



**Roaming Beyond the Fence**  
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# Song and dance over art forms

Culture and its accompanying art forms are possessed and created by individuals and self-defined communities, and not by governments.



**At odds over culture:** Malaysians of the Mandailing community performing the disputed Tor-tor folk dance. — Reuters

**L**AST year I attended a concert staged by the Negri Sembilan Students Association at Universiti Putra Malaysia which included a memorable performance of nine long-barrelled drums, accompanied by a gong and a flautist-singer.

This was a *Gordang Sambilan* troupe, and I was told that the musicians came from a lineage long based in a certain part of Selangor.

This particular art form originated in the Mandailing lands north of Minangkabau territory in Sumatra.

Just as the Minangkabau migrated from West Sumatra to what is now Negri Sembilan for centuries, so the Mandailing people migrated from North Sumatra to Selangor.

However, it was the Bugis who formed the dominant force in Selangor, whereas the Minangkabau entered into alliances with the indigenous people in what became Negri Sembilan by incorporating them into their clan-based politico-cultural system as the *suku Biduanda* (from which the ruling chiefs are still elected).

Given limited public awareness, it is understandable that practitioners of traditional art forms seek help to protect and revive interest – including from the Government.

However, appointing the Government as custodian of the arts comes with risks.

Individuals and groups can do tremendous work with funding from the Government, of course (although funding can come from

many sources), but the problem with government “recognition” is that this can lead to definition and appropriation.

This has happened with *mak yong* and *wayang kulit*, and the same phenomenon is to blame for the stereotypical images of the “Malay”, “Chinese”, “Indian” and *lain-lain* dances in our tourism ads – “1Malaysia” and

“Truly Asia” necessitate the existence of discrete cultural traditions which can be packaged to give the appearance of unity in diversity.

One wider consequence of letting the Government define our culture is that we are prevented (“protected”) from consuming culture that it deems unsuitable, so books are banned, films censored and perform-

ers expelled, even if there is no evidence of disapproval by a majority, nor evidence that consumption by a minority would have any adverse effects on anyone else.

Another consequence is that people in neighbouring countries who make overlapping claims (or don't believe in cultural exclusivity) get annoyed.

This is of course what happened recently when *Gordang Sambilan* together with the *Tor-tor* dance were declared by our Information, Communications and Culture Ministry to be part of Malaysia's national cultural heritage. There was a spirited protest in Jakarta before the diplomats managed to calm things down.

This isn't the first time in recent history that this has happened.

Emotions have been similarly excited by the purported ownership of the *pendet* dance, the song *Rasa Sayang(e)* and the melody of *Negaraku*.

But go back further in history and we find that before our nation-states came into being, people in these parts took it for granted that we shared a cultural heritage, that people and communities moved fluidly

across the kingdoms of our maritime civilisation, and most importantly that culture was something possessed and created by individuals and self-defined communities, not by governments.

The lofty goals of the Asean Socio-Cultural Community recognise this history but too many senior politicians and bureaucrats do not.

The last principle is worth rehabilitating. Already, the private sector, philanthropy and royal patronage are encouraging healthy competition amongst arts practitioners. The next step is to liberate culture from the adverse effects of government “protection” and politicisation within and across borders.

I may be accused of being overly optimistic of Malaysians' receptivity to ancient art forms, but contemporary middle Malaysia has already proven that it is willing to spend considerable amounts of money on different art forms.

With more exposure and freedom to perform and innovate, I'm confident that a self-sustaining demand will eventually be created.

On a related note, I am preparing for a keynote address I'm due to give next week for an International Conference on Malay-Polynesian Ancestral Nations co-organised by several government entities.

What's interesting about this conference is that right at the outset the academic definition of “Malay” is entirely at odds with that described in our Federal Constitution.

Indeed, the accompanying literature claims that Malays are found in Tonga, Tuvalu and Taiwan (and those are just the Ts). It's going to be fun!

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