Star Special

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MALAYSIA DAY 2025

Harmony in heritage

From classical melodies and traditional textiles to the digital preservation of artefacts, cultural treasures bring communities together, preserve our collective memory, and keep heritage alive for future generations.

History goes high-tech 3

The music that binds 4

A walk through time 10

Dancing her way through *ngajat*

Kuching-based Mas Noraina Roselan has fallen in love with the traditional Iban dance – and is now sharing its beauty with others.

By SHEELA CHANDRAN
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MAS Noraina Roselan, 35, was born and raised in Kuching – a city known for its rich blend of Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu and Malay cultures.

Growing up in such a heterogenous cultural environment inspired the civil engineer to explore the different aspects of local heritage, and one that caught her interest was ngajat, the traditional dance of the Iban community.

"Since I was a child, I have watched people perform ngajat at events. I have always been drawn to it because it's very graceful. Every movement tells a story, and it's a beautiful way to connect with the culture and values of the Iban community," says Mas Noraina during a Zoom interview from Kuching recently.

She began learning ngajat in primary school and continued during her university years.

Her interest in the Iban culture was further spurred at university when she visited her friend's longhouse in Sekuau, Sibu, during Gawai, the Sarawak Dayak harvest festival.

"It was the whole experience – seeing how Gawai is celebrated, the rituals, the food and the community spirit. Ngajat is always performed during Gawai. It captivated me... from the sounds of gongs and drums that accompany it to the beautiful ngepan costume."

Two years ago, she signed up for ngajat lessons at the Ngajat Asal Iban Association (Ngasi) – a non-governmental organisation dedicated to preserving and promoting traditional Iban dance and culture.

"It was initially a bit difficult to understand the different types of 'bunga' in ngajat – movements like hand flicks and subtle body gestures that highlight the elegance of this traditional dance. But with regular practice at Ngasi, I've finally gotten the hang of it," says Mas Noraina, who attends classes every Tuesday and Thursday night.

In just two years, her dedication and skills have seen her perform in 10 events across Sarawak, including the recent Borderland Music Festival in Kuching (Sept 5–6).

She also made a national appearance in PETRONAS' 2025 Gawai film, *Tanda Pengerindu Tanda Kasih* (*A Sign Of Longing, A Sign Of Love*), where she performed ngajat alongside other Ngasi members.

"I feel really honoured to perform this beautiful traditional dance at public events," she says.

"I was thrilled to be chosen for the PETRONAS film. As a Malay, I am proud to embrace and learn the Iban culture through ngajat."

Cultural appreciation

Mas Noraina is among a growing number of Malaysians from different racial backgrounds who are embracing cultures beyond their own through traditional dance.

The list includes legendary classical bharatanatyam dancer Datuk Ramli Ibrahim and his protege, Tan Mei Mei; Lim Shao Xi, a Chinese youth from Johor who studied bharatanatyam under Dr Ajith Bhaskar at Suvarna Fine Arts; and Fatin Nadhirah Rahmat, an Aswara (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage) graduate who made headlines in 2023 after her bharatanatyam arangetram (graduation) ceremony.

For Mas Noraina, ngajat has allowed her not only to connect with a new culture but also to grow as a dancer. Her parents have been supportive of her decision to learn ngajat.

"Malaysia is rich in cultural diversity, and we have the privilege of learning new things without leaving our own country," she says.

"We are truly blessed to be able to experience a wide variety of traditional dances – from zapin (Malay) and the fan dance (Chinese) to bharatanatyam (Indian), sumazau (Kadazan) and even branyo (Melaka Portuguese)."

She has also been teaching ngajat at a dance studio in Kuching, aiming to pass on what she has learned to others.

"I want more Malaysians, especially the younger generation, to know that ngajat isn't just a dance – it is a reflection of the Iban identity, its history and values," says Mas Noraina, who has three siblings.

Rooted in tradition

Ngasi president Bartholomew Sirow Chan says Ngasi was set up in 2015 by a group of ngajat enthusiasts who wanted to form a cultural and arts association to preserve their culture.

"We started out with 32 members and now, we have 120 members from all walks of life and different age groups. Our youngest student is 10 and our oldest is 71. We offer ngajat classes lasting two months (basic and advanced) for men and women," says Chan, who is of Iban and Chinese parentage.

He says Ngasi also offers lessons for those interested in learning the betaboh musical instruments.

It comprises engkerumung (similar to a gamelan), bedup (drum), tawak (large gong) and bebendai (small gong).

These instruments create a rhythmic backdrop that energises dances like the Ngajat and enhances the celebratory spirit of the occasion.

Betaboh is usually played during traditional ceremonies or festive celebrations such as Gawai, weddings and other community gatherings.

"It is our hope that we can help and guide people of all ages who wish to learn ngajat and betaboh," says Chan.

He adds Ngasi members have performed at cultural events in South Korea, Indonesia and Singapore.

In 2021, Ngasi members were featured in a YouTube documentary, *Nyerungkai Sejarah Main Asal Iban: Ngajat* (*Unraveling The History Of The Original Iban Dance: Ngajat*).

Despite many efforts to promote Sarawak's traditional culture, Chan admits that preserving it remains an uphill battle.

Many art forms today incorporate modern influences, causing them to lose their authentic roots amid rapid technological advancement.

"To engage the younger generations, we continue to organise ngajat and betaboh classes where young people learn the original Iban dance techniques and music rhythm," says Chan.

He adds that initiatives like Iban language classes, seminars and workshops are vital in keeping the culture alive for future generations.

> I have always been drawn to it because it's such a graceful dance.
>
> Mas Noraina

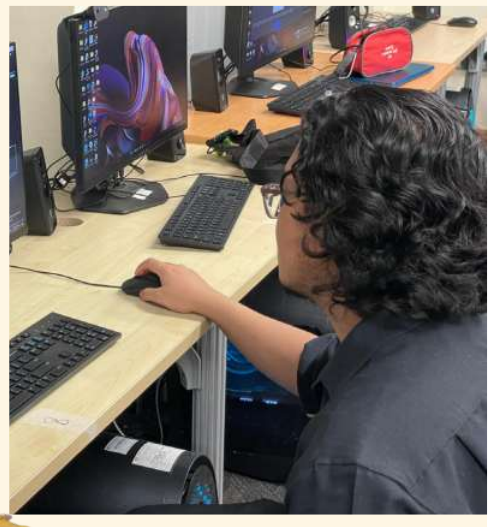
Learning ngajat has allowed Mas Noraina to broaden her appreciation for Malaysia's diverse heritage. — RK Sound

Mas Noraina (centre) leads a ngajat dance practice at Ngasi, demonstrating graceful movements with fellow dancers. — MAS NORAINA ROSELAN

History goes high-tech

Malaysia is turning cultural assets into 3D models so future creators can preserve, share and reimagine them.

(Below) The photos are then cleaned up and stitched together in a 3D software to create a virtual asset which can be used in the popular Unreal Engine.



(Above) Between 60 to 120 photos of each artefact are captured in a well-lit environment with minimal shadows to be used in the photogrammetry process. — Photos: Aswara

By CHRISTOPHER FAM
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WHAT happens when technology meets tradition? The two might seem like polar opposites, but in Malaysia, efforts are underway not just to preserve cultural heritage but to help it live on in digital worlds.

One example comes from the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage (Aswara), which has been working to digitise Malaysian cultural artefacts through photogrammetry, a process that combines images of an object to form a 3D model.

In the long run, these digital cultural assets are meant to become available to the public, both to view and iterate, helping carry Malaysian cultural heritage into the future while making it more accessible and visible.

According to Siti Noraisyah Abdul Rahman, dean of Aswara's faculty of animation and multimedia, the initiative goes far beyond simple preservation.

"It's not the mere safeguarding of cultural heritage – it's also to introduce it to a younger generation. Whatever emerging behaviour, trends, or technology, we synthesise that through our practice," she says.

Currently, around 40 digitised models are already available for public viewing through the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation's IP360 Metaverse, with the team hoping to expand the collection to over 100 by next year.

Also in the pipeline is the Digital Heritage Sandbox (DHX) project – undertaken by Aswara and funded by the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry – which will make the collection downloadable for wider use.

"Once they download the assets, they can make alterations – improve them, simplify the look, or something along those lines," director of Aswara's Future Creative School Dr Jazmi Izwan Jamal says, adding that further changes to suit a certain art direction or style are also allowed, so long as the original model is properly credited.

Cultural connections

When it first kicked off early last year, Aswara's photogrammetry programme began as a follow-up to its motion capture efforts, which allowed virtual characters to perform using motion data of art forms such as the Mak Yong and Randai folk theatre.

"Most of the time, the knowledge will be passed down through oral tradition, so what we do is try to translate that into a digital format.

"For example, with the Mak Yong Metaverse, the biggest limitation that we had was trying to translate 'angin'. In a physical performance, you can feel the 'angin', or soul of a certain performance," Siti Noraisyah says.

Attention then shifted to creating digital assets of the props and costumes from those traditional performing arts, which could then be used in virtual performances.

Jazmi says that this could, in a way, immortalise these art forms while also making them far more accessible.

"We took on this issue because some of the traditional heritage purists feel that it is taboo for them to venture into the future.

"We try to help them realise that whatever they perform, they need to consider the younger audience – digital natives – who are out there in the market, but they can't reach with what they are doing.

"So when we shared these thoughts with them, we told them, 'hey, we know your focus is on performing, but you don't want the art form to die out'," he says.

The initiative started off with Mak Yong, due to it having been recognised on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (Unesco) list of intangible cultural heritage. The traditional Malay theatre form also marked the first Malaysian addition to the list in 2008.

Since then, the initiative has grown to include a wider range of Malaysian cultural artefacts, including items like the keris and even longhouses, with a long-term goal of creating government-owned digital assets that can be used by creatives in video games, animation and metaverse projects.

"Our intention is to build a Lego house for them, with the props and everything to play around with.

"So they may bring it to their game development work, or animation work, or virtual simulation work, with any sort of emerging technologies.

"It's going to be public domain, registered under and owned by the Malaysian government for everyone to use," Jazmi says.

According to Siti Noraisyah, the seeds for this project were planted all the way back in 2017 through a collaboration with the Asean Committee on Culture and Information.

At the time, Aswara held a Masterclass on Virtual Reality Cultural Heritage Storytelling using virtual reality headsets, which gave them their start in exploring how technology could be used to preserve and share cultural heritage.

Making our mark

Looking at the big picture, both Siti Noraisyah and Jazmi hope that the initiative will lead to a greater consumption of Malaysian culture along with the formation of a stronger national identity.

"Going back to cultural identity, think about the gendang. There are so many different variations of it. If you don't know the background, you might just look at it and think, 'Oh, this is just a drum, just a percussion instrument'.

"But in reality, each variation carries its own narrative and cultural identity, its own sense of belonging," Siti Noraisyah says.

Jazmi believes this sense of awareness and cultural practice can be nurtured through the active consumption of Malaysian culture, giving people the chance to identify with it and make it part of their own identity.

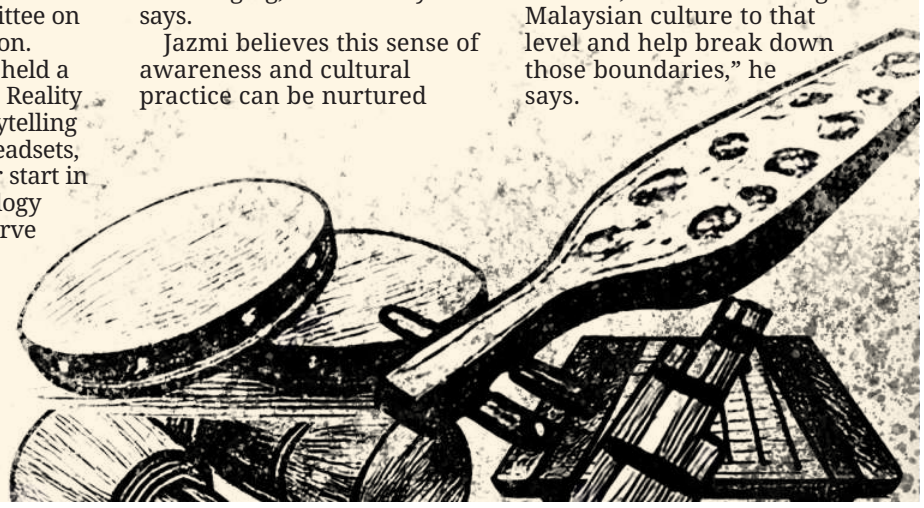
"We've also identified Malaysians around the world whose parents are from here but who were born elsewhere – maybe in Dubai, maybe in the United Kingdom," he says.

He adds that they still identify with Malaysian culture and consume the country's products, but they can't really connect with the culture through things like films.

"For example, they might know that Mat Kilau exists, but how do they actually get a feel of what silat is like?" he says.

He adds that this could come in the form of portrayals in video games or animation, where elements such as silat movements could appear.

"They want to understand Malaysia better, their roots better, but it's not in their media consumption. As game developers, animators, and creators, we need to bring Malaysian culture to that level and help break down those boundaries," he says.



The music that binds

By playing traditional instruments, these local artistes preserve their heritage while showcasing Malaysia's rich cultural diversity.

By MUMTAJ BEGUM
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MALAYSIA Day is a reminder of the sounds that made us. Modernisation and globalisation bring progress, but they can also push the "old stuff" to the edges – among them the traditional instruments that give Malaysia its distinctive heartbeat.

Heritage doesn't just preserve diversity; it helps us understand one another. In a nation of many cultures, each with its own musical lineage, that harmony matters.

That's why mainstream artiste Noraniza Idris sees traditional music as a powerful tool – one that helps the young discover their roots.

For years, the *Dikir Puteri* singer has conducted classes to revitalise the Irama Malaysia genre and ensure the next generation stays connected to its distinctive sounds and dance style.

"Not many people are willing to teach the proper techniques of the Irama Malaysia style, which is why I conduct weekend classes at schools – to ensure this unique sound isn't forgotten," she said.

"There's so much potential for Irama Malaysia, especially in tourism and cultural sectors.

"My aim is to equip anyone who's interested – even those starting with no knowledge of the genre – so they can carry it further than what I've taught them," she added.

Broadening the horizon

Inspiring curiosity in traditional sounds is also something Sarawak-born musician Anderson Kalang is passionate about.

A sape player from the Orang Ulu community, the 45-year-old is encouraged to see growing interest in the instrument not only in Peninsular Malaysia but also abroad.

Still, he admitted there are challenges, especially in terms of funding, resources and manpower.

"The idea is not just about promoting the sape but about building a self-sustaining industry for traditional instruments," he said.

One approach he is exploring with sape is to conduct lessons in schools.

While he has faced roadblocks with public schools, Kalang says he has found interest among international schools in the Klang Valley.

If the paid sape lessons materialise in more schools, he hopes there will be a need for both trained sape players and tutors.

Furthermore, this would develop new players and ultimately contribute to Malaysia's entertainment industry.

Another challenge lies in supply.

"The surge of interest in 2017 and 2018 was something I didn't expect. It was very encouraging, but we simply weren't prepared," said Kalang.

That surge traces back to efforts that began in 2015, when he and fellow sape artistes from Sarawak, including Alena Murang and the late Saufi Aiman, formed the Kuala Lumpur Sape' Collective with Seremban-based sape player Abishegam Thiyaga Dass.

"Our capacity to provide instruments in Peninsular Malaysia is limited because there are hardly any good sape makers here.

"Most instruments are still imported from Sarawak or Borneo, and they are not able to meet the demands," said Kalang, who learned the instrument from his first cousin, Hezekiah Asim.

However, he added that these are good problems to have.

"A friend once joked, 'You should stop teaching, because if too many people learn to play, you'll be out of a job.'

"But I don't see it that way. The more people I teach, it means the more good students I've helped nurture."

One way he draws interest is by fusing sape with popular hits.

Last year, he accompanied British singer Calum Scott on *You Are The Reason*, creating a special "sape version".

For him, blending the sape into contemporary genres is not about replacing tradition but extending it.

He compares it to the fern, a motif often found in Orang Ulu art. Its fronds curl and hold onto one another as they grow – symbolising wisdom, humility and mutual support.

"In the same way, cultural heritage binds communities together, allowing us to grow while staying rooted," Kalang explained.

"When it comes to contemporary music, I can play almost every genre. I've explored rock, blues, a little bit of jazz, and even EDM effects. But whatever the style, it is always about highlighting the sape."

One way Kalang draws interest to the instrument is by fusing sape with popular hits. — ANDERSON KALANG

Lum (left) on gu zheng, and Tan on ukulele and ruan, cover popular songs with a unique twist. — LUM YI MANN

Building bridges

Similarly, gu zheng player Lum Yi Mann believes traditional instruments thrive when reimagined for today's audiences.

Together with her husband Alex Tan, who plays the ukulele and ruan, they run Rockstars Production, covering popular songs with a unique twist.

"At Rockstars Production, Alex and I use the gu zheng and ukulele to show that traditional instruments aren't just about heritage – they can be fun, versatile and a bridge that connects people across cultures and generations," she said.

Lum, who began learning the traditional Chinese musical instrument at the age of five, remembers how difficult it once was to find a teacher or instrument.

"My dad had to ask a friend to bring one in from China.

"But the funny part is – his friend didn't know the difference between nylon-string and steel-string gu zheng.

"He ended up choosing a nylon-string gu zheng, while the music centre I was enrolled in taught steel-string technique."

These days, things are much easier, she said.

"There are many teachers and music centres now.

"Plus, with the Internet and social media, resources are more accessible for anyone who wants to start learning," added the national gu zheng champion, who represented Malaysia in Hong Kong at the 2012 international gu zheng competition where she won the silver prize.

Lum said that staying connected with traditional instruments is "a way of remembering who we are and where we come from".

"For me, the gu zheng grounded me in my roots. Playing a traditional instrument doesn't mean being stuck in the past – it means carrying our heritage forward and giving it new life.

"That balance of tradition and modernity is what makes our identity unique," she explained.

Beyond their work as a duo, the husband-and-wife team also formed Naungan, a group comprising Malaysians of other races who perform with traditional instruments.

Their shared goal is to unite people through music.

Alongside Lum on gu zheng and Tan on ruan, the group features Vickneswaran Ramakrishnan (tabla), Asri Sharizan (jidur and rebana), Yong How Yean (seruling and dizi) and Pravinraj Premkumar (sitar).

"We believe the responsibility of preserving and sharing traditional music doesn't belong to just one community – it lies in all of our hands," Lum said.

"Through Naungan, we bring our different instruments, traditions and stories together, showing that culture becomes even more powerful when it's celebrated collectively."

For National Day and Malaysia Day this year, the group offers its own rendition of Ella's classic *Standing In The Eyes Of The World*, now available on YouTube.

The couple also believes that keeping traditional instruments alive must begin at home.

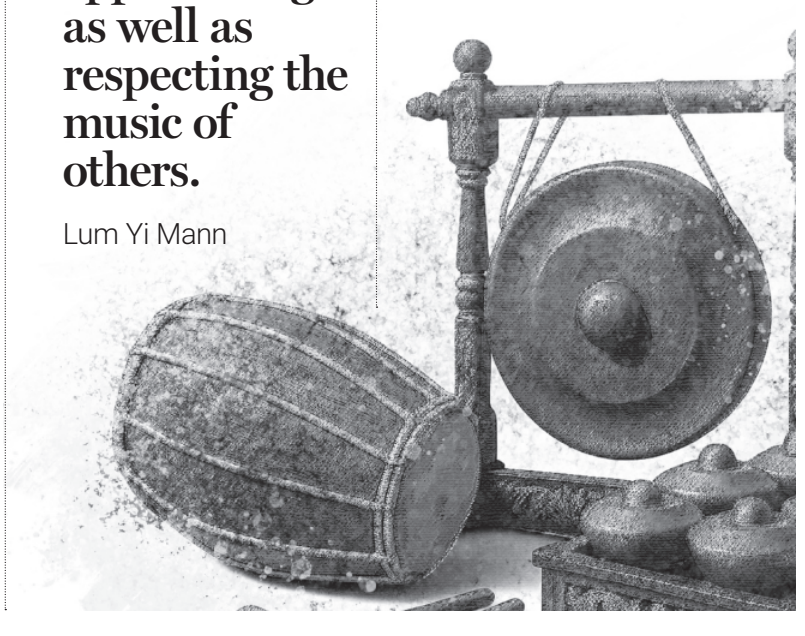
"That's why we begin with our kids – not only teaching them the gu zheng, but also introducing them to instruments like tabla, seruling and many more," said Lum, a mother of two.

"Children should grow up not only knowing their roots but also appreciating as well as respecting the music of others."

Her hope is that small steps of appreciation, support and sharing will ensure these instruments remain relevant.

"Alex and I want people to see that traditional instruments aren't relics of the past – they're living voices that can inspire, connect and carry our culture forward together into the future."

> Children should grow up not only knowing their roots but also appreciating as well as respecting the music of others.
>
> Lum Yi Mann



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A nod to *her roots*

Sabahan filmmaker Ekin Kee Charles captures the vibrant, often unseen lightness of her indigenous upbringing in her short films.

By HANIS MAKETAB
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AT a recent filmmaking workshop she conducted in Penampang in her home state of Sabah, Ekin Kee Charles was reminded of how she first got her start in filmmaking.

"It took me back to about six years ago, when it was just me, my friend and my brother with a camera, still trying to figure out my voice," says Charles during a recent interview in downtown Kuala Lumpur.

The two-day workshop, organised by local non-profit Pacos Trust, was aimed at helping members of indigenous communities across Sabah share their stories through short films and documentaries.

For the 29-year-old Kimaragang descendant, a Kadazandusun Dayak sub-tribe, leading her first formal workshop proved eye-opening, prompting reflection on her filmmaking journey so far.

A cinematography graduate from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), Charles' breakthrough came with *Pace*, her award-winning short film that clinched the BMW Shorties 2019 Grand Prize – making her the first East Malaysian to do so.

"I didn't have any expectations when I submitted the film; I decided to give it a try because there was no submission fee, so I had nothing to lose," she says with a laugh. "But everything changed after winning."

Charles' short *Pace* follows village youngsters in Sabah through the eyes of Yaya, a girl awakening to gender differences and societal stereotypes.

With a BMW Group Malaysia grant, Charles went on to make *Rama Rama*, a coming-of-age story that questions "conventional" beauty, starring her niece Alyaa Sharyana Erisha, who also appeared in *Pace*.

Generational divide

Despite her success, Charles never planned to be a filmmaker. She once dreamed of becoming an architect, even applying to every architecture course she could after finishing school.

"I had eight slots to fill, but there weren't enough architecture courses to fill them all up, so for the final slot, my sister suggested that I put down cinematography. And that's the course I ended up getting," says Charles.

"Filmmaking had never crossed my mind – it felt foreign to someone who grew up in a village in Kota Marudu, three hours from Kota Kinabalu. Until I left at 19, the village was all I knew."

At 23, after finishing her studies, she moved to Kuala Lumpur, where she is now based and works as a script supervisor.

In 2022, Charles received the Han Nefkens Foundation–Loop Barcelona Video Art Production Award after the arts foundation discovered her short films *Pace* and *Rama Rama* through a recommendation by Sabahan contemporary artist Yee I-Lann.

"They asked me to pitch an idea for a film. At the time, I was somewhat grappling with my identity as someone of indigenous descent existing in modern society, so I incorporated that dilemma into my pitch and they ended up liking it," she says.

With the US$15,000 (RM63,430) award, Charles produced *Meet Us At The Ridge: 6.0753° N, 116.5588° E*, an eight-minute experimental film exploring generational differences with her mother over faith and native traditions.

"*Meet Us At The Ridge* was a huge personal milestone for me, as it was my first non-narrative work. I consider it my first debut as an artist," says Charles.

She sat down with her mother, a teacher, and asked her how she felt about identity and culture. The recorded conversation lasted two hours.

"It was the longest talk we'd ever had, and the first time we spoke so openly about these topics. I realised that while our views differ, both are valid – she's a product of her time, just as I am of mine," she says.

In the film, Charles weaves her mother's words with raw, haunting visuals that mirror her own feelings, centring on the Mongukas ceremony – a traditional rite of honouring ancestors through the sacrifice of a bull.

The film has established Charles in contemporary art circles. Premiering at Fundació Joan Miró during the Loop Barcelona Festival 2024, it has since been shown at Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, and MoCA Taipei this year, and will travel to partner institutions including Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva; Art Hub Copenhagen; and Inside Out Art Museum, Beijing.

Home is where the heart is

In March, *Meet Us At The Ridge* was shown as a film installation at Ilham Gallery, alongside Charles' short *Peaceland.* The contrast was striking: where *Meet Us At The Ridge* is sombre and introspective, *Peaceland* bursts with humour and vivacity.

In *Peaceland*, three senior women dressed in their fashionable best – Rena, Mina and Joni – hitchhike on a truck from their distant village to make the long journey to town to purchase monthly household goods and convince Rena's daughter to come home.

"It's a comedy about three 'besties' who are in their late 60s, yet they're acting very Gen Z-like, without a care in the world. I grew up around such vibrant characters. And that's what I wanted to highlight in the film.

"I wanted to show everyone the joy and happiness that exists here in Sabah. These people and these stories ... they're why I think my village is the best place on earth," says Charles.

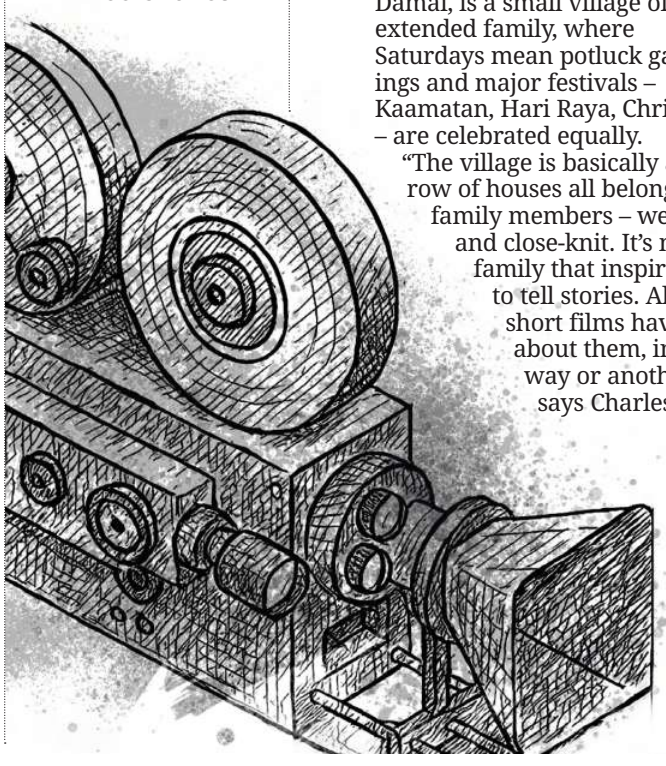
Her hometown, Kampung Damai, is a small village of extended family, where Saturdays mean potluck gatherings and major festivals – Kaamatan, Hari Raya, Christmas – are celebrated equally.

"The village is basically a long row of houses all belonging to family members – we're big and close-knit. It's my family that inspires me to tell stories. All my short films have been about them, in one way or another," says Charles.

Themes of identity and community run throughout Charles' work, most notably in *Meet Us At The Ridge.* – EKIN KEE CHARLES

Charles anchors her stories in her hometown community – often involving them as cast and crew – MUHAMAD SHAHRIL ROSLI/ The Star

> **I realised it's okay not to know everything about my culture and heritage, as long as I'm willing to learn.**
>
> Ekin Kee Charles



To learn and discover

Charles hopes to take on more directing projects: "I'm comfortable with my own work, but I'd like to see how I'd approach stories written by others."

She also hopes to explore creativity beyond film.

"I don't want to limit myself to video – it's a beautiful medium, but through *Meet Us At The Ridge*, I discovered I can sew, making the costumes myself. I may try fashion or mixed media, just to see where those paths lead," she says.

So does she feel closer to finding her voice as an artist? For Charles, it's still a work in progress.

"Right now, there's a lot of talk about proper representation for minority communities, including indigenous voices like mine.

"It's important, but it can also feel like a burden. I used to question whether I was qualified to represent my community and culture, because I felt I didn't know enough," she admits.

It took a friend's reminder – that she didn't need to know everything – to ease that doubt.

"I realised it's okay not to know everything about my culture and heritage, as long as I'm willing to learn. To other filmmakers who feel they don't deserve to tell their stories: don't let that stop you.

"What matters is that you tell them. The more you do, the more you'll learn and discover," she concludes.

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This Merdeka & Malaysia Day, we celebrate more than independence – we honour the strength, resilience, and spirit that thrive right here in Malaysia.

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Tradition *tailored* for today

Keeping heritage alive means honouring traditional textiles and silhouettes while presenting them in contemporary ways.

By BERVIN CHEONG
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

A women's contemporary suit crafted out of kain pelikat perfectly illustrates how the old and new can work in harmony. — Syomirizwa Gupta

Natasha's latest fashion showcase drew on heritage to express what Malaysian identity means today. — Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week

BLENDING tradition with innovation, fashion is proving that heritage can be both preserved and reimagined for the future.

While some international brands have faced criticism for appropriating cultural designs, Malaysians approach it with greater respect.

They draw inspiration from their roots while being mindful of the nuances involved.

"I don't treat traditional fabrics or silhouettes as trends. I treat them as stories," says Natasha Khan of the Nkhan label.

"Whether it's weaving, fabric dyes, batik, songket or even a classic kebaya structure, I look at how each element can live on in a new context without losing its soul."

Natasha's collection at the recent Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week explores heritage textiles through the lens of Malaysian identity.

According to her, it is possible to be rebellious yet respectful.

"Through fashion, I document our identity, challenge colonial imprints, and make space for future generations to see themselves in something powerful," Natasha explains.

She also says that designers can preserve heritage, but not stay frozen in time.

"Innovation comes when you honour your roots while daring to reframe them."

She does this by experimenting with form and function, but staying intentional with classic fabric choices.

"I always say that tradition isn't old, it's just waiting for a new voice," Natasha enthuses.

For Syomirizwa Gupta, he avoids modernising heritage pieces in an overt or heavy-handed way.

"Now, it's more about the feelings and emotions you experience when you see or wear a certain design," he shares.

For him, the process must start with understanding the subject itself first.

"At the end of the day, it's still about being respectful. The next step – and the simplest way – is to adapt traditional elements with current silhouettes and colours to keep them relevant," he explains.

"My other favourite approach will always be to talk to an individual that has a personal relationship to a certain culture."

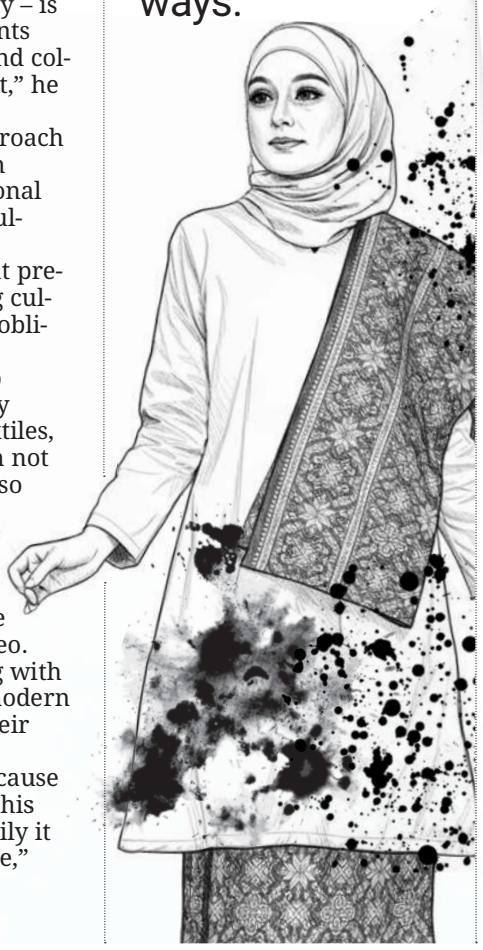
Syomirizwa believes that preserving and reinterpreting cultural designs is a creative obligation for designers.

"It's my responsibility to spark dialogue through my work with fashion and textiles, because life should be rich not only on the surface, but also within our souls," he points out.

The founder of Wynka, Karen Lau, strives to create pieces that embody the identity and story of Borneo.

She recalls collaborating with Penan women to design modern totes that pay tribute to their traditional woven baskets.

"It means a lot to me because I grew up surrounded by this heritage, yet I see how easily it can fade if it doesn't evolve," says Lau, who hails from Sarawak.



Heritage fabrics can feel right at home when incorporated into avant-garde creations. — Melinda Looi

Lau reimagines the cheongsam with a modern touch – an elegant look suited to any occasion. — Wynka

"Whether it's vibrant woven fabrics, intricate beadwork, or playful prints, I believe these details bring out the soul of each piece and reflect the lively spirit of Bornean culture."

She has also released designs that play on the classic cheongsam silhouette for Chinese New Year.

"My designs are very modern and wearable, but they always carry a touch of culture in them," Lau shares.

"It makes me happy to see how these pieces, with their cultural essence, fit beautifully into people's lives and special moments. It shows that our heritage can truly shine anywhere when presented with confidence and style."

She goes on to say that her customers often wear them to weddings, parties and other gatherings – not just cultural festivities.

There are also Malaysian designers who embrace a more avant-garde aesthetic, yet still manage to include traditional local elements into their creations.

"I have a deep love for Malaysian handmade textiles, and they've become an essential part of my creative journey," says Melinda Looi.

"From batik, songket, tenun, keringkam to rattan, I enjoy 'weaving' these rich traditions into my designs. Each piece carrying the soul of our heritage."

Like her peers, she is not afraid to experiment – whether it is with modern cuts, bold styling, or combining it with unexpected materials.

Looi claims that the younger generation has always been super open and excited about traditional fashion – as long as it feels "fresh".

"They're proud to wear their culture, but they want it to feel in the 'now', not old-school," she adds.

Based on the experience with her four kids, she has learned to really think outside the box. Yes, they do wear her designs.

"I still use all the heritage fabrics I love, but I play around with the cuts, colours and styling to make it feel fun and wearable for them," Looi says.

She has even created a couture collection that meshes modern art with Malaysian textiles.

It incorporates doodles by her teenage daughter, Maya, but brought to life on luxurious fabrics like batik and songket – showing how heritage can be reinterpreted through younger eyes.

This proves how the old and new can coexist – where traditional craftsmanship meets modern design, and where heritage resonates with both the older generation who lived it and the younger generation eager to reinterpret it.

"She loved how her work can blend so well with Malaysian traditional textiles and crafts. She felt so much pride in those designs," Looi concludes.

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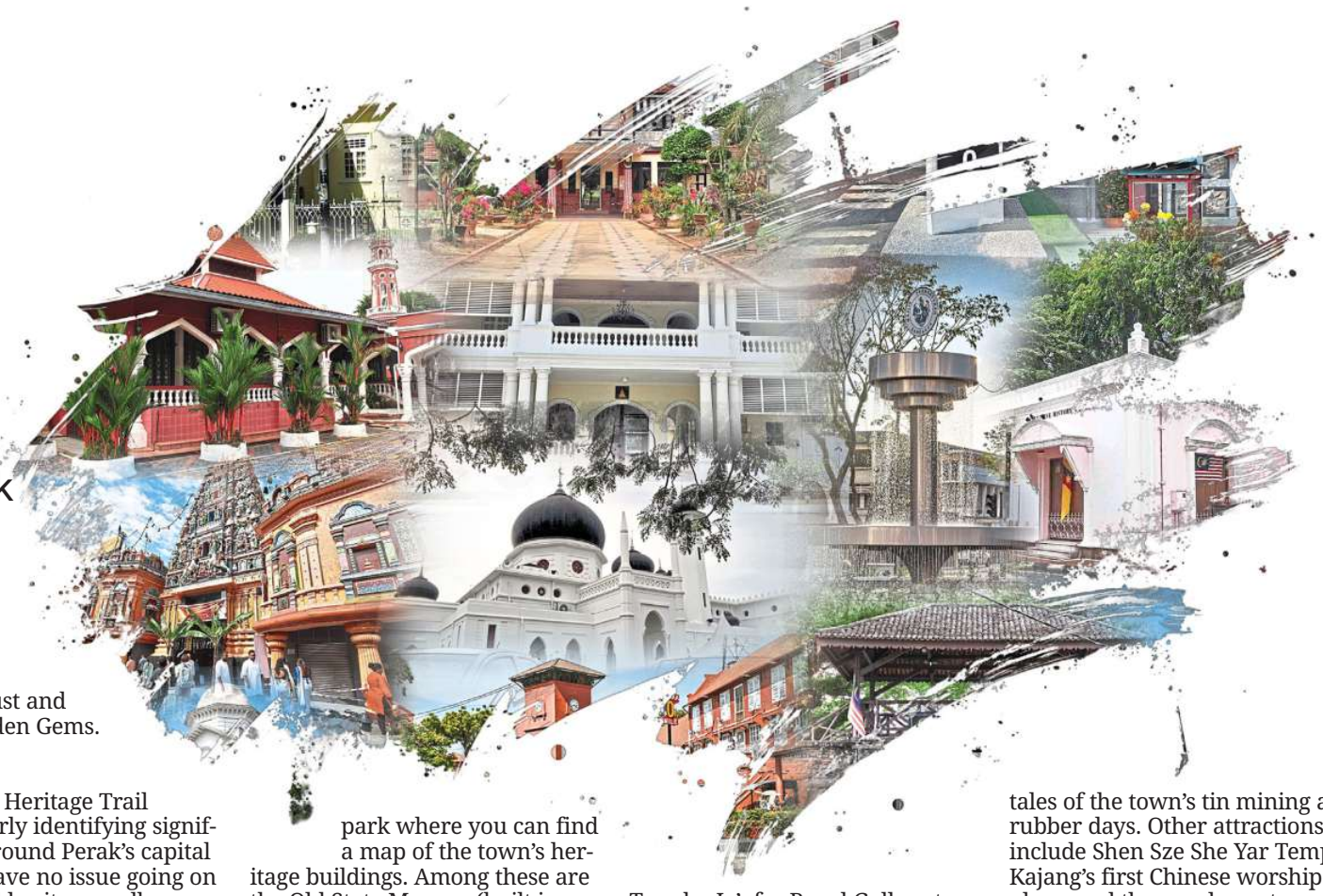
A walk through time

Walking tours unpack Malaysia's past, one landmark and backstreet at a time.



By FLOREY D. MIKIL
and GISELE SOO
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

A BIG part of travelling is immersing yourself in the local culture and history of your chosen destination. Understand the place's heritage by connecting with its people and discovering what's in its past that shaped its present, and future.

One of the best ways to gain an insightful experience is by participating in a heritage walk. You can choose to do a self-guided walking tour or hire a knowledgeable guide for better clarity.

Here's a glimpse of what you may expect in each state in Malaysia.

Perlis

Masjid Alwi is a good place to begin your heritage walk in Kangar, Perlis. Gazetted as a National Heritage site in 2018, it is one of the state capital's oldest mosques, with an elegant facade featuring Mughal architecture.

From there, make your way to the Kangar Street Art 2.0 located nearby. It is a colourful collection of murals themed "Colours of Perlis", where walls come alive with stories of the state's heritage.

Less than 1km away is the "Big Clock Building", a colonial-era monument gazetted as a National Heritage site in 2011.

Kedah

As many of Kedah's heritage buildings are clustered in its capital city, Alor Setar, you can easily do a self-guided walking tour here. Start from the Alor Setar Tower. Enjoy the panoramic views from the observation deck of the 165.5m-tall skyscraper before heading to other attractions like Balai Besar, Kedah Royal Museum and Zahir Mosque.

A 15-minute walk from the mosque will lead to Rumah Merdeka – the house of Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj.

Penang

Here's a fun way to explore Penang's capital city: The George Town Heritage Walk is held annually to commemorate the city being inscribed (jointly with Melaka) on the Unesco World Heritage Site List in 2008.

From the Clan Jetties and Fort Cornwallis to the Kapitan Keling Mosque, you can also wander the streets on your own.

If you prefer having a guide, you can either wait for the city to resume its free George Town Walkabout Tour (halted since the pandemic) or go for paid options by organisations like Penang Heritage Trust and Penang Hidden Gems.

Perak

With Ipoh Heritage Trail plaques clearly identifying significant sites around Perak's capital city, you'll have no issue going on a self-guided heritage walk.

Start at the Ipoh Railway Station, a colonial-era building that remains an important landmark to this day. Right across is the Town Hall. Now an event venue, it once housed the district police headquarters, post office and administrative offices.

Along the trail, discover Masjid India Muslim, the old Chartered Bank, the Birch Memorial Clock Tower, and the Han Chin Pet Soo museum, which tells of Ipoh's tin mining days.

Kelantan

Spend a day walking around Kelantan's capital, Kota Baru. Visit Gelanggang Seni to watch traditional cultural shows like silat and wayang kulit.

Then, take a short walk to the Kelantan State Museum to learn more about the state's cultures and tradition. Some 750m from the museum is Bulatan Tuan Padang, a historical landmark featuring a clock tower.

Walk for 10 minutes to reach Muzium Diraja Istana Batu, which is also within walking distance of Istana Jahar.

Terengganu

Start your heritage tour in the capital city, Kuala Terengganu, at Pasar Payang. You can get songket as a souvenir; the traditional handwoven fabric was inscribed on Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2021.

Next, admire the grand architecture of Istana Maziah, then take a stroll along the Terengganu River to spots like Turtle Alley and the iconic Chinatown entrance arch.

Continue to Rumah Warisan Haji Su at Kampung Losong to admire traditional Malay architecture. Another half an hour or so walk will take you to the not-to-be-missed Terengganu State Museum.

Pahang

The "old town" of Kuala Lipis is a good starting point for a heritage walk through the former capital of Pahang.

Start your journey at the "0 KM" marker, located next to the post office, which is a heritage building dating back to 1910.

The neighbouring Kuala Lipis Information Square is a small park where you can find a map of the town's heritage buildings. Among these are the Old State Mosque (built in 1888) and the Thean Hou Temple (1898).

Johor

Named after an influential merchant, Jalan Tan Hiok Nee in Johor Baru, the capital of Johor, was declared a "heritage street" in 2009. Check out the stunning pre-war architecture as you stroll along the way.

A short walk from there will take you to Jalan Trus, where Sin Keng Wah Kedai Tilam has stood for eight decades; it is still making kapok-stuffed mattresses and pillows.

Located on the same street is the century-old Johor Ancient Temple, built by a group led by Tan himself.

Melaka

Following the heritage trail in Melaka is simple enough, as boards displaying information on its places of interest are found throughout the Unesco World Heritage City.

They are even illustrated in a 3D view map, so you can visualise where each attraction is. Museums, temples, towers and churches are among the places included on the heritage trail.

Some of the most visited places are The Stadthuys, St Paul's Church, Menara Taming Sari, Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, Kampung Kling Mosque and Maritime Museum.

Negri Sembilan

The Seremban Heritage Trail, mapped by the Seremban City Council, is a self-guided walk through 20 landmarks or so.

From the Seremban Railway Station, which was unveiled in the early 1900s, head to the Tuanku Ja'afar Royal Gallery to learn about the royal institution.

Visit the city's oldest church, the Church of the Visitation, built in the 1880s. Tucked along Campbell Road is the Legal Advisor Building, bearing a neo-classica style facade.

Of course, visit the Seremban Jamek Mosque too, recognised as a heritage building under the National Heritage Act 2005.

Kuala Lumpur

To learn more about Malaysia's capital city, join the Chinatown Cultural Walk, part of the Free Walk Kuala Lumpur Unscripted series led by local guides. Find out about KL's heritage through the two-hour tour, which is a gratuity-based walk that operates several days a week.

Stroll through restored shophouses at Kwai Chai Hong, discover traditional trades like tea roasting at Petaling Street, and visit significant landmarks including Sri Mahamariamman Temple and the Gurdwara Sahib Polis.

Selangor

There are two types of Selangor Heritage Walk you can join. One is the Royal Klang Heritage Town Walk, which includes 11 attractions, starting from Sultan Abdul Aziz Royal Gallery. The other is the Kajang Heritage Walk.

Begin at the Kajang Heritage Centre, home to artefacts and tales of the town's tin mining and rubber days. Other attractions include Shen Sze She Yar Temple, Kajang's first Chinese worship place, and the nearly century-old Kedai Runcit Soon Fatt, known for traditional biscuits.

Since this is also Malaysia's "satay town", be sure to indulge in some Kajang satay, which was recently officially declared a "Selangor State Heritage Food".

Sabah

Join the Free Heritage Walking Tour in Kota Kinabalu that's held every Wednesday in English (a Mandarin-speaking guide leads the walk on Saturday). This is a joint effort by Sabah Tourism Board and Sabah Tourist Guides Association and covers sites like Australia Place, Atkinson Clock Tower and Malaysia Monument.

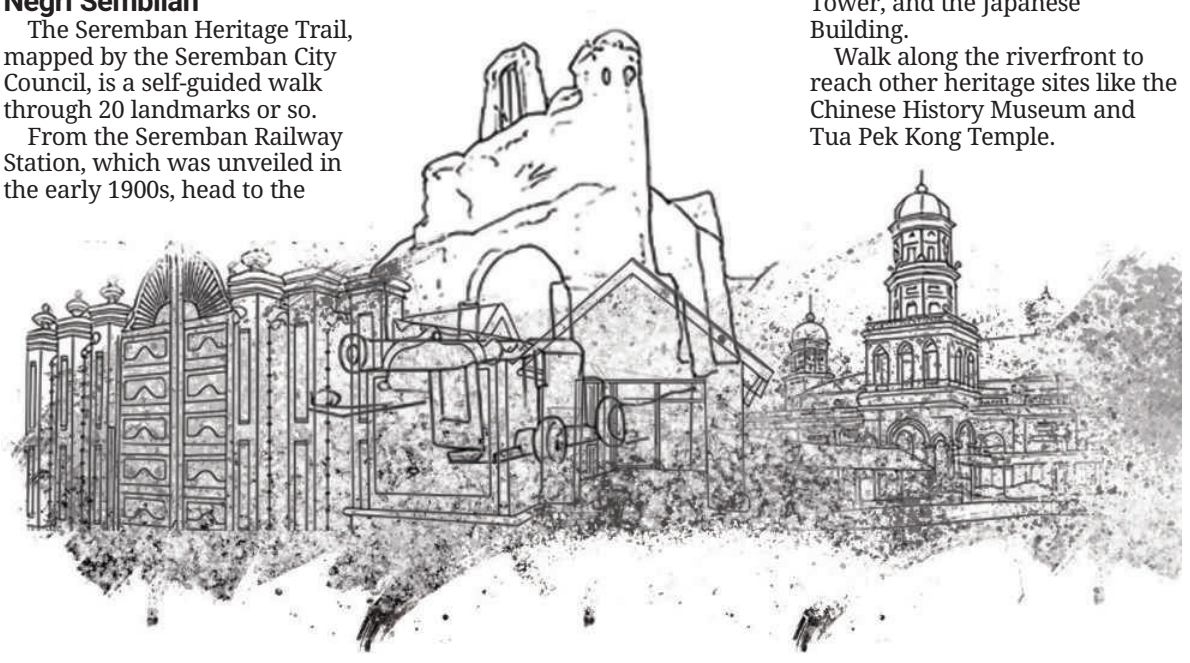
You can also explore Sabah's second biggest city, Sandakan, by following the Sandakan Heritage Trail. It goes through places like Masjid Jamik, Agnes Keith House, St Michael's and All Angels Church, Kun Yam Temple, and Malaysia Fountain.

Sarawak

The Sarawak Heritage Society, in collaboration with several local organisations, has produced a handy trail map of Kuching's historical precinct.

You can grab a copy of this map at the Sarawak Tourism Complex, housed in the Old Kuching Courthouse, a colonial-era building that has stood in Sarawak's capital since 1868. Nearby heritage sites include the Brooke Memorial, the Round Tower, and the Japanese Building.

Walk along the riverfront to reach other heritage sites like the Chinese History Museum and Tua Pek Kong Temple.



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Palliative care focuses on providing relief from the symptoms and stress of serious illnesses, aiming to improve the quality of life for both patients and their families. — 123rf

Bringing care closer to 'home'

This Melaka native works tirelessly to develop palliative care services in Sarawak, her adopted home.

By REVATHI MURUGAPPAN
starhealth@thestar.com.my

THE name Dr Sharon Choo Yoke Ling is synonymous with palliative care in Sarawak.

As the state's first, and one of two current, palliative care specialists, she has been instrumental in developing palliative care services in major hospitals throughout the state.

"Sarawak has a growing number of people with cancer, organ failure and other serious illnesses – many living in rural areas, far from hospitals.

"Palliative care helps manage pain, symptoms and emotional stress, allowing patients to stay comfortable and maintain dignity, often closer to home.

"It can be provided alongside curative or other active treatment, or when curative intent is no longer feasible.

"It also supports families, which is important in our multi-ethnic, family-centred communities," says the head of the palliative care unit in Sarawak General Hospital (SGH), Kuching.

In a study published in 2020 in the *BMJ Supportive & Palliative Care* journal, researchers projected that Sarawak would have the highest number of palliative care cases (35,065) by the year 2030 in Malaysia, surpassing Perak, Johor, Selangor and Kedah.

These top five states will collectively account for 55% of the country's total estimated palliative care needs by then.

Yet another study published in October 2024 in the *Journal Of Palliative Care* revealed that there was a stark urban-rural divide in the availability and accessibility of palliative care services in Malaysia.

The study noted: "In the highly-developed central region of Peninsular Malaysia, speciality care was available within 4km, whereas in the less-developed east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, patients had to travel approximately 46km.

"In the predominantly rural East Malaysia, basic palliative care services were 82km away, and in some instances, where land connectivity was scarce, it took 2.5 hours to access care via boat.

"The corresponding median travel costs were RM9 and RM114 in Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia."

One of Dr Choo's main challenges is the limited number of trained healthcare professionals in palliative care and the frequent turnover of those who have been trained in public service, which disrupts services and reduces continuity of care for patients.

She says: "In rural Sarawak, distance and transportation barriers make it even harder to reach patients in time.

"My role also requires frequent travel to cover services in Sibu and Miri hospitals, with the hope of expanding to Bintulu Hospital next year.

"In addition, there's still limited public understanding of palliative care, so advocacy and education are essential parts of my work alongside direct patient care."

On-the-ground training

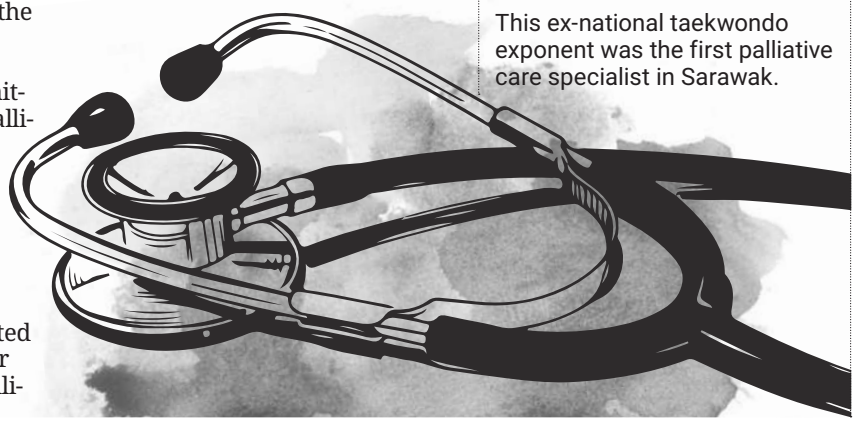
In 2021, when she first started as a full-fledged consultant, Dr Choo initiated the first domiciliary palliative care service (for example: healthcare staff visiting individuals in their own homes) with Siburan Health Clinic.

Dr Choo (left) and her team doing clinical rounds and case discussions at SGH, with American consultant palliative care physician and ASCO volunteer Dr Frank Ferris (second from right). — Photos: Dr SHARON CHOO YOKE LING

She collaborated with local hospices and other organisations such as the Asia Pacific Hospice Palliative Care Network (APHN) and the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) to provide training for the staff.

The programme proved immensely successful, and in 2022, it was rolled out across 34 public health clinics with family medicine specialists in Sarawak.

This ex-national taekwondo exponent was the first palliative care specialist in Sarawak.



She says: "We work with local authorities to ensure there is prescription opioid supply for these palliative care patients.

"In the past, the health clinic team could be sent out, but if there are no proper medications to reduce pain, the patient still suffers.

"Patients reported that they had to wait up to three days to get opioids."

To date, Dr Choo and her team have trained staff at 86 public health clinics, but she says it is still not enough as there are more than 200 health clinics in Sarawak.

"We need staff who can champion the programme. We can do all the training, but if the clinic doesn't think it is an important programme and does not want to support or do home visits, then it is not going to work.

"The staff must be willing to do the hard work as they might have to go out on their own, trek mountains, go on boats, cross rivers ... all these take time just for one visit.

"That's where having a national policy is good," she points out.

From taekwondo to medicine

A sporty kid, Dr Choo was a rising star in taekwondo in her youth.

By secondary school, she was kicking, blocking and sparring her way to win national competitions.

She even earned some pocket money by assisting her head instructor in taekwondo classes.

Her talent didn't go unnoticed, and at 17, the small-town girl from Melaka spent nine months at the Bukit Jalil Sports School in Selangor, preparing to represent Malaysia in various international competitions.

Her career highlight: competing in the 1999 SEA Games in Brunei in the finweight category – the lightest weight class.

"It was my first and last SEA Games as I didn't win anything.

"I couldn't maintain my weight below 44kg; I wasn't eating enough and knew it was not good for long-term growth purposes.

"So I opted on a different career path and retired from the sport to focus on my studies.

"I was always a straight-A student and sometime in secondary school, I considered a career in medicine," she shares.

After moving back home and resuming regular schooling, Dr Choo completed her SPM and STPM with flying colours.

The next question: which public university should she apply to study medicine?

"Against everyone's advice, I put Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) as my top priority as I thought Sarawak would be an adventure," she shares.

Her mother supported her choice as her older sister was also studying there and could look out for her.

"I got a scholarship and off I went.

"My choices in life have not always been conventional ones," says the 40-something mother of two, laughing.

After completing her studies, Dr Choo applied to do her housemanship in Sarawak and "sort of just stayed on".

She says: "In between, I followed my husband, a family medicine specialist, for three years when he did his masters in Universiti Malaya; I also pursued my masters then, and eventually, my subspecialisation in palliative care.

"My first encounter with a dying patient was as a medical student – I took some time to reflect if this was something I could do long term."

The answer was yes, and that sowed the seeds for her interest in palliative care.

Overcoming taboos

Unlike medical treatments targeting diseases, palliative care takes a holistic outlook, addressing a broad spectrum of needs.

But many people mistakenly believe that it is only for the last days of life, when curative treatment no longer works or the patient decides against treatment.

Palliative care has the greatest benefit when the patient is referred early enough, instead of when he or she is dying.

"A lot of patients may be too ill to plan the rest of their life, but if they are sleeping well and are in less pain, they can live well till the end.

"Doctors must be able to identify if the treatment is not working and refer the patient to palliative care as soon as possible.

"If patients are sent late, we miss all the potential to make things happen before the end.

"For example, one patient was so relieved after telling me she wanted a grand funeral – she wasn't able to tell her family members this.

"When they're dying, they are often in delirium and cannot communicate well.

"In our Asian culture, talking about dying is taboo, but many studies show that two-thirds of patients prefer to talk about it and for the healthcare practitioner to bring up the subject," says Dr Choo.

There was another bedridden patient in her 30s with advanced cancer who wanted to get married to her university sweetheart.

She was waiting until she got better to tie the knot, but the doctor estimated her time was short.

Dr Choo and her team quickly planned the wedding in SGH, and fulfilled the patient's last wish in four days – she died at home a few weeks later.

"Poignant stories like these make my work joyful," says Dr Choo, who now does kickboxing and jogs to keep fit.

There is still a lot more work to be done and the physician is working tirelessly to build Sarawak as a centre of excellence for palliative care service and training – one day at a time.

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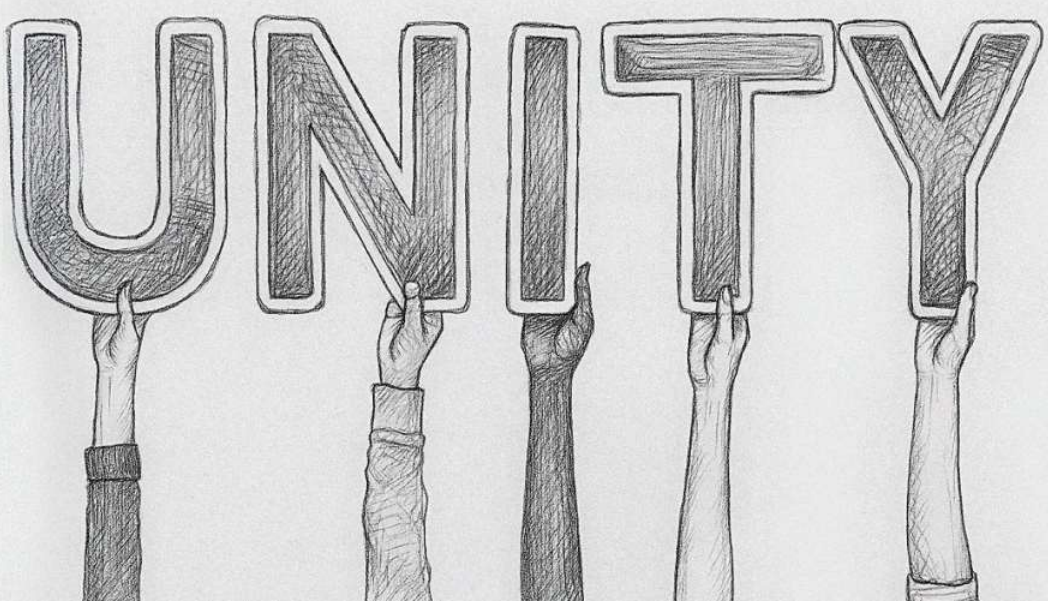
Above: One joy for Sheryl (left) and Shaid Shaqqiq is watching games at their favourite mamak and cheering for the Malaysian team with the crowd. — GLENN GUAN/The Star

Under the lights of Dataran Merdeka, one family snaps shots of their child while another kicks back with snacks and stories. — Photos: CHAN TAK KONG/The Star

The nation's spirit shines in everyday moments of togetherness.

The taste of UNITY



By ADANI ZAIDI
metro@thestar.com.my

IN Malaysia, shared culture isn't just kept in the arts and history books – it lives in the everyday things we do.

Reminders of national unity are found in simple acts of gathering and spending time together, which reflect the nation's spirit.

From teh tarik at a 24-hour mamak restaurant to family picnics in public parks, the Malaysian identity is deeply rooted in togetherness and community.

The busy chatter and laughter at local hangout spots, paired with the delicious aroma of freshly cooked roti canai and nasi goreng, is a familiar scene to many Malaysians.

That same atmosphere filled a restaurant in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, where patrons of diverse ages, races and backgrounds gathered around tables.

Among them were 24-year-old Sheryl Anne Richard and 26-year-old Shaid Shaqqiq Suhaimi, university students who frequent the eatery.

"I feel like no other country has anything quite like our mamak 'culture'.

"It's a place with really good food, heavy meals and light snacks; it's also where you gather with friends, it's open 24 hours, and it hosts screenings of sports games," says Sheryl.

For her, this uniquely Malaysian tradition is about more than just food.

"It's the feeling of being at home. I remember watching a badminton game at a mamak once and everyone was on the edge of their seats or up on their feet.

"We were all glued to the screen, and when Malaysia scored a point or won a round, the whole place – Indians, Chinese, Malays – stood up and cheered together," she recalls.

Sheryl notes that the menu itself reflects inclusivity.

"When you go to a mamak, there's always something for everyone. You have Indian and Chinese food, and also Malay dishes. So I feel this specific culture we have is what ties Malaysians together so well," she adds.

Shaid Shaqqiq agrees, saying these eateries are just one of many major spaces that unite Malaysians.

"It really interweaves racial unity and, most importantly, our love for food," he says.

"As a university student with a multiracial circle of friends, being able to be together at a simple place like this makes me feel that Malaysian spirit.

"Beyond the mamak restaurants – whether at Dataran Merdeka, parks or even a pasar malam – these places are where traditions are shared.

"Seeing people spend time and enjoy each other's company even late at night shows that these spaces house our very own unique Malaysian heritage."

Gideon and Ruth revel in the buzz at Dataran Merdeka – basking in city lights, laughter and time together. — ADANI ZAIDI/The Star

Across town at Dataran Merdeka, the heartbeat of Kuala Lumpur carries late into the night as families spread out across the field, enjoying the cooler air and city lights.

Sakuntala Madurai, 41, says these outings are an essential part of her family's routine.

"Treating your family with care and spending time with them is something families really prioritise.

"It's never just me and my children; my siblings, nieces and nephews are always with us too.

"We gather so that our children can grow up with that tight-knit connection," she says.

Sakuntala adds that outings at public places also offer a chance to expose her children to Malaysia's diversity.

"When we're constantly out like this, our children can meet and interact with people of different religions and cultures.

"They're not confined to knowing only their own culture. It's a Malaysian community out here, and we can experience a lot of different things," she says.

For 26-year-olds Ruth Bintang Kanyan, an office administration officer, and software tester Gideon Pengiran Edward from Sarawak, these shared spaces showcase Malaysian heritage at its best.

"At night, people of all races and cultures – even tourists – gather together, and when there are events, you see Malaysians from different backgrounds working together.

"It makes me proud that people from outside the country can experience the culture, food and unity," says Ruth.

"There's something new almost every week here at Dataran Merdeka. It's always changing.

"And even when the city feels too crowded sometimes, we have other options like Putrajaya, where the scene is very vibrant and chill," Gideon adds.

Late nights, for them, are about appreciating the accessibility of Malaysian life.

"Even at midnight, food is available. There are food trucks with Malay dishes, Indian food and Chinese snacks.

"The mamak is also an automatic destination for us. You sit down and already know what to eat and drink – it's comfort food.

"After a long day, every Malaysian feels the same when you need time out. Automatically, the plan is, 'Let's go mamak'," says Gideon.

From a plate of roti canai to a night under the city lights, these everyday rituals show how Malaysia's strength lies in togetherness – a heritage built on the simple joy of communities spending time side by side.

Customs and confidence

On and off the court, Goh Liu Ying shows how quiet customs and a multiracial team culture shaped her game – and her growth.

By NG CHIA YIN

EVERY smash and drop shot counted, but observing certain customs mattered just as much for Goh Liu Ying

When she stepped onto the badminton court, the Olympic silver medallist in mixed doubles with Chan Peng Soon at the 2016 Rio Games brought more than just her racket and years of training – she carried the cultural beliefs that gave her confidence.

"In Chinese culture, there are definitely beliefs and sayings that my family took seriously," said Liu Ying, who retired in 2023.

"For example, my parents would remind me not to say negative words, especially some 'pantang' words, before competitions because they believe what I speak can affect my luck and energy.

"And to be honest, I also believe that certain words or little routines can help with my luck, so I followed them too."

What might seem like superstition to others became her quiet shield.

"It became part of my preparation, giving me confidence and a positive mindset before stepping on court," she said.

However, Liu Ying's sporting journey was never confined to her own cultural roots. As part of a multiracial national team, she often found herself embracing traditions outside her own.

She remembers fondly the times she joined teammates in festive celebrations.

"In the past, we also ate with our hands sometimes, and I found it really special to experience something different," she recalled.

> Off court, we shared meals, laughed at each other's jokes and supported one another through wins and losses.
>
> Goh Liu Ying

"Whether it was being invited to a teammate's Raya or Deepavali celebration, I would even get excited about wearing their traditional outfits.

"For me, those moments weren't just about food, but about truly sharing in each other's culture."

Learning to adapt to different customs and communication styles could have been challenging, but it became an opportunity.

Those shared experiences taught her that diversity was not a hurdle but a strength.

"As a Chinese athlete, the values I grew up with – discipline and respect for hard work – really shaped my mentality on court," said Liu Ying.

"And being in a multiracial team meant I sometimes had to adapt, whether to different communication styles or habits. But instead of seeing it as a challenge, I felt it made me more open-minded and resilient.

"We came from different cultures, spoke different mother tongues and even celebrated different festivals, but on court we sweated, struggled and improved together.

"Off court, we shared meals, laughed at each other's jokes and supported one another through wins and losses."

Looking back, Liu Ying credits both her personal beliefs and Malaysia's multicultural spirit for shaping her as an athlete and a person.

"In the end, my culture also gave me the environment to grow into a better athlete and person," she said.

"That experience made me realise that our diversity is our biggest strength and, despite our differences, we were always united under one flag as Malaysians."

Malaysian mixed doubles stars Peng Soon (left) and Liu Ying beam with their bronze after a thrilling final in Rio de Janeiro. — AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

Rafiq delivers a blistering shot during the Masters at the National Championships, Sunway Megalanes. — ART CHEN/The Star

Rafiq celebrates his Thailand Open title with a victorious pose. — Thai Tenpin Bowling Association

Discipline and devotion

By NG CHIA YIN

FOR national bowler Rafiq Ismail, the sweetest reward after weeks of competing in overseas tournaments is not just medals but the simple joy of digging into a plate of nasi lemak.

To him, the combination of fragrant coconut rice, spicy sambal and crispy anchovies is more than comfort food.

It carries the taste of Malaysia's culture, the warmth of family, and the feeling of home he longs for most when abroad – a flavour no other country can replicate.

"My go-to comfort food when I'm back from competition is definitely nasi lemak," said Rafiq.

"Even though I can find it in some foreign countries, Malaysia's nasi lemak is different... maybe it's the way Malaysians cook it. That's why our country is famous for its delicious food – not just Malay dishes, but Chinese and Indian cuisine as well."

Yet beyond food, it is faith and discipline that have anchored Rafiq's journey as a national athlete.

As a Muslim, he has learned to balance rigorous training with daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan – a test of both body and mind that requires careful planning.

> We help each other with opinions from different backgrounds and experiences.
>
> Rafiq Ismail

"As a Muslim athlete, I balance faith and sport with good planning and discipline," said Rafiq.

"During the fasting month, I usually sacrifice outings other than bowling to save energy so I can still perform at my best. When I travel, I make sure to keep up with my prayers and routines... it's just another mental game.

"At the end of the day, faith gives me strength, and that is one of the reasons I stay positive mentally."

Those values are rooted in his upbringing and were instilled early by his parents, who taught him humility, resilience and trust in God's plan.

"My parents always remind me that whatever we do in life, we should do our best," said Rafiq.

"Win or lose, it's all written. If I win, stay humble; if I lose, learn from it. Believe in God's plan for us – He knows best."

Bowling has not only taken Rafiq around the world, it has also shaped his character off the alleys.

Training alongside teammates from diverse backgrounds has taught him the value of respect, openness and learning from others.

"To me, we help each other with opinions from different backgrounds and experiences," said Rafiq.

"This sport taught me to be who I am today – to be disciplined and respectful and to practise many good things that I can apply to my life."

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With gratitude to all our stakeholders this Malaysia Day.

At Hibiscus Petroleum, our journey has always been guided by collaboration, trust, and a shared purpose. Our story is written together with our stakeholders who stand with us.

Terima kasih, Malaysia.
Selamat Hari Malaysia.

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