# INTERPRETING THE MUSES IN MUSEUMS OF MALAYSIA

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*Abstract*

This paper aims to explore the representation, misrepresentation and non-representation of women in Malaysia's museums. Malaysia promotes itself as a microcosm of Asia, owing to the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual composition of its society. Hence, it provides an ideal arena in which to examine gender politics in museum institutions.

Most European languages and several Asian languages have adopted lexical variants of the word 'museum', which is traced etymologically to the Muses of Greek mythology. The Muses were female deities but it cannot be assumed that this privileged genealogy of the museum translates into a privileged place for women in museums.

## Introduction: Muses, Museums, Malaysia

This paper investigates an uninvestigated field: the representational spectrum of women in Malaysia's museums. The Malay word for 'museum' is *muzium* and, in common with most European languages (a list of twenty is provided in ICOM 1986: 210), it is a lexical variant of the Latin 'museum', which is traced etymologically to the Greek *mouseion*, meaning a temple of the Muses. It was in honour of the Muses that Ptolemy Soter, ruler of Egypt, erected in about 290 BCE the Mouseion, the renowned philosophical academy with its celebrated library, in Alexandria.

Thus, the genealogy of the museum institution begins with the Greek myth of the nine Muses, depicted as attractive young women, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory). The Muses presided over the epic, music, poetry, oratory, history, tragedy, comedy, dance, and astronomy. Although the specialisation, number, and theogony of the goddesses were not always fixed in this manner (see Jobes 1962: 1138-39), their gender was beyond dispute.

This classical ancestry of the museum institution is routinely recounted, and often glorified, in Euro-American museum literature (e.g. Alexander 1979: 6; August 1983: 137-38; Lewis 1992: 5-6; Pearce 1992: 93; Sande 1992: 185-86). Moreover, this origin myth is also chronicled by Malaysian museum writers (e.g. Mohd Redzuan 1991: 3; Othman 1996: 2-3; Wan Zakaria 1995: 6). Yet, museum history in Malaysia commences with a thoroughly profane ancestry: the British colonisers in the 19th century.

The professional ritualistic invocation of the nine female Muses — be it in Euro-American or Malaysian texts — is somewhat anomalous, considering the history of female gender exclusion in museums.

Applying broad definitional parameters of the word 'museum' (on the definitional debate, see Ginsburgh & Mairesse 1997) more than 120 museums exist in Malaysia, most of which are under the jurisdiction of the federal and state governments. In the majority of these institutions men occupy the highest management positions (a question not addressed in the confines of this



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paper). Before scrutinising issues of representation in Malaysia's museums, it is opportune to briefly delineate the nation.

The Federation of Malaysia, formed in 1963, comprises eleven states on its peninsula in Southeast Asia and two states — Sabah and Sarawak — on the island of Borneo. The capital is Kuala Lumpur, situated on the peninsula. Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy based on a parliamentary system of government. The official religion is Islam, though freedom of worship is guaranteed in the constitution.

The population is currently estimated at 26 million and is made up of fifteen major ethnic groups. The demographic composition is classified in the 2000 census as follows: Bumiputra ('indigenous') 65.1% — the Malay ethnic group constitutes approximately 55% of this category; Chinese 26.0%; Indian 7.7%; and Others 1.2% (see Zakaria & Kadir 2005: 51-52). The Malaysian mosaic of ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religions is the historical artefact of regional migrations, trading missions, imperial ambitions, and colonial policies.

**Where are the women?**

The subheading above appeared in a report on Malaysian museums (Dellios 1996: 15) more than a decade ago and, in the interim, little has changed.

Women are not a homogenous group, but an elaboration of differentiated identities lies beyond the scope of this paper, which can only articulate the representational identity of women as a whole. Furthermore, due to space constraints, the focus is primarily on the past: the province of Clio, the Muse of history.

In the strictly chronological National History Museum, Kuala Lumpur, women are absent from the nation's history. Yet, in the pre-modern Malay Archipelago and wider Southeast Asia, women were vital participants in the economy, particularly in trade and marketing. The historian Reid (1988: 164) informs: "Early European and Chinese traders were constantly surprised to find themselves dealing with women." Even in contemporary terms the female trading role is notable (see Reid 1988: 165), and some markets are still entirely in the hands of women in Malaysia. Moreover, it is not coincidental that a woman has held the federal cabinet position of Minister of International Trade and Industry for the past twenty years. However, women's economic activities remain unrecorded in Malaysian museums.

Significantly, between the 15th and 17th centuries when several states in Southeast Asia developed into important commercial centres, women were placed on the throne. In the 17th century (prior to the Islamic formula of male kingship) two female monarchs ruled in succession in Kelantan, a state on Malaysia's east coast (see Reid 1988: 170). Yet, silence reigns on these female rulers in Kelantan's State Museum, its Istana Batu Royal Museum and its Museum of Royal Traditional Customs.

Historically, women of the region played crucial roles in political alliances, state-building and diplomacy (Andaya & Andaya 1982: 83-89; Reid 1988:165-66). This narrative strand of the nation's biography is barely discernible in Malaysia's museums. In the History and Ethnography Museum of Malacca the historical section shows a commissioned painting captioned: "Tun Kudu was the first woman, who sacrificed herself in order to bring political stability to the Malacca Malay Kingdom." Curiously, the painting diminishes her significance and misrepresents her decision-making role by showing her as a tiny, distant figure in contrast to



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the dominant male figures in the foreground. The museum is, in fact, a panorama of indigenous male rulers, imperialist male conquerors and an arsenal of male weapons.

To bring the discussion to the time of living memory, one can survey museum re-creations of the Japanese invasion and occupation of Malaya (colonial Malaysia) and Borneo during the Asia-Pacific War. This theme is a display component of numerous museums in Malaysia and is the central subject matter of the WWII Memorial Museum in Kelantan. The artefactual content is supplemented by oral history accounts collected from elderly residents, all of whom are male.

The horrendous experiences of women during the Asia-Pacific War, and especially of women used as sex slaves (euphemistically called 'comfort women') by the Japanese Imperial Army, were brought to light in the 1990s. Women from many countries, including Japan, China, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia were forced into officially regulated sexual slavery. The victims suffered sexual violence, torture, malnutrition, disease and psychological trauma (for details, see Hicks 1995; Nakahara 2001).

In Kelantan's WWII Memorial Museum the section on the elderly residents' recollections is headed 'Second World War in Memories', but it is gender-specific remembering. Whilst museums in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia remain comfortably silent (a political expedience, bearing in mind Japan's economic leverage in the area) on the history of 'comfort women', the issue has not been forgotten in Japan where, upon the initiative of women, the Women's Museum on War and Peace was inaugurated in Tokyo in 2005.

Most of the great civilisations, empires and kingdoms of Asia were founded on the wealth of their rice fields (Bray 1986: 11). What is more pertinent to this inquiry is that rice in Asia (excepting the Philippines) is personified as the 'rice-mother' or 'rice-goddess'. The Rice Museum in Kedah, the state nominated as the 'rice bowl' of Malaysia, fails to interpret this sacred power of women which is inscribed in the mythology, rituals and material culture of rice production throughout the Asian region. The role of women is muted, a flaw that is all the more glaring since it is they who are the custodians of the cultural traditions which preserve the rice-soul (*semangat padi*).

**Where the women are**

Even before feminist interrogation of the museum institution became vociferous, Donald Horne in the early 1980s had quietly concluded in his comprehensive survey of European museums that, in terms of representation, "women are simply not *there*" (1984: 4, emphasis in original). When they are there, Horne (1984: 4) noted their appearance was confined to depictions of peasant women (domestic object) and nude women (erotic object). This penchant for "displayed female flesh" (Horne, 1984: 4) has never been institutionalised in Malaysia's museums, owing to cultural and religious proscriptions. Rather, the representational identity of women has been shaped into marital object, particularly since 1963 when the National Museum in the nation's capital installed the prototype wedding tableau (which is still on view).

The wedding tableau is the most pervasive display context in which women are deemed museum-worthy. The very nature of the nuptials exhibit means this museum-worthiness also includes men, but men — in multi-faceted roles — are overwhelmingly represented in museums, whereas women are mostly materialised in, and largely limited to, wedding tableaux. Reconstructions of the traditional wedding ceremony, be they contemporary or historical



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exhibits, most frequently portray the dominant ethnic group — the Malays — though in a few instances the marriage rites of other ethnic communities are also exhibited.

The standard Malay wedding tableau features mannequins representing the bride and groom, clothed in sumptuous costumes, and seated side by side. This 'sitting in state' (the *bersanding* ceremony) takes place on an elaborately adorned bridal dais, with accompanying ritual objects. In a real-life context, the 'sitting in state' ceremony is a state of sitting in immobility on display to the assembled guests. Thus, an ornate reality lends itself readily to the 'frozenness' of display techniques. However, this exhibitionary union of bride and groom conceals a union between representation and misrepresentation.

The ubiquity of the re-created conjugal rite creates a two-tiered museum myth: the only exhibitionary place for a woman is alongside her groom; her only achievement is marriage. In addition, the wedding as artefact reveals nothing about divorce as fact: one sociological trend in Malaysia is an increasing divorce rate (see Forss 2006; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2007).

Other display contexts of women's lives are sparse. A minor theme in some museums is women's attire in the form of traditional garments. One museum, the Agnes Keith House in the state of Sabah, concentrates on an individual woman's life. Agnes Keith was an American author best known for three autobiographical books of her experiences in British North Borneo (now Sabah) before, during, and following World War II. After restoration, her Bornean home was opened as a museum in 2004.

A final form of representation ought to be mentioned. The Government of Malaysia promotes the ethnically diverse nation in tourism campaigns with the slogan 'Malaysia Truly Asia'. The advertising imagery invariably portrays five females (muse-like in their youthfulness and beauty) as ethnic ambassadors. Some museums incorporate these tourism posters which accentuate the entirely female cast of 'Malaysia Truly Asia'. It is an ironic visual statement in museums which are truly male.

The foregoing observations should not be misconstrued as a curatorial conspiracy of men. Jones and Pay (1990: 161), in 'The Legacy of Eve' (which only reviews the legacy of a British 'Eve'), assert that male curators deliberately omit or misrepresent women's experiences. The circumstances are far more complex: museum omissions and misrepresentations must be understood as part of a larger politico-historical edifice in which the ordering of the world has been predominantly a masculine enterprise.

**A Catalogue of 'Others'**

Gender imbalance cannot be discussed in isolation from geographical imbalance. Hence, an investigation of the gendered 'other' (women) cannot disregard the museological 'other' (non-Western museums).

The leading representative body for museums is the International Council of Museums (ICOM), but how balanced is its representation of museums? The International Council of Museums can hardly be labelled 'international', for its membership is European-dominated (see ICOM 2005). Since its establishment in 1947, ICOM has been labouring to mould non-Western museums into its own image, and Cameron (1995: 51) warns that such an approach "raises questions of cultural transfer, or export".



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The 'international' museum movement moves in a uni-directional pathway. The museological centres of knowledge production are Western Europe and North America and, not surprisingly, these two centres have been at the forefront of "selling heritage expertise" to Asia (*Smarts* 1997: 44). Thus, Asia — a lucrative market for the export of conservation services and collections management skills — is not only the recipient of Eurocentric museum models, but it also has to pay dearly for them.

The soothsaying museologist, Sola (1992: 171), argued that museums in Eastern Europe would be misguided to imitate Western Europe, for such a course would be "needlessly self-denying" and result in a "constant lagging behind the West". His prediction is no less germane to current conditions in much of Southeast Asia. Indeed, as Europe shifts its paternalistic gaze increasingly upon the 'other' (non-Western museums), a glimpse at the past is instructive: all Southeast Asian nations (excepting Thailand) endured colonialism (under Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, British or American rule).

In post-colonial nations the stratagem of 'divide-and-rule' is no mere relic residing in the repositories of national archives. The International Council of Museums is divided into six regional chapters (the largest two, numerically, being Europe and North America). Its Asia-Pacific chapter was formed in 1966 but in 2006 at an ICOM regional workshop held in Cambodia and Laos, it was proposed to form an ICOM Southeast Asia chapter (see ICOM 2006). This museological carving up of Asia into neo-colonial zones is also apparent in the Asia-Europe Museums Network (ASEMUS), established at the 2001 ICOM General Conference, held in Spain (see ASEMUS 2007). The headquarters of ASEMUS is in Sweden and that of ICOM in France. What is the implied place of Asian museums in the skewed geography of what is deceptively called the 'international' museum community?

One of the recommendations of the 2006 ICOM workshop held in Cambodia and Laos was to "integrate gender perspectives addressing representations of women's heritage" (ICOM 2006). Nevertheless, museum rhetoric rarely matches museum praxis. Moreover, the currently fashionable leitmotif of 'gender perspectives' should not obscure perspectives of the recent museological past. Critiques from within the Western museum fraternity often employed denigrating sexist language. For instance, museum mission statements were criticised as 'motherhood statements' and museology was condemned as 'grandmotherology' (see, respectively, Trotter 1996: 54: Teather 1991: 409).

Similarly, in *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives* the introduction (Miles 1994: 1) explained what the book did not accommodate: "Regrettably, no room has been found for ... the representation of women, minorities and non-European cultures in museums ... or the current state of museums in eastern Europe." The exclusion of these marginalised 'others' made the 'newness' of these new European perspectives as tangible as a mirage. The omission of women's representation was justified on the grounds that significant advances had already been made (Miles 1994: 1). Conversely, in another volume of museum essays, published in the same year (Kaplan 1994: 9), the conclusion was that gender still received scant scholarly attention.

Contradictory declarations aside, the status of gendered 'other' did improve quantitatively in museological writings of the Euro-American museum world during the 1990s (e.g. Belk & Wallendorf 1994; eds Glaser & Zenetou 1994; Higonnet 1994; Porter 1996; Prince 1994;



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Teixeira 1994). These gender-focused analyses, though laudable, had little or no relevance to museums in the socio-cultural, cosmological, historical and political circumstances of Southeast Asia. More recent feminist museum analyses are equally immaterial. A cursory glance must suffice: the gender of natural history specimens in the Manchester Museum (Smith 2005) and feminist art history in the West (Deepwell 2005). The latter article is found in a volume entitled *New Museum Theory and Practice*, which yields nothing 'new'. Nor does *Towards a New Museum* (Newhouse 2006): although it also proclaims the catchword 'new', Asia is left outside the familiar frame of the Western museum picture.

What should the 'constantly lagging behind' non-Western museums 'catch up with' first: irrelevant feminist models of museum scholarship dating to the 1990s or the irrelevancies (the old recycled as the 'new') of the 21st century? The question is hypothetical because the knowledge generated in the museological centres and exported for consumption in Asia is rarely in the realm of concepts: concepts are not commercially viable, unlike museum methods which can be packaged and sold with the label 'heritage expertise'. The condition of 'lagging behind' should also be considered in conjunction with institutional inertia, for the museum is "a slow mechanism for limited change" (Sola 1992: 166). With such a pessimistic prognosis, what are the prospects? Who will be the harbingers of change?

**Recollecting Clio**

The ten-nation ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is the largest and most influential alliance in the region. However, the prospects for innovative change are not promising. ASEAN, under the purview of its foreign ministers, established a committee on Culture and Information (which has produced several museum publications) and a sub-committee on Women (see ASEAN 2005), but the two committees have yet to cross their respective boundaries to engage in a productive dialogue.

Boundary maintenance is also manifest in institutions of higher learning. Although several women's/gender studies programmes are offered in Malaysian universities, research has not extended to the gendered format of museum interpretations. More perplexing is the case of University Malaya and University Science Malaysia: both have gender studies programmes as well as university museums on their campuses. Paradoxically, no collaborative research on gender representation has been undertaken.

A more dynamic female force emanates from women's organisations in Malaysia, which are mostly non-governmental and number approximately twenty (see Centre for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics 2005). Their ambit encompasses the following: domestic violence, sexual assault, labour discrimination, economic empowerment, health policies and family planning, legal reforms, Islamic divorce codes, public education, and electoral participation, among others. It may be inferred that redressing the gender imbalance in museums is not a high priority on the pressing priority list of women's organisations.

Given the past decade of stagnation, it may be surmised the gender imbalance, especially in representational modes, is not a concern of Malaysian androcentric museums. Where does this leave the gendered 'other', as comprehended by the museological 'other'? Does she wait for others — institutions, organisations, associations and committees (at a national, intraregional or international level) to initiate change? Such an approach would be illustrative of a Malay proverb: 'to wait for the rice to be served on one's knees', in other words, to wait in vain. If the



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museum's epistemological blanks are to be filled, if gender politics are to be debated, and if women are to be more than artefactual footnotes, waiting in blind faith is not a valid response.

It is timely to recollect Clio, the collector of history. The history of women's movements has demonstrated that a marginalised status can be challenged and changed by collective activism. In a like manner, gender inequalities in museum institutions can be challenged. Female visitors can absent themselves from museums: invisibility can be countered with invisibility. Since it is generally women who conduct family groups into museums, non-participation would have a marked impact: museums' audiences would shrink, as would their revenues and prestige. A refusal to engage is one means of contesting the male monologues of museless museums.

**Conclusion: The Muses' Other Talents**

The nine Muses were not simply passive, pretty, young women who danced, sang, recited poetry and played the lyre; they were quick to defend their self-interests by fighting challengers and punishing with a vengeance. Needless to say, they always triumphed. For all the musing on the museum's divine genealogy, this 'less-than-ladylike' behaviour of the Muses is altogether overlooked.

The museum's origins are traced to a myth but, more meaningfully, museums are potent myth-makers (see also Cameron 1993: 167). Alternatively, if one were to accept the proposition that the museum is a reflection of reality, the Malaysian reality would be that women hardly exist/existed. While men were busy being rulers, heroes, warriors, independence-fighters, nation-builders and national leaders, women were either monumentally absent or were waiting mutely to be wed — as defined in the predominant museum motif of the wedding tableau.

Gender representations are not apolitical. Museums are ideological sites and are deeply embedded in power structures and hierarchies, be they configured by gender, ethnicity or class, by nationalist agendas, or by the cultural cartography of museological centres and peripheries. Cameron (1993: 167) rightly argues that the museum is a powerful weapon in the battle for the mind. Correspondingly, Malaysian women must rethink their strategies in the battle for representation in the museum.

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