

BOOK REVIEW

Abu Talib Ahmad. *Museums, History and Culture in Malaysia*. Singapore: National University of Singapore (NUS) Press, 2015.

It is not very often that one comes across a book about museums in Malaysia. Neither can one easily find such a book that has its contents closely intertwined with the history and culture of the country. This is because an attempt to link the museums with history and heritage is indeed full of complexities as the author has tried to show. The book nonetheless shows that such task is possible. In fact, for college students, the book is quite helpful in providing useful historical information of Malaysia's past. From the narratives of the book, readers will certainly be made aware about the truth of the saying that Malaysia is unique in every sense of the word. As a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country, it is unique in its style of political pragmatism as seen from the unconventional way its political elites try to manage a plural society that is still struggling to become a viable and integrated nation. Through his book, *Museums, History and Culture in Malaysia*, the author Abu Talib Ahmad has painstakingly demonstrated how museums in Malaysia try to cope with the diverse and pluralistic views of the country's history.

The book is divided into five chapters, each looking at various aspects of the museums, from the displays and dioramas to the management and ideological influence over them. Besides touching on the overall national policy of the government towards museums' representation of the national history, state history and royal personages, the book also gives space to discussing the galleries that exhibit memorials and towering figures of the nation. According to the author, Malaysian museums are closely related to nation building and to prove his point he conscientiously relates the history of museums in Malaysia to the history of the country. He tries to show that while museums are supposed to represent the history of the country, their role in nation building is also defined by becoming the storage for the national heritage as depicted by history. In the Introduction, the author focuses his discussion on the National Museum which has over the years seen many changes since the days of its first director, Mubin Sheppard. But he also laments the fact that when the management of the national museum changed hands the orientation of its mission also changed, resulting in the national museum becoming increasingly associated with nationalism. The author thinks that by attempting to create a national identity based on a

Malay-Muslim bias the Malaysian National Museum has in some ways polarised Malaysians visiting it. Museum administration, according to the author, tends to follow the provisions laid out in the National Culture policy, which were designed after the inter-racial clashes of 1969, whereby the "positive" values of Malay culture had been stipulated to be the basis and to be at the forefront of Malaysian culture. The author thus sees the exhibits being displayed as being more Malay-centric and less multi-cultural in outlook.

In Chapter One, the author gives a historical background of ancient Malaysia with an overall view of what has been discovered by archaeological findings and what has been shown in galleries and museums particularly in states such as Kedah, Perlis and Perak. The discussion focuses on the animistic prehistoric period, the Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic periods, with the last having its artefacts housed in the Penang, Kelantan and Terengganu museums. In the author's view, despite the valuable archaeological findings showing Malays having inherited the Hindu-Buddhist heritage which for centuries shaped their culture, there is nonetheless a conscious effort to blur the pre-Melaka period so that the image of Malays being Muslims shall not be under-stated. Thus the author quite rightly argues that because of this slanted view of history the Melaka period is given immense prominence just like what is written in the school history text books. To prove his point, the author allocates a special chapter to discuss Melaka history and heritage and the museums related to it.

There are no less than 24 museums in Melaka, all under the supervision of the Melaka Museum Corporation (Perzim). According to the author, it is through these museums that Malay culture based on feudal values is displayed. True to their narrow perception of Malay history and polity the museum bureaucracy attempts to demonstrate that "everything Malay originates in Melaka." Due to this line of thinking, the most prominent museum projected is the Melaka Sultanate Museum. It was officially opened in mid-1986. The museum prides itself in displaying the message that it was the Melaka sultanate that spread the Islamic religion. Using the "Malay Annals" (*Sulalat u's-Salatin*) as their principal source of information, the museum's bureaucracy, benefitting from the service of some local historians, claim that during the period of the Malay sultanate "Melaka became the centre of Islamic knowledge, a centre for the propagation of Islam and a well-known Sufi centre" (94–95). But it appears that all the claims that Melaka was a centre for Islamic propagation and that Islamic law was practised fully during the period of the Melaka sultanate is written with tongue in cheek by the author. He rightly points out that nowhere in the *Sejarah Melayu (Sulalat u's-Salatin)* or *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is *hudud*

(punishment for criminal offences according to Islamic injunctions) described or for that matter implemented in 15th and 16th-century Melaka. On the contrary, the *Sejarah Melayu* does indeed mention about the religious transgressions committed by the aristocracy. Students of Malaysian history will also wonder why there is not a single religious text that has been left by at least one of the *ulama* if the Melaka religious heritage has really been that great. The author also cynically points out that *the bedok* (drum used for calling the faithful to prayers) has nothing to do with the Melaka sultanate and yet it is displayed as a historical relic. So also are the displays of the front pages of religious books which the author succinctly says are not authentic as they are most likely to be from the post-sultanate period (91).

In his narrative of the museums in Malaysia, the author tries to show that just as history writing for school textbooks appear to be bias, the various displays and dioramas depicted in public museums whether at the capital, Kuala Lumpur where the National Museum is located, or the state museums, tend to be very Malay-centric almost to the extent of neglecting the history of the non-Malays in their contributions towards making a Modern Malaya and later Malaysia. Another important point the author makes is that the non-Islamic phase of Malay history when Malays were Hindu-Buddhists is almost consciously neglected in the Malaysian museums, thus depriving the students of Malaysian history from fully understanding the past culture and history of Malays.

The book as a whole is useful to all students of history, whether Malaysian or foreign. The chapter on the Japanese occupation is also well-written and will be of interest to many. However, there is a gap in the narratives of the book. The discussion on the *Orang Asli* could have been given a substantial space and perhaps further information about the Aboriginal Museum built in 1987 at Gombak could have also contributed towards Malaysians' understanding of the culture and history of this important community. Perhaps the background discussion of this ethnic group could be extended by looking at the Austro-Melanesian people across Southeast Asia. Be that as it may, this book is certainly recommended reading for the Malaysian public, not only students and teachers but also people in the museum bureaucracy, and not to forget politicians in the country.

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