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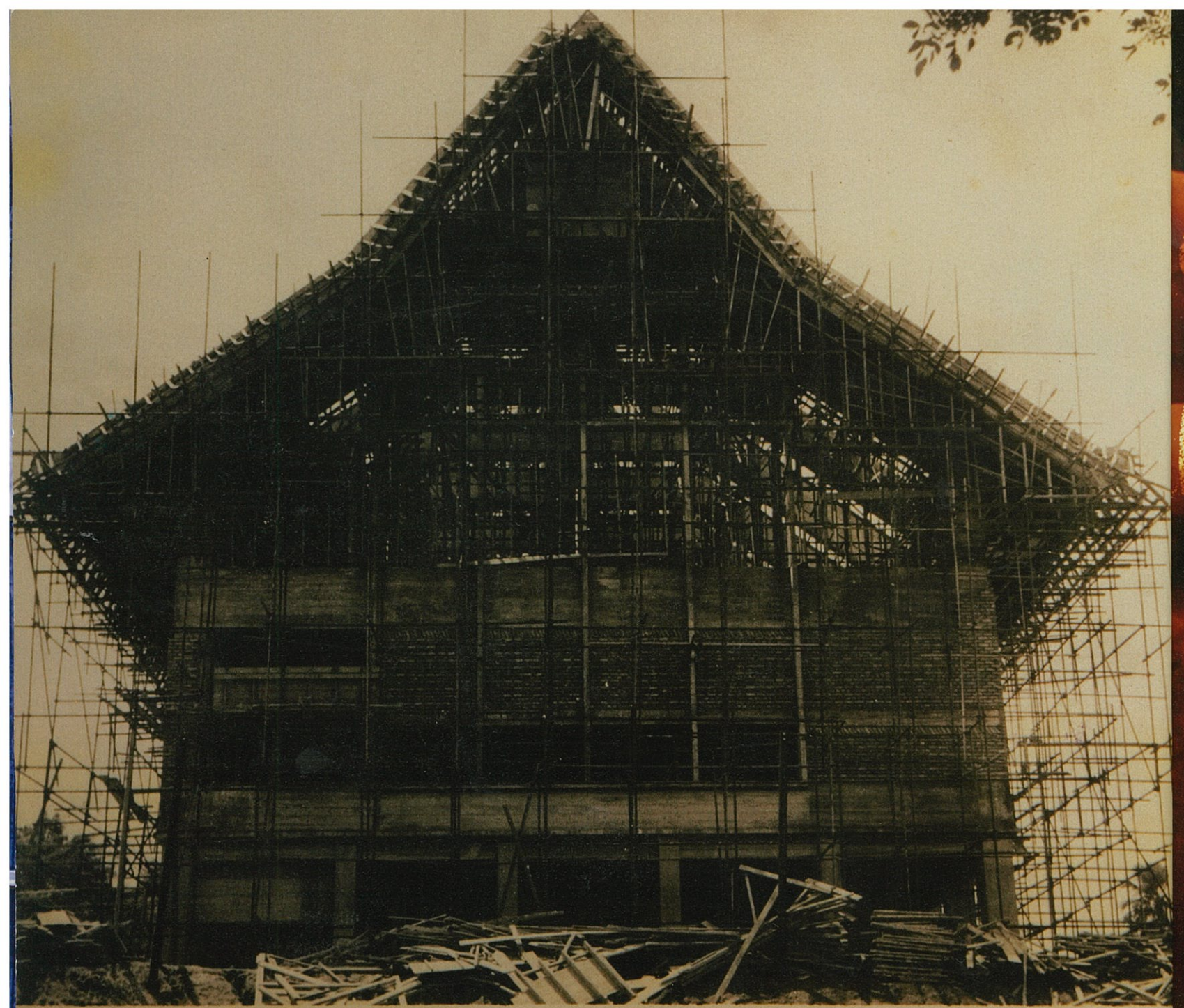
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BUILDING THE CULTURE. National Museum building in progress, Kuala Lumpur, 1962. Photo from the permanent collection of Henry Bong, Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum. See page 31

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Johnny Cheng, *Dayak Girl in Ceremonial Costume (Sarawak)*, oil on mazonite board, 1969.  
From the permanent collection of Henry Bong, Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum

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*Five Minutes* (page 7) is their first collaboration as a photographer/writer team. In a beat-up Satria on a road trip all over Malaysia, the duo captured the stories of over 100 Malaysians. Their effort will soon be published in a coffee-table book and shown in an exhibition. Despite directional disputes, the hardest drive was the one home. 'We really did not want to come back at all'.

**RAFIL ELYAS** attempted to reanimate dead animals using nine-volt batteries as a child. He has been sighted in the deep interior of Borneo, the Badlands in Canada, a Santeria shop in New Orleans, and a back alley in Saigon. These days, he runs a business, dealing with pigs, slugs and fluids. He sometimes writes short stories and songs.

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They curate *galleryW/Owalls* from page 96.

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Italian 16th-century version of the original Greek Ptolemy map of first century AD, showing the Golden Chersonese, Borneo, Southeast Asia and South Asia regions

Permanent collection of Henry Bong, Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum

# Wanderlust

By Jason Tan and Nick Choo

Migrations and the business of art, culture and heritage, as practised by Pucuk Rebung

THE SARAWAK-BORN BONG of Peranakan descent, Henry, takes pride in what he calls 'our collective Malaysian identity', the interweaved threads of our diverse cultures. At 44, he slipped off the golden handcuffs given him by the banking industry to set up Pucuk Rebung Enterprise Sdn Bhd in 1997, completely privately funded, the premises of which was located at Jalan Tun HS Lee. Two years later, Pucuk Rebung Gallery-Museum opened at the arguably incongruous location of Suria KLCC, in a space spanning three shop lots. 'It's part of the idea of bringing visibility, a

museum concept to a mall,' he explains of his choice of site. 'It's about branding. This has to be a labour of love. We don't make much; in fact, sometimes, we make losses. But we have shown that this business can be viable, without a doubt. It's a business of culture, and it can be formidable.' According to the company's vision statement, Pucuk Rebung was created as 'a unique Malaysian and Malay-world lifestyle institution dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the traditional and artistic endeavours across the cultural landscape of our nation – reflecting the

dynamic unity... of our peoples through art and cultural heritage that transcends communal, religious and social lines, expressed as the universal language of timeless beauty'. It reflects the treks Bong has himself made, from East to Peninsula Malaysia, and west to east coast. In 1999, Pucuk Rebung MHS Sdn Bhd was formed as a marketing arm of the group, while Pucuk Rebung Interiors was incorporated the following year with the vision of promoting and elevating the beauty of Malaysian art forms in the context of interior design.

ZAINAB, 40, housewife, Kampung Lubuk Setoi, Kelantan. 'I stay at home with my husband. My hope for them is that they become successful in their lives. My hope for myself is that they become successful in their lives. My hope for them is that they become successful in their lives. My hope for myself is that they become successful in their lives.'





1 **The Bornean Chinese dragon** Cast in our Malay Archipelago, these Sarawak gongs are sold as far as Singapore. Two distinct Chinese dragons meet around the gong with fish and crabs between them, suggesting a watery milieu instead of the high-flying classic Chinese model. Tiny bamboo shoots radiate outwards as a pucuk rebung collar, forming the interesting central suggestion that these were cast by Chinese entrepreneurs for local consumption – hence the water nagas – parallel with the water serpent nagas of the Malay world. Brass, coloured paint pigments; Sarawak, Brunei; 19th century



2 **Moro, Sulu naga** Clearly modeled after the Chinese genre, chasing fireballs (despite having short legs), encircling a brass jar as opposed to a ceramic martaban jar. Heritage of Sabah and South Philippines. Cast brass; Sabah, Sulu; 19th century

3 **Malay naga** On a bronze gong of Brunei manufacture and heritage of Sarawak; swimming in a primordial world of cloud and surrounded by a circular rim of pucuk rebung and an outer strip of Chinese geometric pattern, showing a very rich amalgamation of cultural stereotypes. Cast bronze; Brunei, Sarawak; circa 18th century

Today, the Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum is under the Royal Patronage of HRH the Raja Perempuan of Kelantan Tengku Anis Tengku Abdul Hamid; and among Bong's interior design jobs are Istana Makhota and the Royal Ballroom and Royal Banquet Hall of Istana Negeri, Kelantan, as well as Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Kuala Lumpur; the Sultan of Brunei's Palace in KL; and Carcosa Sri Negara.

Ten years down the track, the next stage, Bong reveals, is to bring the gallery to the museum-level proper, to expound on the museum aspect of the business. 'The point is,' he asserts, 'an appreciation of art history, of cultural motives and background – when we come to understand genealogy... we see the linkages among our peoples.'

*Off The Edge* takes stock of what's on display.

**The business and cultural spheres here seemed to have been cleaved into separate worlds inhabited by peoples of different sensibilities: you can either make money, or you can suffer for your art. You've worked in both worlds. What is your experience of the interaction, and of the relationship, between the two?**

In retrospect, my 20-year banking career in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore (serving Bank Pertanian, Hong Leong, CitiBank, CitiCorp, Maybank Singapore, Bank of America Singapore and Pacific Bank) seemed destined to serve as boot camp to start up my own business. I brought with me sales,

marketing, investment banking and retail banking experiences, with their principles of product development, differentiation, strategising, marketing, regulatory compliance and customer service...

I've swapped financial products for visually stunning and culturally enriching alternatives, while the core principles adopted from the banking business underpin the enterprise. Pucuk Rebung is the expression of a business model based on the more ethereal, refined premises of art, culture and heritage. We're now on the other side of the desk, as it were, from the bankers. The challenge is to convince them that you have a viable business... if you need the funding.

In many ways, and as much as I enjoyed it, banking was my bridge to Pucuk Rebung. It provided the initial means to enrich an earlier collection that was started two generations ago [by my grandfather and father], while financing new acquisitions to those I'd started some 40 years ago. The collection of Malay-world civilisation art had simply reached a critical mass, and that was when Pucuk Rebung was founded.

Still, this took a lot of guts and will-power to realise. Coming from an old and whole family of civil servants, with the exception of my convent-educated mother, the need to conform and remain in the civil service was tremendous. Just being in banking was rebellious enough... To exit it for your own business after a solid

career would then seem totally reckless. I've always wondered if this mid-life change was really a chip off the older block, of my paternal grandparents, who dealt in belian timber, gold jewellery and batik. My parents would not have empathised.

Having lost my mother and father in the last year of my banking career – my father on my final day of banking service – all I had was Pucuk Rebung, total freedom, and the collection of art and heritage. I was finally able to devote my full energy, resources and knowledge to bring to fruition this offshoot of a passion for all things Malaysian and Malay... and try to create a private museum ranking hopefully among the best in the world. It was to show that Malaysia Boleh – that any anak Malaysia, if he or she sets their mind to it, can succeed. I wanted to allow Pucuk Rebung's collection of Malay-world civilisation art to spark dialogue on our commonalities and build bridges between our peoples; between the rapid growth and wealth accumulation caused by industrialisation and the pronounced lack of appreciation for – and low literacy of – things artistic, cultural or heritage in nature.

**After 10 years of 'trading' in culture, is it the more viable business to banking?**

Definitely. Creating Pucuk Rebung as a niche player and a pioneer gives it value and great satisfaction to me and my partners, Terence and Tengku Anisah. We wouldn't trade this business for the world; it 'gives back' through its promotion and sales of





3

4 **Malay naga** From an antique jawi manuscript titled *Kitab Asal Perahu Azimat Raja*, from the Malay heartlands of South Thailand. This hand-drawn dragon has the definitive attributes of the Malay naga. Legless, stubby and rather snake-like, they appear to have evolved from the water serpent guardians of Southeast Asian royalty in the pre-Islamic world of Srivijaya and its strong influence over the Malay world. Ink and pigments on paper; Malay, Patani, Kelantan; circa 18th century

5 **Malay naga** As the vehicle of the deities – in this case, Sita Dewi, in a Kelantan wayang kulit (detail). An idea akin to the cosmic carriers of Hindu Majapahit, like Garuda being the carrier of Vishnu. Buffalo/cowhide, paint and bamboo; Kelantan; contemporary

Permanent collection of Henry Bong, Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum

works by artists, artisans and craftsmen. I can engage the public in arts awareness. It is enriching, and it generates income.

In banking, one needs to toe the appropriate lines as an employee. You earn, say, RM250,000 per annum before tax. How much more you earn, and how far you go after that, depends on your performance and the corporate moves you make, whether within the company or out of it – that is, if you survive the intrigues of office politics. My happiness index factor is now much higher, despite the stress of having to fund all business activities and generate all supporting administrative systems myself. The love for the arts overrides even the onset of hypertension.

**What have been the fundamental challenges in the founding and running of a business such as Pucuk Rebung as a going concern? You are, after all, trading in 'last season's' items at best, any cachet of which cannot be made available beyond a few buyers.**

Founding a business that none thought could be viable and hence impossible, to be sited at the most expensive retail space in Malaysia – Suria KLCC – was an exhilarating experience. We've had to

CONTINUES ON PAGE 38



4



5







## KERIS A selection of Malay Archipelago keris types

1 **Keris Semenanjung**  
A wooden Jawa demam (in a fit of fever) hilt, a gold Peninsula cup selut, and a unique blade with distinct Javanese gold ornamentation but devoid of nagas or any animals. Its pure floral form but highly ornate gold ornamentation suggest that this was a specially commissioned Java blade for the more conservative Patani aristocracy, from which this keris was sourced. 19th century

2 **Keris Tanjung**  
With a silver pekaka hilt and lavish silver-ringed scabbard. Kelantan Patani royalty; 18th century

3 **Keris Jawa**

With a typically up-curved rangka (crossbar), Javanese aristocracy and animal forms on the blade and hilt. Ivory, gold, iron, wood and silver; 18th century

4 **Sumatran Keris Panjang**

Regalia piece. Provenance linked to Malay royalty, indicated by the lavish use of silver and pink gold on the scabbard. 18th century

5 **Post-Majapahit keris**

An early iron and meteorite keris with a stylised hilt, evolved from the human hilts of the Majapahit keris pict genre, Northern Peninsula Malaya. Such kerises were particularly believed to possess strong esoteric powers. 17th century

6 **Keris Madura**

The brass gilded scabbard suggests a link with a wealthy merchant class. The exotic wood of the rangka emphasises Madura's distinct shape of that part of the keris. 19th century

7 **Keris Tanjung with pekaka hilt**

Sometimes also called the wayang hilt. These composite kingfisher, pertalawati hilts are typical of Kelantan-Patani and their common links to an earlier Langkasuka legacy. Kemuning wood, ebony and iron; 18th century

8 **Keris Bali**

A multi-lob blade indicates a high level of rank and nobility within the Brahminic class system of Hindu Bali. This is reinforced with the gold and jewelled hilt featuring a bayu figure and the gajah menyusu on the blade. 18th century

9 **Moro Keris**

Keris Sulu, South Philippines and Sabah. The use of brass indicates a warrior-class of ownership. The cockatoo pommel on the hilt is complemented by the arabesque curve at the bottom of the scabbard, indicating an Arab influence on the design. In this region, we have collected a mail armour suit with a very curved 'arab' dagger like the current Kuwaiti dagger. 19th century

## THE SYMBOLISM OF ESOTERIC POWER OF THE MALAY WORLD

(from top to bottom)

The more reserved Muslim taste of the Moros-Suluks is reflected in the very arabesque styling of their long keris. The cockatoo has been abstracted to a pommel form

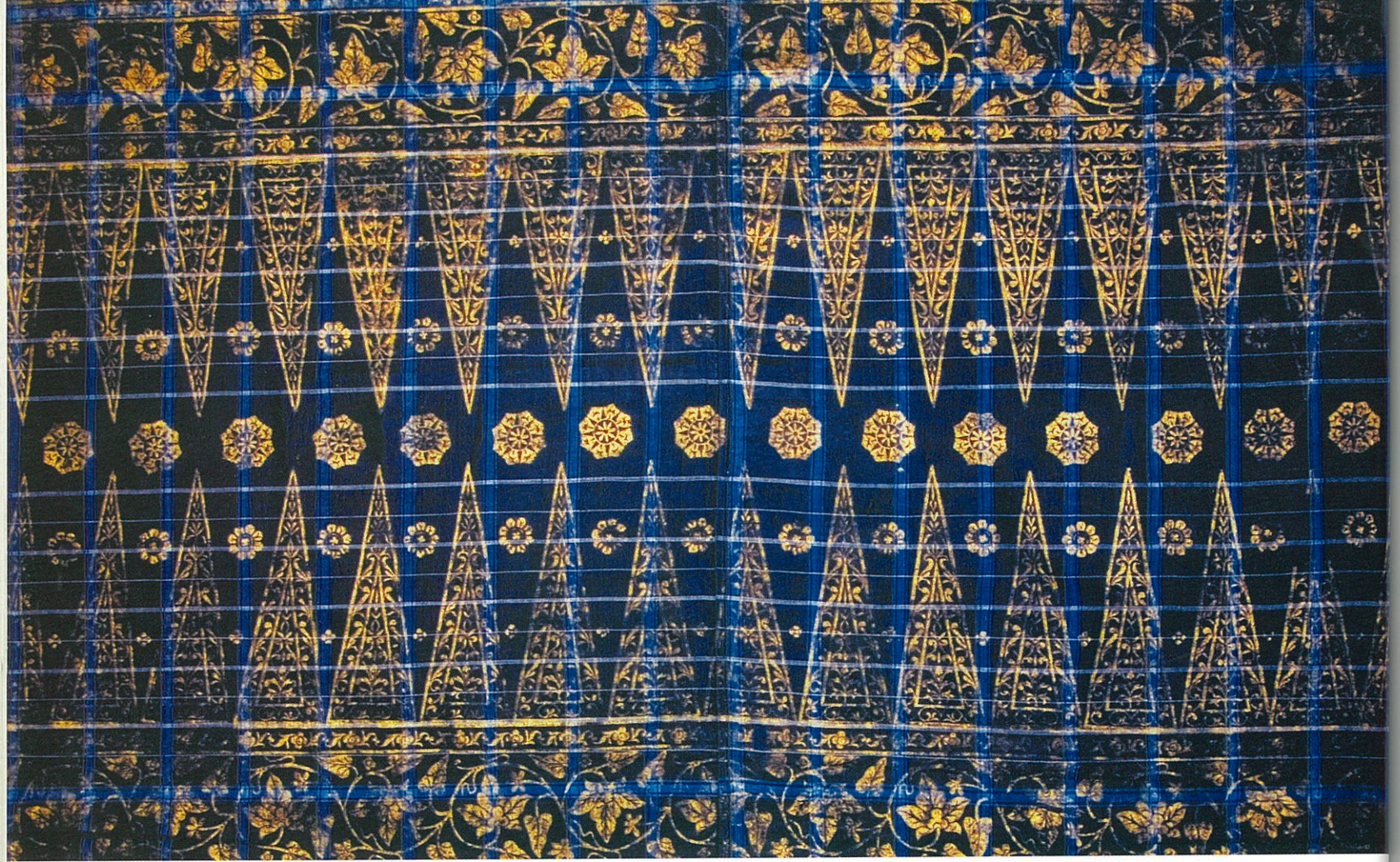
The Kelantan Patani Keris Tanjung has a pekaka hilt. This and the curved rangka of the scabbard evokes the dramatic curves of a magical bird in flight. The metallurgist target for puja is on the blade as the gajah menyusu (see page 42)

The Hindu Balinese embellish their keris not only with the gajah menyusu but protective spirits, demonstrated in this Bayuraksas hilt

Permanent collection of Henry Bong, Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum







**Main picture**

**Kain Telepok**

An extremely rare Peninsula kain gerus (waxed and polished) and kain telepok (stamp gilt), showing a stunning central panel of two facing rows of elongated pucuk rebung (bamboo shoots) with florets between them, bordered by intertwining plants (awan larat motif). The pucuk rebung here are slim and long like those of the Indonesian kain sembagi. The stamp gilt process is known as *prada* in Indonesia and telepok in Malaysia. Origin: Terengganu, Malay indigenous textile. Materials: silk, gold leaf, fish glue. Circa early 19th century.

**1 Pua Kumbu (Iban ceremonial blanket)**

This is a ceremonial blanket used for healing and for the gawai hantu of the Iban of Sarawak. Frieze of pucuk rebung woven initially as a protective layer as the top weaver (*induk ngar*) proceeds to the main body of the textile and incorporates the spirits; the food barrier layer is to stop the spirits in the event they attack the weaver as she proceeds. Origin: Sarawak, Borneo. Iban indigenous textile. Materials: kapok – tree cotton and plant dyes. Circa 1880s. A top weaver wove this piece with white border (1/2 pua shown). By taboo, they can only produce a few of these white-bordered weavings. Hence the bamboo shoot is also seen on an indigenous Malay-related Bornean tribe.

**2 Kain Sembagi, prada (Indian trade cloth)**

The printed cloth comes with two ends, each with a frieze of pucuk rebung in the format of a shoulder cloth (selendang). The gold leaf infilling of parts of the panel is done by a stenciling process. Motif: unusual long pucuk rebung in punca of the selendang. Origin: Indian trade cloth, Malay world, Palembang, Sumatra. Materials: gold leaf stenciled with fish glue on printed trade cloth. Circa 19th century.

**3 Kain Songket Samping Contemporary**

The central panel of this hipster tube for a man consists of two rows of stylised interlocking bamboo shoots. Motif: pucuk rebung in two rows of clenched monster teeth (gigi gergasi). Origin: Terengganu; Malay indigenous textile. Materials: coloured and metallic thread; silk-cotton base. Circa contemporary.

**4 Kain Cindai (Cindai Patola – double ikat)**

**Selendang Cindai** A coarse silk shoulder cloth of the famed double-ikat trade textiles from the Indian Gujurati coast. Such textiles were highly-prized court possessions, used as protective talismanic textiles. Motifs: body – bakul bunga (basket of flowers with central bunga pecah lapan [eight-petalled florets]); end panels – pucuk rebung in gigi gergasi formation. Origin: India; Kelantan heritage. Materials: silk, natural dyes. Circa 18th century.

**5 Kain Pelangi**

Patterns are made by the tie-dye process involving seeds and grains. The pucuk rebung are shown in two series and facing each other at the central panel (kepala) of the silk sarung. Motif: pucuk rebung in central panel. Origin: Malay world. Materials: silk, aniline dyes. Circa Twenties.

**6 Kain Songket (Supplementary Weave Textile)**

Songkets with supplementary weaves of metallic/cotton threads are usually on a silk/cotton base. Exhibited here as an exquisite example from the Malay aristocracy of Kelantan. The use of the classic Malay red-green colour scheme, and supplementary weaves of very fine gold threads, creates a very supple long shawl. Motifs: body – geometric interlocking bays; end panels – pucuk rebung. Origin: Kelantan-Patani; Malay indigenous textile. Materials: Silk, natural and aniline dyes, fine gold threads. Circa mid-19th century.

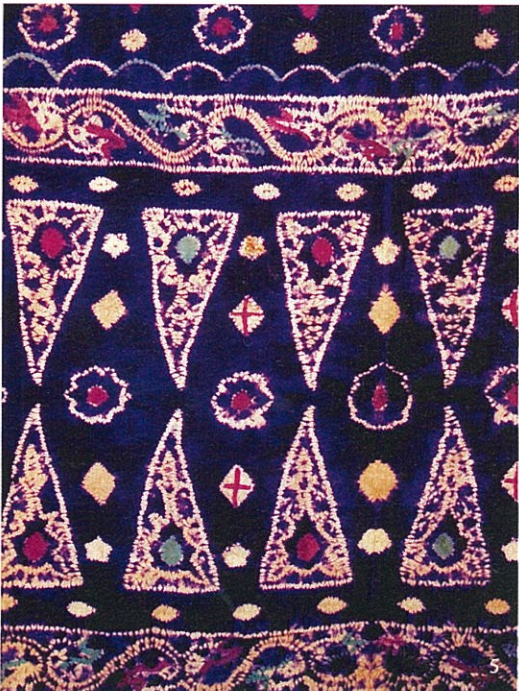
**7 Kain Limar Songket (Single ikat on weft – metallic thread supplementary weave textile)**

**Royal Sarong (Tube Skirt)** Shown here is a highly sophisticated and fine textile. It represents an extremely rare example of court attire, employing the combination of the lost art of ikat on the silk weft with embellishments by the songket technique (supplementary weave of gold threads) on the badan (main body), and accentuated pure gold songket on the kepala (central panel) on the sarung. Production of such limar songket textiles is extremely laborious and specialised. Today, this art form in this disciplined combination does not exist anymore. The single ikat technique for limar textiles is lost, but contemporary weavers continue to produce fine songket materials. Motifs: Sarung body – bunga pecah lapan in Teluk Berantai (interlocking bays); central panel – Pucuk Rebung Lawi Ayam (chicken spur-style bamboo shoots) with *chop mohor* (royal seals) in between. Origin: Kelantan Malay indigenous textile. Materials: silk, gold threads, natural dyes. Circa late 19th century.

**8 Songket Merdeka**

The pucuk rebung-filled central panel has simplified pucuk rebung lawi ayam patterns. The body has loose hibiscus, the national flower showing it to be a Merdeka (Independence) period piece. Motif: simplified pucuk rebung lawi ayam of the Fifties. Origin: Malaya. Materials: silk and cotton threads. Circa late Fifties.

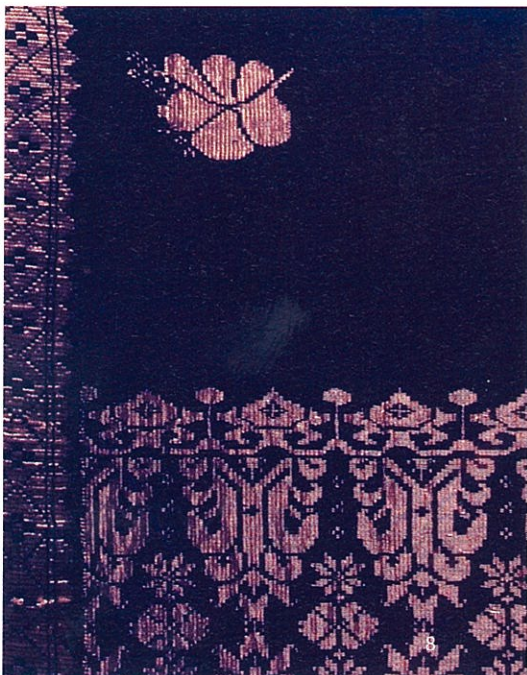
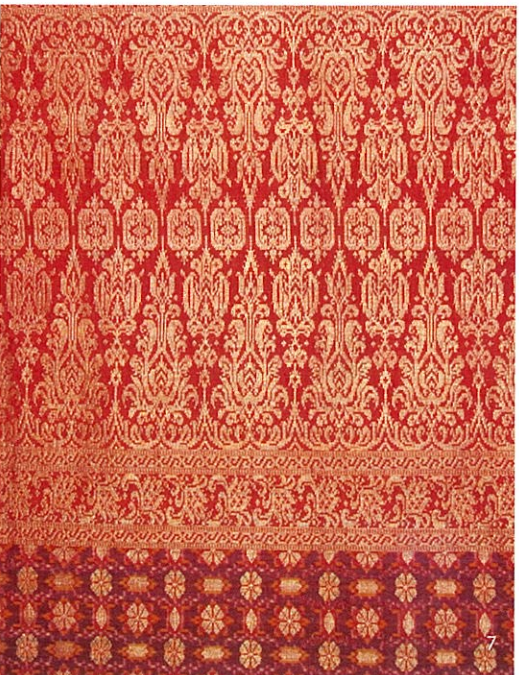




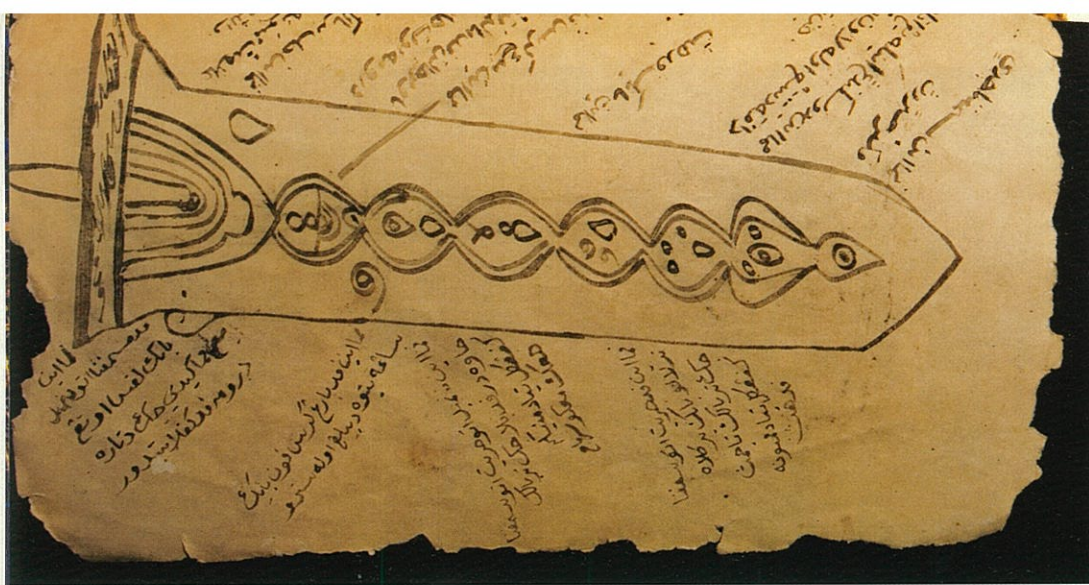
**PUCUK REBUNG: READING THE SIGNS**

'BAMBOO SHOOT', IN the Malay language. The pattern consists of a triangular or pyramidal shape representing the bamboo shoot in transverse section; also known as *gunungan* or *tumpal* in Indonesia, the *gunungan* being representational of the mythological Mount Meru of the Hindu pantheon. This iconic plant shoot representation is seen on many traditional pieces of fabrics, either in a set of two series facing each other in the head (*kepala*) section of a sarung, or as singular series at two ends of the selendang (shoulder cloth).

This motif takes many forms, among them Pucuk Rebung Lawi Ayam (chicken spur bamboo shoot) and Pucuk Rebung Bunga Kayohan (bamboo shoot with flame-like borders). The origins of this classical motif are shrouded in legend, but it probably came with Indian trade cloth, eg the double ikat patola or kain sembagi. The following are examples of this motif on various textiles of the Malay world.







The straight Malay Peninsula keris, its 'picit' pamor and esoteric qualities extolled. Malay manuscript: *Sejarah Keris*; Kelantan, Patani; 19th century

FROM PAGE 33

genuinely believe in ourselves, our products and their appeal to our own staff and clients, local and foreign. This strength of conviction and mutual trust and faith in each other holds the business together.

We also had to adopt a simple corporate attitude: that we will never be greedy but will always be hungry enough for business. We believe that a true love of art is self-evident to potential clients, and the art-related business follows from this. And we temper all the above with an in-house reporting system that rivals some retail banks.

We had to redefine art. Here in Kuala Lumpur, art is regarded as contemporary paintings and sculptures, while traditional art forms are relegated to crafts, almost unworthy of serious attention. Herein lies the challenge. Many locals into art and culture are partial to the former definition. And yet the (American) Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Chicago Institute of Art, for example, classify art as *civilisational* art and basically showcase art history. Contemporary art and sculpture find their more specialised homes in places like the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles. Closer to home, we note that in neighbouring Thailand, the powerful Fine Arts Department has all the museums and their contents – of civilisational art – under its wings. I wonder why our National Art Gallery isn't called the National Gallery of Contemporary Art. Surely my argument would be more compelling then!

So, imagine trying to 're-educate' an established collector of contemporary paintings that an 18th-century brass *tepak sireh* is art – civilisational art of the Malay world, that is. Then one has to 'educate' the completely uninitiated, too – if one can hold their attention.

Overall appreciation of Malaysian and Malay-world art forms has certainly increased in the decade since our inception. There is a distinct increase in awareness and consumption with the locals. Currently, just over half of our clientele are local

buyers, alternating between some repeat customers and new entrants. But after 9/11, the high-end Western tourist has been somewhat replaced by the Arab, Chinese and Indian package tourist, who are generally less inclined towards serious art.

But art is 'legit' in the West, and the art market is very well developed. Take the Credit Suisse indices of personal wealth, for example, which uses, among others, homes, land, boats, and art as measures of wealth. Under 'art' is Chinese art, Russian art... Christie's once had Peranakan art auctions, but with a shortage of supply and awareness, it was short-lived.

**What is it exactly that someone is getting when they purchase an item sold by Pucuk Rebung, and how might this item differ from a high-end fashion item from a branded boutique?**

As purveyors of fine art, it is necessary that we offer a choice of exquisite antiques, sculpture and contemporary visual art. And we are able to custom design corporate gifts, as we did for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for our country's gift to the United Nations, presented to Kofi Annan by Tun Dr Mahathir in 2003. Our corporate gifts have gone to royalty, heads of state, our Prime Minister, and ministers, as well as 'lesser mortals'.

Pucuk Rebung does, of course, have a niche business clientele that generally recognises its items for what they are – art pieces. That said, it's easier to price contemporary branded goods, given that you can do this within a range of market segments, from diffusion line to limited editions. But for unique one-offs? The way to appraise them, really, is to try to put a monetary value on a rare piece of our artistic heritage. If I were to use fashion-speak, these would be classics of enduring value, influenced perhaps by epochs of history, but not susceptible to fashion seasons.

We have an in-house policy of quoting clients a fair price, but we never have a sale – you do not put your heritage and legacy on sale. The sale approach works nicely for more rustic handicraft, which we hardly

stock in our current operations.

How could you even begin to compare an original photo of Tunku Abdul Rahman, a rare antique gold bracelet, or even a commercial but totally handmade silver tea set to branded 'luxury' goods? Branded products are commercial products, mass produced, with craftsmanship, sometimes outsourced to cheaper labour sources like China or Mexico, where the copies also exist in top quality. Granted, both categories are objects of desire that lend breeding, refinement and snob appeal. But perhaps if we understand ourselves to be mere trustees of this world for the next generation, then we understand that the things we buy are not just for ourselves...

**Are we, in general, substituting local narratives, the stories about ourselves, our identities, with branding campaigns? What do you think explains the lack of cachet that local heritage has for most Malaysians – that we reject, ironically, the idea of a Malaysian history as somehow counterfeit and unreal?**

There's no choice but to improve the education curriculum to increase awareness and appreciation of local arts, culture and heritage. It's not quite enough to merely have an inter-ethnic studies module at tertiary level, when minds are already set. There's no choice, because globalisation has been made a commonplace by the sheer pervasiveness of the commercially-driven, segmented media – and the way to teach kids to be selective about what they consume is to expose them to what the world has to offer them. How can they be selective otherwise?

And this is where museums can provide a dazzling experience of beauty across cultures, not arid knowledge but tangible experiences of history before your very eyes. They can put the 'wow' back into our lives. We need to reinvent the museum as a place alive to the world... So, unfortunately, despite death usually conferring sudden value to the works of mastercraftsmen in the West – and so many of ours are now dead – our objects of art are regarded as lowly 'craft' and not as art forms, unless, of course, the *kerongsang* (brooch) is embedded with multiple carats of very big, rose-cut diamonds. This really is the crux of much of our colonial cringe – a lack of appreciation of our own craftsmen as living treasures. When we can reaffirm our legacy of artistic and fine craftsmanship, we'll be able to project style in our own image.



**What do you think it will take for an entity like Pucuk Rebung to achieve a 'Guggenheim effect' for museums and culture in this neck of the woods? What might be the possible pitfalls for Malaysia of such an approach?**

Museums can play vital roles in bringing people together and providing knowledge and education. We can never underestimate their worth. In April 2007, I attended the First Asean Museum Directors' Symposium organised by the Singapore Heritage Board, and was very encouraged to hear Dato' Dr Adi Taha, then our Director-General of the Department of Museums, being very upbeat about our government's commitment to museum development.

My wish is that there is dialogue with the private sector as the Museum and Private Museums Act is being drafted. We could perhaps contribute to its creation and then find it easier to comply with regulatory requirements and be properly accredited as a private museum. Working on a smart partnership with the Malaysian Department of Museums could allow it to be a complementary world-class private-sector contribution to the museum industry in the country – both as a repeat tourism product and as an institution of knowledge.

Pitfalls? We must be mindful of importing wholesale a concept, and adapt it for local circumstances...

**How can a shop/gallery-museum, as you've described Pucuk Rebung, fairly represent the culture inherent in its goods and sell them whole, given its mall location and the risk of commodifying those very goods?**

Yes, we wanted to bring the concept of the museum shop to the mall, with a bit of the museum attached to it, and with a lot of the values we stand for. Pucuk Rebung would be conceived partly from viable museum-shop activity, instead of being funded by, say, the business of its industrialist founder.

This is practised in many advanced countries, and we are the first to do so here. That said, only part of the permanent collection for the museum we envision is currently on display, occupying about 20% of the total floor space. The eventual museum has to be a collaborative effort with property owners and investors at a later stage; it can be offsite from the museum shop, which then remains as a 'portal' to it, from the mall. Pucuk Rebung holds its own in the mall... The *Insight Discovery Guide to Kuala Lumpur 2007* describes it as a must-visit destination, even if you are not buying, and states that 'the goods are pricey, but the quality is *unsurpassed*'. Then again, we have a Fair Price Award from the Ministry of Domestic Trade. It offers a whole lifestyle selection; all business class and handmade. Nothing is machine-pressed except

publications, cards, books and some tourist trinkets. Even the more commercial items are handpicked, one-of-a-kind types.

**Can what Pucuk Rebung offers at the shop museum be branded at all? Cultural artifacts, after all, cannot be serially produced unless, of course, as reproductions. And unlike the integrated product planning of branded goods, with its possibility for celebrity endorsement, celebrity-designer boutique, and a major PR and marketing offensive, culture is too complex to lend itself to a single, simplistic, endlessly repeated brand message. Or is it...?**

Art, culture and heritage can be branded. Look at how Egypt sells her ancient monuments, or how a cultural icon like Nefertiti's bust can even become the brand for Esbiline Egyptian cotton. Then again, look at the household word that the Metropolitan Museum Shop is. It even has Christmas gift catalogues! In a very small way, we are like that, putting our basket of products under the Pucuk Rebung icon.

Why Pucuk Rebung? Because the bamboo shoot is a powerful cultural icon of the Malay world (see page 36). Pucuk rebung is a source of food and nourishment in many Asian cultures. Even when tall, bamboo can bend with the wind, never too proud to be in touch with its grassroots. And bamboo serves society in myriad ways. Such are the analogous development plans for Pucuk Rebung...

**Coming back to that difficult word – 'culture'. Malaysia is sold to foreigners as being 'Truly Asia'. This may be even more true than we know. Perhaps we can start with a rough sketch of the Malay world, which lies beyond Malaysia. What are its known boundaries, from what we have found so far?**

The Malay World stretches from Taiwan to Madagascar, and to Cape Town in South Africa. I still remember that moment in an aboriginal tribe museum in the wet hills off Taipei when I realised how small the world is – the Malay world, that is. I was reading the phonetic charts of the numbers, 1 to 10, as they were pronounced by the Paiwan tribe of Taiwan – the Tagalog and the Malay renditions. For number four, it went like something from 'plat', 'pat' to 'empat'.

As great navigators and seafarers, the proto-Malay and Malays crisscrossed not only the Malay archipelago consisting of what is now Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, South Philippines and South Thailand, but also plied the longer journeys covering the ends of the larger Malay world. Malay folklore tells of Siti Zubaidah and links with Yunnan; the Malay Annals refer to Puteri Hang Li Po's marriage of alliance to the court of Malacca

in the 15th century, prior to which the Malacca Sultanate itself was founded by Parameswara, a Hindu Srivijayan prince from Palembang in Sumatra.

Every time a royal entourage accompanies a royal marriage and settles in another land, they bring their dialect, cooking recipes, menus and food preferences, taboos, adat – and people with them. There is cross-cultural fertilisation, and a sharing of genes. In the Malay Peninsula alone, there are sultanates with links to the old Langkasuka empire, covering areas in South Thailand. Others are linked to Java or Sumatra's Minangkabau heritage or to the Johor Riau-Lingga empire. In Borneo, the Sarawak Malays are culturally linked to the Minangkabau and Brunei, while Sabah has its Puteri Kinabatangan and Sulu links.

Every time turmoil occurs, there is also movement, as with the sacking of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511. The Royal Malaccan lineage went south, towards Singapore-Riau. This huge hinterland has had even earlier movements, at times when the greater Sunda Shelf was not totally submerged by the South Chinese Sea. For example, it was postulated that land bridges allowed migratory movement from as far as Dongson territory in present-day Vietnam to the Ibans in Sarawak, hence having their mental template on the designs of the ikat patterns of the Iban pua.

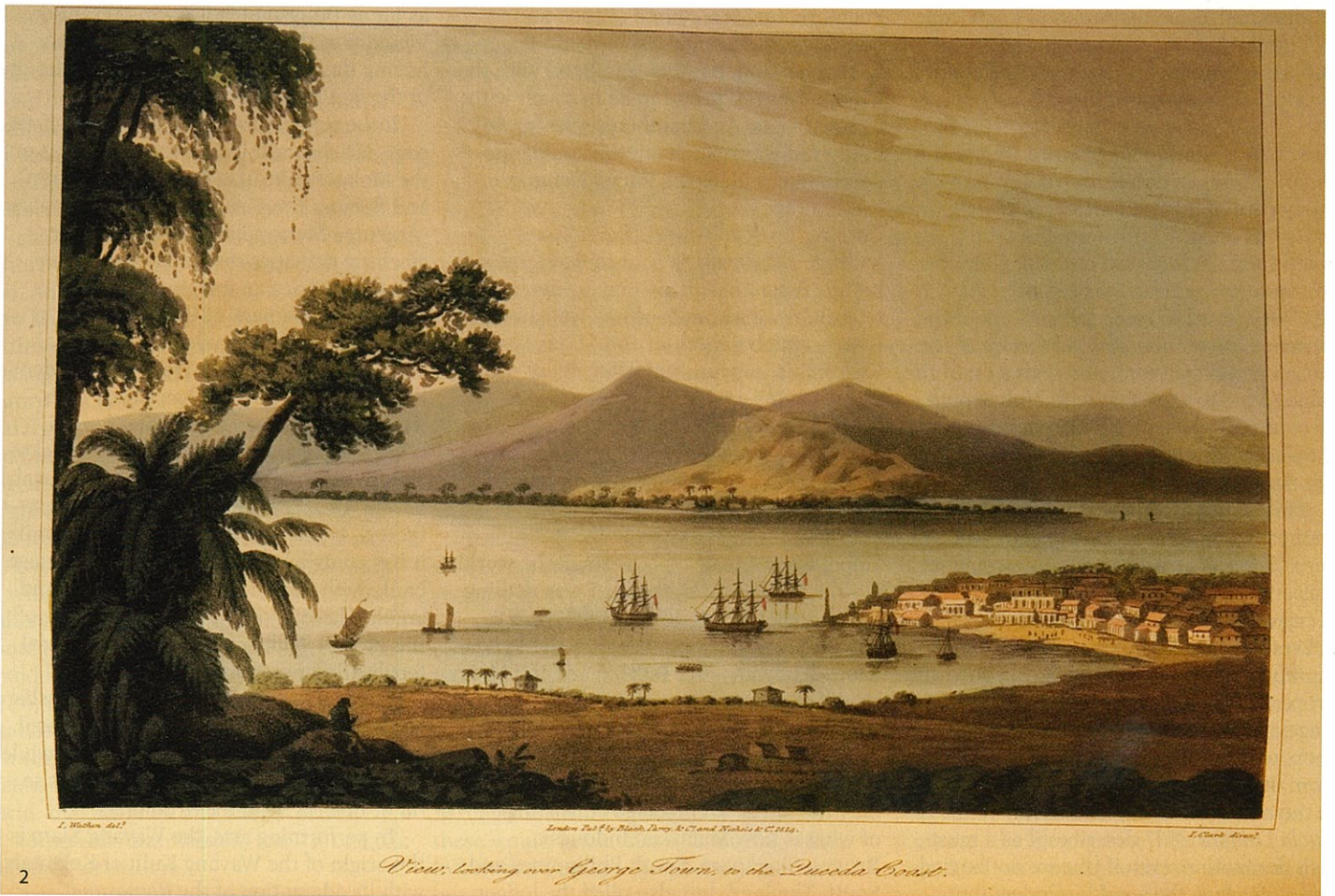
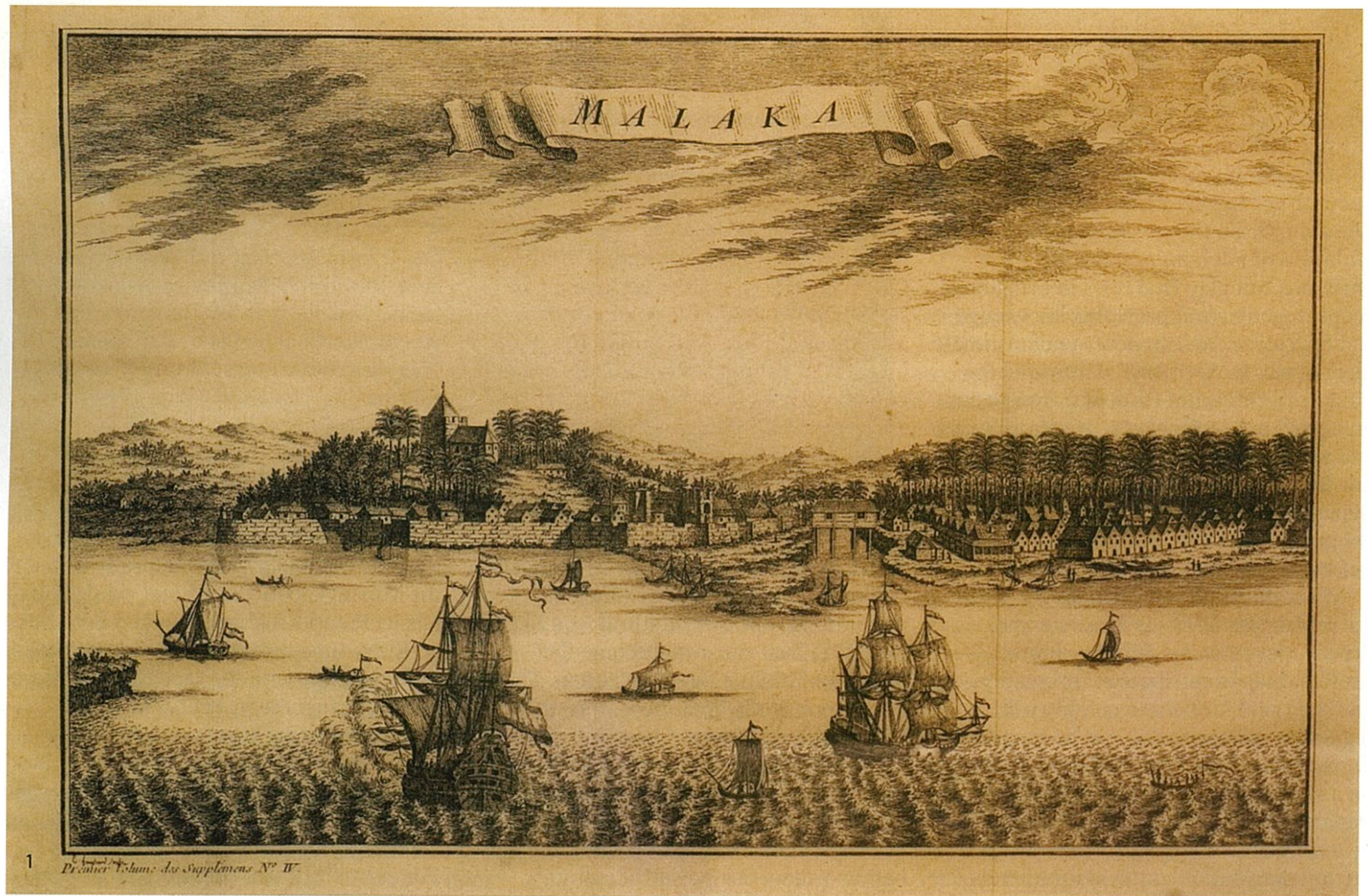
If the first-century map of Ptolemy (see page 31) shows at least two emporiums on the Malay Peninsula (Tracola Emporium and Sabana Emporium) and a city of silver (Argentea Metropolis) due to antimony smelting activities on the Sarawak river delta, then one can imagine how the cultural enrichment of the area must have resulted from trade contact and links between East and West. No wonder the Malay tongue itself has words with Sanskrit-Indian origins (*dunia*, *neraka*, *syurga*, *sengsara*, *derhaka*); Chinese (*teko*, *chio* [mat], *cawan*), Arab (*halal*, *madrasah*, *haram*, *Queda* – *Kedah*); and Portuguese (*gereja*, *bendera*)... and others! Meanwhile, it has contributed to the Western language bank, with *durian* (*Durio Zhibenthis*) and *amok*. These phonetic links form some of the earliest evidence of the cross-cultural fertilisation process.

The Hokkien of Penang have a fair share of Thai influence, referring to 10 sen as *ji phuat*, a direct reference to one baht; while the Kelantanese refer to one ringgit as *se ria* or one *ria* from the Arab links.

In performing arts, the Wayang Siam is the origin of the Wayang Kulit of Kelantan with its adaptation of the *Ramayana*. Other practices such as *puja pantai* and *bersanding* have similar origins, while others are of more *local* esoteric origin.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 42





Three views of the country, and a rare early sketch of the repository of who Malaysians might be

1 Copper engraving of the city of Melaka in the Portuguese Colonial period; laterally inverted; 18th-century version

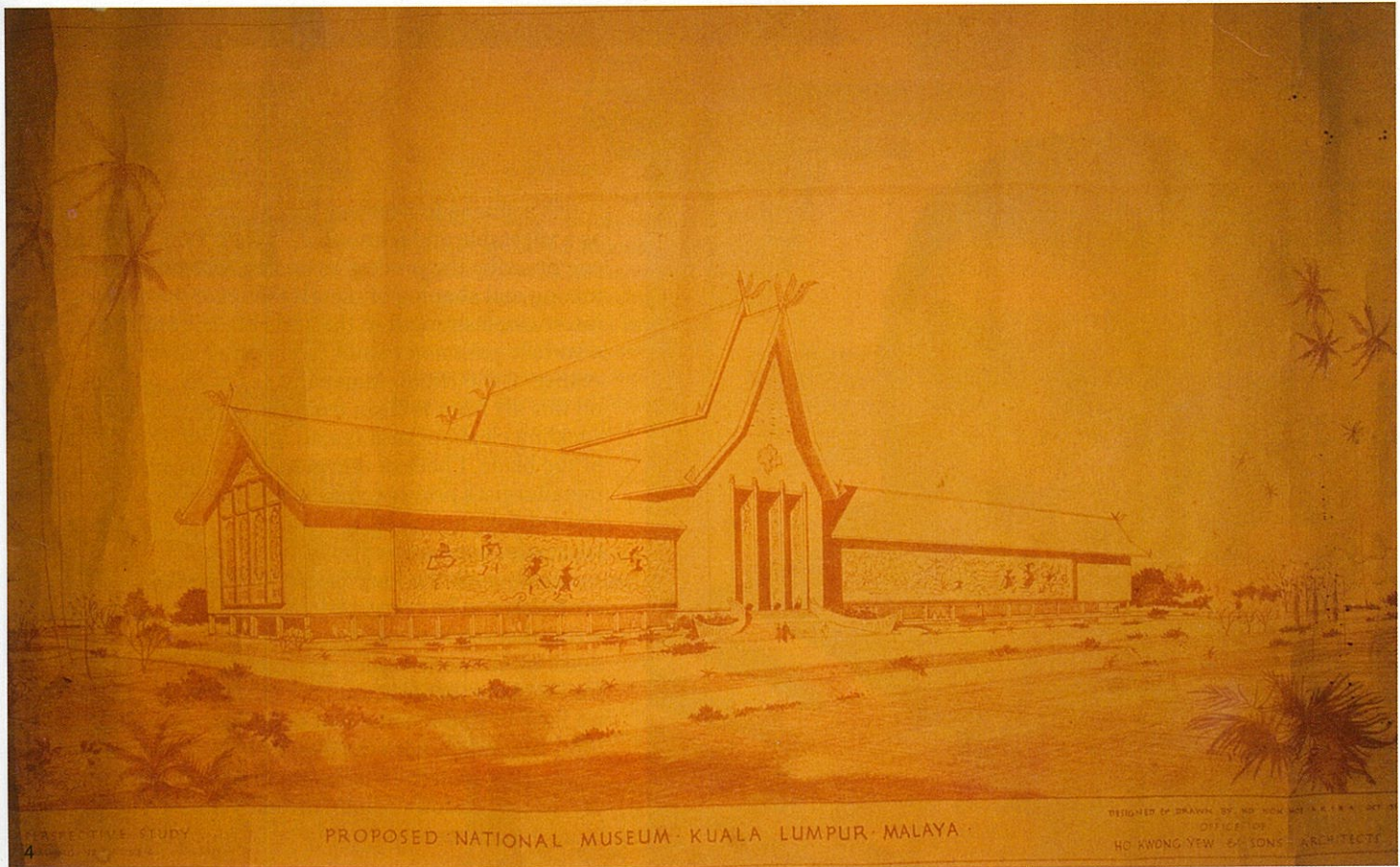
2 View overlooking George Town to the Queda Coast; *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 and 1812 to China and Madras* by James Wathen; 1814





3

GOVERNMENT HOUSE, SARAWAK.



PERSPECTIVE STUDY

4

PROPOSED NATIONAL MUSEUM KUALA LUMPUR MALAYA

DESIGNED BY DRAWING BY HO KWONG YEW ARCHITECTS  
OFFICE OF  
HO KWONG YEW ARCHITECTS

3 Government House, Sarawak. This was the Astana (palace) of the White Rajahs – the Brookes of Sarawak, sited across the river in Kuching. *The Illustrated London News*; 19th century

4 Perspective of Proposed National Museum Kuala Lumpur Malaya, circa 1962



## PERAK ROYAL CHIO FOR THE AKAD NIKAH

Here is the ultimate multifaceted example of a great cultural assimilator. This royal wedding mat for the bridegroom to sit on for the akad nikah ceremony has all the right ingredients of muhibbah in Perak.

Gilded silver florets on tekad in the central square announces its royal provenance. Its five layers indicate a Muslim nature, and the raised spine embroidery (tekad) styles are an adaptation of Syrian embroidery from Aleppo, introduced with the advent of Islam.

The use of imported English velvet backing tells of the prosperity and wealth of the tin-rich Sultanates of Perak in the 19th century. The cartouches within the five layers suggest Chinese influence interpreted by the Malay embroidery. The base of this elaborate mat is of woven pandanus leaf, a truly Malay element, but the name of this whole composite mat is from neighbouring Penang Hokkien: *chio*, meaning reed mats.

It clearly reflects close interracial harmony and interaction and an obvious lack of polarisation, as it would take a degree of endearment to apply a Chinese term on a royal Malay ceremonial mat.

Permanent collection of Henry Bong, Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery-Museum



FROM PAGE 39

It's a shame to hear our people describing ourselves as a vegetable and fruit salad – rojak! Why, when we can describe the process as analogous to the complex mixing and shaping of metals to create the composite intertwined strength in the keris blade, resulting in a surface patina of pamor (serrated patterns)? The vestige of the Hindu Majapahit era of the 14th century on this art form is clear, from the small protruding suckling elephant tusk (gajah menyusui) at the top side of the blade. I believe this is a direct reference to the metallurgist's prayer (puja) to Ganesha (the elephant-headed baby son of Shiva), the god of science, for a successful baptism by fire of the blade.

Surely such the long enduring process of our own evolution can be respectfully likened to the process of strengthening the bonds of the different metals that make up the keris blade – something so elegant and frail-looking that is actually resilient and strong. Now we have to find a name that describes our cultural links accurately, with the dignity it deserves. No one civilisation evolved in isolation. It always is hybrid vigour that endows colour, diversity and strength. Gold in its pure form is too soft to be of much use. ■