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COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACHES TO SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This study examines community-driven approaches to protecting Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage, particularly in Negeri Sembilan. The interaction between local communities and the preservation of cultural practice is explored through a qualitative exploration of four case studies. Data from in-depth interviews and participant observations underscores community involvement in safeguarding and promoting intangible heritage. The findings stress intergenerational knowledge transfer and active community participation in preserving Malaysia's cultural heritage, from *adat perpatih* to traditional music like *bongai*. The study advocates for collaborative efforts among institutions, communities, and individuals to protect Malaysia's diverse intangible cultural heritage through participatory models and redefining notions of authenticity.

Keywords:

Adat Perpatih, Bongai, Community Engagement, Hari Mantai, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Penganan

Introduction

Malaysia is in Southeast Asia and is known for its diverse cultural heritage. The population comprises various ethnic groups, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, Orang Asli, and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak, creating a colourful blend of traditions, customs, and heritage. Malaysia boasts several World Heritage Sites, such as Kinabalu Park and Gunung Mulu National Park, the historical cities of Melaka and George Town, as well as the Archaeological Heritage of Lenggong Valley, which is home to the archaeological remains of Perak Man, recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Malaysia also has a rich tapestry of intangible cultural heritage, including traditional dances, music, rituals, and craftsmanship, deeply rooted in its history and identity. Some of Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage have been inscribed under the Representative List, such as Mak Yong (2008), Dondang Sayang (2018), Silat (2019), Pantun (2020), Wangkang ceremony (2020), Songket (2021), and Mek Mulung (2023). Among these inscriptions list, Mek Mulung is considered the most endangered and needs urgent safeguarding due to its aged practitioners, arduous training, diminishing participation, waning youth interest, and hampered transmission, leading to the loss of knowledge (UNESCO, 2024).

Despite UNESCO having internationally recognised some heritages, it is essential to note that Malaysia is also home to a diverse array of cultures and other national heritages. This study examines four types of heritage that are officially and unofficially recognised in Malaysia. These encompass adat *perpatih*, categorised as customary law and designated as a national heritage in 2012, and the traditional music of Bongai, prevalent among the *adat perpatih* community in Negeri Sembilan. Additionally, this study encompasses heritage food such as *penganan* or *dodol*. It acknowledges the celebration of Hari Mantai as an unofficial heritage, which continues to be practised among the Negeri Sembilan Malay community.

However, there are various challenges in safeguarding and sustaining this intangible heritage. Firstly, modernisation and globalisation often shift towards modern culture and lifestyles (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Therefore, traditional practices can be perceived as outdated or irrelevant to younger generations, while globalisation exposes people to new ideas and influences, diluting interest in local traditions (Cvetkovich, 2018). As people move to cities, traditional practices tied to rural life are challenging to maintain. Secondly, there is an imperative need to cultivate and train more successors within the younger generation. Many traditional practices are typically handed down through oral tradition and apprenticeship. These skills and traditions can be jeopardised if there is a lack of interest or opportunity for younger generations to acquire them. Young people might not be interested in traditional practices because they are often time-consuming, restrictive, or unsuitable for modern lifestyles (Bajec, 2019). Lastly, there is complex food preparation where some conventional dishes or food preparation methods can be very elaborate and require a lot of time and skill (Mat Som et al., 2019). This can be a barrier for busy families or young individuals who lack the time or patience to acquire these techniques. Additionally, the availability of readily prepared foods can make traditional cooking seem less appealing. Therefore, this research explores the various strategies communities employ to safeguard their rich cultural heritage.

Literature Review

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and defined intangible cultural heritage as:

... the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated in addition to that – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise 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.

The definition of this Convention (UNESCO, 2003) emphasises the importance of communities in identifying, safeguarding, and transmitting their intangible cultural heritage. Hence, communities need to play their roles in preserving and sustaining their intangible cultural heritage. Meanwhile, in the National Heritage Act (2005) of Malaysia, intangible cultural heritage refers to:

... any form of expressions, languages, lingual utterances, sayings, musically produced tunes, notes, audible lyrics, songs, folksongs, oral traditions, poetry, music, dances as produced by the performing arts, theatrical plays, audible compositions of sounds and music, martial arts, that may have existed or exist in relation to the heritage of Malaysia or any part of Malaysia or in relation to the heritage of a Malaysian community

Recognising and appreciating the diverse intangible cultural heritage significantly contributes to the appreciation of cultural diversity and identity within the community. Traditional dances, music, rituals, craftsmanship, and other intangible cultural heritage are fundamental in defining Malaysia's various ethnic groups. They serve as expressions of the values, beliefs, and traditions passed down through generations, shaping the cultural diversity that represents the nation.

This section will examine four different types of intangible cultural heritage that symbolise the identity of the Malay community in Negeri Sembilan:

Case Study 1: Adat perpatih

The *adat perpatih* customary law, practised by the Malays of Negeri Sembilan, emphasises the importance of the female lineage in matters such as inheriting customary property, selecting leaders, and establishing lineage (Ibrahim, 2007). This system comprises 12 suku, or lineages, each tracing their descent to a common ancestor and considering it their self-representation (Radzuan, 2021). These suku, including Biduanda, Batu Hampar, Paya Kumbuh (Pekumbuh), Mungkal, Tiga Nenek, Seri Melenggang (Semelenggang), Seri Lemak (Selemak), Batu Belang, Tanah Datar (Tedatar), Anak Acheh, Anak Melaka, and Tiga Batu, are named after their places of origin in West Sumatra. Members of the same suku shared a common ancestress, fostering a strong sense of kinship and belonging within the community. Individuals from different suku are even considered siblings in specific contexts, emphasising the close relationships within the *adat perpatih* system. In the *adat perpatih*, a customary aphorism '*perbilangn adat*' encapsulates the life system of the adat community, the constitution, laws, customs, and other aspects related to their life (Jaafar et al., 2017).

Case Study 2: The Celebration of Hari Mantai

Hari Mantai is a traditional celebration deeply rooted in Negeri Sembilan. The term '*Mantai*' comes from the Negeri Sembilan dialect and signifies the preparation of butchered meat. The

celebration of Hari Mantai is observed annually on the eve of Ramadan, Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Eid al-Fitr) or Hari Raya Haji (Eid al-Adha). Hari Mantai brings the community together to celebrate and honour their cultural heritage. During this celebration, the butchered meat is cooked as rendang, a traditional dish made with coconut milk and seasoned with a mixture of herbs and spices over several hours. It is accompanied by the activity of cooking *lemang*, a traditional dish made of glutinous rice, coconut milk, and salt cooked in a hollowed bamboo stick lined with banana leaves. The preparations of Hari Mantai begin early in the morning after the dawn prayer. Essential ingredients such as coconut milk, bamboo, glutinous rice, banana leaves, and lemongrass are meticulously gathered to prepare *lemang* and rendang. Hari Mantai is also a significant activity for strengthening family relationships and prioritising harmony and unity within the community in Negeri Sembilan (Kamarudin, 2020; Sham, 2023).

Case Study 3: Bongai Performance

Bongai is a traditional Malay music performed during circumcision, weddings, and post-harvest celebrations. This musical style features a duet where singers engage in a call-and-response format, exploring themes such as love, humour, playful banter, and innuendo. The singers are accompanied by a small *caklempong* ensemble that includes a gong chime (gereteh), an oboe, a *rebana* or *gendang*, and a hanging knobbed gong. About eight men and women typically participate in the performance (Matusky & Chopyak, 2011).

Case Study 4: Dodol

Dodol, also known as *penganan*, is a traditional Malay delicacy that represents the culture and identity of the Malays in Negeri Sembilan (Salleh, 2017). *Penganan* holds significant cultural importance and is often prepared during the festive celebrations of Hari Raya (Eid). Additionally, it is a symbolic culinary element in *adat perpatih* ceremonies, traditionally offered as a customary gift when visiting the *adat's* leader. These traditional ceremonies involve the presentation of gifts, including sweets, as a respectful tribute from *adat* members to their leader (Salleh, 2017). Besides that, this delightful confection is lovingly prepared and generously shared with family, friends, and guests. *Penganan's* distinct appeal lies in its sweet, chewy, and sticky texture, reminiscent of caramel. The key ingredients responsible for this delectable treat include glutinous rice flour, palm sugar, and coconut milk. The intricate cooking process demands exceptional heat management skills, deft stirring, and manual mixing techniques. Traditionally, a large wok is used for this purpose, where the careful orchestration of these elements results in the perfect *penganan*.

Furthermore, the traditional method of cooking *penganan* over firewood adds a unique smoky aroma that contributes to its unparalleled flavour, evoking a sense of nostalgia and tradition. In Negeri Sembilan, the preparation of *penganan* is a treasured familial activity. Each member plays a crucial role in a collaborative effort, exemplifying the spirit of gotong-royong. The meticulous planning and coordination ensure that every individual has a specific task, reinforcing the communal bond and joy of creating this beloved national heritage dish (Bernama, 2023).

Bottom-Up And Top-Down Approach In Safeguarding And Sustaining Intangible Cultural Heritage

The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in upholding the richness of cultural diversity and nurturing human creativity (Wendland, 2004). However, the practical effort to safeguard intangible cultural heritage presents notable challenges, particularly when

managing the intricate interplay between community-driven and authority-driven approaches. This involves addressing community participation and consent issues, documenting and transmitting cultural practices, and allocating resources to support these efforts (Kurin, 2007). Balancing these considerations to safeguard intangible cultural heritage requires careful navigation and collaboration among all stakeholders.

At the grassroots level, communities play a vital role in preserving and passing on their intangible cultural heritage (Blake, 2008). They deeply understand their traditions, values, and beliefs, often vital to their cultural identity. Community-driven approaches emphasise the importance of empowering local communities to lead in identifying, documenting, and safeguarding their cultural practices. This bottom-up approach recognises the community as the primary stakeholder and custodian of their intangible heritage, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility (Bhaskara, 2015). Moreover, community-based initiatives can often leverage traditional knowledge, networks, and transmission channels to ensure the continuity of cultural practices, adapting them to the changing modern environment (Magni, 2017). However, implementing community-driven approaches presents numerous challenges, such as limited funding resources (Blake, 2018), lack of formal recognition from the government and international organisations for informal heritage, and potential conflicts within the politics of heritage (Harrison, 2010).

Contrastively, the top-down in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires the frequent involvement of government agencies, international organisations, or other institutional stakeholders. Legal frameworks, funding, and technical expertise (Jacobs, 2017) can be utilised through these methods to help protect intangible heritage on a broader level. For example, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has become a crucial international initiative in promoting the identification, documentation, and transmission of intangible cultural practices through member-state initiatives. Utilising top-down strategies can increase awareness, mobilise resources, and foster coordinating efforts within communities and nations. However, approaches driven by authority tend to be more state-centric, with the authority determining the content and aesthetic values of heritage and enforcing a conservation plan that may not align with the community's cultural values and practices. This can also entail controlling the funding for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (Beng, 2022).

Besides that, Smith's thorough analysis of the Authorised Heritage Discourse sheds light on how the predominant, government-centred, and authoritative approach to heritage preservation often fails to adequately consider the diverse and community-based nature of intangible cultural practices (Smith, 2006), thus highlighting the need for a more inclusive and participatory cultural heritage conservation framework (Rosetti et al., 2022).

Methodology

This study comprises four case studies, all employing the qualitative research approach. The research design utilised is a case study, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the real-life experiences of research participants. Using case studies, researchers can gather detailed insights into community engagement with cultural activities and lifestyle (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, researchers categorised the cases into four groups: customary law (adat perpatih), cultural activities (the celebration of Hari Mantai), performing arts (Bongai), and gastronomy (dodol). Despite their different natures and contexts, all these cases were practised

by the adat perpatih community residing in Negeri Sembilan. The research employed two research instruments which are in-depth interviews and observations.

Table 1: Research Participants

Case Study	Research Informants
Case Study 1	12
Case Study 2	10
Case Study 3	7
Case Study 4	10
Total	39

The table above displays the number of research informants who participated in each case study. Specifically, 12 research informants participated in Case Study 1, 10 in Case Study 2, 7 in Case Study 3, and 10 in Case Study 4. All informants were residents of Negeri Sembilan and were actively engaged in the local culture and traditions. The data collected from the fieldwork was analysed through thematic analysis, a method commonly used to identify patterns of meaning in interview transcripts and field notes. Similar patterns in the data were then organised and categorised into themes.

Findings

This study found that involving the community is one of the most effective ways to protect and preserve cultural heritage, mainly intangible cultural heritage. This was supported by evidence from four case studies. For example, the first case study illustrated the preservation of the traditional law of adat *perpatih* through intergenerational knowledge transmission. The younger generation is encouraged to learn cultural and traditional knowledge by observing and listening to the elders, following the principles of "look, listen, and learn" (Radzuan, 2023). Participation in familial rituals such as assisting in the kitchen enables that customary knowledge to be imparted to the young generation. As they are progressively engaged in these rituals, they are able to acquire culinary skills and familiarity with ceremonial preparations, including the installation of the curtain (*tabir*) and ceiling drapes (*langit*) during the traditional ceremony, welcoming the traditional elders, setting up the tent, and cleaning the house. When assisting the elders, all information related to adat will be transferred as part of intergenerational knowledge transfer. Therefore, learning and safeguarding adat *perpatih* must be done through oral transmission and practical methods to ensure the information is effectively delivered.

In the second case study, individuals in a community play an essential role in perpetuating cultural activities and practices. For instance, many informants interviewed in this study are actively engaged in the Hari Mantai organised in their neighbourhoods. The informants reported that involvement in these programs helps to spark their interest in the traditional activities of the Negeri Sembilan community. Furthermore, Hari Mantai fosters mutual assistance and strengthens friendships within the community. Besides that, the village committee, *Jawatankuasa Pembangunan dan Keselamatan Kampung* (JPKK), is important in organising *Hari Mantai* to promote communal activities. This event brings the community together, fostering a sense of unity and shared cultural experiences. During *Hari Mantai*, the younger generation is specifically tasked to assist the elders in butchering meat, setting up tents, and even slicing meat while women prepare ingredients for beef rendang.

Additionally, the state government of Negeri Sembilan has introduced Hari Mantai Perdana, which allows the community to purchase fresh meat at a lower market price. This program is an endeavour by the Negeri Sembilan Government to uphold and preserve the tradition of Hari Mantai, which has been traditionally practised in villages. Although the current *Hari Mantai* atmosphere differs from the past, ensuring that such cultural activities persist for the younger generations is essential.

In the third case study, a local *bongai* group organised an intensive training session to teach the younger generation about traditional music and associated skills. This training aimed to ensure the continuation of musical traditions and abilities. The community, heritage, and educational institutions work collaboratively to preserve *bongai*. For example, the Department of Culture and Arts of Negeri Sembilan, also known as the National Department for Culture and Arts or Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara Negeri Sembilan (JKKNNS), developed a traditional music learning module reflecting the identity of the Negeri Sembilan community to support *bongai* conventional music. The educational module has been officially integrated into the school curriculum across Negeri Sembilan, becoming an essential component of the co-curricular activities. This initiative aimed to impart knowledge and skills related to traditional *bongai* music, a significant cultural heritage of the region. A dedicated music activist and coach actively engaged in training school students who are interested in learning and preserving this traditional art form. The goal was to ensure the region's continuity and longevity of traditional *bongai* music. Furthermore, the informant highlighted that schools in Negeri Sembilan frequently organised competitions to showcase and cultivate new talent, effectively contributing to preserving and promoting the region's rich musical traditions.

In the fourth case study, a cooking workshop and intergenerational knowledge transfer were conducted at the community level to preserve the knowledge of making *penganan* or *dodol*. Traditional cake production knowledge is usually transmitted through older generations, such as parents, family members, relatives, friends, and the local community. The art of making traditional cake is imparted through home practice, community gatherings, social media, food festivals, cooking workshops, and traditional cake cooking competitions. Nowadays, learning how to make traditional cakes has become more accessible through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among others. Despite such technological enhancements, some individuals acknowledge the irreplaceable value of older generations, who provide crucial tips and insights during cooking. The informant also informed that children are actively involved in cooking traditional cakes to ensure they learn how to make them. Additionally, the local community has organised cooking workshops to engage young people. During these workshops, experienced community members share their culinary knowledge and expertise to preserve traditional recipes and cooking methods.

Preserving cultural heritage is vital and requires the collaborative effort of various institutions and organisations to protect and uphold it. For example, museums are responsible for safeguarding artefacts and traditions. Concerning *adat*, *Perbadanan Muzium Negeri Sembilan*, or the Negeri Sembilan State Museum Board, has collaborated with other institutions such as the National Department for Culture and Arts of Negeri Sembilan, the State Government of Negeri Sembilan, and others to host an annual event focusing on *adat perpatih*, aiming to disseminate and preserve the knowledge of *adat*, particularly among the Malay community of Negeri Sembilan and the general public. This effort raises awareness and helps the broader public better understand and appreciate our cultural heritage.

Besides that, educational institutions, such as schools and universities, play a crucial role in educating the younger generation about cultural heritage. They incorporate traditional music, like bongai, into their co-curricular activities. The role of mass media is also vital in spreading awareness and information to help safeguard intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, government and non-governmental organisations, such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and the National Heritage Department, play essential roles in recognising and preserving cultural heritage as part of the national heritage. Lastly, commercialising cultural heritage, such as *dodol*, can be a way to ensure its sustainability. While commercialisation is essential for marketing local products, it can also adversely affect the community, potentially hindering intergenerational skill transfer, eroding community values, and reducing quality time among members. Togetherness and cooperative activities are essential for preserving cultural value of food and traditions.

Furthermore, preserving and promoting cultural heritage involves digitising and archiving traditional performances, recipes, rituals, and oral histories. These digital archives, including videos, podcasts, and interactive websites, are imperative in aligning with current technological trends and diverse preferences. Additionally, using social media to share content related to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can increase engagement among the younger generation through interactive challenges, captivating storytelling, and live demonstrations. This approach helps younger individuals develop a deeper connection and appreciation for cultural heritages.

Conclusion

This research underscores the importance of community-driven approaches in safeguarding Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage (ICH), focusing on four case studies: Adat, Hari Mantai, Bongai, and Penganan. It highlights the significance of intergenerational knowledge transfer, communal activities, intensive training, and workshops in preserving these traditions. Additionally, it stresses the involvement of educational institutions, museums, government and non-governmental organisations in conjunction with digital platforms to protect and promote these cultural treasures. Therefore, there is an urgent need for collaborative efforts and innovative approaches to ensure the continuity and appreciation of Malaysia's cultural heritage amidst the challenges posed by modernisation and globalisation.

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