsawan* or *Wayang Kulit* that could draw both local and international tourists. However, these attempts at cultural advocacy have fallen on deaf ears. Thus, jaded and lacklustre performances continue to the lame attempt at drawing visitors through dance, and the more authentic arts are not showcased, highlighted or marketed. However, the Sarawak Cultural Village conscientiously presents more authentic experiences of the indigenous people of Sarawak showcased in a theatre, but also in the unique, identifiable architecture of the special ethnic and tribal homes. The performances would usually end with the visitors playing with the *sumpit* or blowpipe to burst some coloured balloons onstage. It is tacky, but the tourists seemed to enjoy themselves. The managers, choreographers and musician who worked full-time at the village were very focussed on documentation, preservation and sought the masters of the tradition to ensure accurate representation. These commendable efforts drew in various stakeholders to the table of conservation, and it proved effective. In support of this, Spiridon (2013) also writes about “the educational, interactive and public-oriented role of the specialists”.

In soliciting partnerships intended for Integrated Conservation, ASK Dance Company has brought important collaborators to the table for the outreach programs and specifically for *Menempa Tari Tradisi*. This has been built on goodwill and networks developed over decades by the artistic team. Further, Imran Syafiq, Managing Director of the company, was awarded “Young Artist Award” by the JKKN Kuala Lumpur in 2023, recognising his role in promoting traditional arts, as well as his personal journey as an artist.

Their commitment towards cultural preservation has brought more people to the table. They are:

4.3.1 National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage, Malaysia (or *Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan, ASWARA*)

In designing, planning and implementing *Menempa Tari Tradisi*, and its preceding and supporting workshop series, *Forging Traditions*, ASK Dance Company found valuable resources and expertise at ASWARA. This national institution has a unique program of employing traditional dance masters in genres of theatre, dance, and music in its core studies in traditional arts. These masters may not necessarily possess formal academic qualifications but would be accorded all the benefits of a “qualified academic” in higher education. The main traditional dance masters interviewed were Mohd Seth Hamzah, Hajjah Yaacob for Malay dance, and Wong Kit Yaw for Chinese dance. Another unique feature of ASWARA, was the senior scholars the late Ghulam Sarwar-Yusof, Mohd Anis Md Nor and Mohd Ghouse Nasuruddin provided the academic components of the teaching (Gonzales, 2013). The company continues to solicit the partnership of ASWARA to provide workshops and performance for the public held in their studios and theatres. The availability of large spaces allows for greater uptake for the workshops and reduces the financial burden of the company as well. For this project, the studios were again offered as the location for the workshops, while the final performances of *Menempa Tari Tradisi* were at the Experimental Theatre (*Panggung Eksperimen*) which seats approximately 300 people.

¹⁵ https://www.academia.edu/27171281/Conservation_of_cultural_heritage_from_participation_to_collaboration



Fig. 5: Bamboo dance from Sabah, East Malaysia taught to participants in West Malaysia conducted in Studio 1, ASWARA. Photo: Mohd Zulkarnain Zuber.

4.3.2 The Ministry of Education, Malaysia

In 2017, the company secured the support and endorsement of the Ministry of Education of the project. Through buying into the proposal, schoolteachers, particularly those in charge of the cultural groups in schools or those with an interest in dance, were encouraged to participate in “Training the Trainers”. They were awarded credits to fulfil their extra-curriculum activities requirements.

To complete the program successfully for certification, the teachers and teachers-to-be would have to send documentation of the training process, a performance under their guidance, as well as detailed feedback. As Spiridon states that there should ideally be “intrinsic motivation and voluntary participation”. Capitalizing on the love of dance of the youth, and the lack of accessibility to learning with good teachers, the workshops that were offered prob bono were great motivation for participation. Further strategies of extrinsic motivation were certificates of participation and “best participant” prizes usually comprising simple company merchandize, and sometimes, books and videos. This collaboration with the Ministry of Education was a milestone for dance in Malaysia.

4.3.3 Venue Partners

As with all artistic production and projects, one of the most challenging and costly aspects is securing funding and consolidating partnerships. This includes individuals and organizations who support the project in kind. Since the initial program in 2011, ASWARA has been a strong advocate and supporter by becoming a venue provider for rehearsals, and performances, as well as providing studio spaces, theatres and transportation to the outreach venues. This partnership allowed the savings on resources, and in return, the company promoted the alumni, events, programs and activities of the college. Subsequently, many universities and schools, together with the teacher’s training institutes were forthcoming in providing the venue pro-bono.

4.3.4 Patronage

Malaysia does not have a system of cultural governance where arts companies are awarded non-profit status. Therefore, financial support and all manner of patronage is critical for the sustainability of non-commercial arts companies including the implementation of outreach projects. After knocking on innumerable doors, the Sime Darby Foundation (*Yayasan Sime*

Darby or YSD) was forthcoming in making ASK Dance Company one of its beneficiaries. It began in 2011, with funding of approximately RM 500,000, but over the last 12 years, this has been reduced to about RM 300,000 per year. Nevertheless, this was historic for dance in Malaysia that a company receives sustained corporate support. The project was a perfect match for YSD's "Arts and Culture Pillar". The timing of the proposal was equally fortuitous as at that YSD was also newly established. Since then, the company has developed a meaningful relationship with the organization. They have extended their support beyond merely providing the finances, but also working to improve the company's knowledge and credibility in professional governance and ethics of running a business. This is not usual for corporations, and the company owes them a debt of gratitude. In return, YSD has benefited from the logo placements in all the publicity materials (see below), and the frequent mentions they receive, leading numerous awards for arts patronage and impactful outreach programs. A host of other arts organizations have also benefitted from their generosity making YSD a front-runner for arts funding.



Fig. 6: Forging Traditions: Training the Trainers program with Sponsors logo placement.

However, being identified with one primary funder comes with its own challenges. ASK Dance Company has observed and experienced that other potential benefactors are hesitant to come aboard due to a perceived reduced visibility, and lack of ownership or title sponsorship. This is a common mindset in the Malaysian arts ecosystem. However, it would be more beneficial for all if there were more shared partnerships and responsibilities since the arts needs a lot of support.

The 12-years commitment of YSD is phenomenal and the company has tried valiantly to reach out to other potential funders with limited success. From 2020-2021, the company received RM 20,000 from the private organization, Creador Foundation, and RM 100,000 from Cendana that disburses a portion of government funds for the arts through the Ministry of Finance. For *Menempa Tari Tradisi*, the company successfully received RM 130,000 funding from Yayasan Hasanah under their Arts for All Seasons (AFAS) program. This funding enabled all artists to be paid, as well as payments for sets and props, and videography to produce a performance of professional standard.

4.3.5 Performance Collaborators

To promote, preserve, and transmit traditional cultural dance heritage, it is important to factor in its outreach to wider audiences and participants including younger performers too. This project successfully solicited the participation of Malaysia's High Schools of the Arts (*Sekolah Seni Malaysia*) located in Johor and Kuala Lumpur. With a curriculum that incorporates arts subjects such as dance, theatre, fine arts or music alongside regular secondary school subjects tailored for students aged from 13 to 17 years.



Fig. 7: Sekolah Seni Students performing Chinese Fan dance at Menempa Tari Tradisi. Photo: James Quah.

The performance also involved the student body and alumni from ASWARA, and several freelance dancers for the specific dances required to be presented. The gathering of dances of different generations, and from different organizations or institutions was a powerful tool in raising the standards, inspiring the younger members of the audience and performers. It served to draw better numbers to each performance as well proving great value in synergy.

4.3.6 Media Engagement

Arts projects need the support of the media to disseminate information to the wider public. Producers and artists understand the importance of the media for long-term benefits and sustainability. This includes previews and reviews to create the excitement that is needed for the projects. Aside from mainstream media, today's younger generation rely heavily on social media – and that too is moving away from Facebook to newer and “trendier” platforms such as Instagram and Tik Tok. The project planners rely on these platforms to attract larger audiences and participation in their projects. It is also of greater value when the posts are shared and reshared thus multiplying the viewership that can now be tracked through “likes” and “comments”.

Through years of prolific work, ASK Dance Company has managed to cultivate good relationships with the major newspapers and online sites providing information about the arts. National print media dailies, television programs, and websites frequently interview the artists and provide insight into the performances and projects for its readership. These publicity and profile articles serve as valuable documentation for all future funding applications, giving credibility to the company and validating its impact. *Menempa Tari Tradisi* received its fair share of publicity through several profile interviews with the program manager Imran Syafiq, as well as several television interviews on the breakfast shows that have the highest viewership.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This critical review paper has discussed preservation, conservation and transmission of traditional cultural dance heritage through the case study performance production of *Menempa Tari Tradisi*, and its supporting project *Forging Traditions*. The key issues identified in the objectives of transmission are authenticity, preservation and transmission, and finally integrated conservation. The nexus of these factors within preservation and transmission of cultural heritage of dance is imperative. This paper has analysed different aspects of the project to locate how these issues have been factored within the project. It is evident the task of preservation is a collective one. It needs a buy-in from those who value it, and with an ambition to propagate it.

There are numerous challenges to surmount such as modernization, the impact of scarcity of time, erosion of traditional values as discussed. The increasing socio-economic polarization caused primarily by government policies have created distrust and tension in Malaysia (Gonzales, 2023). To a certain degree, *Menempa Tari Tradisi* and *Forging Traditions* have played a role in building bridges across these divides by reaching out to government and private Chinese and Tamil schools, as well as the international schools which cater to the upper middle-class population of Malaysia. As McCarthy and Kimberly (2001) state the effective strategy to build audiences participation is to “broaden, deepen and diversify” is proven through the encouraging response of the participants and audiences of all social and racial groups.

Menempa Tari Tradisi succeeded in bringing together multiple organizations, communities and ethnicities to participate in the performance of traditional dances of Malaysia. Through the process of rehearsing and presentations, the performers learned dances of the different ethnic groups and embraced the cultures, traditions and practiced embodied in the dances. It was the performative of Malaysian sociality, a collaboration that reflected the diversity of generations, ethnicities, and religious beliefs working towards a common goal of perpetuating the rich cultural heritage of Malaysia. It was a symbol of nationhood and togetherness. The project validates Spiridon’s claim that “accessibility and the equal rights and opportunities for informed engagement in the cultural life of the community with respect for history and cultural diversity” is a vital strategy for creating a nurturing environment and instilling a greater love for cultural heritage. This ideally translated into taking a shared ownership and responsibility which can only emerge when the people love, care, and have a passion for it.

Therefore, the objectives to promote the traditional dances far and wide, and to inculcate values of national pride and identity was achieved through the project. This comes with the realization that there is a long road ahead in seeing how these dances become embodied and or transformed in the domains contemporary life with the latest advancements of technology and concepts of modernity.



Fig. 8: The finale: Mission Accomplished. Photo: James Quah.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Implementation Plan

(May 2022)	IMPLEMENTATION PLAN ASK DANCE COMPANY MENEMPA TARI TRADISI 4 MONTHS																														
	2022																														
Month [Bulan]	JULY				AUGUST				SEPT				OCT				NOV				DEC				JAN						
Week [Minggu]	1				1		4	1				1				1				1				1				1			
Project Objective / Project Activities																															
IDEA AND CONCEPTUALIZATION																															
Brainstorming between artistic team																															
Funding Application																															
Determine Venue																															
Production Team - Casting																															
Determine Stage Design																															
Artistic Meetings																															
ADMINISTRATION																															
Contracts/Agreements - Production team																															
Payments																															
...																															
RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT																															
-																															
Audition																															
Learning the dances from																															
Rehearsals																															
Previews																															
MARKETING/ PROMOTION																															
Photoshoot																															
Event Design - Poster/Social Media, Bunting																															
Videoshoot																															
Materials released - Social Media/ Advertising																															
Ticket Purchase																															
PERFORMANCE																															
Bump In																															
Technical Rehearsals Full Dress																															
RehearsalsSHOWTIME																															

