

SYAIR IN THE LIFE OF CONTEMPORARY MALAYS IN SINGAPORE

(*Syair dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat Melayu Kontemporari di Singapura*)

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To cite this article (*Rujukan makalah ini*): Sa'eda Buang & Kartini Anwar. (2024). Syair in the life of the contemporary Malays in Singapore. *Malay Literature*, 37(1), 49–78. [https://doi.org/10.37052/ml37\(1\)no3](https://doi.org/10.37052/ml37(1)no3)

Received: Peroleh:	7/5/2024	Revised: Semakan	14/6/2024	Accepted: Terima:	18/6/2024	Published online: Terbit dalam talian:	20/6/2024
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Abstract

Syair, a form of traditional Malay poetry believed to have been adapted from the Persian or Arab civilization, has been a popular performative art in the Malay world, including Singapore. It has evolved since its first introduction to the Malay Archipelago with the coming of Islam, and what constitutes as *syair* today is a culmination of its language structure, aesthetics, and depth of author's insights as a form of the Malay community's creative art. Once prevalent amongst the Malays until the 1970s, *syair* has significantly declined in popularity with the emergence of modern poetry and printed prose, and modern-day forms of entertainment, among other things, though it is still familiar to the urban and contemporary Malays in Singapore. Based on the data collected from a research project (2018 to 2020) in Singapore, this paper demonstrates that *syair* in the form of rare *hikayat* (tales) texts and manuscripts are still kept as personal collection and family heirloom. Albeit dwindling in number, the art of *syair* recital is slowly

eroding if not for individuals who perceive the preservation of *syair* texts and the art of *syair* recital as their honourable responsibility, akin to preserving the Malays' social memory and collective wisdom.

Keywords: *Syair*, traditional Malay poetry, Singapore literature, social memory, *syair* recital, Jawi manuscripts

Abstrak

Syair merupakan puisi Melayu tradisional yang dipercayai diadaptasi daripada tamadun Parsi atau Arab, telah menjadi seni persembahan yang popular di Alam Melayu, termasuk di Singapura. Syair telah berkembang sejak pertama kali diperkenalkan ke Kepulauan Melayu dengan kedatangan Islam, dan perkara yang membentuk syair pada hari ini ialah kemuncak struktur bahasa, estetika dan kedalaman wawasan pengarang sebagai bentuk seni kreatif masyarakat Melayu. Walaupun pernah menjadi lazim dalam kalangan orang Melayu sehingga tahun 1970-an, populariti syair telah menurun dengan ketara dengan kemunculan puisi moden dan prosa bercetak dan bentuk hiburan moden, antara lain, tetapi masih biasa dalam kalangan orang Melayu bandar dan kontemporari di Singapura. Berdasarkan data yang dikumpul daripada projek penyelidikan (2018 hingga 2020) di Singapura, hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa syair dalam bentuk teks dan manuskrip hikayat yang jarang ditemui masih disimpan sebagai koleksi peribadi dan pusaka keluarga, walaupun jumlahnya semakin berkurangan, tetapi seni bacaan syair semakin terhakis jika tidak kerana individu yang menganggap pemeliharaan teks syair dan seni bacaan syair sebagai tanggungjawab mereka yang mulia, sama seperti memelihara ingatan sosial dan kebijaksanaan kolektif orang Melayu.

Kata kunci: Syair, puisi Melayu tradisional, kesusasteraan Singapura, memori sosial, dendangan syair, manuskrip Jawi

INTRODUCTION

The term *syair*, a traditional form of Malay poetry, is derived from the Arabic word *shi'ir*, which refers to poetry in general. Just as other forms of traditional works of prose such as *kitab* (religious treatises) and *hikayat* (tales, legends), *syair* has been ingeniously utilised by the Malay community as a “device” to record historical events, socio-cultural happenings, natural phenomena, and day-to-day occurrences seen from the perspectives of the authors and community at large. Briefly, *syair* is a poem with many four-

line stanzas using *a-a-a-a* rhyme scheme to tell a complete story—these include romantic adventures such as *Syair Bidasari* (1886), depiction of scandalous affairs in the Singapore palace such as *Syair Tuanku Prabhu di Negeri Singapura* (1841), and description of natural disasters such as *Syair Negeri Lampung yang Dinaiki oleh Air dan Hujan Abu* (1883/1884). However, unlike other poetic genres such as *seloka*¹, *gurindam*², and *pantun*³, and foreign-influenced poems such as *mathnawi*⁴ and *ruba 'i*⁵, *syair* is relatively more popular (Muhammad Yusoff Hashim, 1992:49, Teeuw, 1966:433). Generally deemed to have been adapted from Persian or Arab poetry, the origin of *syair* is inconclusive. Al-Attas (1968) championed the notion that Hamzah Fansuri, a 16th-century Sumatran Sufi scholar and writer, was the originator of *syair*, and earlier in 1952, Hooykas (cited in Teeuw, 1966:433) asserted that although bearing a foreign name, *syair* is an indigenous form of poetry. Other than *syair* texts, *syair* recitation as a performative art is popular in the Malay world. In Singapore, whether in its performative or textual formats as in manuscripts, *syair* has been popular and a reading staple for the Malay community in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

***Syair* in the Communal Spaces of the Early Malay Community in Singapore**

The writing and reproduction of Malay manuscripts, including *syair*, thrived in Singapore particularly when the printing machine was introduced in 1817 and Singapore became the centre of the Malay literary scene in the 19th century up until the mid-20th century. Other early *syair* texts produced in Singapore include *Syair Singapura Terbakar* authored by Abdullah Munsyi in 1843 and *Syair Khadamuddin* (1917) crafted by Raja Aisyah Sulaiman, a Riau princess and author who penned down her social and political observations critically through the said *syair* whilst residing in Singapore after the demise of her husband, Raja Khalid Hitam, a Riau statesman and scholar. As amongst the first few cosmopolitan and trading states of the Straits Settlements, Singapore in the early 19th century saw its dystopian trajectory in the hands of British imperialism. Treacherous business practices, the immigration of their own henchmen, and socio-economic injustices and political hegemony by the British colonial administration throughout the land gave rise to a *syair* genre unique in Singapore, that is, *syair* of dissent. Recopied in 1835, *Syair Dagang Berjual Beli*, *Syair Potong Gaji* by Tuan Simi⁶, and *Syair Tuanku Prabhu di Negeri Singapura*

whose writer is unknown, are recognised as *karya gelap* or black oeuvre. Muhammad Haji Salleh (1994:ix) argued that these *syair* bear witness to the sorrow and pain of those whose freedom, social status, and dignity have been obliterated by the colonial power.

In the 19th century, there was a flurry of activities in publishing, selling, purchasing, preserving, reading, borrowing, and lending of Malay manuscripts, including *syair*, by the Malay community in Singapore. Raja Aisyah Raja Sulaiman is cited to have been actively involved in the borrowing and lending of Malay manuscripts while she domiciled in Singapore in the first two decades of the 20th century (Ding, 1994:119-120). In Malaysia and Singapore, for example, the first printing press was started on Prince of Wales Island, Penang, in 1806, followed by missionary presses in Malacca in 1815 and in Singapore in 1822 (Rony, 1991:129). With more *hikayat* and *syair* to peddle, Malay bookshops actively advertised their catalogues or book lists of their holdings through the press of the day, such as *Jawi Peranakan* (1876-1895), and received book orders in person or through mail. According to Proudfoot (2002), in 1890- the first year for which the researchers of this study have orderly data for output of printed works- one Muslim printer in Singapore issued 10 titles, which alone amounted to 10 000 printed books. Reading materials such as Malay manuscripts, once costly, scarce, and sequestered- had become cheap, plentiful, and accessible. Briefly, the culture of buying, borrowing, lending, and keeping of Malay literary works was ubiquitous. Many families kept Malay manuscripts in Jawi, including *syair*, as family heirloom to be read for leisure and handed down from generation to generation.

In the past, the relationship between *syair* and performative art was intimate. It was believed that only through recital for an audience can the innate meaning of a *syair* come alive and be appreciated effectively. For a *syair* to be significant, one should “have it read aloud with its melody, that is like a song, and its meaning will emerge more clearly” (Putten & Azhar, 1995, as cited in Proudfoot, 2002). The reading of a *syair* text was frequently done as a communal activity, whether as a learning text in religious classes or as a cultural endeavour, or simply for communal entertainment by individuals with special talent in storytelling, singing, and playing musical instruments (Mustafa Mohd Isa, 1984). A glimpse of emotional interconnectivity between the *syair* reader and the audience, and the reader with himself that transpires during the reading *majlis* (a gathering to hear *hikayat* and/or *syair* reading) is found in the preface of *Hikayat Anak Pengajian* by Safirin bin Usman Fadli. The audience, both

men and women, were transfixed to the reader's beautiful voice and tune and, not infrequently, the ladies fell in love with the reader, while the men found that their own love experiences were enhanced by the recitation. Sometimes, the reader also experienced the ecstasy of love while listening to his own voice (Braginsky, 2002:44).

Proudfoot (2002) suggested that prior to the presence of printing machines, *syair* recital had its role in maintaining one's political power. As *syair* manuscripts were scarce and would only be handed over from the *syair* master to his carefully chosen successor, *syair* ownership therefore indicated the latter's rise to a special position and power. In another instance, *syair* reflected its power when the captive audience transcended the physical space as they immersed in the tales recited. As time progressed and even with the reproduction of *syair* texts, it continued to be recited to an audience in a variety of popular melodies such as "Selendang Delima" or "bangsawan" (opera), "Dandan Setia," and "Narasi" to attract and maintain their attention (Zurinah Hassan, 2009). Largely functioning as a medium for socialisation and cultural preservation, *syair* recital filled the social, educational, and cultural spaces for this early community.

The actual number of *syair* melodies known to the Malays in Southeast Asia is not conclusive. At this juncture, a brief illustration of efforts by *syair* enthusiasts to record *syair* melodies from within the Malay Archipelago is necessary. In his attempt to collect *syair* tunes from the region, *syair* guru Roslan Madun (2020) managed to secure seven from Brunei, viz. "Irama Saparas", "Berungai Lanjar", "Semercu Gunung", "Tambang Begawan", "Tambang Beranyut", "Dendang Beradu", and "Siti Zubaidah" (Brunei version). From "Daik Lingga, Indonesia, Roslan gathered "Dandan Setia", "Syair Burung", and "Selendang Delima" melodies, and from Tanjung Pinang, Indonesia, three more melodies, viz. "Irama Perang", "Irama Burung", and "Irama Kapal". In Tanjong Balai Asahan, Indonesia, Roslan learnt four more tunes, namely "Senandung Asahan", "Seranggah", "Didong", and "Qasidah Asahan". In Medan, he acquired "Syair Munajat", "Siti Zubaidah", "Selendang Delima", "Dendang Langkat", "Irama Ahoi", "Tukukur Balam", and "Berdangai". In Dumai, his last destination, Roslan collected 10 more tunes, viz. "Irama Berghondak", "Irama Kapal", "Irama Berdindung", "Irama Mengayun", "Irama Bergamboh", "Irama Mayang diumbuk", "Irama Dodoi Anak", "Irama Selendang Delim", "Irama Rawi", and "Irama Burun" g. As presented in Table 1, "Irama Burung" appears to be most popular with four out six places familiar with this tune, followed by "Irama Selendang Delima":

Table 1 Syair Melodies from within the Malay Archipelago.

Places	Syair Tunes or Melodies Collected										
Brunei	“Irama Sapparas”	“Berungai Lanjar”	“Semercu Gunung”	“Tambang Begawan”	“Tambang Beranyut”	“Dandang Beradu”	“Siti Zubaidah “(Brunei version)”				
Daik Lingga, Indonesia	“Dandan Setia”	“Syair Burung”	“Selendang Delima”								
Tanjung Pinang, Indonesia	“Irama Perang”	“Irama Burung”	“Irama Kapal”								
Tanjung Balai Asahan, Indonesia	“Senandung Asahan”	“Seranggah”	“Didong”	“Qasidah Asahan”							
Medan, Indonesia	“Syair Munajat”	“Siti Zubaidah”	“Selendang Delima”	“Dandang Langkat”	“Irama Ahoi”	“Tukukur Balam”	“Berdangai”				
Dumai, Indonesia	“Irama Berghondak”	“Irama Burung”	“Irama Kapal”	“Irama Mengayun”	“Irama Bergamboh”	“Irama Mayang Diumbuk”	“Irama Dodoi Anak”	“Irama Selendang Delima”	“Irama Rawi”	“Irama Berdinding”	

Through radio broadcasting under Radio Malaya (1948–1956), and thereafter Radio Singapura from 1959 to the 1980s, *syair* recitation was kept rife in the Malay community by means of a weekly series called *Bangsawan di Udara* (opera off air), featuring traditional Malay epics and folktales⁷ that interspersed with *syair* as chorus lines and interludes. *Syair* subsequently declined in popularity with the emergence of modern forms of entertainment, among other things. Albeit its decline in popularity, was the practice of *syair* recital continued by the community? Is *syair* retained by the urban and contemporary Malays in Singapore as a cultural memory? What melody and special techniques do they use in reading/reciting the *syair*? Do they still keep *syair* manuscripts or reprints as their personal collection? If they do (or otherwise), what is their rationale? To extract responses to these questions, a research project was conducted in Singapore from 2018 to 2020⁸. The following section of this paper discusses the sampling and methodology of the research project, followed by the findings of the project in relation to *syair* in the contemporary Malay community in Singapore.

METHODOLOGY

Authors have mentioned that part of this paper's data is accrued from the findings of a three-year research project entitled “Reinstating Malay manuscripts as cultural heritage through locating personal manuscripts collections and re-discovering the art of manuscript recital of the Malay community in Singapore” (2018–2020). Cultural heritage includes the tangible (such as books) and intangible (such as stories, values) legacy of a group or community that authors inherit from previous generations. It needs to be emphasized here that the research aims of this project, and therefore research questions, are numerous and go beyond *syair*. However, specific issues and data only relevant to *syair* are shared in this paper.

The research study employed the qualitative approach of cultural ethnography, with a purposive sampling plan. The partial ethnography approach or “ethnographic perspective” (Green & Bloome, 1997:183) of cultural ethnography is viewed as a more focused approach than full ethnography and therefore is applied in this study. It directs the study to aspects of everyday life, such as examining the role of Malay manuscripts in supporting the inculcation of Malay cultural traditions. In this case, it is collecting the manuscripts and maintaining the art of manuscript recital such as *syair*. Purposive sampling is designed to extract important, relevant, and directed information from a particular group of subjects with certain field knowledge or characteristics to answer the purpose of a study

(Cohen et al., 2007). In the case of this research project, a group of subjects with knowledge of Malay manuscripts and the art of manuscript recital (recitation of *syair*) was selected. As the manuscripts, including *syair*, are written in Jawi script, the reading of Jawi manuscript requires individuals with Jawi literacy. Therefore, graduates of Malay vernacular schools or *madrrasah* were identified as the main bulk of the respondents. Jawi reading and writing was taught in the Malay vernacular schools and the *madrrasah* until the closure of government-run Malay schools in 1986/7 in Singapore. Reading Malay literature texts, such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah*, and *syair* texts such as *Syair Selendang Delima*, *Syair Siti Zubaidah* and *Syair Dandan Setia* (Rosnani Suni, 2004, Awang Had Salleh, 1979), was part of the curriculum then. Since the closure of the Malay vernacular schools, Jawi was no longer taught as a school subject. The last batch of students of the last two Malay secondary schools, viz. Sang Nila Utama and Tun Sri Lanang, totalled 94 and 139 respectively. By 2018, the year when our study was conducted, those said students were aged between 47 and 50 years old. This age category was determined by considering the year Malay schools were closed in Singapore, viz. 1986/7, during which time the subjects were probably 16 years old upon reaching Secondary Four, and adding to that the 32 years of gap between 1986 and 2018. However, authors acknowledged that Jawi manuscript owners are not necessarily Jawi literate, and the reasons for their keeping of the manuscripts could be other than reading the texts. Hence, efforts to include respondents who are not Jawi literate yet preserve Jawi manuscripts were embarked. Despite our attempts, only one such respondent was successfully included, reflecting a relationship between Jawi text ownership and Jawi proficiency of the owner that the researchers aimed to confirm. This matter is discussed in the “Rationale for Preserving *Syair* Texts and Manuscripts” section.

The sampling was recruited from the researchers’ social circles through recommendations and advertisements, as well as from weekend and weekly evening religious classes held at mosques that are frequently attended by congregations of 47 years old and above. With the permission of the mosque committee and the religious teachers of the classes visited, the researchers held a short 15-minute briefing about the research project before or after a religious class was held. During the briefing, the researchers distributed research posters that include information of the research project and contact information of the researchers. Social media was also utilised to secure research participants. A Facebook account was created for this purpose. The prerequisites of research respondents were

as follows: ethnic Malay, 21 years old and above, and in possession of manuscripts as personal collection. The ability to read Jawi was not a prerequisite, although preferable. However, often, and as discovered from this research, manuscript owners are most likely able to read Jawi. A total of 100 adult respondents, male and female, were identified for this research to ensure that the data collected were sufficiently representative of the Malay community at large. As expected, the age group of 50 to 89 years old formed the majority (76% of the respondents (see Figure 1), with female respondents numbering 10% more than male respondents. Their educational background varied from primary school to diploma, graduate, and postgraduate levels.

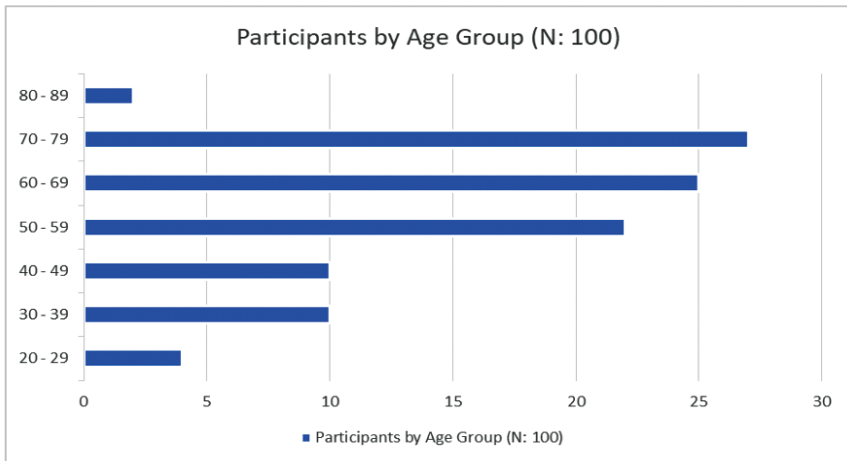


Figure 1 Participants by Age Group (N: 100)

In gathering the data, various research instruments were used, including semi-structured interviews and audio-recorded artefacts. This included the respondents' recitation of their manuscript collection, including *syair*, to search for melody, rhythm, and techniques they employ. Key interview questions included those pertaining to the respondents' direct experience with their manuscripts, and their perspectives of the Singapore Malay community's experience with Jawi manuscripts and *syair* recital. Other data gathering tools included audio recordings, field notes, and photographs of the manuscripts kept at the home or dedicated places of the respondents.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Personal and Direct Experience of Contemporary Malays with *Syair* and Manuscripts

While the research project confirmed that all respondents owned or kept Jawi manuscripts, and therefore continued the tradition of preserving manuscripts as personal or family heirloom as their predecessors of the 19th and early 20th centuries, what is more fascinating was the uncovering of their rationale for continuing the practice. To put this into context, an analysis of the types of manuscript preserved is necessary.

There are 264 manuscripts or reprints, including several repeated titles, kept by the respondents (see Figure 2).

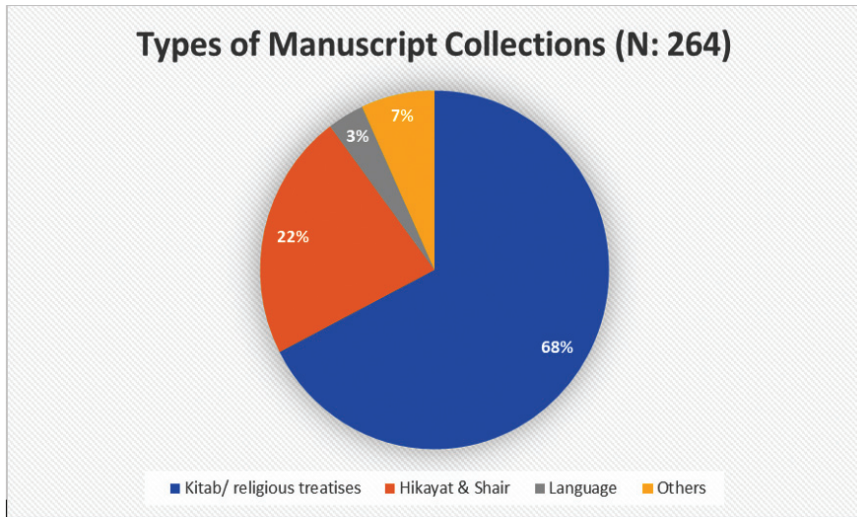


Figure 2 Types of Manuscript Collections Owned by Respondents (N: 264)

Our data showed that out of these 264 manuscripts and reprints, religious treatises or *kitab* were mostly preserved (178 titles), followed by literature books (59 titles), language and grammar books (nine titles), and others (18 titles). Literature books are characterized by its form and style, such as traditional poetry (*syair*, *pantun*, *mantera*, or prose as in *hikayat*). Further classification of religious treatises indicated that *tasawwuf* or Sufism topped the list at 26.8%, followed by *fiqh* or jurisprudence at 20.6%, *tauhid*

or foundation of belief system at 15.3%, and *ibadah* or Islamic rituals at 13%. The typology of religious treatises and its distribution informed the researchers of the Sufi religious orientation of the urban Malays in general. Alattas (1969:5) theorised that Islam came to the Malay Archipelago couched in Sufi metaphysics or *tasawwuf*⁹. Essentially, the Islamisation of people of the Malay Archipelago was through the efforts of traders and wandering Sufi teachers of Sunni traditions who upheld the doctrines of Ash'arite theology (*kalam*), Shafi'i *fiqh*, and Ghazalian Sufism. The spread of Ash'arite theology and al-Sanusiyah dogma to the Malay Archipelago can be traced back to the use of the Ash'arite's classical text titled *Dur al-Mahzum* by a Sufi named Maulana Abu Bakar when teaching the Malaccan rulers and its people in the early period of Islamic expansion in Southeast Asia (Ahmad Daudy, 1983:27–28). Considering that the manuscripts or reprints are handed down from their preceding generations, the assumption that there has been a perpetuation of such Sufi orientation and practices from the early 19th century until now is not excessive. This study's uncovering of religious reading circles in urban housing flats focusing on *Kitab Kuning*¹⁰ and Sufi *kitab* as their learning texts further confirms authors' supposition. However, such a discussion is not the focus of this paper and will be articulated on other platforms.

Out of the 59 literature titles preserved by the respondents, *syair* constitutes only 30.5 percent, while the rest are prose or *hikayat*. The *syair* titles are as follows: *Abdul Muluk: Bahawa Inilah Syair Yang Bernama Abdul Muluk* (undated), *Hikayat Panji Semirang* (1973 edition), *Hikayat Seri Rama* (1964 edition; original copy 1900), *Inilah Syair Fihrasat Nabi* (between 1930 and 1950), *Puisi Lama* (1954), *Sha'er Lahmudin Menjual Ibu Bapanya* (1966), *Syair Merpati*, *Syair Ma'rifat*, *Syair Nasihat* (undated, reprinted of original copy 17th century), *Syair Anak Miskin: Karangan Baharu (Bihtimam)* (undated), *Syair Bidasari* (undated, reprinted of 1814 copy), *Syair Dandan Setia* (1954), *Syair Nazam Tajwid al-Quran* (2006 edition; reprinted of original copy 1927), *Syair Qiamat* (1932), *Syair Siti Zubaidah* (2 copies, 1920), *Syair Tantangan Singapura (Abad ke-sembilan belas)* (1994 edition), *Syair Yatim Mustafa Adanya* (1934), and *Syair/Kitab Tajul Muluk* (1924). Although belonging to the poetry genre, thematically, *Syair Merpati*, *Syair Ma'rifat*, *Syair Nasihat*, *Syair Nazam Tajwid al-Quran*, and *Syair Qiamat* are Sufi in nature, reminding readers of the importance of purity of the heart and good deeds for the Hereafter, which is eternity.

Rationale for Preserving Syair Texts and Manuscripts

The respondents offered the following rationale for continually conserving their manuscripts despite their shrinking home sizes and lifestyle changes due to urbanisation: (1) cultural heritage, and its historical and aesthetic value; (2) sentimental value as they hold special memory as a gift or family heirloom; (3) content value as content knowledge is still relevant, useful, and suitable as reference tools; (4) pragmatism (as a source of income); and (5) personal hobby as a collector (see Figure 3). Most of them used to live in more spacious *kampung* houses but willingly brought along their manuscripts when they had to downsize to flats when Singapore underwent rapid urbanisation process in the 1970s.

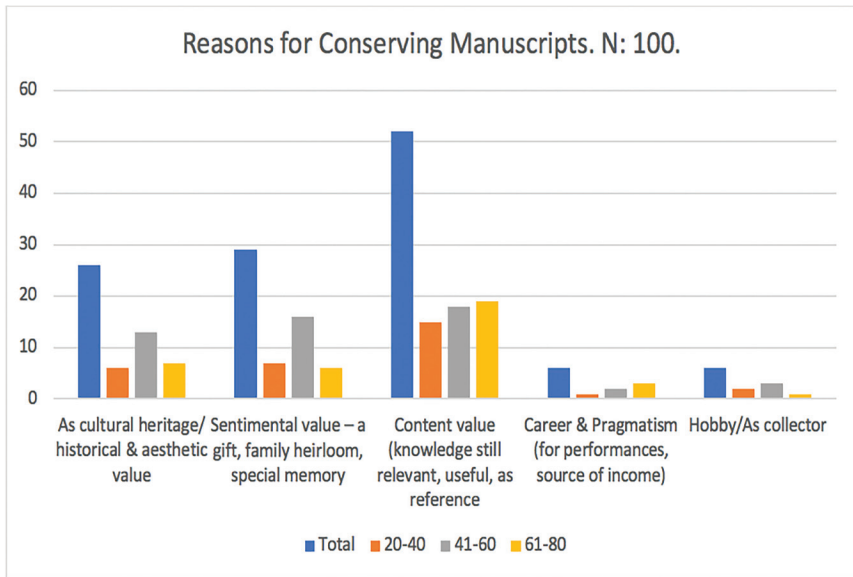


Figure 3 Reasons for Conserving Manuscripts (N: 100)

As many as 52% of respondents quoted content knowledge of the manuscripts as the primary reason for their preservation. To them, the manuscripts have currency due to their usefulness and relevance to their current socio-religious interest, particularly for those belonging to reading circles that use *Kitab Kuning* and religious tracts as their learning texts. Hence, rather than waiting to be given as gifts or heirloom, these

respondents actively sourced for *Kitab Kuning* manuscripts to purchase, be it via online or by crossing over to neighbouring countries. Excerpts of the respondents' rationale are as follows:

Respondent 1 who is a member of a reading circle:

"I bought. Ordered. Possibly from Malaysia or Indonesia.

Respondent 1 who is a member of a reading circle:

"Unique *lah*. Because we want to use it. Our work involves *dakwah* (religious propagation). So, sometimes we use it as reference, we read, sometimes we hold classes (to teach this book). To retain Jawi text. It's invaluable."

Respondent 12:

"*Mengapa beli kerana minat, kerana juga untuk buat rujukan. Misalnya buku Jawi oleh Frank Swettenham ni, dia actually vocabulary of the English and Malay languages, tapi dalamnya ada daftar kata yang ditulis dalam huruf Jawi, itu yang buat saya minat untuk simpan buat rujukan masa hadapan.*"

[Translation: The reason I bought it was because of interest, and as my reference. As an example, this Jawi book by Frank Swettenham, is in English and Malay vocabulary, but inside this book there's a word list written in Jawi. That's the reason I'm interested in keeping it, as a reference in the near future.]

Twenty-nine percent of respondents received the manuscripts as gifts from family members or special individuals, and therefore decided to keep the manuscripts for their sentimental value or as special memory, though they might not read the manuscripts at all. Excerpts of the respondents' rationale are as follows:

Respondent 2:

"I got this from my mother. My mother used to open this book to find out specific incantations for specific months."

Respondent 13:

"*Sebab tak ada orang nak (laughs). Tapi sayang, kenangan juga, kenangan juga kan.*"

[Translation: (I keep it) Because no one wants it (*laughs*). But this fondness, and also memory, memory, right?]

Respondent 14:

“Tak tahu, I just put it there. Dan saya cakap dengan isteri saya you don’t touch this book, kalau nak baca okay, tapi kalau cuma nak kemas nak buang awas you.”

[Translation: Not sure why (I keep it), I just put it there. And I told my wife, “You don’t touch this book, if you want to read it, fine, but if you want to clean the place and throw it away, you watch out!”]

The expression of *sayang* (love, fondness) for the Jawi manuscript collection from the above group of respondents reflects a special bond between the individual recipients and their predecessors that is connected by the manuscript. In a nutshell, the manuscript or heirloom carries sentimental value, a connection to the significant past that is hard to let go. Although the respondents, as the new owners of the manuscripts, were Jawi literate, the idea of reading them for leisure or as reference texts was not part of their daily experience.

The other 26% of respondents preserved *hikayat*, *syair*, or religious treatises as cultural heritage, particularly due to their historical and aesthetic value, including to honour the significance of Jawi during the olden days. Excerpts of the respondents’ rationale are as follows:

Respondent 3:

“From my late grandad. This is a heritage that we must preserve, for us and for the next generation. Of course, we can, we can learn. Have not been reading it for so long. But I know that this manuscript is useful. Our old traditions, right?”

Respondent 11:

“Yes, yes. Because, saya rasa bahasa is one of the Singapura punya jati diri, especially untuk bangsa Melayu eh, bukan hanya pakaian, I rasa Jawi, Bahasa Melayu are part of us also, kalau kita tak tahu Bahasa Jawi, tak tahu Bahasa Melayu, that means part of kita punya identity diri hilang juga, macam ah... Siapa, Hang Tuah cakap takkan Melayu hilang di dunia. I think I agree with the sentiment, sebab selagi adanya orang Melayu, Bahasa Melayu akan tetap ada.”

[Translation: Yes, yes, because I feel that language is one of the identity markers of Singaporeans, especially for the Malay community, not only our attire but also Jawi. Malay language

is part of us also, if we don't know Jawi, don't know Malay language, it means that a part of our identity is gone...just like what Hang Tuah claims that the Malays will not disappear from this earth. I think I agree with the sentiment, because so long as there are Malays, Malay language will be preserved.]

Respondent 23:

Bagi saya buku-buku itu merupakan sejarah; ia tidak hanya menunjukkan Melayu sebagai bangsa yang ke hadapan dari segi pemikiran dan mantap dalam kesusasterawan serta bahasa tapi penulis mapan sewaktu itu juga peka dalam menyemarakkan ilmu di kalangan ibu pertiwi dan nusa. Kita bukan bangsa yang dianggap kebelakang. Kita pernah melahirkan sejarawan, cendekiawan-cendekiawan tersohor yang patut dicontohi dan dikenang. Dan saya percaya kita boleh melahirkan pendita-pendita sebegitu lagi. Contoh-contoh buku yang saya ada membuktikan betapa hebatnya kita Melayu sebagai seorang ilmuan dan kesopanan bahasa Melayu itu sendiri. Buku buku itu adalah khazanah warisan bangsa.”

[Translation: For me, these books are history. They not only prove that the Malays are a race with advanced thinking, and endearing literature and language, but also with veteran writers of the time who were empathetic in advancing knowledge for the nation. We are not a backward race. We have produced famous historians and intellectuals who should be exemplified and remembered. And I believe we can produce such scholars again. These books that I have reflect the Malays' prominence as experts, and the refinement of the Malay language. These books are our cultural heritage.]

Respondent 70:

“Saya rasa menyimpan buku-buku lama amat berguna kepada kita kerana kandungannya ditulis oleh penulis dahulu. Di mana pemikiran mereka berlainan daripada pemikiran penulis sekarang and pembaca boleh membuat semacam rujukan penting dalam kehidupan dan kita patut bangga mempunyai simpanan sejarah lama buku-buku itu.”

[Translation: I believe keeping these old books are useful due to their content knowledge written by writers of the olden days.

Their thinking is different from that of current writers, and readers can refer to these books as important references on life skills, and we should be proud to keep these books as part of our history.]

Except for two, all the respondents agreed that the practice of manuscript preservation, including *syair*, must be continued and encouraged. They subscribed to the idea that manuscript collections are cultural heritage that the Malays must be proud of as they are part of the community's cultural and religious identity. With pride, a few respondents alluded to the *hikayat*, *syair*, and religious tracts as reminders of their socio-cultural history written from their own perspectives. It is a collection of alternative history that must be reckoned with and pursued relentlessly as part of mainstream history. In a world where cultural appropriation is rampant, the respondents felt the urgency to preserve *syair* and Malay manuscripts as evidence of Malay intellectualism and civilisation. Although the element of sentimentalism is evident in the 29% of respondents who received manuscripts from their family members or significant individuals that became their rationale for preserving them, the similarities stop here. The same group put forward the need to reclaim the community's leading position in knowledge creation, language development, and civilisation through the restudy of such manuscripts. Briefly, the reinforcement of their identity as a symbol of their dignity was oft-repeated during the interviews, though they stopped short of discussing or suggesting a form of the community's blueprint towards such a mission.

Embracing Syair Recital as an Art and Cultural Memory

Syair and *syair* recital can be perceived as receptacles of cultural memory. Simply put, cultural memory is a form of collective memory and experiences shared by a group of people. On whether the Malays in Singapore still observe the art of *syair* recital at personal and communal levels, the distribution of responses based on the respondents' perceptions is presented in Figure 4.

Slightly more than half (58 percent) of the respondents perceived that *syair* recital was no longer practiced at a personal level or as a communal activity, as done in the past. Excerpts of two respondents lamenting on this situation are presented as follows:

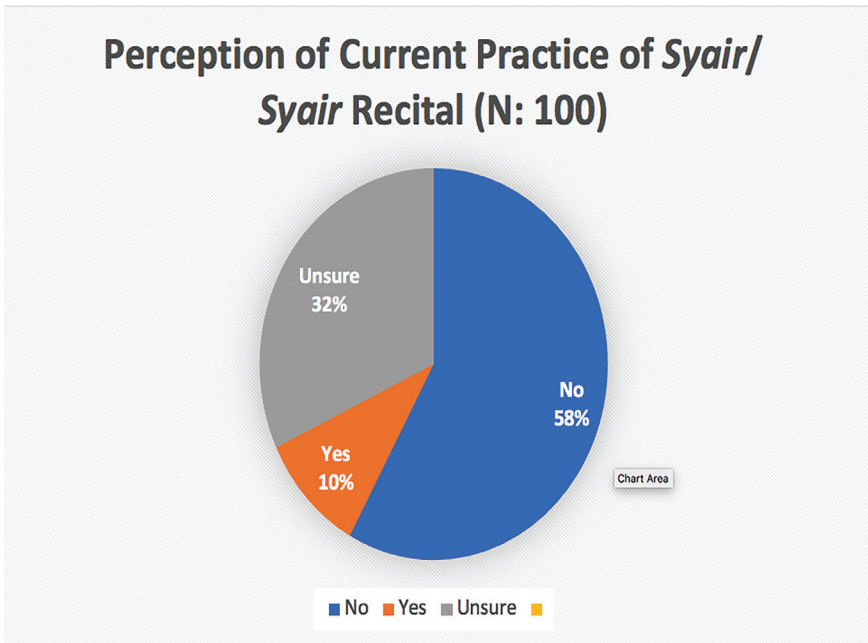


Figure 4 Perception of Current Practice of *Syair*/*Syair* Recital (N: 100)

Respondent 22:

“Sewaktu sekolah dalam tahun 70-an membaca dan menulis Jawi adalah kebiasaan. Tapi selepas tahun 90-an sudah tidak terdengar atau membaca bahan yang berjawi. Lagi lagi syair atau hikayat. Melainkan jika ada rancangan TV.”

[Translation: When I was in school in the 1970s, reading and writing Jawi was a norm. However, after the 1990s, we didn't hear or there was no reading of Jawi materials. Especially *syair* or *hikayat*, unless if it was on a TV program.]

Respondent 94:

Semasa berusia belasan tahun (1977–1980-an), saya pernah didedahkan dengan Bangsawan di Udara oleh Radio Televisyen Singapura. Terdapat lagu-lagu dalam pementasan tersebut. Namun, pada masa itu saya tidak pasti samada ianya *syair* atau tidak. *Syair-syair* pula, mungkin pernah dilagukan oleh kumpulan penyanyi tertentu. Saya pernah menghadiri

pertandingan membaca syair di peringkat maktab rendah, mungkin 1982. Lepas itu tidak ada. Seingat saya, saya tidak pernah mengadiri aktiviti membaca hikayat di Singapura.”

[Translation: When I was a teenager (1977–1980s), I was exposed to *Bangsawan di Udara* (a traditional play) by Radio and Television Singapore. There were songs during the play. However, I was not sure then whether they were *syair*, perhaps *syair* was sung by some groups of singers. I used to attend *syair* recital competition at the junior college level, perhaps in 1982. After that, no more. As far as I could remember, I have never attended *hikayat* reading activities in Singapore.]

While 32% of respondents were unsure on whether *syair* recital is still prevalent, merely 10 percent gave a positive response. The latter is the same group of respondents who still practice the art of *syair* recital either at a personal level or as *syair* advocates. However, based on the responses this research project has extracted from the respondents’ own practices, ability, and knowledge on *syair* and/or *hikayat* recitation, 77% of them affirmed that at least they could still recognise a *syair* melody. A few of them were able to hum at least one *syair* tune that they had heard before. The most familiar tune is “Selendang Delima” (loosely translated as “Ruby-coloured Scarf”), also known as *Syair Sari Baniyan*.¹¹ This research was also able to extract information from the respondents on various *syair* melodies practiced in Singapore. Interestingly, the following 10 *syair* melodies were identified, of which the most popular was “Selendang Delima”¹² as 10 respondents were able to serenade the melody competently.

- (1) “Irama Selendang Delima”
- (2) “Irama Narasi”
- (3) “Irama Siti Zubaidah”
- (4) “Irama Tambang Begawan”
- (5) “Irama Perang”
- (6) “Irama Dodoi”
- (7) “Irama Batu Belah”
- (8) “Irama Hiasan”
- (9) “Irama Senandung”
- (10) “Irama Burung”

A combined total of 90% of respondents (58% who no longer practiced *syair* and 32% who were unsure) lamented that the decline of cultural and *syair*-related activities in Singapore is a matter of concern. This concern was highlighted by Malay Singaporean writers such as literary pioneer Masuri S. N. in his poem “Epilogue” (2006)¹³, which calls for literary circles and the community to proactively deal with the issue.

Do we feel marginalized
When we write in our mother tongue
Feel compelled to follow and made to feel small
In an environment that pays scant heed
To every artistic endeavour?

Is it possible
Our artists
With their vaulting ambitions
Would gradually slide
Regress and degenerate
Forsake their culture, their art
In order to be instantly accepted
As artists of the globalized world

Yes, this then is the challenge
Culturati, literati, linguists
ARTISTS
If we sink
In the morass of complacency
Just we wait
Our children, grand and great grandchildren
Will lose their identity
In the midst of a universe
Brightly illuminated
Around us especially
And globalization.

Earlier in 1986, Suratman Markasan, another Singapore literary pioneer, through his poem *Cerita Peribumi Singapura* (1986)¹⁴,” cautioned the Malay community of the danger of losing their identity if they do not take their language and socio-cultural development seriously.

Aku tak punya apa lagi
[I have nothing else]

Sri Lanang dan Nila Utama tinggal nama
[Sri Lanang and Nila Utama are just names]

Saudara peribumi menolak bahasa
[My indigenous siblings reject the language]

Mengejar Inggeris lambang kemajuan
[pursuing English, symbol of progress]

Puisi prosaku kurang dibaca
[My poetry, prose is infrequently read]

Tak juga sastera dunia
[neither is the world literature]

Cuma aku masih mendengar
[But I still merely hear]

Anak cucuku menghafal,
[my grandchildren memorizing by heart,]

“Asyhadu-Allah ilahail-lallah”
Wa asyhadu-anna Muhammadu-rasulullah”

Syair Enthusiasts and Regional Networking

In a contemporary urban community where *syair* as an art has slowly receded, the discovery of 10 *syair* melodies is refreshing. At the individual level, it reflects, albeit small, the community's strife to preserve and appreciate *syair* recital's rich body of knowledge and techniques. At least one respondent knew and practiced an almost unheard of “Irama Burung” melody. Out of 100 respondents, only 10, from as young as 30 years old to the golden age of 89 years old, were able to demonstrate their *syair* recitation skills and agreed to be audiotaped. Six respondents aged 70 years old and above had the skills to execute *syair* recitation with ease. They were exposed to *syair* either through teaching, performing *syair*, or being in the company of *syair* practitioners when they were younger. They were very familiar with “Selendang Delima,” a foremost melody of the 1930s to the 1960s. This melody earned its name and popularity when it was specifically

used for reciting *Syair Selendang Delima* text through *bangsawan* (opera) performances and over the radio. Zurinah Hassan (2009) posited that the melody was created by Tijah¹⁵ Dean *Bangsawan* (opera) in the 1930s, when *bangsawan*'s popularity was at its peak. The soothing melody captured the community's attention, particularly when it was serenaded by the *Bangsawan* troupe on the weekly opera series *Bangsawan di Udara* over Radio Malaya in pre-independence Singapore. It was very soon utilized prominently in almost every *syair* recital and for other *hikayat* as well. Zurinah Hassan (2009) further disputed any suggestion that "Selendang Delima" melody was used extensively in the early inception of *syair* performances. She argued that its slow tempo is incapable of capturing the ever-changing scenes and quick paced storyline of *hikayat*. Nevertheless, up to now, the melody is evergreen in Medan, Daik Lingga, and Dumai, Indonesia.

While the senior respondents' knowledge of *syair* tunes seemed limited, four respondents aged between 30 and 47 were skillful in reciting six or more *syair* melodies. Two respondents who were *syair* practitioners took it upon themselves to learning the craft professionally from *syair* guru in Malaysia and as far as Riau. They were able to serenade up to nine *syair* melodies, including tunes that were relatively new to the Singapore audience. Sharing his personal and limited experience with *syair*, one respondent narrated as follows:

Respondent 24:

"Selendang Delima ja lah...Betullah. Sebab di sekolah kita cuma didedahkan kepada irama tu saja. Kita cuma tahu itu sahaja. Di radio pun itu, di filem pun itu. Jadi mungkin ketika itu, dia sangat kukuh tak ada irama lagilah, syair cuma ini sahaja. Filem pun cakap itu, radio pun cakap itu. Jadi kita cuma percaya cuma itu sahaja. Tapi bila saya kenal rakan-rakan yang bawa irama lain, saya pun rasa, eh kita macam tertipu, banyak irama lagi sebenarnya. Saya nak belajar."

[Translation: Only Selendang Delima... Yes, because in school we were exposed to only that tune. We only know that melody. On the radio and films were also the same thing. Probably because there weren't any other tunes, that particular *syair* became more established, only one tune of *syair*. Therefore, we falsely believed that there was only one tune. But when I met friends who were familiar with other tunes, I felt deceived. There were many more tunes, actually. I wanted to learn.]

Respondent 24's rude shock and realisation brought him to Indonesia on his own accord in the early 2010s to learn from experts. He had an interesting outlook of being self-reliant to ensure his mission was achieved in good time. An independent, strategic, and bold millennial, he took it upon himself as a member of the populace to reignite the life of *syair* in Singapore. Upon returning to Singapore, he gathered like-minded colleagues and trained them. It was during this time he felt the urgency to establish a Singapore brand of *syair*. Hence, in 2018, he founded Syairpura, a *syair* movement by local and young activists.¹⁶ A force to be reckoned with in Singapore, the respondent has since established and maintained networking with other *syair* experts around the region. Although comparatively smaller in number, the respondents who belong to the millennial age group compensated for their shortage with extensive knowledge of *syair*. As millennials with a vast social network, the transfer of knowledge among *syair* enthusiasts in the region is promising.

Syair in the Spiritual Realm

Another interesting finding of this research project was that *syair* recitation is not only performed in cultural occasions such as engagements (*bertunang*), weddings, performances, or family events, but in Singapore context, in religious classes as well. This phenomenon, however, is not unique to Singapore. *Syair Munajat* (a poem of prayers) is Sufistic and recited frequently in Medan, Indonesia. A few respondents shared that they attended religious classes that mainly read *Kitab Kuning* (loosely translated as a collection of religious treatises translated from Arabic into Malay and compiled by traditional Malay scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries), including *syair* of religious content. According to them, during the class, the religious teacher would recite a *syair* text, such as *Syair Nazam Tajwid al-Quran*, by using one of the *syair* melodies. When the researchers asked if they could name the melody, unfortunately, the respondents were unable to do so. The students were sometimes instructed to recite stanzas from *Kitab Kuning* in chorus with the teacher by using a *syair* melody. It is not certain whether such practices are rampant in the urban community at large. However, it deserves further investigation to confirm the said *syair* melody and to find out the rationale for using such a teaching pedagogy.

Another fascinating discovery of this research project was that *syair* might have also been recited during medical treatments involving mystical rituals. A 72-year-old respondent shared his personal experience that took

place in the 1950s when he accompanied his mother and a Peranakan woman to a shrine situated in a temple in Jalan Ulu Siglap, near Jalan Jamal, Singapore. He witnessed a Baba shaman in a trance using a *syair* melody to issue advice and consultation to the Peranakan woman, his patient. Upon further investigation, researchers found the location of the temple, which is still intact, but the shrine has been demolished and the treatment rituals have long ceased.

Syair Beyond the Parameter of the Research Project

Although *syair*'s popularity is dwindling, its roles as a medium of expression, a literary receptacle to exude moral values, an embodiment of culture and traditions, and a channel for entertainment, dissent, critique, and education are still relevant. In some families, the exchange of *syair* verses are still heard during *majlis meminang* (marriage proposal) and *bertunang* (engagement) ceremonies. Occasionally, *bangsawan* (traditional Malay musical opera) performances such as *Bangsawan Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2015), *Bangsawan Gemala Malam* (2022), *Bangsawan Sang Nila Utama* (2022), and *Bangsawan Bispuraja* (2023) have incorporated *syair* as a primary component of its script. Since its formation in 2018, Syairpura (an abbreviation of *syair* and Singapura), a cultural club specializing in *syair* has been actively organizing *syair* workshops in schools and for the public. Mainly to preserve and enhance *syair* as a cultural heritage, the club's founder members such as Afi Hanafi, Anis Qurratu'aini, and Khaziah Yem play a key role in the revival of *syair* in Singapore.

The realm of socio-political dissention, which has long been instituted through *syair* by Tuan Simi in the 1830s, has its contemporary successors. True to the tradition of dissent, an intellectual named Azhar Ibrahim (2016) flexed his intellectual acumen and incisive criticisms on political hegemony, social injustice, cultural supremacy, misplaced nationalism, historical amnesia, and out-of-place intellectualism in society through *syair* verses in *Syair Kesaksian: Darihal Menyinggung Fikiran dan Perbuatan* (loosely translated as *Poems of Testimony: Of Invasive Thoughts and Deeds*). In *Syair Gelegak Menegak*, for instance, Azhar (2016) draws attention to out-of-focus national planning and state governance.

Inilah pengaruh politik Islaman

[This is the impact of Islamist politics]

Hukum hudud jadi tumpuan
[Hudud law is given attention]

Senyap pula soal pembangunan
[but silence on issue of development]

Jauh lagi hak kebebasan
[Social justice is remotely ruminated]

In *Syair Berpihak Bergerak* (Azhar Ibrahim, 2016), the ills of liberal economy and capitalism received Azhar's attention:

Merata tempat asyik disebut
[Frequently mentioned throughout the place]

Dunia global baik direbut
[Globalisation should be seized]

Kapitalis korporat untung mengaut
[corporate capitalist grabbed all profits]

Rakyat termiskin sesak tercabut
[While the poor remain suppressed, displaced]

Just as Azhar, another Singaporean nascent writer, Muhammad Khairool Haq, ventured into *syair* genre in his work entitled *Syair Asas Ugama* (2019). However, unlike Azhar, rather than observing the convention of dissenting, *Syair Asas Ugama* is a prosody of religious lessons based on Sunni scholar Imam Nawawi's compilation of 40 *hadith* (the traditions of Prophet Muhammad). An ardent student of *Kitab Kuning*, Khairool followed closely the tradition of *Kitab Kuning* of the Malay Archipelago's religious scholars such as Shaykh Ahmad Al Fathani, Tuan Guru Haji Ahmad Melaka, and Raja Ali Haji when writing his book. Humility frames the diction of his *syair*; such as in *Syair Asas Ugama* (Muhammad Khairool Haq, 2019):

Bermula hamba menulis puisi
[As this servant begins writing this poem]

Asas ugama menjadi paksi
[religious foundation is the core]

Empat puluh hadits An-Nawawi

[Forty Prophet's traditions by An-Nawawi]

Dalam berjalan mengenal jati

[uncovering my identity while on this journey]

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the practice of keeping Malay manuscripts, rare texts, or reprints of *hikayat* and *syair* as personal collection and family heirloom, albeit dwindling in number, is still being observed by the contemporary Malays in Singapore. Once permeated in almost all spheres of life, the art of *syair* recital has slowly eroded and become less significant over time. However, this lackluster state was confronted by a younger section of the community ready to rebound and promote the art and practice. Ten *syair* melodies have been identified as being practiced in Singapore, indicating *syair*'s continued appreciation by the practitioners. The preservation of *syair* texts and the art of *syair* recital are perceived by a segment of the Malay community as their responsibility to uphold their social memory and collective wisdom—in short, their identity. However, one respondent's sentiment and insight deserves our attention:

“Saya rasa untuk menggalakkan amalan menyimpan dan membaca manuskrip kita perlu pertama sekali memberikan mereka akses kepada ilmu membaca teks tersebut. Jika saya ada buku itu, tetapi tidak dapat membaca kerana tidak mampu untuk membaca aksara jawi maka sama sahaja dengan membuang teks-teks ini kerana teks ini hanya akan tangkap habuk dalam stor atau di bawah katil.”

[Translation: I feel that to encourage manuscript reading and preservation we must first give people access to the knowledge of reading the texts. If I had the book but was not able to read due to being Jawi illiterate, it is as good as throwing the texts out because these texts would only collect dust in the storeroom or under the bed.]

On this note, it is our ardent hope that a concerted effort to reignite and promote the preservation and reading of manuscripts, including *syair* texts, be taken up by all interest groups, particularly the relevant governing body. This is in line with Singapore's vision to become the Renaissance City for the arts via establishing the country as a global arts city conducive

to creative knowledge-based industries and talent, as well as strengthening national identity and belonging among Singaporeans by nurturing an appreciation of shared heritage. The art and thoughts of *syair* can be part of the education curriculum, permeating all levels from pre-school to tertiary, by highlighting the socio-cultural history, moral values, and intellectual aspects of *syair*. More workshops, scholarships, and grants for *syair* content and talent development could be offered and made easily available to the practitioners and interested individuals. It is judicious to suggest that more in-depth research on *syair* content and practices as ethnic heritage in Singapore, the region, and beyond, as well as comparative studies be carried out. The growing presence of *syair* activists amongst Singapore millennials is proof of the reemergence of interest in the art and cultural heritage in the younger generation. Perhaps it may sound cliché, but the strategy to strike while the iron is hot is critically wanting.

NOTES

- 1 *Seloka* is a traditional Malay poem in verses. However, the number of lines in each verse is unfixed. It is used as a satire. See Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. (n.d.[d]). Seloka. In *Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu, DBP*. <https://prpm.dbp.gov.my/Cari1?keyword=seloka>
- 2 *Gurindam*, another form of traditional Malay poem that comprises two lines in each verse, conveys its main moral point in the second line of each verse. See Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. (n.d.[a]). Gurindam. In *Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu, DBP*. <https://prpm.dbp.gov.my/Cari1?keyword=gurindam>
- 3 *Pantun*, like *syair*, is a traditional Malay poem made up of verses containing four lines with a-b-a-b rhyme. Unlike *syair*, the main thesis of *pantun* is found in the last two lines of each verse. See Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. (n.d.[b]). Pantun. In *Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu, DBP*. <https://prpm.dbp.gov.my/Cari1?keyword=pantun>
- 4 The *Mathnawí*, believed to have originated in Persia, is a very long poem, in which each verse has 22 syllables, the hexameter may vary from 13 to 17, and the *terza rima* admits only 10 or 11 in each verse. See Nicholson, R. A. (1925), *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*, p. 2, <https://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Rumi-The-Mathnawi-of-Jalalu%E2%80%99ddin-Rumi-trans.-Nicholson-1.pdf>
- 5 *Ruba'i* is a stanza of four lines, a genre of Persian poetry of quatrains with generally a-a-b-a rhyme. See Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. (n.d.[c]). Rubai. In *Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu, DBP*. <https://prpm.dbp.gov.my/Cari1?keyword=rubai>

- 6 Tuan Simi served in the British Company, most likely as a customs officer who was in the know of the British administration's commercial law and deceitful practices. His position is clearly depicted in the first verse of "Syair Dagang Berjual Beli" (1994:39).
- 7 For more information about Radio Malaya and Radio Singapore, see Lee, G. (2020). Radio Broadcasting in Singapore, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuud=2b972ada-0a21-4bfd-841f-976693cdcaae>
- 8 The research project "Reinstating Malay manuscripts as cultural heritage through locating personal manuscripts collections and re-discovering the art of manuscript recital of the Malay community in Singapore" received research grant from the National Heritage Board Grant (NHB), with NTU-IRB approval IRB-2019-01-005-02. Part of this paper's data is extracted from the research project's findings.
- 9 *Tasawwuf* is the knowledge of cleansing one's soul to remove the undesirable attributes (*mazmunah*) of man so as to achieve desirable attributes (*mahmudah*).
- 10 *Kitab Kuning (Yellow Books)* are a collection of adapted religious books in Arabic that have been translated and copied by traditional Malay scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Sheikh Daud al- Fatani, Zainal Abidin bin Muhammad al-Fattani, and others. They are still being used in certain religious classes in Singapore and Southeast Asia. See Sa'eda Buang (2010).
- 11 A copy of the text in Jawi is kept at the Medan District Library, Indonesia. The Jawi text was published by Maktabah wal Mutoba'ah Sulamian Peringi, Singapore/Penang, scribed by Bahtaman. See Muhammad Jaruki (1999).
- 12 To get a glimpse of "Selendang Delima" melody, see Syair Warisan Bangsa (20 March 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SLfSJU6x04>
- 13 See "Epilogue" in Malay and English, in Sa'eda Buang (2012).
- 14 See Suratman Markasan (1986) for the full poem in Malay.
- 15 Miss Tijah (full name is Che' Wan Tijah binti Daud) was a famous Singapore-based Malay opera performer. Born in Pontianak (c. 1906), she began performing at the age of 12 with the Kung Hup Malay Opera. Her career in Singapore began in 1919 with the Nahar Opera. Together with her husband K. Dean and her elder sister Miss Salmah, Miss Tijah was considered as one of the "Big Four" of Malay *bangsawan* in the 1930s. She passed on in Singapore in 1964. See National Archives of Singapore (2024), https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/audiovisual_records/performer?performerId=457
- 16 Syairpura is a combination of two words, *syair* and Singapura. See Syair di Pesisir, <https://www.esplanade.com/whats-on/festivals-and-series/free-programmes/2023/foreword/syair-di-pesisir#synopsis>.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors would like to express our gratitude to National Institute of Education–Nanyang Technological University for the support in the research process.

FUNDING

The publishing of this article is funded by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of interests: We declare that there is no conflict of interest and no relevant financial or non-financial interest in this research.

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