

## **Tradition and Transformation: Harmonizing Heritage and Modernity for the Sustainability of the Malaysian Traditional Performing Arts through the Popular Culture**

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### **Abstract**

In a society marked by rapid technological advancement and globalisation, the preservation and innovation of traditional performing arts present a distinctive challenge that requires a delicate balance between protecting heritage and embracing modernity. This paper explores the complex interplay between tradition and transformation within the context of Malaysia's traditional performing arts, focusing on the challenges posed by the age gap, cultural imperialism, and the evolving landscape of entertainment and popular culture. The pivotal role of Malaysia as a case study is examined, considering its unique multicultural heritage. The paper contends that popular culture can serve as a transformative force rather than a threat to traditional arts. It introduces the late Pak Ngah as a case study, emphasizing his innovative approach in fusing traditional and modern elements to create "Traditional Pop." Pak Ngah's success stories and initiatives illustrate the potential of popular culture in preserving and promoting traditional arts. Pak Ngah's model of Traditional Pop Innovation & Preservation is presented, encompassing elements of Malay-ness, Malaysian-ness, hybridity, and audience engagement. The model outlined the importance of artists possessing "twenty-first century skills." In conclusion, the insights derived from Pak Ngah's pioneering work offer a framework for the preservation and revitalization of traditional performing arts in Malaysia and beyond. By embracing the dynamism of popular culture and cultivating a harmonious coexistence between heritage and modernity, traditional performing arts can not only survive but thrive in the face of contemporary challenges.

*Keywords:* cultural preservation, Malaysia's cultural heritage, tradition and modernity, traditional performing arts, traditional pop

### **Introduction**

In an age of rapid globalisation and technological advances, the practice of traditional performing arts is an issue of cultural preservation as well as adaptability. The performing arts, being a dynamic and ever-changing medium of artistic expression, have frequently experienced a clash between traditionalism and modernism. Within this particular framework, heritage is understood to pertain to the safeguarding and conservation of performing arts traditions (UNESCO, 2003). Conversely, modernity is frequently perceived as a negative influence that poses a danger to these traditional

practices (Thani, 2021). A divergence of viewpoints appeared to exist between the traditionalists and transformists (Galland & Lemel, 2008). According to traditionalists, cultural heritage must be kept in its most authentic form and within its original context; any changes from this are regarded as a corruption of the tradition (Lim & Mohd Fadzil Abdul Rahman, 2011; Yin et al., 2012). On the contrary, transformists maintain that changes are unavoidable and consider the innovation and freedom of expression in traditional performing arts to be indispensable for accommodating the preferences and way of life of modern society (Oalere, 2019).

The transition from the traditional village community setting, where the performing arts were normally performed as a popular culture in the past, to the concert halls and now to internet video streaming live-to-digital theatre or gadgets at the comfort of one's bedroom is laden with issues that need to be examined (Ruastiti et al., 2021). Sustaining our distinct cultural identities and the ways in which we have traditionally expressed ourselves becomes progressively more challenging as our way of life undergoes transformation especially during and after the Pandemic Covid 19. As a consequence of the pandemic, a shift towards digital audio-visual experiences has occurred (Webb & Layton, 2022). The accessibility of online videos through social media like YouTube and Instagram has enabled the transmission of performances and content from many parts of the world to new audiences. In the future, the boundaries between the real world and virtual worlds continue to blur, and through advancement in artificial intelligence, we are now engaging with technology like virtual reality (VR) and Immersive Reality, creating a different new experience for enjoying the performing arts (Kaushik, 2020). How do we address the concern of many academics and artists that there is a chance that our traditional performing arts will become something that is only shelved in the library or dusty archives? (Kamarulzaman Mohamed Karim, 2016; Lim & Mohd Fadzil Abdul Rahman, 2011)

Malaysia, a country known for its unique heritage, is a living example of the interaction between tradition and transformation. Similar to many other nations grappling with the effects of globalisation, Malaysia provides an intriguing lens through which to examine this intersection of heritage and modernity in the performing arts. Naohiko Umewaka, a master of the Japan's Noh theatre who once travelled to Malaysia to conduct master classes at universities in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Tanjung Malim, viewed Malaysia as one of the most complex countries he has ever visited (Ferrarese, 2017). "There's spirituality, religion, economic and historical heritage, and so much more, all intertwined. It's historical and modern at the same time." (Ferrarese, 2017). Malaysia's traditional performing arts, deeply rooted in the country's multi-ethnic and lengthy history of interactions with external influences, are a monument to the rich and diverse cultural heritage that makes up this beautiful nation. These cultural traditions, from the melodious Asli songs to the intricate footwork of Mak Yong dance to the intriguing shadow puppetry of Wayang Kulit, provide a glimpse into Malaysia spirit and soul. Besides being a source of cultural pride, they provide a profound connection to the past, serving as a bridge to the ancestors and the stories and values they wanted to share (Hardwick & Fara Dayana Mohd Jufry, 2022). As Charoenrat and Charassri (2017) puts it, they provide insight into the rituals, myths, and everyday life of the people who shaped this nation.

Nonetheless, Malaysia is not alone in its quest to strike a balance between tradition and innovation in the performing arts. Many countries around the world are coping with comparable issues. How can our performing art forms not just survive but thrive, retaining their essence, even as they adapt to changing times in the face of adversity?

### **The Challenges Faced by Malaysian Traditional Performing Arts**

The age gap is one of the most critical concerns. The attraction of more modern forms and media of entertainment younger Malaysians can put traditional performing arts at danger of going out of style. Many parties, including academics and art activists, have been concerned about this issue for more than 40 years. Mohamed Ghouse Nasaruddin (1979), Ang and Yeoh (2002), Lim and Mohd Fadhil Abdul Rahman (2011), Syed Mahadzir Syed Ibrahim (2014), Wan Jamarul Imran and Wan Abdullah Thani (2021) to name a few, claimed that Malaysians view local performance arts as outmoded because they are cut off from their cultural history and ignorant of the significance of traditional performing arts. According to these academics, the traditional performing arts are seriously threatened by this shift in preferences, which is made worse by the impact of western pop culture.

Numerous academics have engaged in thorough discourse on this matter, employing the frameworks of cultural imperialism theory and hegemony theory. A study conducted by Ang and Yeoh (2002) found that young Malaysians not only love western popular music but also dislike and are ignorant of traditional music from Malaysia. Nettl (1995) claims that “the most significant phenomenon in the global history of music has been the intensive imposition of western music and musical thought upon the rest of the world.” In the case of Malaysia, the profound influence of Malaysia’s performing arts heritage can be attributed to the protracted British colonial rule that characterised the nation (Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon & Shahanum Mohd Shah, 2013).

Nonetheless, in the past two decades, a greater number of young Malaysians have become increasingly captivated by the Korean Popular Culture (Nur Ayuni Mohd Jenol & Nur Hafeeza Ahmad Pazil, 2022). Not only in Malaysia, with K-pop artists like BTS, Blackpink, Twice and Seventeen drawing in millions of fans worldwide. The exponential increase in the worldwide appeal of Korean popular culture products, sometimes referred to as the “Hallyu wave,” is undeniably a captivating phenomenon on a global scale (Ganghariya & Kanozia, 2020). According to Syed Mahadzir Syed Ibrahim (2014), the Malaysian traditional performing arts are adversely affected by the prevailing trend in contemporary popular culture, which is primarily because of the constraints imposed by their regional context and the extremely limited medium through which they can be performed.

Concerned about the potential impact of contemporary popular culture on the future of the traditional performing arts as the intangible cultural heritage, numerous parties have up until the present time, reacted and undertaken a variety of initiatives and projects. These actions and initiatives were manifested in a variety of ways and forms. Certain initiatives seem to be germinating some sign of success, but others are comparatively less fruitful and have, in fact, impeded efforts to sustain the popularity

and appreciation for local performing arts traditions. Lim and Mohd Fadhil Abdul Rahman (2011) praised the organisation of concerts, workshops, appreciation classes, and seminars, but question the extent to which these initiatives contribute to enhance the younger generation's appreciation towards the indigenous performing arts. For example, the traditional Malay performances of Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit and Main Puteri were prohibited in the PAS-dominated state of Kelantan in 1995, allegedly due to the implementation of the National Culture Policy (NCP) in 1971.

NCP is guided by three fundamental principles: (a) The National Culture of Malaysia must be based on the cultures of the people indigenous (Malay) to the region; (b) Elements from other cultures which are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the National Culture; and (c) Islam will be an important element in the National Culture. Zawawi Ibrahim (2016) argues that the NCP has given rise to contrasting interpretations of traditional Malay culture, with the more conservative PAS (opposition political party) interpretation of what constituted 'legitimate' Islamic cultural practice had rendered some traditional Malay popular cultural forms non-Islamic. As a result, the Ulik Mayang, an additional traditional art form, encountered criticism about its legitimacy as an Islamic cultural practise in Terengganu, a mostly Malay state, in the period following the 1999 General Election, when the PAS party was in power.

A further noteworthy issue that arises when contemplating the survival of traditional performing arts heritage pertains to the notion of "authenticity." In today's climate of instant gratification, mass production of information and entertainment, traditional performing arts run the risk of losing the profundity and spirit that set them apart from other performance forms. It is indeed critical that we investigate and develop more effective methods in order to preserve the integrity of these artistic practises and prevent their dilution due to their adaptation to the current environment. However, it is evident that the extreme views and actions pursued by specific factions in the past to preserve the integrity of indigenous traditional performing arts led to this tradition becoming dormant, unresponsive to modern developments and devoid of admiration. In their discussion regarding the sustainability of indigenous music in Sarawak, Lim and Mohd Fadhil Abdul Rahman (2011) reach the conclusion that the endeavours to popularise traditional performing arts were not very successful due to concerns surrounding authenticity. Similar issue was discussed by Yin, Mohd Nasir Hashim and Chiat (2012), in the context of the Malay Asli tradition. They view the argument on authenticity as problematic because it is denying the fact that transformation of the Malay Asli music has already taken place over many generations in the past.

Despite these challenges I wish to highlight my confidence in the transforming potential of popular culture, which is the driving force behind the majority of the contemporary entertainment happening around the world. Popular culture is both dynamic and influential that can serve as a bridge between the tradition and the modernity. We may find the solutions to the pressing issues faced by the traditional performing arts as discussed earlier by exploring the contemporary Popular Culture as a platform to promote the Malaysian traditional performing arts especially among the younger generation.

The wave of popular culture brought by the era of globalization through

technological and communication advancement should no longer be viewed as an adversary of the destroyer of culture but on the contrary as an opportunity for a broad global market without borders (Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon, 2014). To maintain the viability of traditional performing arts, we must regard these art forms as commodities with significant commercial value while also emphasising the significance of conserving their distinguishing essence and spirit (Olalere, 2019).

### **Success Stories and Innovative Initiatives of the Late Pak Ngah**

As we explore the transformative potential of popular culture in preserving and promoting Malaysian Traditional Performing Arts, we can find inspiration in the remarkable career of the late Pak Ngah, whose real name was Suhaimi Mohd Zain. Pak Ngah (26 September 1958 – 25 September 2018) was a Malay traditional musician, songwriter, and producer. Pak Ngah's life and work serve as an exemplary illustration of how one can successfully blend traditional music elements with modern music in the popular music industry. Pak Ngah, a master of traditional Malay and popular music, embarked on a journey that transcended generational and genre boundaries (Shafa'atussara Silahudin, 2008). With a deep-rooted passion for Malay traditional music, dance and theatre, he became a true pioneer in harmonizing tradition and modernity through the concept of music composition that he coined as the Traditional Pop. His contribution to Malaysian music is a testament to the power of creativity and innovation in preserving our cultural heritage in the contemporary world.

Sadly, only a negligible number of scholarly studies have been conducted into the life and works of Pak Ngah. It is unsurprising according to Raja Iskandar Raja Halid (2019) that the biographical works on traditional or modern Malaysian artists remain sparse. Raja proposed for more biographical studies on notable figures including innovators of a certain tradition and key individuals who hold significant roles within a musical culture. Given the limited literatures on Pak Ngah, my writing here are mostly based on my own observations and personal communications with Pak Ngah on multiple occasions over twenty five-year period, as well as information obtained from the internet and discographies of his works.

One of Pak Ngah's notable achievements was his instrumental role in reviving and popularizing the Malay *Gendang* (Malay drums) especially the *kompang*. The *kompang* are larger tambourine-like Malay hand drums traditionally used in Islamic rituals and cultural celebrations. It was, for the most part, confined to these specific contexts. However, Pak Ngah recognized the potential of the Malay percussion instrument including *kompang*, *rebana*, *gendang Melayu* and other local instruments and their unique sounds to be promoted and appreciated through the popular music. In his groundbreaking work like *Ala Dondang* (1997) by Noraniza Idris and *Cindai* (1997) by Siti Nurhaliza, Pak Ngah integrated the rebana and kompang into a contemporary music genre, infusing Malay traditional rhythms and melodies into the pop songs.

In most of the albums under his production, by Pak Ngah creatively fused the rhythms of Malay dance like the Inang, Zapin and Joget with the western pop beats,

the Malay melismatic style of singing with the western harmonies, and the Malay music instruments with western and other world music instruments including the Indian tabla and Arabic darbuka in his music arrangements. The result was a mesmerizing fusion of old and new, where the soul of traditional Malay music found a place in the modern music landscape.

Pak Ngah innovative approach brought the Malay melodies, Asli style of singing and Malay music instruments to the forefront, not only in Malaysia but also on the international stage particularly in the South East Asia region, captivating audiences and introducing them to the rich heritage of Malaysia. TV3 (a major Malaysian television channel) once classified this innovative style to composition that arose in the 1990s by blending traditional and contemporary music elements as 'Rhythm of Malaysia,' 'Ethnic pop,' and 'Creative Ethnic,' although Pak Ngah preferred the term 'Traditional pop' (Kamarulzaman Mohamed Karim, 2016).

*Cindai* (1997) was the first Rhythms of Malaysia song to win the Best Song of the Year Award at the 1998 *Juara Lagu* (Song Competition) Finals, while *Ala Dondang* (1997) won the Best Ethnic Pop Album at the Malaysian Music Industry Award 1999 (AIM '99). Pak Ngah created his own history when he emerged as the first composer and lyricist to qualify in the Rhythms of Malaysia category when three of his songs—*Hati Kama* (1999), *Samrah Mentari* (1998) and *Dondang Dendang* (1998) were contested through the 1999 *Anugerah Juara lagu* (Song Champion Award) which qualified him to win that category. According to Pak Ngah, the medium to fast tempo memorable melodies, structured in refrain-chorus strophic style were composed to appeal the old and young people since they used traditional music, while remaining upbeat (Tan, 2005). During live performances of the finals, according to Tan, the audience was immersed in aural and visual spectacle, particularly, in which an enormous stage is filled with a vast ensemble of western and local instruments, a large number of backing dancers dressed in colourful and ornate traditional Malay costumes, and spectacular lighting effects using latest technology. This dynamic and inventive performance serves as evidence of Pak Ngah's skill in integrating traditional components with contemporary inspirations, resulting in an enthralling encounter that appeals to captivate both local and international audiences.

Each album produced by Pak Ngah has its own uniqueness which demonstrate his exploration and experimenting with new musical ideas and concepts. Through the *Bekaba* (1999) album for instance, Pak Ngah and Siti Noraniza Idris (the Malaysia queen of traditional pop) recorded the pop traditional Malay songs with lively musical arrangement. The Arabic influences in the Malay culture were highlighted in the album particularly in *Si Nara* (1999), *Tinting* (1999) and *Ya Salam* (2000) which requires Noraniza to delve deeper into several variations of Zapin dance rhythms.

Meanwhile in the album named *Masyur*, Pak Ngah experimented with the elements from *Dikir Barat* in the song *Dikir Puteri* (1998). *Dikir Barat* is a traditional music from the state of Kelantan, northeast of Peninsular Malaysia. Pak Ngah was also involved in the production of the song *Iboq* (2000), which creativity blended modern western music with the music of the Semai people, who lives in the jungle of Pahang, a state in the east coast of the Peninsular Malaysia. The recording of the song involved the musicians from a tribe of Semai from the jungle in Pahang. *Cintong*, an

authentic music instrument made from bamboo were used by the musicians in the recording.

In 1995, Pak Ngah established his own production company in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur, with the aim of facilitating and developing his artistic pursuits. This marked his entry into the music business industry. Collaboration with D'Academy Asia and Indosiar, an Indonesian television station, to produce a reality programme that search for talent for dangdut singers throughout Asia was one of the numerous accomplishments of the Pak Ngah production. Pak Ngah was designated as a regular judge for this particular programme. D'Academy premiered in a number of Asian countries. In addition to attaining the best ratings and shares, the programme received the award for the Best Talent Search & Reality Show category at Panasonic Gobel Awards 2016.

Pak Ngah's fame went beyond his musical innovations. He was also a cultural ambassador and educator who worked relentlessly to share his knowledge and passion with the next generation. His dedication to passing along traditional arts to future generations insured the survival of these creative forms. As he believed that education had a critical part in ensuring the future of Malaysian Traditional Performing Arts, Pak Ngah offered classes and workshops on traditional music and dance for children, teenagers and young adults. Pak Ngah developed close relationships with academics and students at higher education institutions. He was always willing to lend his assistance and support to research work and programmes aimed at incorporating traditional arts into the curriculums of schools and institutions of higher learning, ensuring that young Malaysians are exposed to the beauty and relevance of these art forms from an early age. Pak Ngah was always eager to accommodate requests to provide lectures, presentations, workshops, and clinics to university students. Pak Ngah's legacy continue to inspire a new generation of musicians, ensuring traditional elements' continued relevance in modern music.

### **Insights Drawn from Pak Ngah's Remarkable Work**

In addition to leaving behind a vast body of traditional pop music repertoire, Pak Ngah also served as a role model for the modernisation and preservation of Malaysia's traditional performing arts heritage. Figure 1, which depicts his framework for popularising traditional music, can be a useful point of reference. I dubbed this "Pak Ngah's Model of Traditional Pop Innovation & Preservation" which comprised of four primary features or components: (a) Malaysian-ness; (b) hybridity; (c) Malay-ness; and (d) audience engagement.

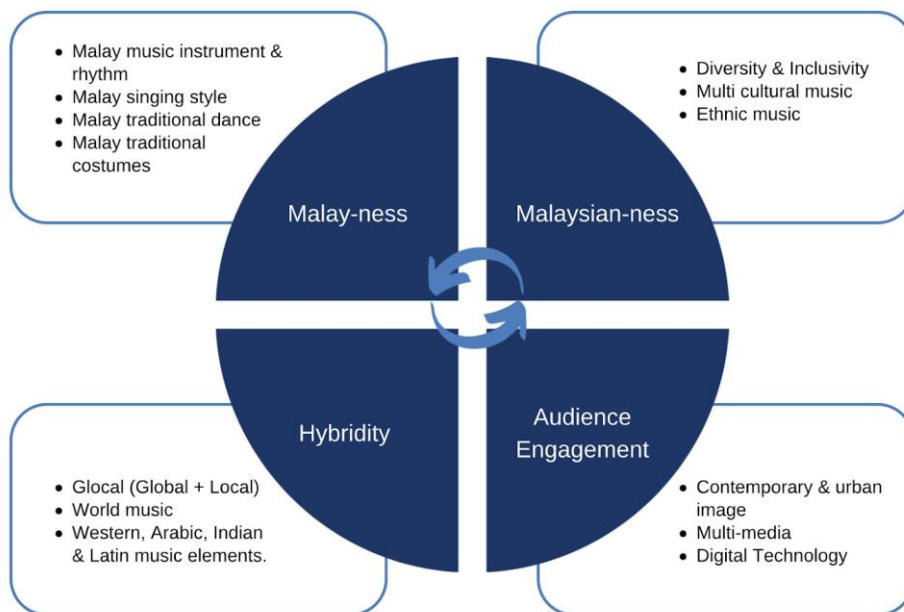


Figure 1. Pak Ngah's model of traditional pop innovation & Preservation

### Malay-ness

Notwithstanding the hybridity and multicultural nature of Pak Ngah's body of work, the essence of "Malay-ness" (Melayu-ness) is effectively conveyed in his creative works. Pak Ngah has incorporated the Malay musical attributes as delineated by Weintraub (2010: 59-60). These attributes consist of "pantun poem structure, conventional melodic formulae, ornamentation style, and extra words and phrases (such as "oh, my darling" and "tuan")." Furthermore, Pak Ngah's popular music showcased the prowess of Malay musicians and singers. This is as Benjamin (2019) defines it:

Skilful Melayu musician move from one note to another by a devious, melismatically decorated route. In Malay these decorations are variously referred to by such terms as *nada-nada hiasan* 'decorated notes,' *grénék* 'quavering,' *patah lagu* 'song-fracturing' or *cengkok Melayu* 'Malay (-style) twisting. (p.100)

Additionally, the Malay heritage is demonstrated by means of the application of Malay traditional rhythms and instruments. Moreover, the exquisite choreography of the Malay traditional dance, executed in traditional attire, serves to accentuate the authentic Malay spirit.

The element of Malay-ness in the traditional pop form is of considerable strategic significance for several reasons. To begin with, Malay identity is essential

for mitigating some of the concerns around authenticity. Modernizing traditional art forms through modification or change does not undermine their essence, spirit, or value, so long as the Malay sensibilities are appropriately taken into account. While the traditional pop incorporates modern elements, it never compromises the authenticity of traditional performing arts forms. It provides a framework for preserving these art forms while allowing them to evolve and adapt to modern style and taste. Consequently, this could potentially garner the support and endorsement of the traditionalists who maintained the perspective that popular music endangered the sustainability of traditional performing arts. The third justification is to garner backing from significant individuals and political authority, given that the Malay agenda aligns with the national policy of safeguarding the rights and interests of the Malay people. Lastly, the Malay identity aligns with the tenets of the National Cultural Policy (NCP), which stipulates that the national culture ought to be based from the Malay culture as main race in the country.

### **Malaysian-ness**

Additionally, the creative works of Pak Ngah are distinguished by their pronounced “Malaysian-ness.” Pak Ngah seeks to make traditional performing arts accessible and appealing to all Malaysians, regardless of their cultural background. His works portray the healthy coexistence of the multi-ethnic groups in an inclusive manner. This presents the concept of “Muhibbah,” which signifies harmony and goodwill, is the fundamental characteristic of being Malaysian.

According to Adil Johan (2020), Muhibbah signifies the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious communities, promoting understanding and respect among Malaysians of various backgrounds; each ethnic group contributes to the collective identity, fostering a sense of unity in diversity. This concept of unity in diversity is evidently expressed in Pak Ngah’s composition “Jalur Gemilang” (Stripes of Glory), a song officially launched to commemorate the national flag, in anticipation of the 46th Independence Day and made its way to becoming one of the most memorable songs. Jalur Gemilang’s lyrics describes about the national flag and explain what it stands for: the national identity and unity of its people.

### **Attributes**

Pak Ngah’s works exhibit the characteristic of “hybridity” as an additional essential attribute. His musical arrangements are a fusion of local and global influences, such as those of Indian, Chinese, and Latin American, apart from western styles. Similar to the concept of K-Pop, the blending of Eastern and Western styles produces a unique sound and visual experience that attracted local and international audiences (Ganghariya & Kanozia, 2020).

Scholars who are interested in cultural transformations within the framework of globalisation consider the notion of hybridization to be theoretically relevant. This is due to the fact that it provides a structure for examining and comprehending the effects of many cultures (Wagner, 2012). Hybridization, as stated by Shim (2006), results in the maintenance of regional identities within the global context.

### Audience Engagement

Pak Ngah’s artistic endeavours prioritise audience engagement, with a specific emphasis on involving the younger demographic, which could possess limited knowledge of traditional art genres. Through the utilisation of aurally and visually engaging performances that were also relatable, Pak Ngah sought to foster an understanding and admiration for these traditional customs among different generations. In addition to musical fusion, Pak Ngah’s Tradition Pop performance is renowned for its visually captivating performances, vivid costumes, and elaborate makeup, all of which strongly appeal to the contemporary audience. Multimedia elements, including animations, digital effects, and video projections, are frequently included in order to augment the visual and narrative components of the performances. By harmoniously integrating contemporary technologies with traditional elements, a heightened level of visual immersion is achieved.

Pak Ngah’s success in popularising Malaysian traditional performing arts certainly cannot be attributed just to his expertise in the performing arts. He is an artist who possess the ‘twenty-first century skills.’ These abilities extend beyond his artistic skills and encompass a range of capabilities that enable any artists to achieve success and stay relevance in the face of challenges and competitiveness of the contemporary living. This may encompass a range of skills, including but not limited to the one I observed in Pak Ngah: (a) adaptability, (b) innovative, (c) entrepreneurship, (c) technological proficient, (d) cross-cultural competence, and (e) communication. I added these supporting attributes to complete Pak Ngah’s model as shown in Figure 2:

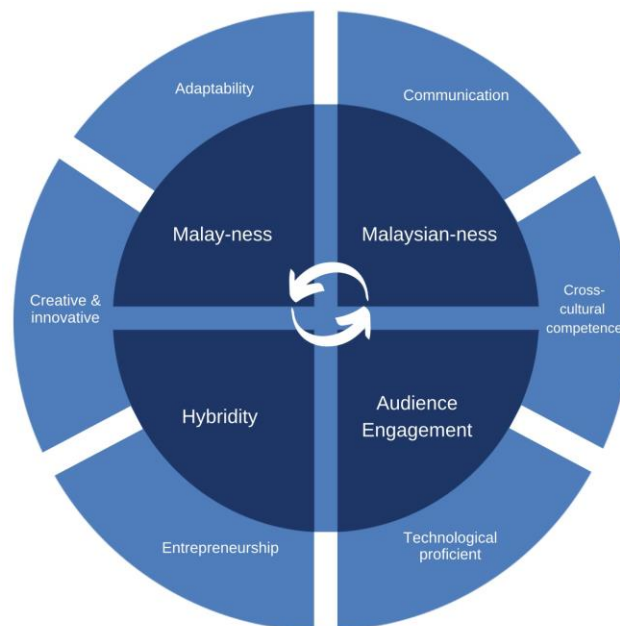


Figure 2. Pak Ngah’s traditional pop innovation & preservation model

### **Adaptability and Innovative**

Staying relevant demands a readiness to adapt, adjust and innovate. Artists should not be confined to rigid or fix boundaries but should evolve to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of the modern world. It is imperative for practitioners to experiment with new elements, techniques, form, and contexts in order to maintain their creative work remain fresh and appealing to contemporary audiences while upholding the essence of their traditions. Regarding “adaptability to current interest,” Suet (2018) argues that for cultural traditions to be sustainable, they must be functional, pertinent to people’s lives today, and capitalise on what the community is now interested in. Additionally, she proposed a strategy that combines creativity with tradition in an effort to rekindle interest towards indigenous music.

### **Entrepreneurship**

It is imperative for artists to have an entrepreneurship mindset that is congruent with the prevailing currents in popular culture. Furthermore, apart from refining their artistic prowess, they must also grasp the intricacies of efficiently endorsing themselves on platforms associated with popular culture. In order to achieve financial sustainability and maintain relevance in the popular culture industry, it is critical to possess the necessary abilities to seek sponsorships or funding opportunities and effectively manage the intricate commercial environment involved.

Pollard & Wilson (2014) argues that in order to adequately prepare graduates for the demanding nature of the industry, creative and performing arts higher education curricula must incorporate an entrepreneurial mindset. Additionally, he delineated five components of an entrepreneurial mindset: “(a) the capacity to think creatively, strategically, analytically and reflectively, (b) confidence in one’s abilities, (c) the ability to collaborate, (d) well-developed communication skills, and (e) an understanding of the current artistic context” (p. 3).

### **Technological Proficiency**

In the modern digital age, technological innovations have a profound effect on how the world interacts with and consumes art (Kaushik, 2020). In order to attract new audiences, performing artists must be able to opt for the use of technological innovations and actively include younger generations (Ruastiti et al., 2021). This involves making use of digital content online streaming platforms, and social media to distribute information regarding their performances, make connections with peers around the world, and cooperate with individuals in the field of popular culture (Webb & Layton, 2022).

The notable achievements of Korean popular culture in leveraging technological advancements serve as a valuable case study. A significant contributor to the dissemination of Korean popular culture across the world is the enhanced internet access and the various social media platforms. Ahn & Kim (2013) summarizes the social media strategy of Korean entertainment agencies which include aligning strategic business model with social media; maximizing various

social media channels; engaging customers with on-and offline promotions; and stimulating audience with exclusive contents. By focusing on the business potential of social media, K-pop entertainment industry utilizes various social media channels to promote music videos and to communicate with global audience.

Central to the success of K-pop is the dedicated fandom culture that has emerged. This sense of community amplifies the impact of K-pop, turning it into a social and cultural phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of traditional music fandom. A case study conducted in Malaysia by Nur Ayuni Mohd Jenol & Nur Hafeeza Ahmad Pazil (2022), discovered that K-pop fans actively create and produce their content from the social media. An exemplary instance of how fandoms have established an online presence and optimised technological utilisation is the ARMY fanbase of BTS, which was established on July 9, 2013 subsequent to the group's debut on June 13, 2013 (Tina & Utami, 2020). As of May 23, 2021, BTS official account has 41.9 million followers on Instagram; BTS's parent company Hybe Labels has 5.63 subscribers on YouTube; BTS Twitter handle @BTS\_twt has 35.6 million followers; and BTS official Facebook page has over 18 million followers.

### **Cross-Cultural Competence & Communication**

It is crucial that practitioners of traditional performing arts maintain an open mind regarding the prospect of partnerships and combining elements of various cultures, given the worldwide influence of popular culture. Bennett (2009) defines cross-cultural as “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 95). Meanwhile, Paracka and Pynn (2017) contend that intercultural competence transcends a mere dichotomy of similarities and differences in order to establish profound and significant connections; thus, those aspiring to enter the professional, local, and global music communities should strive to achieve this objective.

Cross-cultural competence includes effective communication skills, which are essential for traditional performing artists to have success in promoting their art form. It is their responsibility to weave narratives that engross the audience and communicate the cultural importance of their undertakings, both in person and through the digital media (Ruastiti et al., 2021). Furthermore, they must have the ability to function as educators and advocates, cooperating with academic institutions and incorporating their body of work into curricular to ensure the continued existence of their artistic field.

### **Conclusion**

The harmonization of heritage and modernity is not a paradox; it is imperative for the sustainability of Malaysian Traditional Performing Arts. Our traditions are our roots, and our ability to adapt and transform them into something that resonates with the current and future generations is our strength. As we navigate this path, we need to bear in mind that the preservation of our cultural heritage does imply a state of stagnation, but rather one of progression and evolution. It entails searching innovative ways to embrace and transform the past tradition as our heritage. The success story

exemplified by Pak Ngah demonstrates that the harmonization of heritage and modernity is not just a theoretical concept; it is a practical and achievable goal.

While preserving the definition of art as the aesthetic manifestation of a country's cultural heritage remains relevant, a more comprehensive outlook must be adopted by incorporating a commercial definition that can industrialise the traditional Malay performing arts, especially as a means to penetrate the global market. Creative individuals within the performing arts must strive to provide innovative and original products that merge traditional features with modern elements. Performing arts work must align with contemporary preferences, especially those of the younger demographic, who perceive them as new, unique, urban, and remain relevant with the attributes of popular culture.

The barriers that may have hindered the development of the traditional performing arts to libraries or dusty archives can be surmounted by capitalising on the transforming capacity of popular culture. Our capacity to infuse them with renewed vitality ensures that they will remain pertinent and important for forthcoming generations. The utilisation of popular culture enables us to reinterpret, remix, and recreate our traditional performing arts. This facilitates the accessibility of these artistic expressions to individuals from various demographic backgrounds, in Malaysia and those from around the globe, urban and rural.

One of the most impressive abilities of popular culture is its capacity to make traditional forms of the performing arts appealing to a larger audience. The capacity of popular culture to act as a medium through which people of different generations can communicate is the source of the transformative potential of popular culture. It is possible for older people to impart their wisdom and enthusiasm to younger generations in a way that is not only interesting but also pertinent through the medium of popular music. By promoting a sense of shared cultural history, this generational bridge helps to ensure that traditional performing arts will continue to exist in the future.

During this process of development, we are not looking to water down our heritage; rather, we are looking for creative ways to honour it and incorporate it into the modern landscape. It is about incorporating our past performing arts traditions into the fabric of our modern daily lives, making it possible for them to coexist and thrive alongside the most recent trends in the arts and entertainment. As a result of the appreciation of our traditional arts as a component of popular culture, they become a source of national pride, and their continued existence is ensured.

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### Biography

**Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon** is a music education professor at Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI), Tanjong Malim, Malaysia, where he teaches courses in music education, research, and marching band techniques. Zaharul was the dean of the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts at the University from 2012 to 2019. He received his undergraduate degree in music from Southern Illinois University, USA, and his master’s degree in education from the University of Houston, Texas, USA. Zaharul has 40 years of experience in the field of education as a school teacher and lecturer at teachers’ colleges and universities. He actively provides consultation services both at home and abroad, serves as the lead researcher and a member of several research projects, presents papers at local and international conferences, and is involved in the publication of learning and teaching materials, as well as the production of creative works. Zaharul is one of the founding members of the Malaysian Association for Music Education (M.A.M.E.) and the Malaysia Band Association. Throughout his career as an educator, Zaharul has received several awards and recognition at both the national and international levels.