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# Public Services in Malaysian Museums within an Educational and Multicultural Context

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## Abstract

With the advancement of globalization and the concept of cultural diversity, the social role of museums has gradually expanded—from collection and research institutions to cultural platforms that serve the public. As a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-religious country, Malaysia's development of museum public services reflects a unique model of cultural integration. This paper outlines the theoretical foundations of public service and traces the evolution and current practices of Malaysian museums in education, social inclusion, and digital innovation. Two of the case studies which are National Museum and Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery to analyse their achievements and challenges, and to offer strategic recommendations for enhancing the quality of public services. Institutional support will resource allocation, public participation, and technological innovation are important to promoting cultural equity and social cohesion through museums.

**Keywords:** Museums, Public Service, Malaysia, Cultural Diversity, Social Inclusion, Educational Ro

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary society, museums function as essential spaces for education, cultural engagement, and civic involvement. With the worldwide trend towards museum democratization, public service has become a fundamental aspect. This is particularly significant in multicultural countries, where museum services are crucial in promoting interethnic understanding, social cohesion, and cultural identity. Malaysia, as a quintessential multicultural state consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Indigenous peoples, has historically leveraged cultural policy and museum development to foster national unity. Nevertheless, providing inclusive and equitable public services while honoring cultural differences continues to pose a complex challenge. The objective of this study is to investigate the changing role of Malaysian museums as public service providers in a culturally diverse society. It seeks to understand how museums navigate the balance between building national identity and embracing cultural pluralism, as well as how they address social demands for increased accessibility, participation, and technological integration. Utilizing theoretical frameworks and current policies, this paper examines key institutional practices and challenges, focusing on two case studies: The National Museum's "Spirit of ASEAN" exhibition and the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum's "Gerak Bayang" exhibition. These examples highlight the diverse roles that museums fulfill as educational platforms and cultural connectors.

The importance of this study lies in its timely contribution to discussions on museum reform and cultural inclusion in Southeast Asia. As Malaysia continues to navigate the formation of a postcolonial identity and rapid socio-digital transformation, museums are uniquely positioned to serve as inclusive spaces for dialogue, empowerment, and mutual understanding. However, challenges such as uneven resource distribution, digital underdevelopment, and limited participatory frameworks threaten the ability of museums to function as equitable public institutions. The main issue addressed in this paper is the gap between policy aspirations and practical implementation in Malaysian museum services. While national cultural frameworks promote unity through diversity, systemic limitations—ranging from infrastructural disparities to administrative fragmentation—often prevent museums from effectively reaching marginalized populations and encouraging broad public participation. This paper argues that for Malaysian museums to achieve their full potential as public service institutions, a comprehensive strategy must be developed that integrates digital innovation, community engagement, equitable policy support, and culturally sensitive programming. Only then can museums realize their promise as democratic spaces for lifelong learning, cultural sustainability, and social cohesion in a diverse society.

## 2. Theoretical and Policy Framework

Public service in the museum context refers to inclusive activities aimed at all social groups, emphasizing access, education, cultural transmission, and social integration. Hooper-Greenhill (1994) advocated for the “Learning Museum,” shifting focus from objects to audiences; this paradigm has been largely adopted by Malaysian institutions seeking to place visitor experience at the heart of exhibition design (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Black (2005) further emphasized the museum’s social responsibility to promote cultural democracy and inclusiveness—an imperative in Malaysia’s multilingual, multi-religious context, where linguistic and religious rights must be carefully balanced (Black, 2005). Since the 1971 National Cultural Policy, Malaysia has explicitly promoted Malay culture as foundational while formally recognizing Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous cultural expressions as integral to national identity. In practice, this dual mandate has met with mixed success. On the one hand, major institutions like the National Museum and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia have developed comprehensive Malay-centric galleries. On the other, excellent examples of cultural inclusivity have emerged—such as the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum in Penang, the Negeri Sembilan Chinese Museum in Melaka, and community-run Orang Asli galleries—demonstrating that non-Malay cultures enjoy dedicated platforms and programming.

Nevertheless, tensions persist. While policy rhetoric stresses “unity in diversity,” resource allocations still skew toward flagship Malay heritage projects, and smaller ethnic or Indigenous museums often operate on shoestring budgets. This imbalance calls into question how evenly JMM’s nearly 200 institutions can deliver truly equitable public services (Jabatan Muzium Malaysia, 2018). More recently, the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMK-12) has recognized these gaps and explicitly earmarked funding for digital engagement and community outreach across all ethnic museums (Prime Minister’s Department, Malaysia, 2021). Early indicators suggest improved online catalogs and multilingual virtual tours, but long-term impact will hinge on sustained investment in both technological infrastructure and culturally sensitive staffing.

## 3. Current Practices of Public Service in Malaysian Museums

Education is a core public function. Institutions like the National Museum, Penang State Museum, and Sarawak Museum provide guided tours, student workshops, and temporary exhibit activities. For example, the “History Alive!” program at the National Museum offers multilingual materials and interactive modules for diverse school groups. Partnerships with schools provide teacher training, resource kits, and internships to embed museum content into curricula. Multilingual accessibility is essential in a diverse society. Most museums offer services in Malay and English, with some—like the Penang Heritage Museum—adding Chinese and Tamil options. Exhibit panels, audio guides, and brochures are increasingly multilingual. Exhibits such as “Ethnicity and Unity” at the National Museum feature Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous traditions, reflecting commitment to cultural coexistence (Department of Museums Malaysia, n.d.).

Volunteer programs recruit university students, retirees, and local residents as docents and event facilitators. The “Living Museum” in Penang and the Maritime Museum in Melaka foster partnerships with communities, including youth as “Cultural Ambassadors.” NGOs like Think City and George Town World Heritage Inc. collaborate with museums to document local histories, supporting participatory and community-based museum models (George Town World Heritage Incorporated, n.d.).

## 4. Challenges

### 4.1. Improving Museum Development and Public Services through Policy and Management Integration in Malaysia

Malaysia lacks unified industry standards for museum construction, exhibition planning, management and operation, resulting in varying levels of development of museums in various regions, making it difficult to form a nationwide integrated development model. Due to the lack of systematic policy guidance and standardised management norms, different museums present large differences in terms of infrastructure construction, conservation techniques for collections, exhibition design concepts, and visitor service systems. For example, some more developed states, such as Selangor and Penang, are able to build more modern museums equipped with advanced temperature and humidity control systems, collection restoration techniques and interactive exhibition equipment with sufficient funding and government support; while states with relatively limited

resources are unable to carry out the corresponding upgrading due to insufficient financial investment, resulting in the museums' exhibitions still being relatively traditional and lacking in scientific and technological elements and modern services. In addition, due to the lack of a unified national industry, the museums are not able to provide modernised services. In addition, due to the lack of a unified national industry standard, there is no coordination mechanism among different museums in terms of exhibition theme planning, inter-museum co-operation and education promotion, which affects the development of the museum industry as a whole and the public's experience of viewing exhibitions. In addition, since 1787, Malaysia's museum administration and its subordinate organisations have been in a state of confusion. The overlap and lack of clarity in the set-up, division of responsibilities and implementation of policies at various levels have led to repeated bottlenecks in the operation, resource allocation and decision-making processes of museums. This confusion in the management system not only affects the normal development of museums, but also weakens their ability to provide external services and cultural promotion, and there is a great need to improve management efficiency and public service levels through institutional integration and reform.

#### 4.2. *Imbalanced Service Development*

One of the significant challenges facing Malaysian museums is the uneven development of public services across different regions and institutional levels. While national and state-level museums, such as the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur or the Sarawak Museum in Kuching, benefit from relatively stable government funding, professional staffing, and infrastructure, smaller community and local museums often struggle with limited budgets and human resources. These disparities result in varying levels of service quality and outreach capacity. In particular, rural and remote areas—especially in East Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak—face major accessibility issues (Sabah State Museum, n.d.). Many Indigenous communities living far from urban centres have limited or no access to museum resources or cultural education programs.

This geographical and institutional imbalance not only limits cultural equity but also hinders the broader goal of inclusive heritage preservation and education at the national level. When certain ethnic or regional narratives are underrepresented in public museum spaces, it risks reinforcing cultural hierarchies and perpetuating a sense of marginalization among minority groups. This can weaken efforts to build a cohesive national identity that genuinely reflects the lived experiences and heritage of all Malaysians. Furthermore, insufficient representation and participation from East Malaysian and Indigenous communities can undermine inter-ethnic understanding and reduce the potential of museums to serve as platforms for cultural dialogue and reconciliation. Addressing these imbalances is therefore crucial to fostering a more inclusive, representative, and unified Malaysian identity through equitable public service delivery in museums.

#### 4.3. *Insufficient Digital Services*

The rapid digital transformation of the cultural sector globally has not been fully matched by developments in Malaysian museums. Although the COVID-19 pandemic prompted some institutions to explore virtual exhibitions and online engagement tools, most museums still lack the necessary digital infrastructure, technical expertise, and long-term strategic planning to sustain these services. Many museum websites are outdated, difficult to navigate, and fail to provide interactive or educational content for remote users. There is a noticeable shortage of user-centered digital features such as online catalogues, augmented or virtual reality (AR/VR) experiences, e-learning modules, and multilingual digital guides. Without significant investment in digital technology and professional training, museums risk being disconnected from the younger, tech-savvy generation and failing to meet the growing expectations of a digital society.

#### 4.4. *Weak Public Participation Mechanisms*

Another major issue is the limited involvement of the public in museum planning and programming. Despite the increasing global emphasis on participatory and community-based approaches in museum work, many Malaysian museums continue to adopt a top-down model, where exhibitions and educational initiatives are largely developed by internal staff without adequate consultation with target audiences or community stakeholders. As a result, these programs may not fully reflect the needs, experiences, or interests of diverse visitor groups, especially marginalized or minority communities. The lack of formal mechanisms for public engagement—such as advisory committees, co-curation initiatives, or community forums—undermines the democratic potential of museums as inclusive cultural institutions. In the Malaysian context, co-curation could involve inviting local communities—such as Orang Asli groups, Indian temple communities, or urban Chinese associations—to contribute artefacts, oral histories, or interpretive texts directly to exhibitions that represent their heritage. For example, a co-curated exhibition on Indigenous crafts might be shaped through field visits, joint design workshops, and rotating community narrators, ensuring authenticity and mutual ownership of the content. Similarly, the democratic potential of museums in Malaysia lies in their ability to serve as shared spaces where diverse cultural groups can tell their own stories, debate collective histories, and challenge stereotypes through inclusive and representative programming. Strengthening these participatory structures is crucial to ensuring that museums truly serve the public and contribute to social cohesion. By facilitating shared cultural representation and intergroup dialogue, museums can become active agents in fostering empathy, mutual respect, and a deeper sense of belonging within Malaysia's plural society.

## 5. Case Studies

### 5.1. *National Museum – “The Spirit of Asean” Exhibition*

In 2018, the National Museum of Malaysia launched a permanent exhibition titled “*The Spirit of Asean*” centred around the theme of “Unity in Diversity.” This exhibit aims to reflect the multicultural fabric of Malaysian society by presenting the unique customs, traditions, and lifestyles of the country's major ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various

indigenous communities. Key themes include traditional clothing, festivals, languages, culinary heritage, and interethnic exchanges. Beyond the static displays, the museum developed a comprehensive student activity kit titled “*Cultural Adventure*,” which incorporates interactive assignments and discussion prompts designed to stimulate intercultural understanding among young learners. The exhibition also features multilingual interpretive materials, including guidebooks and audio tours available in Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil. By combining educational outreach with inclusive narrative presentation, the “Diverse Malaysia” exhibition exemplifies how museums can function as spaces for cultural dialogue and social integration in a pluralistic society.

### 5.2. Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery – “GERAK BAYANG: The Art of Storytelling – Wayang Kulit Exhibition”

In 2023, the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery (BNM MAG) launched a temporary exhibition titled “GERAK BAYANG: The Art of Storytelling,” which reimagines the traditional Malaysian shadow puppetry form known as wayang kulit through contemporary artistic interpretations. This exhibition explores the transformation of wayang kulit from a performative heritage art to a visual storytelling medium, bridging the past and present through multimedia installations and fine art expressions. Featuring 144 works by 39 Southeast Asian artists—including influential Malaysian names like Nik Zainal Abidin and Long Thien Shih—the exhibition showcases how wayang kulit continues to inspire new generations of creators. The thematic curation moves beyond mere display by inviting viewers to reflect on broader Southeast Asian narratives, mythology, and moral storytelling traditions. A distinctive aspect of the exhibition is its emphasis on interactivity and creative engagement. Visitors are encouraged to participate in hands-on activities such as assembling large-scale puzzles, exploring velcro-based shadow play scenes, and contributing to a community shadow wall. These components are designed to appeal to younger audiences and families, transforming passive viewing into active learning. In line with its educational mission, BNM MAG also introduced accompanying workshop series and storytelling sessions for schools, which allow students to explore the symbolism, craftsmanship, and cultural significance of wayang kulit through direct experience. Multilingual interpretation materials and artist-led talks further promote accessibility and cross-cultural appreciation. By blending artistic innovation with traditional heritage, the “GERAK BAYANG” exhibition exemplifies how Malaysian museums can reinterpret cultural legacies for modern audiences while maintaining respect for their historical roots. It stands as a model for how museums can foster intergenerational connections and cultural continuity through imaginative curatorial practices.

## 6. Recommendations and Future Directions

### 6.1. Strengthen Digital Capabilities

To meet the demands of a rapidly digitizing society and expand access to cultural resources, Malaysian museums must prioritize the enhancement of their digital infrastructure. Strategic collaborations with universities, research institutions, and technology firms can facilitate the development of integrated virtual museum platforms, multilingual educational applications, and immersive digital experiences using technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). These tools can significantly enrich visitor engagement, especially for younger audiences and remote communities with limited physical access to museum facilities. Moreover, the implementation of user-friendly websites, online learning modules, and virtual tours can transform museums into accessible cultural hubs that extend their reach beyond traditional brick-and-mortar boundaries.

### 6.2. Establish Multi-Level Public Participation Mechanisms

Inclusive and responsive museum governance requires the institutionalization of public participation across multiple levels of decision-making. Establishing public advisory boards composed of representatives from diverse communities, including educators, artists, local leaders, and cultural practitioners, can help align museum programs with societal needs and perspectives. In addition, the promotion of citizen-curated exhibitions—where community members are invited to propose themes, contribute artefacts, or co-create interpretive content—can democratize the curatorial process and foster a sense of ownership among the public. Such participatory practices not only enhance institutional transparency but also ensure that museums evolve as socially relevant and people-centred spaces.

### 6.3. Promote Cultural Equity

Museums play a pivotal role in shaping cultural narratives and public memory. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that exhibitions, educational activities, and interpretive strategies reflect the rich diversity of Malaysian society. Greater efforts should be made to represent all ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups equitably, including marginalized and Indigenous communities. Initiatives such as multicultural festivals, cross-cultural workshops, and interethnic youth exchange camps can serve as platforms for intercultural dialogue and empathy building. By promoting cultural equity and mutual understanding, museums can contribute to national unity while honouring the distinct identities that make up the Malaysian cultural mosaic.

### 6.4. Enhance Policy and Resource Support

Long-term improvement in public service delivery requires stronger institutional support and policy innovation. One recommendation is to incorporate public service indicators—such as accessibility, inclusiveness, and educational impact—into national museum performance evaluations. This would encourage institutions to prioritize community engagement and social value. Furthermore, targeted funding mechanisms should be established to support under-resourced museums, particularly those in rural or remote areas, enabling them to upgrade facilities, train staff, and expand outreach programs. Encouraging inter-museum collaboration through resource sharing, staff exchanges, and joint programming can also help to optimize the use of limited resources and foster a more cohesive national museum network.

## 7. Conclusion

In multicultural Malaysia, museum public services are not only tools of cultural dissemination but also mechanisms for fostering national identity and social inclusion. Despite existing gaps in digitalization, resource equity, and participatory practices, the foundations for educational outreach, multilingual services, and community collaboration are in place. Moving forward, enhanced technology, participatory innovation, and systemic support will be vital in making museums truly inclusive cultural spaces for all.

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