**From Children's Theatre to Community-Engaged Arts:**
**The Development of Non-Formal Arts Education in the Malaysian Context**

by Mark Teh

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This article is a preliminary attempt to locate the practice of non-formal arts education in Malaysia since the 1970s, tracing and intersecting its growth across a broad panorama of cultural, social, and political change highlighted in the *AEAM Meta-Timeline*. My reading considers how the trajectories of this field may have responded to overlapping currents in civil society and pedagogy, as well as parallel movements in regional cultural practice.

Drawing principally from materials in *Arts Education Archive Malaysia*'s *FAC-Arts-ED Collection*, it should be apparent that the observations in this article provide an incomplete history and a subjective reading of the field. The analysis focuses primarily on the arts education programmes initiated by two organisations: *Five Arts Centre* (established 1984 in Kuala Lumpur), a collective of artists, producers and activists dedicated to generating alternative arts forms and images in the Malaysian landscape; and *Arts-ED* (initiated in 1999 in Penang), a non-profit organisation which has provided innovative community-based arts and culture education to more than 16,000 young people in rural and urban communities.

The story laid out here prioritises the development of non-formal arts education through several accumulative turns – from the emergence of a nascent, alternative children's theatre in the 1970s; to experimentations with integrated arts and interactive, issue-based pedagogy in the 1980s and 1990s; to more recent, expanded notions of community engaged and place-based practices. In the concluding section of this article, some prospects for further investigation and research are suggested.


**Part 1:  The Connection between Children's Theatre and Arts Education in Malaysia**

Engineering and Experimenting the Nation in the 1970s

The development of contemporary non-formal arts education can be traced back to the 1970s, against a backdrop of top-down restructuring and reconceptualisation of Malaysian society in the aftermath of the violent May 13 racial riots in 1969. The beginning of the decade witnessed an economic turn towards export-led industrialisation, and the introduction of several new legislations and policies, including the *New Economic Policy*, the *Official Secrets Act*, the *Universities and University Colleges Act*, and the *National Cultural Policy*, amongst others.

During this period, the Malaysian education system accelerated its belated process of decolonisation with the conversion of English-medium schools to Malay instruction. To meet the demands of a newly-independent nation with a young populace, four institutions of higher learning were created or upgraded – *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*, *Universiti Sains Malaysia*, *Universiti Teknologi Malaysia*, and *Institut Teknologi MARA* – alongside the established *Universiti Malaya*. This resulted in an explosion of educational access, rural-urban migration, student political activism, and youth subcultures – mirroring social changes and upheavals in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

These experiments in nation-building and social engineering could also be discerned through the efforts by arts workers to decolonise and reshape the cultural sphere. At the 1971 *National Cultural Congress*, new directions for Malaysian aesthetics and identities were proposed and debated, including calls to re-engage traditional practices through

contemporary expression, and articulations for more critical and existential modes of self-apprehension. Some of these polemics were manifested officially through the formulation of the *National Cultural Policy* (which foregrounds Malay culture and Islam, with provisions for suitable elements from 'non-indigenous' cultures), and in the establishment of *Kompleks Budaya Negara* (*KBN*) in 1972 under the *Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.*

At the same time, discursive spaces for arts and culture expanded with the mushrooming of publications such as '*Dewan Sastra'*, the bilingual '*Seni dan Theatre'*, *Dewan Budaya*, and the *New Sunday Times*' weekly column '*Talking Drama with Utih*' by theatre director and critic Krishen Jit. In particular, the latter two publications provided significant coverage to the nascent practice of children's theatre.

The Impact on Arts Education

Parallel developments were also taking place in university campuses and syllabuses. In *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (USM) Penang, where the country's first performing arts programme was set up in the early 1970s, the teaching of *wayang kulit* (traditional shadow puppet theatre) was formalised in 1977, by master puppeteer Hamzah Awang Mat, ethnomusicologist Patricia Matusky, and Southeast Asian theatre expert Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof. A Children's Theatre course was initiated in *USM* by Zainal A. Latiff in 1979, while Southeast Asian Theatre had been introduced as a subject in *Universiti Malaya*'s (UM) Department of History in 1975 by Krishen Jit. It was within this milieu that an alternative approach to children's theatre comes into existence.

The earliest notions of a modern children's theatre first emerged in the 1960s in teacher training colleges and was encouraged by the teaching fraternity as part of literature or language development. This development is witnessed by the publication of several anthologies of children's plays, including '*Mari Berlakon'* (1967), '*Panggong Kanak-Kanak'* (1967), the '*Lakunan Ria'* series (1968) by drama moden playwight Mustapha Kamil Yassin, and Patrick Yeoh's '*Plays for Malaysian Schools'* (1972). Most of the plays were written in the *drama moden* (realistic plays) style, and tended to represent children as embodying or espousing the values of 'mini-adults' in plot and characterisation.

Until the late 1960s, theatre activities for schoolchildren in urban centres remained extracurricular options. A typical diet of classical British repertoire and American musicals were found in English-medium schools, while Malay schools favoured *sandiwara*-style historical narratives and the occasional Western-influenced *drama moden*. As English-medium schools transitioned to teaching in Malay, *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (*DBP*, the *Institute for Language and Literature*) published and organised school drama activities in the national language, in line with the federal government's agenda of localisation.

An Alternative Children's Theatre Emerges

By the early 1970s, a departure from the classical and modern literary-influenced children's plays favoured by the formal education system could be discerned, in tandem with the dynamic stylistic experimentation and decolonisation that Malaysian theatre was undergoing. While informed and influenced by these broader developments, a separate space for a child-centric theatre was also being articulated and imagined; the new children's theatre would excavate local folktales, legends and myths, and incorporate children's games, creative play, dance, mime, music, nursery rhymes, and traditional artforms.

While there was no dedicated Children's Theatre course offered in local universities until 1979, its practice was nurtured informally within institutions such as *Institut Teknologi MARA* (*ITM*), *UM* and *USM*. Performances throughout the 1970s featured adult actors, university students, and teacher trainees performing to child audiences – characterising the first stream of alternative children's theatre in Malaysia. An early pioneer was *ITM* lecturer Vijaya Samarawickrama, a prolific director of performances such as '*Denda Manis'* (1973)*, 'Dewi Bunga'* (1973)*, 'Topsy Turvy Castle'* (1973)*, 'Azad dan Gergasi'* (1978)*, 'Sang Kura-Kura'* (1978)*, 'Pak Pandir Moden'* (1979)*,* and '*Visitor from Mars'* (1979). These plays were developed with and scripted by his teacher trainee students and were later anthologised by DBP.

At USM, expatriate lecturers Lois Long and Tone Brulin fostered new approaches and vocabularies. Long wrote and directed '*Magic Bag'* (1974), a fantastical local musical featuring original music and chants with strong elements of audience participation, while Brulin's '*Tak Kotak-Kotak'* (1979) was a devised children's theatre production staged in public spaces that employed street and poor theatre techniques. Zainal A. Latiff's '*Cerita-Cerita Pak Pandir'* (1979) and *'Sang Kancil Putar Alam Syah'* (1982) combined *randai* and *silat* (Malay martial art forms) with process drama and audience participation techniques developed by British drama pedagogues Dorothy Heathcote and Brian Way. All these productions retained the approach of casting adults or university students to perform for children – early precursors of what would today be referred to as *Theatre for Young Audiences.*

A second stream of alternative children's theatre practice surfaces in 1977, with the establishment of *Kompleks Budaya Negara*'s '[Teater Kanak-Kanak'](#) programme. This marked an important shift – from theatre for children to *theatre by children*. Run by successive *USM* graduates Elizabeth Cardosa and Janet Pillai, the programme was initiated by visionary artist-educator turned cultural bureaucrat Ismail Zain – who served as *Director of Culture* at the *Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports* from 1975 to 1982. Between 1977 to 1985, '*Teater Kanak-Kanak'* recruited and trained primary and secondary schoolchildren in Kuala Lumpur (KL) in an experimental theatre arts programme, and produced several performances such as '*Beg Sakti*' (a Malay translation of Long's *Magic Bag*, 1978), '[Si Geroda'](#) (which toured 9 towns across Malaysia and Singapore, 1979 and 1981), and '[Sri Ayu'](#) (1980). Its innovation was in locating the child at the centre of the artistic process, with adult practitioners serving as facilitators to elicit the children's agency and creativity. The programme benefited from being hosted within *KBN* – this allowed the children to learn traditional arts such as *gamelan*, *joget gamelan* and *wayang kulit* alongside improvisation, martial arts, and theatre, and encounter a range of artists from traditional masters and *KBN*'s cultural troupe to members of the experimental *Anak Alam Collective.*

It should be noted that several of these children's theatre pioneers furthered their studies at the *University of Hawaii* – a recognised centre for Asian theatre. These included Samarawickrama and Zainal in the 1970s, as well as Janet Pillai and Leow Puay Tin the following decade. Noordin Hassan, a leader of experimental Malaysian theatre, enrolled in Heathcote's *Drama-in-Education* course at Newcastle University in 1976 and attempted to introduce this approach in several teachers training colleges upon his return.

**Regional Resonances and Local Libraries**

By 1981, a sufficient community of practice existed on a national level for a '*Bengkel Penggerak Teater Kanak-Kanak;* (*Workshop for Children's Theatre Practitioners*) to be

organised, drawing participation from 21 practitioners across eight states in Malaysia. At the regional level, an important network for children's arts activists and practitioners was established through the '*International Workshop on Living Children's Theatre'*, which featured workshops, seminars and performances. Conceived by Mitsue Ishitake of *Ohanashi Caravan Center*, the *University of Philippines*'s Amelia Bonifacio, and Krishen Jit from *UM*, the International Workshops brought together Japanese and Southeast Asian children's theatre practitioners, book publishers and educators across three gatherings in Tokyo (1979), Manila (1983), and Kuala Lumpur (1985).

The KL Workshop was significant in exposing local practitioners to the work of groups such as *Pusat Bimbingan Kanak-Kanak Indonesia*, *Ohanashi Caravan Center* (Japan), *Teatrong Mulat ng Pilipinas*, *ACT3* (Singapore), and *MAYA: Art and Cultural Institute for Development* (currently *Mayarith Theatre,* Thailand). The network's impact could be felt directly in the flourishing of children's theatre activities in public libraries across KL and other urban centres. Alimah Salam – the director of *Pustaka Bimbingan Kanak-Kanak*, Kuala Lumpur's first children's library – was inspired by the 1979 Workshop and founded two groups in 1980 which focused on cultivating reading habits by dramatizing well-known children's stories: *Teater Kanak-Kanak Pustaka Bimbingan* (with adult performers), and *Kumpulan Boneka Pustaka Bimbingan* (puppetry by and for children). Other groups in the 1980s 'library movement' include *Si Nuri*, *Teater Anak-Anak Alam* (led by Thangarajoo of Anak Alam), *Teater Kanak Kanak Perpustakaan Negara*, *Kumpulan Boneka Perpustakaan Negara* (headed by Shukri Edrus), *Pusat Perkembangan Kanak-Kanak Yayasan Sabah*, *Aries Nine*, and *Teater Abros* (formed by Alimah, Sudiro Sukirman, and Yusof Gajah amongst others). These groups performed children's theatre, puppetry, and storytelling; and would branch out to kindergartens, schools, shopping malls, and children's television programmes, influenced by the popular model of *Sesame Street*. It was also during this period when the publication of children's plays flourished with the encouragement and support of *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, and school drama competitions and festivals began to be organised at state and national-levels (the latter sponsored by the *Ministry of Education* and *TV3*, a recently established television station.

<u>The State of Children's Theatre: Missed Opportunities, Spectacularisation, Formalisation</u>

In the 1980s, Malaysia underwent rapid industrialisation and economic transformation – accelerated by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's fusion of neoliberal politics with supposed 'Asian values' of loyalty and respect for authority. Government policies and direction in this era focused on economic prosperity and preservation of social harmony, eschewing seemingly 'Western' notions of freedoms and civil rights. However, attempts to modernise and reform education could be seen through the introduction of *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah* at primary level (1983) and *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* for secondary schools (1989). In theory, these emphasised child-centred education, with the teacher framed as a facilitator of experiential, interactive, and spiral learning. Teacher training colleges provided trainees with more exposure to the arts in the hope of encouraging greater creativity, and while music, visual arts and literature were incorporated as official school subjects – theatre was neglected. In hindsight, given the development and volume of alternative children's theatre activities in the 1980s, this was a missed opportunity to channel and formalise theatre education into the national school system.

By 1987, the governmental portfolio for Culture was removed from the *Ministry of Youth and Sports* and reassigned to the *Ministry of Tourism and Culture*. This configuration (presently the *Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture*, after several further reshuffles) places the

emphasis on tourism and its contribution to economic growth, while the intrinsic value of culture and the arts are deprioritised and relegated to supplementing the vision of making Malaysia a world class tourist destination. Partly resulting from this consumerist instrumentalisation of culture and untethered from a pedagogical base, children's theatre in the 1990s and 2000s began to take on an increasingly professional and spectacularised sheen.

The establishment of the *Tunas Budaya* programme (1992) by the *Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism* to train children in traditional Malay dance and music, coupled with the launch of the *Malaysia Tourist Information Complex* (*MaTiC*) in 1989, and *Istana Budaya* (*National Theatre*) in 1999, facilitated the growth of a more orthodox and exclusively Malay children's theatre. Large-scale productions and children's musicals began to be staged in these venues, including Siti Hajar Ismail's *'Lagenda'* (1996), Adlin Aman Ramlie's *'Taman Baginda'* (1997), Ladin Nuawi's '*Durian Gergasi'* (1999), Aminah Rhapor's '*Siti Di Alam Fantasi'* (1998) and '*Aladdin'* (2007), Zaifri Husin's '*Bawang Putih Bawang Merah'* (1997), '*Ali Baba'* (2007) and '*Upin & Ipin'* (2012), and Fateha Hanif's '*Sarian Tiana'* (2016). In 2000, children versions of Malay theatre forms such as *bangsawan* ('*Cermin Sapura'*) and *makyong* ('*Raja Pensel'*) were produced, inventing a new trend of 'traditionalised' performances featuring young people. By and large, these productions replicated the mainstage aesthetics and language of commercial adult theatre, with the creative process and artistic decisions controlled entirely by adult professionals with little or no involvement from the children. Today, Malay-language children's theatre continues to be sustained through governmental funding and commissions by agencies such as the *Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara (National Department for Culture and Arts)*, *DBP*, and *ASWARA* (*National Arts Academy*).

It should be noted that within the formal education system, the *Ministry of Education* launched the secondary-level *Sekolah Seni Malaysia* (*Malaysia Arts School*) in 2007, to provide a platform for interested and talented youth to pursue studies in music, dance, theatre and visual arts. There are currently five *Sekolah Seni:* in Johor, Sarawak, KL, Perak, and Sabah; and while this formal arts education initiative can be viewed as a belated and positive move by the *Ministry of Education*, the curriculum follows a conventional framework and maintains the conservative and traditionalist agenda as officially interpreted in the *National Cultural Policy*.


**Part 2: Mapping Other Directions through Non-Formal Arts Education**

In contrast to the formalising of arts education in schools and the mainstreaming of out-of-school programmes and performances by the *Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture*, alternative trajectories in non-formal arts education and performances were also cultivated by practitioners, institutions and groups. The [FAC-Arts-ED Collection](#) highlights some of these programmes or initiatives; this archive collection brings together [seven programmes](#) that cumulatively span across four decades; *KBN*'s '[Teater Kanak-Kanak](#)' (1977-1985), *Universiti Sains Malaysia*'s '[Program Seni Kreatif](#)' (1986-1992), *Five Arts Centre-Young Theatre Penang*'s '[Teater Muda](#)' (1992-2002) and '[Theatre-in-Education](#)' (1998-2004), as well as *Arts-ED*'s '[Anak-Anak Kota](#)' (2001-2005), '[myBALIKpulau](#)' (2005-2010), and '[Heritage Heboh](#)' (2006-2012). These programmes chart an innovative, reflexive, rigorous and resilient approach to alternative cultural and pedagogical praxis of arts education in Malaysia – from initial models of children's theatre and theatre-in-education (late 1970s to

2000s) to more recent projects incorporating heritage and place-based arts education (2000s to present).

By reading across the programme archives, we can trace how this interdisciplinary practice drew from eclectic influences and fields of knowledge. From the performing arts, we can detect aspects of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, Augusto Boal's forum theatre, inspirations from local folk and street theatre, as well as the 'total theatre' concept evident in many Asian traditions – an integration of dance, drama, music, puppetry and visual arts. A progressive educational foundation was encoded in the early programmes, inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey's philosophies of experiential education, the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and Ivan Illich's proposals for deschooling society. Attempts to understand children and their aptitudes were derived from the field of developmental psychology; Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky's theories on cognitive development in children, Donald and Clare Winnicot's play advocacy, and Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences. Later programmes adapted concepts and methodologies from the broader humanities and social sciences – action research, ethnography, human geography, social history, sociology, global citizenship, as well as popular and visual cultures.

An important influence on programmes in the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* was the work of theatre for liberation groups in Southeast Asia such as *Philippines Educational Theater Association* (*PETA*, founded 1967) and Thailand's *MAYA: Art and Cultural Institute for Development* (1980). Both grew out of the 1970s democratic movements in the region and emphasised conscientisation and decolonisation in their educational theatre programmes – advocating the use of local cultural resources and integrated arts. In the 1980s, *PETA* disseminated their '*Basic Integrated Theatre Arts Workshop'* model across Southeast Asia (including a workshop in KL organised by the then *Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports* in 1986), and published a series of manuals that popularised their exercises in creative drama, movement, writing, music, and sound for children. *MAYA*, whose founders were trained in mass communications at *Thammasat University*, viewed the arts as a media or tool for social mobilisation. They created more structured pedagogies that synthesised experiential learning, teaching, and performance into training programmes adaptable to different contexts, e.g. children's art camps, district-level workshops for teachers, non-governmental organisations, and even governmental educational programmes. *PETA* and *MAYA* sustained exchanges with *Five Arts Centre* and *Arts-ED* throughout the 1980s into the 2000s.

An important layer in the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* merits further recognition – the contributions of artists, educators, facilitators, producers, and activists whose diverse experience, knowledge, training, and worldviews collaboratively shaped and structured these non-formal arts education programmes. While pursuing their own professional careers and directions in the field of contemporary performing and visual arts, these cultural workers also committed a significant portion of their time to the practice of non-formal arts education – in some cases developing parallel careers. In doing so, they would have had to learn, revise and unlearn approaches and assumptions relating to children, education and youth culture, confront challenging questions about their own artistic practice and its social applications, while simultaneously developing shared vocabularies as artist-facilitators in experimental, integrated arts programmes.

These figures include Elizabeth Cardosa (theatre), Janet Pillai (sociology and children's theatre), Marion D'Cruz (dance), Anne James (theatre), Sugu Kingham (visual arts), Leow Puay Tin (theatre and playwriting), Charlene Rajendran (theatre), Liew Kung Yu (visual and graphic arts), Aida Redza (dance), Tan Sooi Beng (ethnomusicology and music of sound),

Ho Sheau Fung (theatre), Chen Yoke Pin (mass communications), Goh Hun Meng (visual and graphic arts) and Kuah Li Feng (visual communications), amongst others. A distinctive through-line across the programmes is the presence of Janet Pillai – children's theatre expert, long-time *USM* lecturer, and specialist resource person on arts education, cultural mapping, and placemaking. Since her involvement in '*Teater Kanak-Kanak'* in the late 1970s, Pillai has dedicated her life to the field of non-formal arts education. Following her retirement from *USM*, she has published prolifically and continues to lecture and facilitate training workshops widely across Asia.

A reading of the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* is simultaneously a reading of the extended journey undertaken by Pillai and her fellow travellers through the landscape of arts education in Malaysia. As detailed interpretations are available on the selected programmes and projects, my observations are limited to larger turns and patterns that emerged in the practice of non-formal arts education over the last four decades.

1. <u>An expanded practice – from children's theatre to community engaged arts.</u>

Three major threads of practice can be discerned in the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection*. The early programmes from 1977 to 2002 ('*Teater Kanak-Kanak',* '*Program Seni Kreatif'* and '*Teater Muda'*) shared a common objective of decolonising the arts in content and form. These programmes were acclaimed for their unique training processes, intercultural Malaysian aesthetics, and challenging portrayals of the world of young people – as experienced, co-devised, and performed by young people. Ambitious children's theatre productions such as '*Si Geroda'* (1979-81), '*Suara Rimba'* (1994), '*Rama & Sita: Generasi Baru'* (1996) and '*Ne Zha'* (1999) reinterpreted legends, epics and folktales through the contemporary lens, images and issues of teenagers. While more intimate projects such as '*Sri Ayu'* (1980)*, 'Zam Zam & Peminjam Wang'* (1990-91)*, 'Kami Bukannya Patung'* (1991) and '*Red and Gold Shoe'* (2001) reflected the trials and tribulations faced by social outcasts, street children and the disabled.  The programmes consciously introduced the traditional arts (*wayang kulit, gamelan, shigu drumming, bharatanatyam, wushu, silat*, etc.) and encouraged multilingualism. In an attempt to emulate an art tradition that did not separate the arts into different disciplines, children were trained using an integrated arts process – encompassing an exposure and blending of theatre, dance, music, visual arts, and literary arts.

A second, more pedagogical thread is found in '*Theatre-In-Education'* projects such as '*Setumpok Pisang'* (1996), '*STOP! LOOK! GO!'* (1998), '*Ok Tak Ok'* (1998-2002) and '*RESPEK'* (1999-2004), which critically interrogated social issues faced by young people using interactive techniques from process drama, theatre-in-education (TiE) and forum theatre. These projects involved research with student focus groups to elicit real-life experiences on topics such as identity, gender and self-image, conflict handling, sex education, and abusive relationships; to allow for greater criticality and aesthetic distance, the personal case studies were workshopped by actor-facilitators into fictional contexts, with multiple possible outcomes or solutions – allowing for audience participation through role playing, collective decision-making, and discussion. These performances were toured to secondary schools with the underlying intention to change social behaviour and perception, and were equipped with teacher's resources to facilitate pre- and post-event discussions of the topics. Several of these *TiE* performances were later adapted into educational videos.

*Arts-ED*'s ground-breaking community-based arts and heritage education work since 1999 constitutes a third thread which emphasises the interaction between people, place and use within a local cultural ecology. The '*Anak-Anak Kota'* (2001-2005), '*myBALIKpulau'* (2006-

2010), and '*Heritage Heboh'* (2006-2012) programmes represent an expanded social practice – intersecting cultural heritage education, place-based pedagogy, cultural sustainability, as well as intergenerational and intercultural transmission between young people and other stakeholders in Penang. While building on core principles from earlier threads, these programmes marked a departure from the regular production of performances and focused on long-term processes of cultural mapping and interpretation, community placemaking, planning, and problem-solving. *Arts-ED*'s work has become an important reference in Southeast Asia over the past two decades, and its present activities include training and exchanges, research, documentation and interpretation, as well as providing consultation with diverse communities, stakeholders, and networks.

2. <u>Children – from artists and experiential learners to social actors.</u>

The social phenomenon of childhood has been impacted by cultural, sociological, psychological and philosophical changes over recent decades, and the child's conception of the world has become ever more layered and complex. Coming out of a new paradigm of child-centred education, creative and critical pedagogy was always at the heart of the *FAC-Arts-ED programmes*. At the same time, we can also trace how these experimental arts programmes have contributed to a more contemporary conception of the child as a local and global citizen.

A consistent tactic employed through all the projects has been the conscious recruitment of youth participants from different genders and family income levels, as well as ethnic, age, and language groups – emphasising a process of respecting differences and overcoming stereotypes through cross-, inter-, and intracultural exchange. Prior to the art-making process, the participants go through exercises that help identity their individual capabilities, knowledge, interests, and personality traits – drawing from Howard Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences – to aid the formation of groups, sharing, collaboration, and the distribution of roles.

While earlier programmes such as '*Teater Kanak-Kanak'*, '*Program Seni Kreatif'* and '*Teater Muda'* pursued a decolonial approach to create a Malaysian children's theatre and employed developmental psychology to construct the child as a lifelong learner and artist, a shift can be detected with the *TiE* projects towards considering young people as potential change agents in their own contexts. The *TiE* work focused on theatrical and conflict handling strategies – working from personalisation to generalisation, and from the experiential to the performative – and marked an important transition to the '*Anak-Anak Kota'*, '*myBALIKpulau',* and '*Heritage Heboh'* programmes.

Recent projects such as '*Endangered Trades and Traditional Foods'* (2001-2005), '*Stories on the Wall'* (2002), '*Signboard Making for Traditional Trades'* (2002), '*mySELF, myFAMILY, myTOWN'* (2005-6), '*Heritage Building Inventory'* (2006), '*Balik Pulau Interpretation Signage'* (2009), '*Heritage Heboh Street Festival'* (2006), and '*Heritage Discovery Trails'* (2011-2013) witnessed young people conducting field research in communities and interpreting their findings through a wide range of creative outputs and vernacular expressions. No longer just actors in performances or participating spec-actors in *TiE* projects, children assumed the role and responsibility of social actors – performing as citizen journalists, cultural mappers, and researchers, as 'experts' of their everyday environment.

3. <u>Re:location – from Kuala Lumpur to Penang.</u>

Beyond the historical tropes of capital/second city or centre/periphery binarism that tend to govern comparisons between KL and Penang, the bi-locality and bi-focality of the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* provide useful reflections on arts education between these cities. At the federal political level, successive Ministries of Education have exhibited little interest in social and arts education, whereas in Penang – with a stronger tradition of consumer associations, citizen initiatives, and activism – the state government and universities found ways of collaborating with these non-governmental organisations. For example, *Arts-ED*'s early forays into non-formal arts education was supported by the *Penang Educational Consultative Council* and by *USM*. In the 1980s and 1990s the *USM School of Arts* boasted several artist-lecturers who encouraged an interest in experimental pedagogies and process art, such as Zainal A. Latiff, Janet Pillai, Ray Langenbach, Sugu Kingham, and Tan Sooi Beng, amongst others. *Arts-ED* benefited from its connection to *USM* in terms of this kind of institutional memory, as well as access to staff, student facilitators, and the *ABN-AMRO* space and facilities in George Town, where its early programmes were conducted.

After moving to Penang in 1984 to join the *USM School of Arts* as a lecturer, Pillai commuted to KL weekly throughout the 1990s to continue collaborations with *Five Arts Centre*'s '*Teater Muda'* programme (initiated in 1992). In Penang, Pillai continued to experiment on the integrated arts approach with visual arts colleague Sugu Kingham and found opportunities to attempt theatre-in-education between 1998 and 2000, working collaboratively with activist NGOs and engaging *USM* students as actors. While '*Teater Muda'* performances in KL were very well received, by the end of the decade Pillai became troubled by the broader commercialisation of children's theatre in the capital, with middle class communities making up primary audiences. Within '*Teater Muda'*, projects such as '*Suara Rimba'* (1994) developed organically out of a two-year open-ended process but later performances saw an increased orientation towards production, with prolonged rehearsals and more control asserted by the adult creative teams.

The year 2000 facilitated a turn for Pillai and her activist-orientated collaborators towards site- and community-specific work in Penang. This was instigated by the unsatisfactory reception to attempts to introduce non-formal arts education into Penang schools, coupled with an opportunity to utilise arts education to revitalise cultural assets in a community setting.

In 2000, the *Rent Control Act* which provided cheap housing for working class tenants of inner-city George Town was repealed to allow for new development. The resulting mass outmigration of traditional communities and the rush to tear down old properties threatened the cultural destruction of the historically diverse 19th century port settlement. Concerned citizens and non-governmental groups rallied to conserve the built and living heritage in George Town, and this potential collaboration with activists and NGOs interested in safeguarding local culture sealed the identity and development of *Arts-ED* in culture and heritage education. This agenda would later be co-opted by the state government when George Town was designated as a *UNESCO World Heritage Site* in 2008.

The '*Anak-Anak Kota'* (2001-2005) programme was developed to help children in the inner-city identify their local cultural assets and examine how people, practices and place are connected through time, space, and socio-economic interaction. Other community-engaged projects followed in the agricultural region of Balik Pulau (2005-2010), the urban public housing community in Sungai Pinang (2012-2014), and suburban Butterworth (2016). These projects utilised cultural mapping as a tool to assess the DNA of a community ecosystem and combined the findings with bottom-up placemaking consultations to propose sensitive

revitalisation of a location's cultural assets. As Pillai has stated, "placemaking is both a creative and adaptive process. It naturally occurs when people interact with new environments, urban or rural, to forge new social relations and livelihoods. Cultural adaptation, or the ability to creatively blend the known with the unknown, the old with the new, is a kind of creative force that generates cultural energy. This energy, in turn, facilitates placemaking, and develops robust human settlements."

4.  Studio, stage, street, site – from safe spaces to real environments.

Workshops and rehearsals in the earlier programmes were conducted in schools and studios, where conducive environments were created for the emotional and physical safety of children to engage freely in creative exploration and expression. However, the performances created under '*Teater Kanak-Kanak'*, '*Program Seni Kreatif'*, '*Teater Muda',* and '*Theatre-in-Education'* were staged in diverse locations – schools, gymnasiums, libraries, civic halls, theatres, and urban public housing flats.

In some projects such as '*Zam Zam & Peminjam Wang'* (1990-91) and '*Suara Rimba'* (1994), the artist-facilitators organised field trips to enable participants to learn from specific environments. For example, in the former they conducted character and street-life observation around the working class area of Sungai Pinang as well as moneylending and 4D gambling shops in George Town, while in the latter, the children learnt weaving techniques from the *Mah Meri* community on Pulau Carey, immersed themselves in the Kuala Kubu Baru jungles, and studied animals at *Zoo Negara*. These observations, sensations, and studies were brought back into the school or studio to be workshopped further. This experiential, child-centric fieldwork would become key to later programmes – the environmental and nature mapping for *Suara Rimba* can be seen as a precursor to the use of cultural mapping across '*Anak-Anak Kota'*, '*myBALIKpulau'*, and '*Heritage Heboh'*.

When *Arts-ED* began as an informal group in 1999, it attempted to create arts education programmes in Penang schools without much success. Safe spaces could not be created as power relationships and hierarchies between teachers and students were entrenched, while schools were unwilling to accommodate alternative pedagogies into the curriculum as they did not conform to pre-existing key performance indicators. Within the formal education system, themes and topics relating to people, place, and practices are taught theoretically in subjects such as Geography, History, Science, and Living Skills. However, the student is alienated from the living dynamics of cultural sustainability and are denied access to experiential research and inspiration in real environments – beyond the confines of the classroom and curriculum. This contradiction necessitated the leap in *Arts-ED*'s work to a non-formal, place-based approach – reconceptualising George Town as an open source classroom and the street as a site-specific cultural lab.

This change of direction precipitated an explosion of intergenerational, intercultural dialogue, research, documentation and interpretation, which were harnessed into creative outputs such as walking maps and brochures, discovery trails, shophouse and sidewalk signboards, exhibitions in public spaces, oral history interviews, site-specific storytelling, children's and traditional games festivals, and more. It is worth noting that street theatre and community performances remain staples of *Arts-ED*'s activities – inspired by Penang's visible heritage of folk culture and religious rituals on the streets – but over time, photography, video, and visual arts have become the primary mapping, documentation, and presentation tools. This is due to the accessibility and proliferation of mobile digital technologies, and the related shift to greater literacy in visual cultures across society at large.

5.  Networks - from national to local.

The final evolutionary pattern that is discernible in the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* is related to ecologies of support and sustainability – where an earlier dependence on national-level or formal institutions has given way to alliance building with local stakeholders as well as regional communities of practice.

Many of the early children's theatre and non-formal arts education pioneers came of age in the post-1969 period when a seemingly more experimental and open-ended post-independence nationalism was temporarily harnessed as an engine to decolonise culture, the arts, and society in search of new Malaysian identities. Impetus was provided in the early 1970s through governmental initiatives such as the setting up of the *Kompleks Budaya Negara* as a training ground to transmit and promote local performing arts, the creation of new universities, and the formulation of the *National Cultural Policy* (NCP) as a measure to promote national unity following the racialised political violence of 1969. The NCP in particular came to be interpreted in increasingly conservative terms, and since the 1980s more powerful currents of developmentalist and neoliberal capitalism, feudal governmentality, an entrenchment of racial politics, and the politicisation of Islam gathered force to shape the form of Malaysian society. As such, the practice of non-formal arts education in Malaysia over the last four decades can be interpreted as a form of creative resistance and resilience against these larger hegemonic forces seeking to instrumentalise the arts and education sectors to promote more exclusionary cultural politics.

We can witness a move from relying on national, institutional, formal and bureaucratic systems of support and funding in the earlier programmes to sustained relationships with civil society and non-profit organisations in more recent programmes. The '*Theatre-In-Education*' period witnessed a prototypical partnership with the *Women's Crisis Centre* (now the *Women's Centre for Change*) across multiple projects, and over the years collaborations with other non-governmental organisations have provided reliable sources of funding and enduring stakeholder commitment to issue-based projects. These have included heritage groups, city-making organisations, schools, as well as local and municipal councils. Due to the nature of its place-based work, *Arts-ED* has attempted to advocate and work long-term with diverse stakeholders, supporters and partners such as historians, architects, urban planners, anthropologists, local residents and businesses, places of worship and community members to sustain its larger humanistic mission of making meaningful work and empowering citizens' lives.

In 2018, a small window for systemic reforms and overhauls appeared after a democratic change in government in Malaysia for the first time since independence in 1957. Among several efforts to address decades-long stagnation of public institutions and systems, the *Ministry of Education* established a 13-person *National Education Policy Review Committee*. The taskforce was set up to review national education policies and improve the curriculum and educational system from pre-school to university level by incorporating civic and ethics education. It should be noted that non-formal arts education pioneer Janet Pillai was appointed to be a member of the Committee. A final report was submitted to the *Ministry of Education* in May 2019, with new initiatives and policies based on the recommendations to be rolled out in stages from 2020 – but another change in government has taken place since then. A reversion to the previous status quo seems very likely and it appears that the potential of incorporation or working together between the non-formal and formal education sectors will remain an unfulfilled and distant prospect.

For the foreseeable future, non-formal arts education will persist in working on a small scale, with limited funding, and on the outer contours of the mainstream education system – punching way above its weight to create long-term engagement by focusing on building local community relationships, fostering mutual support and sustainability amongst diverse stakeholders, and sharing citizen power, knowledge, resources, and visions of cultural sustainability.


**Part 3: Some Prospects for Further Research**

While the non-formal arts education sector in Malaysia remains under-resourced and under-studied, for those who may be interested to conduct more research and scholarship into the field, there are many possibilities for further investigation. What follows are some prospective directions and suggestions that are by no means exhaustive, but indicative of the rich potential of this vital field of practice.

1.  Other threads in children's theatre in Malaysia

Apart from the experimental, integrated arts programmes in the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* and some writings on mainstream Malay-language children's theatre, there is also a parallel lineage of Chinese-language children's theatre which developed out of the independent, vernacular school movement. Besides shedding more light on contributions by the early pioneers, the work of active groups such as *Red Sister Studio*, *Greenhopper Theatre*, *TEAM* (*Theatre Education Arts Mentor*), *Tammy Yee Production* and *ART.Institution* merit further study. The presence of *Green Leaf Theatre House* in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah also suggests casting the net wider to regional coordinates beyond the usual urban centres.

In Klang Valley-based English-language circles, *The Jumping Jellybeans* has been noted for their work in children's homes and communities as well as for organising the '*KL Children's Theatre Festival'* in 2005, while the *Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre*'s '*Theatre for Young People'* (T4YP) programme has produced several well-received performances since 2008. Over the last decade, there have been a number of Malay children's theatre shows supported by non-governmental organisations that platform the narratives, experiences and aspirations of orphans, refugees, and urban poor children – the work of Nawfal Zamri, Fazleena Hishamuddin, and *Akademi Seni Teach for the Needs* is representative of this trajectory. More research could also be undertaken on the 1980s library movement of children's theatre, storytelling and puppetry groups, looking into its potential crossover into formal education via institutions such as libraries and *DBP*, as well as the reasons for its eventual decline.

2.  Community- and Socially-Engaged Arts Projects

Since the 1990s, there has been a growth in the global practice of community- and socially-engaged arts. These are artistic initiatives involving public participation or co-production, and are variously referred to as social practice, artistic activism, participatory art, relational aesthetics, dialogic art, social justice art, new genre public art, community performance, applied theatre, community dance, theatre for social change, etc.

Parallel to *Arts-ED*'s work in Penang, many socially-engaged arts projects in Malaysia since 2000 have also emphasised a community-centric and non-formal arts education focus.

These include groups and initiatives such as: *Five Arts Centre*'s '*Taman Medan Community Arts Project'* (2002-2005); Chu Chu Yuan's '*1948 Projects'* in Seri Kembangan (2008); *Lostgens*' series of community arts projects in the Penang Clan Jetties, Bukit China (Melaka), Pudu and Petaling Street (KL) from 2009 to 2011; *Rumah Air Panas'* '*Majujaya Community Playground Workshop'* (2011); *Kota Kita*'s '*Chow Kit Kita'* and '*Projek Rumah Ibadat Kita'* (Brickfields, KL and Tuaran, Sabah), *Sasaran Arts Association* in Kuala Selangor; *Pusat Sekitar Seni*; *Serdang Community Art Carnival*; *Kajang Heritage Centre*; *Rakan Mantin* in Negri Sembilan; *Pangrok Sulap* in Ranau and Kota Kinabalu, *Art Baiduren*, and the multi-nodal, rhizomatic movement *Buku Jalanan*.

Most of these initiatives emerged in the post-March 8, 2008 landscape, when the ruling *Barisan Nasional* government was denied its then-customary two-thirds majority in the general elections – paving the way for an emergence of two-coalition political system in Malaysia and a growth in wider civic participation. In general, documentation of these projects have tended to be patchy but the work provides valuable contributions to the fields of arts, activism, and education. Community- and socially-engaged artists in Malaysia would benefit from greater knowledge sharing, solidarity building, and networking, as well as further scholarship and recognition as a community of practice.

3.  Regional networks of non-formal arts education

These alternative channels of socially-engaged art and horizontal peer networks have also been developed at the regional and international levels. However research and scholarship has not kept apace – generally keeping to intra-national studies (for example, on the proliferation of cultural collectives in Indonesia) or confined to specific disciplines of art (social practice within the discourses of contemporary art). While a handful of publications have focused on the Asian theatre for liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the legacies of these political and educational theatre groups need further updating and critical engagement, alongside the influence of international platforms such as *ASSITEJ* (the *International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People*, founded 1965) and *IDEA* (*International Drama/Theatre and Education Association*, founded 1992) on local and regional practices of non-formal arts education.

These should be brought into constellation and comparison with more recent, interdisciplinary networks such as: *Makhampom*'s '*Living Theatre Centre'* (Chiang Dao, Thailand); *Five Arts Centre*'s '*Asian Youth Artsmall'* and *Arts-ED*'s '*Community Engaged Arts Network'* (Malaysia); *KUNCI*'s '*School of Improper Education*', '*Jatiwangi Art Factory*' and '*Gudskul Ekosistem*' (Indonesia); '*Asahi Arts Network*' and '*Toride Art Project'* (Japan) and '*Bamboo Curtain Studio'* (Taiwan), amongst many others.

4.  The work of cultural dramaturgy in the emergent national ecosystem

While figures such as Ismail Zain, Krishen Jit, Noordin Hassan, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and Usman Awang continue to receive attention for their individual creative output as artists, theatre directors and playwrights, their work as inclusive, visionary cultural bureaucrats, and regional networkers remain largely under the radar.

The case of Ismail Zain is particularly instructive – from 1968 to 1985, while maintaining his own art and curatorial practice, he served variously as a member of the Inspectorate of Schools at the *Ministry of Education* (1968-1972), the Director of the *National Arts Gallery*

(1972-1975), the Director of Culture at *Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports* (1975-1982), and Director-General of the *National Film Development Corporation* (FINAS, 1982-1985).

Ensconced in national and formal institutions, Ismail and his contemporaries took on the tasks of artistic directors, curators, chairpersons, enablers, gatekeepers, initiators, or propagandists on various arts and cultural committees, festivals, programmes, and showcases in the formative years of post-independence cultural practice. The shape, influence and impact of their 'national' dramaturgies and intrinsic cultural imaginaries – which included formal and non-formal arts education as a site of engagement – bear further investigation, critique and unpacking, given the bureaucratic, conservative and instrumentalised directions taken by Malaysian institutions since the 1980s.

5.  <u>Feminist and decolonial histories of performing arts and education practice in Malaysia</u>

Many of the key figures in non-formal arts education in the *FAC-Arts-ED Collection* are part of an exceptional cohort of practitioners who attended local universities in the 1970s and came to prominence as artists in their own right in the 1980s and 1990s. Entering into the performing arts arena where men dominated creative leadership roles in organisations and productions, artists such as Anne James, Elizabeth Cardosa, Janet Pillai, Leow Puay Tin, Marion D'Cruz, and Tan Sooi Beng established pathbreaking and sustained careers as actors, producers, directors, playwrights, choreographers, composers, and educators involved in the creation of experimental, intercultural, and original work. While there have been individual Masters and PhD dissertations produced on the work of Leow and D'Cruz employing feminist frames – a label not worn comfortably or lightly by either – more work needs to be done to reflect on the evolving, multifaceted decolonial poetics and politics produced by these artists.

On a broader level, interdisciplinary analyses could also be used to trace parallel movements initiated by women activists, lawyers, and scholars from the same generation – many of whom were involved in the establishing and leading of women's rights and human rights non-governmental organisations in the 1980s. These include figures such as Ambiga Sreenevasan, Cecelia Ng, Chong Eng, Diana Wong, Irene Fernandez, Irene Xavier, Ivy Josiah, Maria Chin Abdullah, Mary Cardosa, Meera Samanther, Norani Othman, Prema Devaraj, Zainah Anwar, and many others. A more comprehensive women's history of Malaysia needs to be produced to dismantle the entrenched feudal and patriarchal narratives.

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