

14th AMER International Conference on Quality of Life
Sunlake Waterfront Resort & Convention, Jakarta, Indonesia, 02-03 Jan 2026

Narrating the Local Heritage Environment: Cultural memory in Malaysian folklore

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Abstract

This study examines two Kuala Selangor folktales and reads them as cultural memory sites that quietly carry maritime knowledge, leadership ideals and traces of early multicultural diplomacy. Using an interpretive textual approach informed by heritage theory, the paper explores how these stories give emotional and symbolic weight to local landscapes. In relation to the Quality of Life (QoL) research, these tales reveal how storytelling can support social cohesion and cultural resilience. The research suggests that such narratives have contemporary relevance connected to local heritage environment, education and community place-making. Their underlying themes can strengthen cultural sustainability and nurture communal wellbeing.

Keywords: Cultural memory; intangible cultural heritage; Kuala Selangor folklore; Quality of Life (QoL)

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1.0 Introduction

Whenever we talk about heritage in Malaysia, the conversation often gravitates toward architecture, archaeological sites or state-level cultural programmes. What tends to be overlooked is how heavily many communities depend on stories to make sense of the world around them. This becomes even more evident in coastal regions, where rapid urbanisation and environmental shifts can unsettle a community's understanding of its past. The coastline adjusts its shape almost as if it were breathing and long-standing routines sometimes feel less stable than they used to. In such situations, oral traditions provide a kind of mental scaffolding that helps people interpret change. As Finnegan (2012) notes, oral traditions preserve memory systems that help communities navigate change and sustain collective meaning. Such cultural memory practices contribute not only to historical understanding but also to community wellbeing, grounding social identity, continuity and belonging. In the context of Quality of Life (QoL) scholarship, these narrative traditions contribute to social cohesion, emotional resilience, place attachment and collective capability. These are factors recognised as foundational to wellbeing (Gallou, 2022).

The central purpose of this paper is to explore how Malay coastal tales from Kuala Selangor function simultaneously as cultural memory, heritage resources and emotional anchors. In approaching this topic, the study draws on three research objectives. The first is to examine how the selected tales operate as narrative *lieux de mémoire*, borrowing from Pierre Nora's influential concept. These memory sites capture experiences of maritime danger, leadership norms and cross-cultural relationships. The second objective is to trace how storytelling contributes to place identity and cultural continuity, especially in communities shaped by centuries of waterborne mobility. Finally, the third objective considers how these narrative functions intersect with QoL research. There is an expanding body of

work showing that heritage participation and storied landscapes influence capability-building, belonging and resilience. By looking closely at these folktales, the research aims to show how intangible cultural heritage strengthens these QoL dimensions.

To build the conceptual foundation for this inquiry, the study leans on the works of Jan Assmann and Pierre Nora. Assmann's (2008) distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory sheds light on how stories shift from informal conversation into institutionalised heritage. Meanwhile, Nora's (1989) *lieux de mémoire* provides a vocabulary for interpreting narrative places like Teluk Penyamun or Jeram as symbolic anchors. Recent studies from Abdul Aziz et al. (2023) Gallou (2022) tie these insights to wellbeing research by emphasising how people derive emotional stability from participating in cultural memory practices.

Folktales from Kuala Selangor make it particularly suitable for this kind of discussion. Bugis settlers, Orang Laut communities and Malay rulers all played roles in shaping the region's maritime identity. With this in mind, the folktales under study reveal intertwined themes of danger, diplomacy and leadership. They also encode ecological awareness, suggesting ways of living with unpredictable coastal environments. Interpreting these tales through contemporary heritage and QoL frameworks allows us to see how communities continue to draw meaning from the past in order to navigate ongoing change.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Folklore as Cultural Memory

Folklore often carries a quiet sense of authority that can be easy to overlook. Communities do not simply recall events for the sake of remembering. They retell stories because these narratives help hold together the fragments of shared experience. Ruth Finnegan's (2012) work demonstrated how oral traditions compress complex histories into symbolic forms that are easier to recall. In maritime settings, this function becomes critical. People rely on stories to explain sudden changes in weather, dangerous waters and the uncertainties of living so close to the sea. These stories may not be technical manuals, but they keep essential knowledge alive in a memorable way (Bauman, 2004).

Foundational studies by Finnegan and Andaya remain central to understanding oral tradition and maritime social organisation, particularly in relation to memory and authority. More recent scholarship extends these concerns by linking folklore and living heritage to Quality of Life. Gallou (2022) conceptualises heritage participation as a process shaping emotional capability and agency, while Abdul Aziz et al. (2023) demonstrate how engagement with living heritage strengthens collective learning and cohesion. Together, these perspectives extend folklore beyond textual analysis into contemporary wellbeing discourse.

Recent interdisciplinary work has also framed memory as something encountered through landscape and repetition rather than preserved solely in narrative or archive. Wellen (2021) offers a useful parallel by treating coastal environments as affective spaces where rhythm and familiarity shape lived memory. Although not focused on folklore, such perspectives help explain how stories attached to bays and shorelines acquire emotional durability. Read alongside cultural memory theory, Malay coastal folktales emerge as lived frameworks that support orientation, continuity and wellbeing.

Despite growing interest in heritage and wellbeing, recent scholarship engaging Malay coastal folklore within Quality of Life frameworks remains limited. This study addresses that gap through a focused case from Kuala Selangor.

2.2 Pierre Nora and *Lieux de Mémoire*

Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* has been widely used to understand how communities anchor memory in both physical places and symbolic forms. Memory sites arise when lived experience begins to fade yet the need to remember persists. These sites include legends, rituals and recurring motifs, not only physical monuments that may help communities recover the essence of earlier experiences. Nora's concept, hence, offers a framework for understanding how narratives become symbolic anchors of identity.

In Southeast Asia, landscapes are often deeply intertwined with narrative meaning. Rivers act as thresholds between safety and danger. Mangroves appear as liminal spaces where spirits, traders and fugitives all find refuge. Coastal headlands can signify authority or protection. In the Malay world, many of these ecological features have gained narrative significance, forming quiet memory sites that shape how people relate to the environment.

Nora's framework becomes even more compelling when placed alongside Gallou's (2022) argument that memory sites support wellbeing by encouraging emotional attachment to place. Graham and Howard (2008) similarly note that heritage places are shaped by the stories that circulate around them. In Malay coastal folklore, places like Jeram or Teluk Penyamun are more than locations. They become narrative containers that store emotions and values. Applying Nora's framework thus demonstrates how oral traditions serve simultaneously as heritage, memory and emotional infrastructure with direct implications for QoL.

2.3 Heritage and Place Identity

Heritage scholarship has been undergoing a notable shift. Instead of treating heritage as a fixed collection of artefacts, scholars like Smith (2006) argued that heritage is a cultural process. Communities interpret the past in ways that help them navigate the present. In addition, Graham and Howard (2008) emphasised the role of shared stories in constructing place identity, while Lowenthal (2015) described such landscapes as storied when natural features acquire narrative significance. These stories can become part of the emotional fabric of a place, shaping how people feel toward it.

Furthermore, Aldy et al. (2024) observed that ritual practices create emotional resonance, strengthening the bond between people and their environment. Abdul Aziz et al. (2023) found that heritage involvement nurtures cultural literacy and resilience. Gallou suggests that heritage practices develop capabilities that contribute to agency and wellbeing. In the case of Malaysian folktales, Malay coastal

stories provide a vivid example of how narrative shapes place identity. These narrative associations deepen cultural attachment and shape how communities imagine themselves and further may contribute to identity formation and wellbeing by offering recognition and belonging.

2.4 Maritime Societies of the Malay World

The Malay world's maritime history is rich with movement, negotiation and cultural exchange. Bugis migration patterns, for instance, were shaped by values centred on *siri'*, which emphasised honour and resilience. Stories featuring Bugis leaders often reflect these ideals. Orang Laut communities contributed significantly to regional maritime expertise, navigating tides and currents with remarkable skill. Sopher (1977) noted that their knowledge shaped many coastal polities and their stories often portray them as guardians of waterways.

Reid's (2000) portrayal of early Southeast Asia as a network of fluid connections aligns with narratives that feature cross-cultural encounters. The region's political landscape was shaped by flexible strategies rather than static borders. These dynamics appear in stories about alliances, moral judgments and cultural negotiation.

Contemporary researchers such as Daly et al. (2022) have warned that maritime heritage faces increasing threats from rising sea levels and coastal erosion. Intangible heritage becomes particularly important in this context because it carries adaptive knowledge that might otherwise disappear. Malay maritime folktales encapsulate local histories of adaptation and negotiation, reinforcing community identity and QoL.

2.5 Gender Dynamics in Maritime Folklore

Although classical Malay literature often appears heavily male-centred, folklore presents more varied images of gender. In many coastal communities, women maintained social and economic stability while men were away at sea. Andaya (2006) has highlighted how women exerted influence and decision-making power in these contexts. Their presence in folktales as protectors, advisors or moral anchors reflects this historical reality (Andaya, 2008).

These gendered representations shape emotional connections to landscapes. Female figures who guide or protect their communities help frame the environment as a relational space. Such portrayals can enhance empathy, belonging and cultural understanding across generations. Chou's (2003) work suggests that gendered stories contribute to cohesion, while Andaya and Andaya (2017) show how women held meaningful autonomy in early societies. These stories therefore shape wellbeing by reinforcing shared values and emotional security.

3.0 Methodology

The following diagram illustrates how heritage practices feed into memory, how memory attaches itself to place and how these layered processes contribute to community wellbeing, thus further ensuring coherence with the study's objectives in order to provide a structured foundation for the findings.

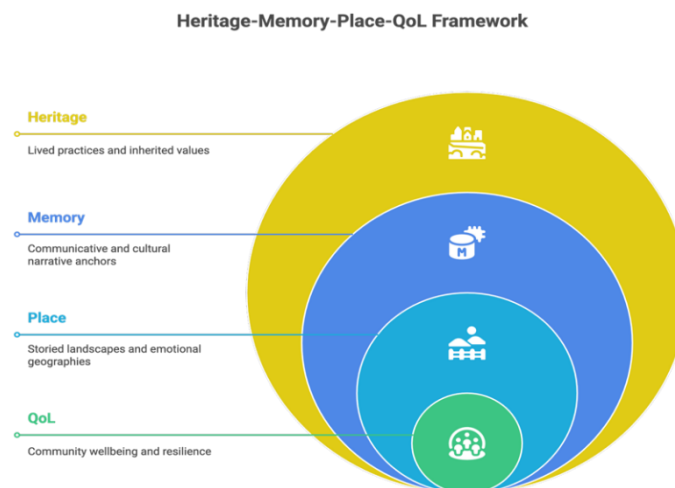


Fig. 1: A Conceptual Diagram of Heritage-Memory-Place-QoL Framework

Interpreting the two folktales required a qualitative approach centred on close reading, thematic analysis and cultural contextualisation. The selected texts, *Legenda Pekan Lama Kuala Selangor dan Teluk Penyamun* and *Legenda Jeram dan Penabalan Paduka Seri Cina*, come from *Penglipur Lara: Cerita Rakyat Asia Tenggara* (Aziz, Abdillah and Omar, 2025). They were chosen primarily because they originate from historically significant coastal zones and contain themes that correspond with broader regional histories. Other tales were considered, but these two offered the clearest overlap between maritime identity, leadership values and, multicultural diplomacy.

A limitation worth acknowledging is that the study focuses solely on textual sources. While this allows for a concentrated analysis of narrative structure and meaning, it does not include ethnographic insights from local storytellers or community members. Such perspectives could enrich the interpretation. Another limitation is the small number of tales. A broader selection might reveal additional patterns or contrasts. Despite these boundaries, the textual analysis offers a structured way to explore how these stories function as cultural memory frameworks.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Heritage Values, Cultural Continuity, and Maritime Knowledge

In *Legenda Pekan Lama Kuala Selangor dan Teluk Penyamun*, maritime knowledge is conveyed through references to tides, hidden coves and the need for constant vigilance. Teluk Penyamun is marked as a dangerous landscape where survival depends on collective awareness, turning place itself into a mnemonic for inherited maritime knowledge. Rather than functioning merely as background, the cove operates as a repository of practical and emotional memory, reinforcing Smith's (2006) understanding of heritage as something enacted and lived.

In *Legenda Jeram dan Penabalan Paduka Seri Cina*, Jeram functions as a ceremonial landscape where leadership legitimacy is enacted through ritual anchored to place. The installation of Paduka Seri Cina transforms the site into a memory centre for political authority and intercultural negotiation, demonstrating how ritual performance sustains continuity in governance and collective identity (Lowenthal, 2015).

While both tales emphasise cohesion, moral clarity and continuity, they also reveal narrative silences. Authority is rarely questioned, and attention is largely directed toward elite figures. This selectivity highlights how cultural memory privileges certain experiences while marginalising others, reminding us that folklore preserves values as much as it omits alternative perspectives.

4.2 Landscapes as Anchors of Communal Identity

The tales portray Teluk Penyamun and Jeram as symbolic landscapes infused with historical and emotional meaning. Teluk Penyamun is depicted as a dangerous cove, associated with bandits and the need for constant vigilance. Its physical isolation and hidden terrain create an atmosphere of suspense. This landscape becomes a place where fear and resilience coexist. Jeram, by contrast, functions as a ceremonial site. The tale presents it as a location of legitimacy and unity, connected to the installation of Paduka Seri Cina. These examples show how landscapes serve as narrative sites of memory, echoing Assmann's (2008) idea of cultural memory that persists even when direct experience fades.

4.3 Memory, Maritime Risk, and Resilience

Maritime risk shapes the emotional tone of the stories. The depiction of Teluk Penyamun as a hideout for bandits conveys a deep sense of vulnerability. This vulnerability is not presented as mere danger but as a shared challenge that demands collective responsibility. The community's response to threat becomes part of its identity and historical realities (Warren, 2008). In the Jeram tale, ceremonial memory offers a different kind of resilience. It transforms an ordinary coastal settlement into a site associated with political authority and intercultural cooperation. Both tales turn uncertainty into narrative structure, reinforcing resilience by offering interpretive tools for confronting risk.

4.4 Leadership, Agency, and Intercultural Diplomacy

The Bugis woman leader in the first tale stands out as an example of gendered agency. She demonstrates moral authority and strategic insight, guiding her community through danger. Her character complicates assumptions about gender roles in early Malay societies, echoing Andaya's (1981) findings about women's influence during men's maritime absences. Her leadership is relational, grounded in empathy and collective welfare.

In the Jeram narrative, the mixed Malay–Chinese heritage of Paduka Seri Cina symbolises early intercultural diplomacy under Sultan Mansur Syah. His installation reflects a political openness that predates colonial divisions. Andaya and Andaya (2017) note that multicultural alliances played a significant role in the region's history. The tale highlights unity through diversity, offering insights relevant to contemporary discussions of cohesion.

4.5 Place Attachment and Community Wellbeing (QoL Relevance)

The folktales contribute to place attachment by turning landscapes into emotional geographies. Research on place attachment suggests that strong emotional bonds with meaningful environments support social cohesion and subjective wellbeing (Hernández et al., 2020; Scannell and Gifford, 2017; Maricchiolo et al., 2021). In the first tale, the river and sea appear almost animate, shaping daily life and reinforcing communal ties. In the second tale, Jeram's natural setting becomes the backdrop for political symbolism. Research on place attachment suggests that emotional bonds with meaningful environments enhance wellbeing, and these stories support that notion. They illustrate that wellbeing can stem from cultural continuity and relational security rather than material prosperity. In this manner, Heritage supports QoL by fostering cultural pride, identity and resilience (Gallou, 2022).

4.6 Synthesis: Folktales as an Integrated Heritage–Memory–Place–QoL Framework

The findings reveal that heritage, memory, place and wellbeing work together to support community resilience. The folktales preserve maritime heritage, encode memory in landscapes, strengthen emotional attachment to place and nurture identity (Relph, 1976; Kamarudin & Denison, 2022). These interconnected functions show that intangible heritage can play an essential role in contemporary QoL. These narratives also show how intangible cultural heritage can support community cohesion, especially in coastal regions experiencing rapid change.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Folktales as Cultural Memory Frameworks and Their Tensions

Read through the lens of cultural memory theory and Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, the folktales operate as frameworks that support continuity and resilience. At the same time, they reflect historical assumptions about authority and social order. Hierarchical leadership is normalised, and gendered agency, while present, appears as exception rather than norm. Acknowledging these tensions avoids romanticising folklore as uniformly inclusive and allows for a more critical engagement with heritage narratives.

Rather than offering fixed moral instruction, the narratives provide interpretive resources for negotiating uncertainty in volatile coastal environments. Their value lies less in consensus than in orientation, offering ways to think through danger, responsibility and belonging. In this sense, folklore aligns closely with contemporary heritage and Quality of Life debates that emphasise adaptability, meaning-making and resilience over static ideals.

5.2 Environmental Knowledge and Coastal Resilience

The environmental knowledge embedded in the folktales remains relevant today. The stories convey warnings about risk and guidance about living harmoniously with the coastal environment. The portrayal of treacherous waters or shifting tides communicates ecological humility. In the context of climate challenges, such narrative insights can complement contemporary environmental education.

From a QoL perspective, such knowledge contributes to ecological wellbeing, which involves safety, environmental harmony and adaptive capacity. The symbolic portrayal of coastal spaces as zones requiring vigilance and humility mirrors lived experiences of coastal communities. Ecological metaphors such as treacherous bays, mangrove refuges and ceremonial centres operate as teaching tools that transmit risk awareness and environmental ethics.

These insights support the idea that intangible cultural heritage assists with contemporary climate adaptation. The folktales contain knowledge about living with coastal volatility that remains relevant in an era of rising seas and intensified weather events. They provide historical strategies for resilience that can complement present-day environmental education and policy.

5.3 Re-centring Marginalised Histories Through Multicultural and Gendered Narratives

The folktales highlight voices that are sometimes overshadowed in formal historical accounts. The Bugis woman leader challenges male-centric narratives, showing that women played significant roles in community protection. Similarly, Paduka Seri Cina's mixed heritage draws attention to early multicultural alliances. These insights contribute to a more inclusive understanding of heritage and support wellbeing by validating diverse cultural identities.

By foregrounding women, foreign traders and minority figures, the analysis enriches understandings of coastal heritage and counters homogenised narratives of Malay identity. This has implications for intercultural understanding, heritage education and community cohesion, which are all central to community-level wellbeing.

5.4 Folklore as Intangible Heritage and Tool for Cultural Sustainability

The stories align with UNESCO's vision of intangible heritage as a living resource. They preserve ecological ethics, leadership values and communal norms that can guide contemporary communities. By maintaining these narratives, communities strengthen cultural sustainability. The stories serve not as nostalgic remnants but as active cultural tools that support resilience.

The findings affirm that safeguarding intangible heritage benefits community wellbeing by deepening place attachment, strengthening intergenerational ties and motivating care for cultural and ecological landscapes. Preservation becomes not an exercise in nostalgia but an investment in communal psychological and socio-environmental resilience.

5.5 Intergenerational Dialogue and Pedagogical Implications

Folktales encourage intergenerational dialogue, allowing communities to pass down values and experiences. They can be incorporated into educational programmes to promote cultural literacy and ethical reasoning. The themes present in the tales, including leadership values, maritime knowledge and negotiation of diversity, offer useful points of entry for curriculum design, youth programmes and cultural events.

These functions relate to educational wellbeing, where learning includes cultural literacy, critical reflection and ethical reasoning. Integrating folktales into educational settings strengthens identity, moral imagination and socio-emotional development while contributing to the long-term preservation of local heritage.

5.6 Relevance to National Heritage Discourses

Although rooted in local settings, the folktales resonate with national themes of unity, diversity and shared maritime heritage. They remind us that Malaysia's cultural landscape has long been shaped by mobility and cross-cultural contact. By highlighting resilience and cooperation, the stories contribute to national discussions on cultural harmony and wellbeing.

When interpreted through QoL frameworks, the folktales demonstrate that heritage preservation is not only about protecting stories but about supporting the social and cultural conditions necessary for communities to thrive. In this sense, folklore becomes a bridge connecting past knowledge systems with contemporary aspirations for resilience, harmony and inclusivity.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that Kuala Selangor folktales function as narrative lieux de mémoire shaping place identity, leadership ideals and communal resilience. By integrating cultural memory and Quality of Life perspectives, the analysis highlights folklore as a living resource that supports belonging, orientation and social continuity rather than as a closed archive of the past.

The research remains limited by its small corpus and textual focus. Future research could incorporate ethnographic perspectives or comparative coastal studies to deepen understanding of how these narratives circulate within contemporary communities. For educators and heritage practitioners, engagement with folktales should balance preservation with critical reflection, recognising both their cultural value and their narrative silences. Such an approach strengthens cultural sustainability while remaining attentive to inclusivity and change.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the research project *Cerita Rakyat Kuala Selangor: Memahami Asal-Usul melalui Warisan Budaya* (The Folktales of Kuala Selangor: Understanding the Origins through Cultural Heritage), funded under Project Code 600-UiTMSEL (PI. 021/2023) through the Geran Kesenian & Kreativiti Dana UiTM Cawangan Selangor (DUCS-KK) 2023. The authors gratefully acknowledge Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Selangor and the Research Management Centre (RMC) for their financial and administrative support. Grammarly was used solely for basic proofreading and minor language refinement to achieve an overall score above 90%.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to folklore, heritage and cultural memory studies by showing how Kuala Selangor's coastal folktales operate as *lieux de mémoire* that sustain communal identity, preserve maritime histories and foster place-based belonging. By linking heritage-as-process approaches with Quality of Life research, it demonstrates how vernacular storytelling supports cultural continuity, community wellbeing and social cohesion, offering a grounded model for understanding the role of intangible cultural heritage in Malaysia.

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