

ATTENTIVENESS OF BABA NYONYA CULTURE AMONG YOUNGER GENERATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multi-racial country with a rich cultural heritage where cultures have been meeting and mixing since the very beginning of its history. Much of its cultural heritage is recorded in various format - manuscripts, artifacts, sculptures, traditional motifs and designs on textiles and jewels and kept in libraries, museums, archives, art galleries and cultural centers. These cultural potentials demand proper preserving, management and promotion. Preserving this culturally related potential means preserving the nation, a situation that in turn would keep human civilization in Malaysia sustainable. This research aims to create awareness among the Baba Nyonya generations and people of the importance of preserving its culture such as its language, marriage customs and other aspects of Baba Nyonya culture. This research is focusing more on the language and marriage customs as it is the most important part of the Baba Nyonya culture. Preserving these aspects is important as it will flash back all the glory of Baba Nyonya. The language spoken is really interesting and is one of a kind, in another word unique. The traditional marriage customs are different compared to the Chinese as it is a blend of two cultures.

Keywords: Baba Nyonya; Awareness; Preservation; Ethnic

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1.0 Malaysian Cultures

“*Culture Briefings* discuss the cultural ways, social system, politics and economics of countries, providing crucial information for travelers interested in other ways of life.” Malaysia as we might know has different kind of ethnic groups that live together in harmony. The Malaysian can live happily in one nation and share everything together and there are no boundaries to which we want to be friends with and what we want to try. Everything seems to work out on its own. In Malaysia we have ethnic such as Malay, Chinese and Indian. But the biggest ethnic group in Malaysia is Malay. The Malay dominates half of the population and the national language. With the oldest indigenous people they form a group called Bumiputera, which also translates as “sons” or “princes of the soil”. Almost all Malay are Muslims and the traditional culture center revolve around the kampong or village.

The Chinese came to Malaysia as traders’ centuries ago. They then settled here in Malaysia in the 19th century, when the word of the richest in the Nanyang or “South Seas” spread across China. The Chinese had succeeded in many industries and regarded as Malaysia’s businessmen. Last time, the Chinese used to work in a tin mining and railway construction. They form about 35 percent of the Malaysian population. In addition, the Indians had come to Malaysia for over 2,000 years ago and did not settle until the 19th century and most of them came from South India. Many of these Indians works as rubber tappers, while others are contractors or work as an administrator and small businessman. Today, ten percent of Malaysian is Indians and they had a wonderful cuisine and colorful costumes or dress.

2.0 The Baba Nyonya History

The Baba Nyonya of Melaka is the early descendants of Chine immigrants who came to trade. They settled mainly in Penang, Singapore and Java. They are also called “Peranakan” which is an Indonesian word for descendants. “Baba” is a Hindi/ Sanskrit words which mean reverence and affections while “Nyonya” means lady in Portuguese. The Baba and Nyonya ancestors originally came from the Fujien province in China and they came to Melaka to trade and look for jobs which then married the locals.

This mixture happens during the Ming Dynasty where the emperor of China brought along his daughter, Princess Hang Li PO to meet the Sultan of Malacca for the intent of trading. The Royal Princess along with its 500 entourage then permanently located in Melaka at Bukit China. The earliest evidence for Chinese communities in the Straits must be considered to date from Eunoch Cheng Ho's founding of Melaka in 1408. It can be safely assumed that from the time of its founding, the Chinese must have had a regular, if not continuous, residence there. It is likely that the earliest Chinese settlement had more of the character of a transient camp or a small trading colony town of a settled, internally organized community. "From the available Chinese, Malay and Portuguese sources, it seems certain that there was a Chinese trading community in the port-city of Malacca before the fall of the Sultanate in 1511. But whether these Chinese represented a permanent or a fluid society, that kept coming and dying with the monsoons, is still unsettled. The size of the Chinese trading community was probably small and insignificant. Even so, it laid the groundwork for the growth of a permanent Chinese community in Malacca." (Yeh Hua Fen, Historical Guide of Malacca, 1936)

Later, these settlers wed the local Malay and this is where the first generation of mixed Chinese-Malays known as *Peranakan*. The early Peranakan community, then married their own community of Babas and Nyonyas establishing a strong mixture of culture that is strongly proud of its heritage. According to Tan, Indonesian kin-terms used by elderly women, referring to Child's spouse, were sexually marked-- "Babah mantu" (Daughter's husband) and "Njonja mantu" (Son's wife) (Tan Giok-lan, 1963:pg. 125).

J. D. Vaughn, in his early work *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (1879) traces the etymology of the word Baba; as the a term used by Bengali descendents to designate European children, "and it is likely that the word was used by the Indian convicts at Pinang to Chinese youngsters and thus came into universal use." (Reprint, 1971: 2) R. J. Wilkinson held that Baba was a descriptive name for "European, Eurasian and Chinese males to distinguish them from men born in Europe and China", and "Descriptive name applied to male Straits-born Chinese." (R. J. Wilkinson, *A Malay-English Dictionary*, 1959: 50). Png Poh-Seng notes that "In the heyday of Straits Chinese prestige and influence, it was an advantage to be a Baba, and it is not far-fetched to assume that all Straits-born Chinese then liked

to be known as Babas." ("The Straits Chinese in Singapore" in The Journal of Southeast Asian History, 1969: pg. 97)

Unlike the other Chinese ethnic groups, the Babas and Nyonyas speak mainly Hokkien with a mix of Malay language and English. Even though they speak part of a sentence in Hokkien and part Malay, yet they still could understand each other with ease. Some masses might encounter this strange for this is what pulls in these people or culture unique. The common words that are often said include *tumpang, kasihan, sembang, tuala, tapi, suka, batuk, tolong, jamban, piring, sampah, geram and others.*

They also had adopted many Malay cultures into their lives, especially in food, dress and language used while at the same time practicing Chinese traditions and culture such as religion, name, folk medicine and festival celebration. But by the middle of the Twentieth century, most of the Peranakan is English educated, this is due to the result of the British migration to Malaya. Good interaction with the British also caused many of the Peranakan community to convert into Christianity. The Peranakan community later on became very powerful in Malacca and Singapore and was also known as the King's Chinese due to their loyalty to the British Crown. In mid 1900s, most Peranakan can speak in three languages which are Chinese, Malay and English.

The common profession for these Peranakan was as merchants, traders and general intermediaries between China, Malay and the West. This relationship was especially valued by the British, since the Babas also enjoy good relations with the Malay community and served as advisor to the royal Malay courts. Since the independence period of Malaysia and Indonesia, the Babas and Peranakans have been considered a dying breed and a cultural remnant of a bygone colonial era." The halcyon age for the Baba community is said to have been between 1830 and 1920, although their prosperity and heights of glory continued well into the 1930's and 40's.

The decline of the community coincided with the Japanese occupation in Singapore (1942-45) N. Balakrishnan, Far Eastern Economic Review, 1984)." Peranakan status in Indonesia, after the riots and political disturbance and anti-communist reaction of 1963 and 1965-6, has declined and became a separate community. On the other hand, Babas community in Singapore had become increasingly modernized and westernized. The Singapore culture had absorbed in the psyche and spirits of this Baba community. In modernizing Malaysia, the old

Chinese section in the city had been completely demolished in order to give room for new development. The Chinese community, including the Babas is one of the communities affected by these changes and being isolated through structural and social discrimination.

2.1 Baba Nyonya Culture

The Peranakan had absorbed some of the Malay culture into their lives, such as food, clothes and speech while keeping hold of their Chinese tradition as well, such as religion, name and ethnic identity, whereby making a fusion culture of their own. The Nyonya cuisine has developed some Malay spices and cuisine for instance Chicken Kapitan and Chicken Curry. The women would wear “baju kebaya” which is a Malay dress. The wedding ceremony still largely based on Chinese tradition and has become one of the most captivating wedding ceremonies in Malaysia and Singapore. The Baba Nyonya is not Muslim and preserves the tradition of Chinese and most of them had changed into Christian. The reason on why this culture extinct is because of the political and economic events brought by nationalism in Singapore and Malaysia. The assault of Japanese soldiers had marked the end of Baba dominance in the Straits Settlements. Many of the Babas are being executed during this invasion. Only after the war, the Baba community had regained back much of their wealth, but lost most of its prerogatives. In Singapore, the Peranakans are classified as Chinese minority and because the mother tongue of Singapore is Mandarin Chinese they had to learn this instead of the formal Malay education. "The result of these processes was to make the Singapore Babas less easily distinguishable--especially from the English-educated Chinese; who not only abound but are on the increase." (Clammier, pg. 8). While Peranakan in Malaysia is required to use Bahasa Malaysia as the first language which same goes to other ethnic groups. This eventually had led to the disappearance of the unique characteristic of Baba Malay.

2.3 Baba Nyonya Customs (Wedding Ceremony)

The wedding of Baba and Nyonya is somehow very unique because it has both Malay and Chinese element that involved with ritual ceremony. This ceremony has been the main topic of discussion because of its uniqueness, but the Chinese marriage practices are dominant. The Wedding ceremony of Baba and Nyonya features matchmaking, wedding preparations, sang ih (personal invitation), lap chye (engagement day), an ch'ng (blessing the bridal bed), hari kupas

bawang and hari menyambal. It is a mixture of Malay and Chinese traditions. "In the old days, a betel leaf box would be placed on the bed on the wedding night.

If the bride was not a virgin, the betel leaf box would be turned upside down by the bridegroom." (Chan Kim Lay). The "lap chai" ceremony was held three days before the wedding and the groom's family would send twelve attendants carrying gifts to the bride's family's home or "rumpah abu" accompanied by the Chinese trumpets.

The bride's gifts were carried on a brass or red lacquered trays which uses Malay names such as "kain songket" (embroided sarong), "belanja kawin" (marriage expenses). These gifts also include several "ang pows" or red pockets money, the first "wang tetok" or nursing money which contains 12 dollars, the second is called "wang belinja" or "expense allowance" and the third is called "wang sireh" or "betel nut money" (Ho Wing Meng, 1976:31). Other trays would contain a marriage agreement called "surat kahwin" written in Chinese character.

For some wealthy Nonyas, an Indian servant would be hired to carry a large trays of the brides wealth along the streets and this ceremony was attended by many spectators "Business was frequently brought to a stop in Penang while traders and others craned their necks from upper windows to see the procession of a wedded couple's gifts. On large and nicely decorated carts were placed furniture, washstands, plates, other household utensils, jewelry, and so forth. Behind and in front marched the musicians, in all kinds of uniform with a variety of instruments, principal among them being the ubiquitous drum (John Balibain, Hail Penang! 1932:pg. 131).

2.4 Baba Nyonya Language

The older generation of Babas and Nyonyas were a colorful refined, elite community with a rich, unique, cultural identity of their own. They include many Malay elements into their daily lives such as the language, dressing, cooking, belief in Malay superstitious and taboos, adopting Malay nickname, songs, drama and even follow Malay humorous ways in exclamations such as *amboi!*, *alamak!*, *chelaka!*, and *latah*. Sometimes, mispronunciations happened because many Baba and Nyonya pick up Malay words by ears and most of them can't read and write at that time. They only rely on memory power alone. They usually communicate through speaking with their Malay neighbors and perhaps with the Indian who sells kuih (cakes), married and expectant

Nyonya who had employed Malay or Javanese orang jaga (confinement period woman) and bidan (mid wives). From these people, they had picked up words such as bunting (pregnant), gugur (miscarriage), bulan beranak (given birth), susu (milk), lampin (baby diapers) and so on.

Later on, the Babas and Nyonyas slowly learn, acquired and incorporated more than 50,000 Malay words into their vocabulary. They should be thankful to Chan Kim Boon alias Batu gantung, who had translated classical Chinese literature like 'Water Margin', 'Kou Chay Thian' (The Monkey), 'Hwan Tong', 'Song Kang' and 'Sam Kok'(The Three Kingdoms). His contemporaries and juniors who are interested could read those books that he had translated. The older generations of Baba also like to read certain poetic form from the Malays which include 'syair', 'pantun', stories like 'Burung Nuri' and 'Abu Nawas' and also singing songs like 'Dondang Sayang', a tune from a book called 'Penghiboran Hati' which even provided the musical notes.

The Nyonyas also involve in Malay local superstition and beliefs. Therefore, it is not surprising if their babies had local Malay nicknames such as Tuteh, Itam, Bulat, Kurui, Botak, Panjang and even Kassim. For female children, their nicknames would usually be Kechik, Molek, Intan, Nya-chik, Penyet and others.

But, most of these Baba Nyonyas spoke Hokkien with a mix of Malay languages as well as English. Even though they speak all the different languages in one sentence, nevertheless they still can understand one another with ease. It might sound strange but this is what makes this community different from others. Common Malay words being used include tumpang, kasihan, tuala, tapi, suka, batuk, tolong, jamban, piring, sampah, geram and others. A simple conversation might include sentences like:

- (1) Ee suka lai sembang. (He likes to come here and gossip).
- (2) Kelip-kelip ee naik angin. (Slightly provoked, he gets angry).
- (3) Gua tan ee sampai gua k'ee gram. (I waited for him till I got angry).
- (4) Oo-wa! Kinajeet, ee pasang kuat. (Wow! Today he dresses stylishly!).

This corrupted form of spoken Hokkien with the borrowing of Malay words can have more than one meaning such as:

Chabut can mean 'run away' or 'pull out'.

Chabai means chilies but chabai ee means 'to scold another severely'.

Buta means 'blind' but can also mean 'wrongful'.

Other Baba Nyonya words are:



Bo laku	- of no value
Bo lalu	- no appetite
Kachau	- disturb
Kachip	- betel nut cutter
Kaduk	- show off
Kaku	- stiff
Kalang kabut	- confusion
Kang kang	- standing feet apart
Kapok	- lime paste
Kapomi	- cotton

2.5 The Declining of Baba Nyonya Culture

After the Second World War, the Baba Nyonya culture had decline dramatically. It is claimed that it was not totally the Second World War that is responsible for the declining but other factors that contributes to this declining.

The Great Depression had contribute in several impact on the livelihood of most well-known families of Babas as the price of tin and rubber which the Babas relied heavily on, had begun dropping and were declare priceless when the price of these products fell rock bottom. Many of Baba Tycoons & society leaders were hit hard by this situation for the period of four years. But later they did recover and gain back for what is lost.

After the First World War, the Baba and Nyonya had to deal with another problem which took its toll when the war in Europe occurred. The Babas had to defend their colonial master by making some donations and monies for the war effort in Europe. As loyal subjects to the British, they could not say no or refuse such command. This action had affected the economy greatly and many Babas had lost their fortunes as war had undermined the economic state of affairs.

The Second World War happened in 1942, has the final blow to the prestige, influence, prominence and wealth of the entire Baba community as a whole. The Baba community was devastated because they would never imagine working with the Japanese or even supporting the Japanese during the Japanese invasion in Tanah Melayu. They are truly loyal to the British and would not even betray them if given a chance. During this time, in order to survive, they had to sell much of their fortune such as their heirlooms, furniture, silver, porcelain and jewelry to be sold in the market.

To make matters worse, many Baba family lost their uncles, cousins, son and brother to the Sook Ching massacre and most of the young Nyonyas were married off to Non Peranakans due to the results of the new colonial would never touch a married woman. Due to this belief, the decline of Peranakan community and culture occurs where before the war; this community would only marry their own people.

This intermarriage had broken up the traditions and open up novel possibilities for the very first time. More and more Peranakans intermarriages with other Chinese communities took place. This intermarriage has been approved due to the fact that many young Babas died during the Sook Ching massacre or to the fact that these young Babas can't provide for their newfound brides because of the declining of fortunes. As intermarriage happened, all of the Peranakans culture, tradition and practice decline more rapidly. The sole means to go out of the expenses

problem is through conversion. Many Babas later converted into Christian and hope to find strength and hope in the Gospel.

As time passed, younger generation of the Nyonyas starts to work and the belief that women should not work is broken. After the war, the traditional Baba family who had refused to accept the stronghold of changes gave in. When most of their parents or elderly died, most of the younger generation converted into Catholic or Protestant and their cultural norms were replaced with Christian beliefs and norms. Baba Malays were replaced with English and Peranakan culture replaced with Western modern culture. Alongside with this, the Peranakan wedding and Chinese religion died and withered away thus does the traditional, ingrained in Chinese religion and manner of life of the Babas and Nyonyas due to the modernization and religious variety. All this occurred within a short time of 20 years after the war. This change is common in any countries that go through a war.

3.0 Preservation Effort

The Melaka Chinese Peranakan Association will not leave any stone unturned in its attempt to promote pride and passion for their own Peranakan roots to younger generations. They want the younger generation to be aware and learn their own civilization and inheritance. The associations are committed to teaching the youngster how to speak the dialect, how to prepare Baba Nyonya cuisine, dance the joget and construct the pantun also how to play the traditional games such as “congkak”. “If there is no attempt to conserve the unique Baba Nyonya culture, it will soon die a natural death. The people of this country, including the Malays, will one day forget who the Babas and Nyonyas are”, (Chan Kim Lay. Vice-president Peranakan Association).

For this feat, the Heritage Museum in Malacca signifies Chan’s aspiration to introduce the community about Baba Nyonya via the old-fashioned house which was built in 1896 by his ancestors. Established in 1984, this museum is furnished and designed with interesting motifs which was being crafted by a carpenter from China. In this museum it displays dozens of old things such as ancient chairs, tables and cupboard, family heirlooms such as daily wears, accessories, wedding attire, kitchenware and other interesting artifacts. Once inside, visitors will experience a feeling of way back in the 1980’s where the Baba and Nyonya once live. Today, there is the question regarding the future of Peranakan language and culture.

In 1983, Kuala Lumpur held a Warisan Baba (Baba Heritage or Legacy) exhibition held at the Muzium Negara and in October 1988, the National Museum in Singapore had organized the Heritage Peranakan Exhibition and Lecture Series. In December of the same year, Penang had organized a Minggu Warisan Peranakan (Peranakan Heritage Week), which includes a seminar on the Heritage of Peranakan Cina (Chinese Peranakan). In December 1989, Malacca hosted the 1989 Baba Convention. The Convention was organized by the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (The Peranakan Chinese Association of Malacca) and the title for this convention is “The Future of the Peranakans”. Other preservation effort done by the Peranakan Association especially in Singapore is that, Singapore Associations are more active compared to associations in Melaka and Penang.

In 1984 Festival of Arts, performance by Felix Chia’s play that is *Pileh Menantu* and the wedding pageant, which William Gwee Thian Hock was the coordinator has created a huge interest in the Baba play and influence the writing or production of a succession of Baba plays through the 80s and into the 90s. Later on, the Baba plays made their way into Drama Festivals and Festivals of Arts. Felix Chia came out with two other plays which is *Laki Tua Bini Muda* for the opening of Peranakan Place in 1985 and another play title Sam Pek Eng Tai based on the classical Chinese legend which Chua Soo Pong directed in 1986 for the Chinese Theatre Circle. Another play by Felix Chia called *Menyesal* was produced in 1986 signaled the individuals and institutions that were to dominate the Baba drama scene from there on. Among these individuals was William Tan, a former and already accomplished Dondang Sayang singer. As a play director, he joins partnership with new playwright in the industry, Henry Tan.

Lastly, the institution that establishes itself as the principal producer of the Baba play is the Gunong Sayang Association. Word about this association travel fast among the fans of the Baba Theatre around festival times, whether it is the Festivals of Arts, Drama Festivals or the Festival of Asian Performing Arts, everybody is talking about it.

All of these frantic activities which involve around the Peranakan life and language in this century could perhaps be seen as the frantic last battle of a dying or declining community or perhaps not. But whatever the reasons, the Peranakan community seems determined to redevelop

its once lost identity in the face of encroaching modernity and loss of traditional culture and language.

3.0 Conservation Strategies

Melaka's conservation areas contain both tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources of universal values. The residential areas around Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Jalan Hang Jebat, Jalan Tukang Emas, Jalan Tukang Besi and Jalan Tokong were the most important are back in the bygone era. It is a place where the Prime Minister's house lays and both famous Melaka Bazaar was located during the Malacca Sultanate. Later, the Dutch had built two residential areas along Hereen Street (for the rich) and Jonker Street (for the poor) and all the areas was called Kampung Belanda or Dutch Village. When the Dutch left, the Baba Nyonya took over this residential area and made some changes to the design of the buildings. In order to protect the unique cultural heritage, the Cultural Heritage Management and Tourism had drafted out some plans to conserve this cultural heritage by having:

3.1 Action Plan for Cultural Heritage Tourism in Melaka historic City

This action plan is aim to preserve the present culture and revive the lost skills and practices. As most of the communities today is living in a closed society on the city edge, the area being study is extended from the conservation area to this remote area. A complete inventory of the cultural resources of main community was carried out, namely the Baba and Nyonya Community, Malays at Kg. Morten, Chittys at Kg. Gajah Berang and the Portuguese at Ujong Pasir. The research methods used in the study were a combination of semi-structured interviews with the community leaders and focused group discussions with local committees. The researcher will stay at the homes of the community leaders or elders in order to get information about their present and lost cultural resources as well as the community's aspirations. A list of recommendations was put forward to regenerate the various cultural resources.

3.2 Action Plan for Cultural Tourism along Harmony Street

This action plan is a follow-up study in the form of pilot projects for cultural revitalization and tourism. This study will cover three areas specifically Jalan Tukang Besi, Jalan Tukang Emas

and Jalan Tokong. These streets are actually a joining street and commonly referred to Jalan Harmoni. This name was taken to reflect the racial composition and harmony that used to exist among its former resident during the Melaka bygone era. Now, the only remaining evidence has left of these communities is the location of places worship that belongs to each community groups. However, most of these community groups had moved out to other areas leaving behind a handful of artisans which still practicing their old world trade such as the blacksmiths and goldsmiths. At the same time, Jalan Harmony is experiencing the impact of tourism-related business such as theme café and souvenir shops. The action plan also recommended that the place should be used as an interpretive center for each community.

4.0 Conclusion

The conclusion that we can have here is that Malaysia is a very wonderful country with its beautiful blend of culture, foods and exciting places. Thus, the existence of Baba Nyonya culture has makes it more interesting and more unique. People of Malaysia should be proud of its culture and ethnicity. Baba Nyonya people or the generation should actually be proud of their roots as they are the first race that introduce intermarriage. The younger generations should tries to be more open and accept that their culture and ethnic is really different.

The associations of Peranakan in Melaka should focus to a greater extent on how to regain back its glory and tries to be more alive and not only depend on the Heritage Museum alone. They should take in more efforts in preserving the culture by doing more promotions, exhibitions and other action that would create interest of the younger generation. They need to be told and educate that this culture is truly one of its kind and should be proud of it.

Without strong efforts of the association itself, this culture will eventually die and be forgotten. In Malaysia, it is very hard to find research done involving the preservation effort of Baba Nyonya culture. Research on Baba Nyonya culture and ways of preserving it should be exercised so that masses will recognize and have the idea on what is going on. Without the in depth research on these matters, people will have no idea of the existence of this person as well as its culture.

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