

From Folklore to Urban Folklore: A Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the field of folklore and urban folklore at the School of Malay Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, National University of Malaysia. Obviously, the term oral tradition and its subtopic oral literature or folk literature is well accepted in Malaysia compared with the term folklore. Being part of the literature especially traditional Malay literature, folk literature is introduced as society's earliest form of literature before the existence of other forms of literary genres either written or print traditions. According to Mohd. Taib Osman, folk literature emerged as a tradition but eventually became incognisant in the context of nation building. Such a scenario makes the field of literature static, outdated and assume the role of a complementary subject in the field of literature as a whole. In this context, a different perspective is needed and folklore should be considered. From this perspective, literature is seen as a phenomenon that exists parallel to the changes in the way of life in the contemporary world, the world of IT and cyber traditions. Folklore now not only exists as an oral tradition but it has been captured and spread via modern technology and cyber space such as the internet, blog and social networks. Through such medium, urban folklore and urban legend exist as a continuation of yesteryear traditions when one discusses the current phenomenon as society's thought and creativity.

Keywords: Cyber tradition, current phenomena, folk literature, folklore, oral tradition, social media, urban folklore, urban legend

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INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of Malay Studies, 'folklore' and 'oral tradition' are two terminologies that are often used when referring to traditional Malay literature. The usage of such conceptual terms is an

important indication of the recognition of oral tradition as the earliest form of Malay literature. Discursively, the predominance of both conceptual terms does hint at the impact as well as implications that they might have had on the development of Malay literary genres today. It was perhaps R. O. Winstedt, the British colonial anthropologist whose scholarship first shed a critical light on the usage of the term 'folklore' in the context of oral traditions in Malaya. Winstedt (1939) sees the emergence of Malay folklore as the resulting influence of a well-known British colonial policy in places such as India, Arabia and Persia, that is, the acquisition and control of 'indigenous knowledge' for the 'creative' purpose of colonialism; in essence, the critical invention of colonial knowledge that it can control. However, for Mohd. Taib (1974), this is not the case. An influential Malay Studies scholar, he argues that the Malay oral tradition is a collection of genuine and creative literary works produced at an early phase of civilisation. He sees it as one of the key evolutionary tools for Malay civilisation as much as modes of expression of Malay identity. Mohd. Taib is a major figure in nurturing and propelling the field of oral tradition and its sub-disciplines, folk literature and oral literature to becoming recognised as one of the most popular subjects in schools and universities in the 1960s in post-colonial Malaysia.

In the scenario above, 'oral tradition' seems to be the perfect field to leverage on a collective but battered sense of Malay

identity that had been undermined as the 'colonised.' It also functioned to promote the spirit of solidarity among the racially diverse society. However, as old policies and visions are replaced by new ones within the vastly changing sociocultural, economic and political landscapes resulting in what has been dubbed as 'borderless world', or for the same account, a 'global village' founded upon digitally-propelled process of time-space compression better known as 'globalisation', the study and research on Malay folklore suddenly and comparably finds itself rendered somewhat on the peripheral, becoming lesser in importance and contribution with respect to the processes and demands of nation building and generating transformation. The new scenario does make oral literature look unwittingly obsolete, static, outdated and complementary to the field of literature as a whole. In contrast the field of folklore develops parallel to the changes in the ways of life in the West, especially in the hypertext, multiple-identity world of ICT and cyber 'traditions'. Folklore no longer exists in its status quo conventional form as we now know it. Today, this oral tradition has been virtually embedded and diffused electronically as 'e-folklore' and may become accessible from a digital repository such as websites, blogsites and social networking sites. This paper attempts to explore the slippery terrains beholding Malay folklore and its scholarship in the future.

FA(R)THERING MALAY FOLKLORESHIP ON TWO FRONTS

Folklore as Colonial Knowledge

Based on history, the field of folklore¹ has had its root in the colonial period of Malaya. The British administrators were among the pioneers in this field such as of W. Maxwell, R.J. Wilkinson, R.O. Winstedt, A.J. Sturrock, Evans, W.W. Skeat and A. Hale. Most of their works were published in the *Journal of the Malayan/Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS)*² and printed in a book form for British officers as well as reading materials in Malay schools before the Second World War (Mohd. Taib, 1981, pp. 10-11). Shamsul (2000) linked such an effort towards the 18th century's Western imperialism and colonisation due to European nation-state in developing a new world order for exploitation of wealth and developing the field of social sciences. Gathering information is vital to sustain the Western dominance of the colonised state since knowledge represents a form of power. Through such acquisitions, the British managed to control the mind of the natives by changing, establishing and replacing the existing mind set and strengthening the colonial position including in Malaya. Therefore, according to Shamsul

(2000), during the colonial period (1819-1957), anthropology was the medium of intellectual discourse and the methodology involved gathering information; it was part of the British science of administration vital as a tool in building the colonial image and also gather knowledge on Malaya's natives.³ Shamsul's notion is based on the concept of 'epistemological space' coined by Bernard Cohn (1996) in discussing British occupation of India. Similar notions could be seen in Knaap (1994, pp. 637-638):

'In order to rule the colonies properly, the colonial power of the time were of the opinion that they needed not only a strong army and navy and a well-trained civil service, but also scholarly and practical knowledge of indigenous society. Scholarly interest in the colonies can thus be interpreted as an offspring of the process of colonial state formation. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in England and France as well as in the Netherlands, all sorts of journals came into being to disseminate knowledge about the colonies. Few of these journals survived the wave of decolonization

¹ Folklore is an English term coined by William John Thoms on 22 August 1846 (Dundes, 1965, pp. 4-5). Folklore then developed in the study of English language and literature and also later in anthropology before separating itself to form a separated field of study.

² Previously *Journal of the Strait Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JSBRAS)*.

³ Anthropology was then seen as a critical subject for the British in implementing its administration policies. One had to bear in mind that one of the subdivision of anthropology is cultural anthropology which encompasses similar elements like the to folklore.

after the Second World War. In the Netherlands only two survived, Bijdragen and (Nieuwe) West-Indische Gids, founded in 1919. The other well-known journal on Southeast Asia from this period that is still in existence is the Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, founded in 1878.'

In the field of folklore studies, most of the early efforts were focused on collecting and editing stories rather than engaging in theoretical debates, except for and indeed among the most prolific, were those of Wilkinson and Winstedt (Muhammad, 1999, pp. 129-164; Braginsky, 2008, pp. 417-428). The latter, for instance, initiated the theories of diffusion and Indianisation in his discussion of traditional Malay literature including folk literature which he referred to as folklore. As Winstedt (1939, p. v) maintains:

Any one who surveys the field of Malay literature will be struck by the amazing abundance of its foreign flora and the rarity of indigenous growths. Malay folklore, even is borrowed, most of it, from the vast store-house of Indian legend, an early crop garnered in the Hindu period, and later in the Islamic.

Winstedt's commentary, published in his well-known book *A History of Classical*

Malay Literature, demonstrates his conviction in the diffusive impact of Indian culture within Malay society and folk literature. He asserts that Indian socioculture is the main source of folk stories for a budding Malay folklore and subsequently the Arabic-Persian imaginary through the spread of Islam in the region. Similar plots between source and contact cultures respectively, for instance, in humorous Malay tales such those *Pak Belalang*, *Mat Jenin* and *Si Luncai* are identical to those in *Kartha Sarit Sagara*, *Jataka Tales*, *Hitopadesa* and other Southern Asian great works. Likewise, *Abu Nawas* and *Musang Berjanggal* were clearly appropriated from The Arabian Nights and other tales from the Arab world. Indeed, the immense influence of the Indian sociocultural heritage on Malay social identity and practices must have informed Winstedt's (1920) perception on language, religion, customs and literature. The direction of the dissemination of such stories, in this case from India to the Malay Archipelago, can be understood from a diffusionist perspective, in that, it highlights traceable engagement between cultures and the shifting of a group of people through migration.

Folklore as Post-Colonial Identity

Most third world countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei share similar experiences; they were once colonised either by the British or Dutch. When they gained their independence after the Second

World War (1942-1945), folklore (oral tradition) and the written tradition became the medium to restore their image in order to lift the spirits of people from the shackles of colonialism and its remnants. By means of these traditions, their pride and self-esteem could be restored to the heights of their pre-colonial days. Therefore, past achievements were extolled and glorified in order to portray the nation's greatness as a great power and civilisation a long time ago. In contrast to Javanese civilisation which depicts the greatness of their civilization through bas-reliefs, monuments and temples, the Malays preserved their cultural knowledge and values, political or historical records by means of literary works especially after the coming of Islam (Braginsky, 1993, p. 1; 1994, p. 41; 1998, p. 1). As highlighted by Ismail (1974), traditional Malay literature is rich in repertoires from whence two sub-traditions may be derived, one, the folklore (oral tradition) while another, the written tradition.⁴

Folklore is considered to be the oldest form of literature and became the basic foundation of civilisation before it took on new forms expressed through the written, print and now cyber traditions. Through this evolutionary changes, from primitive to higher form of civilisation, folklore acts as a signifier of the height of civilisation. In other words, all folklore should be considered as 'a form of empowerment to the nation'. As such, following Hanapi and Shaiful Bahri (2003, pp. 69-70), the concept of '(em)power(ment) to the nation' necessitates an acknowledgment of the greatness of a nation's folkloric tradition for its immense contribution to the evolution of thoughts and sustainability of values and norms from which generations in future may benefit. There are three basic components or traditions encompassed in a folklore or oral tradition: verbalised expression, behavioural,⁵ and material culture.⁶ Verbalised expression is also known as folk

⁴ To him, traditional Malay literature encompasses every form of literary phenomenon either written or oral that existed or existed during the middle of 19th century. Basically, the demarcation is based on the introduction of printing machineries which revolutionised the concept of Malay literature. In terms of traditional Malay literature, Ismail differentiated it by the court composition and by the masses. The court literature is confined to written literature which is more advanced and cosmopolitan in nature whereas for the masses it is an orally transmitted tradition (Ismail, 1974, pp. 9-10).

⁵ The behavioural tradition is a performance types of tradition which includes customs, ritual, ceremonies, traditional theater, food and delicacies, art and craft such as those of knitting, weaving, carving, wood and metal works (cooper, bronze, silver and gold).

⁶ Material culture encompasses inherited artifacts such as costumes, musical instruments, architecture, vase and weaponry.

literature or oral literature⁷ which includes the narrative form of heritage (prose) and non-narrative (poetry). Among others, such narrative form or prose are those of myths, legends, animal tales, beneficial stories and *lipur lara* (soother of cares) whereas *pantuns*, charms, *selokas*, riddles, *talibun (sesomba)*, *teromba (perbilangangan adat)* and proverbs make up the poetries. From this verity of genres, the function and creation of works clearly show the genius of the Malay thought and creativities in coping with their surroundings.

After the independence in 1957, many local academicians began to explore this field, especially from the perspective of traditional Malay literature⁸ to replace the

vacuum left by the British administrator cum-academicians pioneered by Mohd. Taib Osman.⁹ Their intervention was timely as the nation had just gained its independence. In addition, world governing bodies such as UNESCO also assisted in channelling funds for collecting oral traditions and conducting relevant research especially folk literature in identifying and promoting solidarity among Malays freed from colonialism.¹⁰ Mohd. Taib Osman's writings have influenced local scholars since the 1960s and it continues to do so as seen in the works of Jamilah Haji

⁷ Oral literature is a form of literature disposed orally and it is part of an oral tradition or folklore. It is the earliest form of literature that existed in society during the primitive stage. It is also considered to be the oldest form of literature as its existence came before the written form of literature. Each form of literary genre is disseminated orally by words of mouth from one generation to the other. Oral literature is also known as folk literature based on its creator. Each individual in the groups is considered to be the owner collectively and each member is able to narrate it freely in terms of genre and at any particular time as the concept of copyright did not exist then. Folk literature or oral literature can be divided into two subdivisions, narrative in the form of prose and poetry as non-narrative.

⁸ Since 1993 by the publishing of namely *Kesusasteraan Melayu Tradisional* by DBP whereas other terminologies used are 'sastera Melayu lama' (oldern Malay literature) and 'sastera Melayu klasik' (classical Malay literature).

⁹ The Indonesian James Ananda has a different view from Mohd. Taib Osman. As Danandjaja (1986, p. 5), who prefers folklore puts it: "I'm not in agreement with the usage of oral tradition to replace folklore since oral tradition is more acute in its meaning compared to folklore which is very broad. Oral tradition only encompasses folk stories, riddles, proverbs and folk songs, whereas folklore's scope goes beyond them, like folk dance and folk architecture" (*Kami tidak setuju penggunaan istilah tradisi lisan untuk menggantikan istilah folklor, karena istilah tradisi lisan, mempunyai arti yang terlalu sempit, sedangkan arti folklor lebih luas. Tradisi lisan hanya mencakup cerita rakyat, teka-teki, peribahasa, dan nyanyian rakyat; sedangkan folklor mencakup lebih dari itu, seperti tarian rakyat dan arsitektur rakyat*).

¹⁰ See the project report on *Regional Seminar on Oral Tradition. Final Report, Kuching, Sarawak. 12-16 November 1973*.

Ahmad.¹¹ In the meantime, similar efforts have been undertaken by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the key government agency responsible in promoting language, literature and culture. Under the stewardship of its second director, Tun Syed Nasir Ismail (1957-1969), numerous research officers were sent throughout the country to collect and record folk stories before they disappeared. Most of these research officers who took part in the project were under graduate students doing part time jobs such as Baharuddin Zainal (Baha Zain), Zaharah Khalid, Zaharah Taha, Nik Maimunah Yahya, Hamsiah Abdul Wahid, and Sa'ad Haji Musa. Eventually, the project achieved its goals in collecting various form of folk literature either in prose or poetry. In terms of *lipur lara* (soother of cares), they succeeded in recording a huge collection of stories which were later published in a book

form under the 'DBP Classic Series' (*Siri Klasik DBP*) for 1960s readers. These *lipur lara* stories which they managed to record are listed below:

- i. *Cerita Raja Dera* (The Story of King Dera),
- ii. *Raja Gagak* (The Raven King),
- iii. *Selindung Bulan Kedah Tua* (The Old Kedah and Hidden Moon),
- iv. *Raja Donan* (King Donan),
- v. *Cerita Si-Gembang* (The Story of Si Gembang),
- vi. *Cerita Selampit* (The Story of Selampit),
- vii. *Bongsu Pinang Peribut* (The Story of Bongsu Pinang Peribut),
- viii. *Cerita Sulung Jawa* (The Story of Sulung Jawa),
- ix. *Hikayat Parang Putting* (The Tales of the Nipple Machete), and
- x. *Raja Donai Bahtera Kulit Kacang* (King Donai and the Peanut Shell Ship).

Interestingly, the issue of a suitable term to be used for such field either 'oral tradition'

¹¹ Several works of Mohd. Taib Osman include "Mengenalkan Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama," *Penulis* (1964); "Kesusasteraan Melayu dengan Corak Masyarakat dan Budayanya: Tradisi Lisan atau Sastera Rakyat yang bercorak Cerita," *Penulis* (1970); "Myths, Legends, and Folktales in Malay Culture," *ASPEC Quarterly of Cultural and Social Affairs* (1970); "Sastera Rakyat dalam Pembinaan Kesusasteraan Kebangsaan," *Dewan Sastera* (1974); "Pendokumentasian Sastera Rakyat dan Sastera Daerah Malaysia," *Dewan Sastera* (1976); and "Strategi Pendokumentasian Tradisi Lisan di Sabah," *Dewan Bahasa* (1977).

or 'folklore' did arise. Such an era can be considered as the transitional period from Winstedt's school of thought to Mohd. Taib Osman. However, oral tradition is a much preferred term for Mohd. Taib (1975, pp. 86-87) compared with folklore when he casually stated his views as follows:

Penggunaan istilah tradisi lisan atau oral tradition difikirkan lebih sesuai dan tepat daripada istilah folklore kerana istilah yang kemudian ini selalunya mendapat tanggapan yang berbeza daripada tujuan asalnya. Kalau pada mulanya istilah folklore ditujukan kepada aspek-aspek itu selalunya terdapat dalam masyarakat yang dikenali dengan label folk (atau volk dalam bahasa Jerman), sekarang ia menjadi satu istilah popular untuk ditujukan kepada benda-benda atau perkara-perkara yang kebenarannya disangsikan. Sebab itu bahan-bahan folklore selalu diterjemahkan sebagai dongeng... Untuk menghindarkan berlakunya salah tanggapan itu, maka istilah tradisi lisan atau oral tradition lebih diutamakan daripada folklore. Namun bahan-bahan yang dirangkumi oleh oral tradition itu samalah dengan yang ditunjukkan oleh istilah folklore pada awalnya.

[The usage of oral tradition or *tradisi lisan* is considered suitable and a perfect

terminology compared with folklore as the latter is usually perceived differently in its actual meaning. Obviously, at the beginning, folklore is referred to any aspect of society which is normally known under the label 'folk' (known as *volk* in German) but currently it has become a popular term referring to things or events whose truth is considered questionable. This is the reason why folklore materials are viewed as nonsensical. To avoid any wrong perceptions, the term *tradisi lisan* or oral tradition is preferred compared with folklore. Nevertheless, all the elements in oral traditions are similar to those in folklore.

Although Mohd. Taib admits that both oral tradition and folklore encompass similar set of materials, actually his preference lies with the former.¹² The reason for his selection is to avoid confusion since the term folklore has become very popular that can cause confusion and deviation of its actual meaning more so because the truth in folklore is doubtful as it is

¹² The materials contained in oral tradition as explained above by Mohd. Taib Osman are similar to the ones identified by Western scholars who placed them under the folklore label for collections from the Orang Asli, Malays, Sabahan and Sarawakian indigeneous peoples such as those of H.N. Evans Ivor (1923) in *Studies in Religion, Folklore, and Customs in British North Borneo and the Malay Peninsula*. Winstedt (1969) used the term extensively especially in his well-known work, *A History of Classical Malay Literature*.

considered nonsensical. Surprisingly, no materials on folklore were written in Malay by local scholars that eventually made it so popular. In relation to the matter, the 'Mohd. Taib Osman sect' established itself in Malaysia especially at the local universities dominating the field in the likes of Halimah Hassan (Universiti Putra Malaysia), Mohd. Khalid Taib and Mustafa Mohd. Isa (Universiti Sains Malaysia), Ismail Hamid, Mohd. Pozi Hj. Masurori and Inon Shaharuddin Abd. Rahman (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), Siti Aishah Mat Ali (Universiti Malaya) and Jamilah Hj. Ahmad (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka). Amin Sweeney¹³ joined the debate of this era when he criticized rather strongly

¹³ Patrick Lois Amin Sweeney (1938-2010), of Irish descent came to Malaya during the Emergency (1948-1960) to join the British Army. He became a Malaysian citizenship after he passed his HSC and was awarded a scholarship by the Kelantan State government to further his study in SOAS. In 1970 he gained his PhD in SOAS under the guidance of Hooykaas. He then joined the Institut Bahasa, Kesusasteraan dan Kebudayaan Melayu (IBKKM, currently Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu, ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. In 1977, Sweeney moved to join University of California at Berkeley, United States and stayed there until his retirement in 1998. During his tenure there, he held several posts such as Professor of Malay Language and Literature and also as the Head of the Department of Southern Asia and Southeast Asia (1986-1991). After his retirement, Sweeney moved to Indonesia and resided in Cibereum, Cipayung, Bogor until his death.

Winstedt's views on folk literature. For Sweeney (1976), if borrowing were to be over-emphasized, it would inevitably lead to an assumption that there would not be a single story left for the Malays to call their own. Sweeney insists that what matters most is to understand how the motifs from various sources have been deployed and remoulded to create and authenticate its 'Malay' settings. Sweeney sustained his criticism in several of his works such in *A Full Hearing: Orality and literacy in the Malay world (1987)* and *Malay Word Music. A Celebration of Oral Creativity (1994)*.

In Mohd. Taib Osman's views, folk literature should be seen and developed as a heritage which eventually made the field insignificant in the context of nation building. Such scenario makes the field of literature static, outdated and becomes only as complementary subject to the field of Malay literature as a whole. The function in portraying identity and civilization through folklore becomes insignificant as the nation moved forward to achieve its ultimate goals, Vision 2020. It is only essentials during the early years of independent and in 1960s and 1970s as the spirits of identity and civilization has faded away by time due to the current needs of life in this fast moving world of the 21st century. The new generations of 1990s and in the new millennium were totally of a different generation. Such situation made the field of folk literature a dead field. Therefore, a new perspective in the folk literature research is much needed and urban folklore provides a promising hope.

THE WORLDLINESS OF FOLKLORE STUDIES

'Folk' and Urban Folklore

The West especially, the United States and Europe, is considered the centre of knowledge. The advancement of knowledge in the West through various intellectual activities is very well nurtured and this includes the field of folklore. Notable scholars in the field include W. Bascom, S. Thompson, A. Dundes, D. Ben-Amos, J. H. Brunvand, V. Propp, and R. Bauman. Their involvement, according to Sims and Stephens (2005, pp. 174-201) resulted in the introduction of various new methodologies and theories such as functionalism,¹⁴ structuralism,¹⁵ psychoanalytic interpretation,¹⁶ and also post-structuralism. Some of these new methodologies and theories were in fact introduced as early as the 1930s in Western academy, though Malaysian universities had to wait for almost 50 more years before their scholars could return from their studies abroad to introduce 'new methodologies' and 'new theories.'

Alan Dundes (1980, p. 2) is one of the leading figures in the field of folklore studies who has brought in a new dimension in the

debate on the conception of the 'folk.' Since the 19th century, the 'folk' has been defined as the lower stratum groups of people referring especially to the peasant, savage and primitive.¹⁷ Such view contrasted the 'folk' against what was perceived to be the more 'civilised' urban society based on their writing and reading literacies. As peasants, they were considered to be illiterates. These earlier, built-in biased perceptions could well be deployed against the marginalised through a set of crude labels such as the uncivilised, un-European, primitive and rustic; and deemed as people who were dispossessed of the best traditions and 'lore.' Furthermore, the repertoires of this group of people were considered traditional in nature, full of fantasies, charming, spontaneous, unsophisticated, uncritical and obsolete. Interestingly, these views have also been echoed in Malaysian scholarship especially in the works of Mohd. Taib (1975, 1981 & 1982), Ismail (1987) and Jamilah (1993). Dundes (1980, pp. 1-19) has refuted such a restrictive definition because he believes peasants will undergo

¹⁴ Bascom (1965) is well-known for his monumental article entitled, 'Four Function of Folklore': amusement, validating culture, education and identity.

¹⁵ Prop with his 'function of Dramatis Personae' while Stith Thompson with his Motif-Index and Type-Index.

¹⁶ Pioneered by Freud but championed by Dundes in terms of folklore studies

¹⁷ Folk was defined in contrast with or in opposition to some other group. Folk was understood to be a group of people who constituted the lower stratum, the so-called *vulgus in popula* – in contrast with the upper stratum or elite of that society. The folk were contrasted on the one hand with "civilisation" – they were the uncivilised element in a civilised society – but on the other hand, they were also contrasted with the so-called savage or primitive society, which was considered even lower on the evolutionary ladder (Dundes, 1980)..

social transformation as they gradually become part of the urban community; they tend to lose some of their agrarian qualities due to development and modernisation. He believes that modernisation will promote uniformity in all cultural aspects such as language, education, food, clothing and ways of living, thus paving the way for the emergence of a new set of lore while the 'folk' go about their everyday lives. In this context, Dundes has interpreted the 'folk' as any group of people that shares at least one similar factor with each other such as occupation, language, interest or religion. In theory, the group may be as large as a country or as small as a family as explained by Dundes and Pagter (1975, p. xv):

The modern definition of folk as any group whatsoever that shares at least one common factor-language, occupation, religion, ethnicity-makes it possible to consider the folklore of various urban groups. Labor unions, industrial companies, civil rights groups, and hippies are all examples of urban folk groups who have their own special sets of traditions.

However, he points out that what matters most is that the folk groups must have their own traditions. Although the group members may not know each other but they understand the core of the shared tradition and could feel that they are part of the formed group. Clearly, there is a possibility that the existing group will be adopting or

adapting to a new set of tradition which is completely different from that of the rural, marginalise and traditional elements. Its values will be modern, culturally-sophisticated and shared among the urban communities. Folklore needs to loosen up its perspective and conventions for its own survival. The significance of urban folklore and its co-existence in the modern urban technological world has been highlighted by Dundes and Pagter (1991, p. 20) who disagreed with the view that folklore is merely a nostalgic social and cultural practice. They wrote:

The idea that folklore reflects only the past is incorrect. Yes, some folklore reflects the past, but there is also folklore, ongoing, current, which reflects the present, the culture of today. As more and more individuals move from rural to urban settings, a trend which is observable in many parts of the world, the folklore of offices and of bureaucracy is bound to continue.

Once a society has changed through evolution, its tradition may follow suit. Therefore, any form of unpopular traditions may be left behind due to its loss of functionality while at the same time, a new tradition which is more significant and relevant emerges. Folklore is not limited to a time frame but it is a continuous process which mirrors its current culture. The society that possesses such traditions is the print based society and they are no longer

an oral based society. Furthermore, "...the folklore of offices and of bureaucracy..." as stressed by Dundes and Pagter above are humorous folklore such as jokes in the forms of cartoon, chain letters, memo, poetry and short notes that are disseminated through photocopy machines in work place environment. What made these types of modern stories as urban folklore is its criterion of 'existing in multiple versions and in more than one time or place' (Dundes and Pagter 1975, p. xix). In relation to this, the perception of associating folklore to illiteracy is unfounded (Dundes 1980, pp. 1-6). Well in fact, Dundes (1980, p. 17) has pointed out that technology actually promotes folklore in terms of the transmission of exciting source of inspiration for the new generation of folklore.

In practice, Sweeney who championed the field of folklore in Malaysia does not care about the existence of the two conflicting views between oral tradition and folklore (the thoughts of Winstedt and Mohd. Taib Osman). To him, what matters most is the 'purity of the tradition' and 'originality of the data' (Sweeney 1987, pp. 10-11). Sweeney (1987, 1990) doubts the existence of such modern form of folklore in the context of Malay society and he strongly opposes it. He is more concerned with seeing folklore in its purely traditional nature and thriving in society whereby the practice of oral transmission will not be discriminated against by the dominant written and print tradition. Furthermore, the originality of data must be ascertained

through a data collection procedure that privileges the narrator voice through direct recording or recitation by the narrator.¹⁸ Sweeney (1987, p. 10) raises his concerns as follows:

"Folklore" is equally unsatisfactory terms for the orally produced materials with which we are concerned, particularly since the recent efforts of Dundes (Dundes and Pagter, 1975), which have convincingly demonstrated that the compass of folklore need not be confined to orally transmitted materials. This has, however, removed one of the few criteria upon which folklorists are able to reach some consensus in defining their field. Dundes's contention that his 'urban paperwork' written materials are folklore, that is, traditional, insofar as they "exist in multiple versions and in more than one time or place" (1975, p. xix) would force us to label all traditional Malay literature "folklore."

Besides this new form of folklore as stressed by Dundes dan Pagter above, the other terminology which also formed part of the urban folklore is urban legend. Jan Harold Brunvand (1981, p. xi) defines urban legend as:

¹⁸ Further explanation, see Sweeney (1994).

...stories that most people heard as true accounts of real-life experiences, and few except scholars recognize as an authentic and characteristic part of our (American folk) contemporary folklore. ... refer to these believable stories about vanishing hitchhikers, batter-fried rats, grandmothers' runaway corpses and the like as "urban belief tales" or, simply, "urban legends." ...Urban legends, ...are realistic stories concerning recent events (or alleged events) with an ironic or supernatural twist. They are an integral part of white Anglo-American culture and are told and believed by some of the most sophisticated "folk" of the modern society-young people, urbanites, and the well-educated.

The essence to Brunvand's definition above shows that urban legends are stories which are modern and contemporary in nature. Such stories are supposedly true account of believable recent events that occurred in real-life. In one example, Brunvand drew the story of the vanishing hitchhiker which is well-known among the American society - the story of the disappeared hitchhiker whose return as a ghost were depicted in numerous versions.

Accordingly, the contemporary Malaysian society is no longer a purely oral based society as once hoped for by Sweeney. Malaysia has changed so much since it achieved independence. The

National Education Policy has successfully eliminated society of basic illiteracy, the traditional criteria begin to become redundant and almost at the same time the characteristics of urbanisation begin to emerge. However, in 20 years' time, any tradition will be regarded 'traditional' and 'conservative' before decidedly and qualitatively considered as 'classic'. This paper argues that the Malaysian society perceives its own folk literature or oral literature as having entered a kind of vicious cycle which will unfold itself in the aforementioned order: old, traditional and classic. The survival or rather revival of an oral tradition in such a situation must be championed by later generation, one that bears the traits of its 'ancestors' and yet, capable of adjusting to the demands of changing times. This is precisely the reason why the future of oral tradition lies within the landscape and uncharted terrains of urban folklore and its emergent sub-genres.

Folklore and Social Media of the Digital Age

Computer technologies have become the necessary tools for communications and competitions in this globalised world. The advancement of computer and the internet have been the driving force behind the dynamics of global economics and politics in the 21st century. The young generations nowadays are capable users of various platforms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp including their personal blogs. Through social networking sites, group members

are able to exchange stories, update current status, distribute news, express their sorrow and happiness and may even conduct business transactions. This means that the involvement of social networking sites inevitably is transforming the 'traditional' notion of urban folklore because these platforms have become the new terrains for urban folklore. It is possible to say that cyber culture exists because of the existence of folkloric sites in the Internet. E-mail for instance, has become the major medium for society to have a connection, to reach each other and also to interact (Bronner, 2009).

Since the younger generations today are both users and audiences of various forms of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and of course, the blogs, we cannot afford but to see the involvement of such social networking sites as part of the emergent urban folklore. Through social networking sites, group members are able to post their daily thoughts, find out each other's status, make speculations or analyses, seek help from strangers and openly share their sorrow and happiness. If scrutinised further, folkloric items emerging from such groups can be considered a verbal form of literature within which is embedded their ethos and worldviews. In other words, it is something which is delivered is not solely for entertainment purposes but it also performs other social functions such as deliberating their emotions for the things that happened in their lives. Based on this perspective, folklore represents the group personal image of them (Dundes, 1980, p.

9). As an image of the group, interpretation of folklore is significant and much desired. In this respect, the meaning of certain items of folklore can be ascertained. Dundes (1980, p. viii) elaborates:

... it represents a people's image of themselves. The image may be distorted but at least the distortion comes from the people, not from some outside observer armed with a range of a priori premises. Folklore as a mirror of culture provides unique raw material for those eager to better understand themselves and others.

All items of folklore are not only for the purposes of collecting, recording, classifying, transcribing, editing, archiving and publishing – not just in computers but in our smart phones and tablets too – but more than that, because they are loaded with variety of meanings given the many ways of reading them. Things which otherwise would be considered to be nonsensical and irrational by folklore's common standards should be subject to critical interpretations for they might surprisingly reveal certain ethos and worthy worldviews of the bearers. It is through interpretation that our understanding on the pattern of the society and its awareness will increase because such awareness will be shared with the others in society. Dundes (1980, p. xi) explains that, "[t]hrough an understanding of worldview principles, we should be better able to comprehend ourselves as well as others."

Undeniably, urban folklore came into existence due to the advancement of communication technology. The cyber culture enables people to interact. Unknown to each other, they exchange stories and jokes, distribute news, share information and experiences and express their views and emotions. The subject discussed are the 'tradition,' in which they could feel they are part of the group. On the same account, these groups are formed based on similar interests such as in entertainment, sports, experience, field of study and hobby - travelling, pets, music, foods, cars, bikes, and movies. They are the chat groups of colleagues, neighbours, car lovers, animal lovers, music lovers, and sport lovers chatting and debating current issues or any incidents that occurred recently that attracted the interest of general public. From this perspective, it is crystal clear the existence of the fundamental criterion of folklore, group and tradition. Since the tradition is contemporary in nature, there is no doubt such tradition is qualified to be labelled as urban folklore because it suits the interest of the current young generations, the capable users of social networking sites. Bonner (2009, p. 31) says:

Youth has also influenced the growing compactness of the Internet, which can be utilized on the run and in private, away from home and the watchful eye of authority. Youth are thought to engage the Internet particularly because they have more to say,

fantasize, or worry about, and they derive gratification from widening their circles of contacts into definable networked cliques. It enables their transition out of the home, giving them the physical mobility and social connections often associated with cultural passage into adulthood. The openness of youthful endeavor is indicated by the number of electronic means to tell others what one is doing. Facebook has a prominent feature of posting what one is doing presently and Twitter is a service to stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: what are you doing? This linkage of action to age is yet another way the Internet mediates and alters tradition.

Ontologically, Malaysia is not much different from the rest of the world in terms of the globalised phenomenon of urban folklore discussed above. In the Malaysian scenario, this social phenomenon created various forms of groups based on entertainment, sport, experience, and hobby such as EPL (English Premier League) fans especially the Devils MU, the Harimau Malaya; pets' lovers, Kembara groups etc. They too reach out to each other and interact, express their views, exchange stories, update current status, distribute news, share information, exchange jokes, exchange experiences, emotions, promote ideologies and also

discuss current issues and incidences. Accordingly, due to freedom of expression, some members of these groups would convey matters that are sensitive especially in the plural society of Malaysia and get entangled with the authority. This immense wealth of information and stories that these groups convey are actually tradition in terms of folklore. Therefore, the existence, nay, survival of urban folklore in Malaysia is promising. These warehouse of stories are contemporary in nature and turned them into urban folklore. Furthermore, as some of this stories fit Brunvand's definition of urban legend, true account of recent happenings that occurred in real-life and much believed could surely be classified as urban legends. The unfortunate fatal crash of the Malaysian airplanes, flight MH370 and MH17, the introduction of the GST and the Duke Expressway fatal accidents recently are among the hotly debated topic in the internet and which are examples of local urban legends.

At the Frontier of Malay Folkloreship

It appears that clouds of ignorance do still linger upon the utilitarian jargons of 'urban folklore' and 'urban legend.' Although considered somewhat 'alienating', both terminologies have indeed intrigued the local academic circles who seem wary of the fact that the interest in the more popular terms like 'folklore' and 'oral tradition' are rapidly declining, and eventually losing their significance in academia and scholarship. The conventional purposes of

folklore for recognising identity, promoting solidarity, and as a signifier to the evolution of civilisation have little, if no relevance, to the current generations. The contemporary society is a changing society especially in terms of the hypertext, multiple-identity world of ICT and cyber traditions. They are no longer a purely oral based society as desired and imagined by Sweeney. Currently, folklore, namely urban folklore and urban legend, has been virtually diffused electronically and become accessible from a digital repository such as websites, blogsites and social networking sites.

Due to the current development in the study of folklore, The School of Malay Language, Literature and Cultural Studies (*Pusat Pengajian Bahasa, Kesusasteraan dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, PPBKKM – Malay Studies), Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, National University of Malaysia intends to take the School to greater heights in terms of Malay folkloreship. By taking such steps in playing the leading role in promoting urban folklore and urban legend in its curriculum, PPBKKM will be placing itself at the nation's forefront and in line with current trend of the world folkloreship. Through such perspective, literature is seen as a phenomenon that exists in parallel to the changing way of life in the contemporary world, the world of IT as folklore diffused in cyberspace via the internet, blog and social networking sites. Through such new and social media, urban folklore and urban legend now exist as a continuation of the yesteryears whereby the

process of reflecting upon one's tradition now means relating society's thought and creativity to the current phenomenon. As an ongoing process, focusing on urban folklore could be perceived as something anew and thus giving freshness and originality to the field of research study. Furthermore, it will become more interesting and exciting as it touches upon every aspect of life and eventually may reveal certain ethos and worldviews of the bearers, the current young generations and the capable users of social networking sites.

However, while promoting urban folklore is desirable, it is unwise to abandon the importance of folklore in terms of recognising identity, promoting the spirit of solidarity and as a signifier of the evolution of human civilisation. Failure to promote these fundamental functions, will surely create a disastrous effect, as future generation will become ignorance of its own roots and existence. Pertaining to these pressing issues, it is wise perhaps, that conventional folklore is taught at the undergraduate level, whereas urban folklore is offered at the postgraduate level. Having a two-tier programme of study as such has been effective in demonstrating how the traditional-urban continuum salience embeds the sub-disciplinary study of folklore in a modern, sociocultural phenomenon. Indeed, the efforts in introducing urban folklore at the School have been quite a fruitful endeavour. To date, several postgraduate theses at MA level have been written on the discourse of urban folklore. The topics range from the wellbeing of Putrajaya

residences, MU¹⁹ glory in *pantun*, Mat Rempit in *pantun* and Malaysian cuisine as shown in Table 1 below:

CONCLUSION

'Folklore' has performed various functions ever since its introduction to the Malay World in 19th century. During the colonial period, folklore was used by the British colonial as a tool for gathering information which is vital in terms of colonialisation. However, after Independence, local scholars use it under the much preferred term 'oral tradition' in identifying identity and promoting solidarity among Malays. In time, such perspective lost its touch and significance as the interest in folklore declined rapidly and made literature static and outdated. Accordingly, Dundes's monumental views on folklore in 1980 changed the general perception on the subject matter. Folklore is not only seen as belonging to the lower stratum groups of people but is also perceived as the more civilized urban society based on their writing and reading literacies. With the advancement of current communication technology, folklore not only exists in merely oral tradition but it diffused in cyber space via the internet, blog and social networks. Through such medium, urban folklore and urban legend exists as a continuation of yesteryear tradition when one discusses the current phenomenon as society's thought and creativity.

The existence of urban folklore is phenomenal. Such social phenomenon created various form of groups based

¹⁹ Manchester United.

Table 1
MA Thesis on Urban Folklore and Urban Legends

No.	Title	Candidate	Year Start	Year Completed
1.	<i>Folklor Bandaran: Suara Warga Putrajaya</i> (Urban Folklore: The Voices of Putrajaya Residence) (Master of Arts)	Zaiton Mohd Rashdi (P37829)	2008	Completed (2008)
2.	<i>Manchester United dan Legenda Urban: Satu Analisis Ke Atas Pantun Siber</i> (Manchester United and Urban Legend: An Analysis on Cyber Pantun) (Master of Arts)	Siti Arash Zakaria (P61452)	2012	Completed (July 2013)
3.	<i>Folklor Urban dan Pantun Siber: Satu Analisis Gejala Mat Rempit Berdasarkan Teori Sosiologi Sastera Strukturalisme Genetik Lucien Goldmann</i> (Urban Folklore and Cyber Pantun: An Analysis on the Mat Rempit Phenomena based on Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism of Sociology of Literature) (Master of Arts)	Nurul Fitriah Afifi Baharuddin (61789)	2012	Completed (July 2013)
4.	<i>Jurang Digital dalam Cerita Jenaka Internet: Satu Wacana</i> (Digital Gap Humour in the Internet) (Master of Arts)	Siti Salasiah Tamam (P64352)	2013	Completed (Jan. 2014)
5.	<i>Mona Fandey: Legenda Urban Di Malaysia</i> (Mona Fendy: Malaysian Urban Legend) (Master of Arts)	Norashikin Hamzah (P66761)	2013	Completed (August 2014)
6.	<i>Skeptis dan Sterotaip Terhadap Kereta Nasional: Satu Wacana Daripada Perspektif Folklor Urban</i> (Sceptism and Stereotyping of National Cars: A Discourse from the Perspective of Urban Folklore) (Master of Arts)	Muhammad Izzuddin Nawi (P67850)	2013	Completed (August 2014)
7.	<i>Juadah Malaysia dalam Folklor Urban</i> (Malaysian Cuisine in Urban Folklore) (Master of Philosophy)	Suhaila Muhamed (P75235)	2014	On Going

Source: Own Data

especially on entertainment, sports, experience, and hobby among the current young generations who are capable users of social network. As they reach out to each other and interact, they express their views, exchange stories, update current status, distribute news, share information,

exchange jokes, exchange experiences, emotions, promote ideologies and also discuss current issues. Besides being a tradition for this particular groups, these materials of folklore represent a people's image of themselves that could reveal certain ethos and worldviews of the bearers.

Through such perspective, literature is seen as phenomenon that exists parallel to the changes in the way of life in the contemporary world, the world of IT and cyber traditions. In regard to this, the School of Malay Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, National University of Malaysia lead the path in promoting urban folklore and its sub-genre urban legend especially at post-graduate level. That such efforts have been fruitful yielding success are evident in the encouraging number of Master's theses produced recently.

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