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**A Comparative Review on the Uniqueness and Speciality of
Oral Tradition Arts in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia**

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Abstract

This paper compares oral tradition arts in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, focusing on cultural identity, heritage preservation, and sociocultural cohesion. Drawing on interdisciplinary studies, it examines their unique traits, characteristics, functions, and evolution. The review highlights the impacts of modernization, globalization, and digital media, alongside efforts in documentation and revitalization. The finding reveals a shared Southeast Asian ethos rooted in indigenous beliefs and historical connections, while acknowledging local variations. The paper concludes with suggestions and recommendations for future research and policy measures to protect this intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Oral Tradition; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural Identity; Heritage Preservation

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1.0 Introduction

Oral tradition arts, comprising spoken word, musical expression, ritualistic performances, and storytelling, form a critical part of Southeast Asia's intangible cultural heritage. The survival of oral tradition arts in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia is not only a matter of cultural continuity but also a regional responsibility. In Asian nation-states, such traditions are not merely artistic expressions but complex systems of communication, education, spiritual practice, and social memory.

"Through ethnographic and historical analysis of specific case studies, we examine the conflicts and challenges faced by Asian nation-states and local communities as they seek to list, define, and promote the continuation of expressive culture and traditions perceived as endangered by rapid cultural change, globalization, political movements, and religious change". (Hardwick et al., 2020).

As these forms of intangible cultural heritage face erosion due to modernization, urban migration, and the commodification of culture, Southeast Asian nations have increasingly turned to structured preservation and conservation initiatives. These efforts vary across

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countries but reveal a common commitment to safeguarding these traditions, often through a blend of policy intervention, community-based programs, and transnational cooperation. Amid rapid sociocultural changes and globalization, these traditions face increasing threats to their continuity. Based on Table 1, this paper seeks to investigate the unique traits and shared elements of oral tradition arts in the three countries, drawing on a range of scholarly works to situate them within both local and transregional contexts.

Table 1. Key Forms of Oral Tradition Arts in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand

Tradition Type	Malaysia	Indonesia	Thailand
Spoken Word	Pantun, Syair, Storytelling (hikayat)	Cerita Rakyat, Kaba Minangkabau	Sepha, Jataka Tales, Oral Retelling
Musical Expression	Dikir Barat, Ghazal, Kompang	Tembang Sunda, Gamelan (accompanied songs)	Piphat Ensemble, Khon Music
Ritualistic Performances	Mak Yong, Main Puteri, Wayang Kulit	Wayang Kulit, Reog Ponorogo, Barong	Likay, Khon, Phi Ta Khon
Storytelling	Hikayat Hang Tuah, Cerita Pak Pandir	Wayang Epics, Legenda Danau Toba	Ramakien, Folk Epics

(Source: Compiled by the author from scholarly literature review on Southeast Asian Oral Traditions)

This study sets out to achieve three main objectives;

- i) To identify shared features of oral tradition arts across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia.
- ii) To analyze the unique national characteristics that distinguish the oral traditions of each country.
- iii) To investigate the contemporary challenges faced in the preservation and transmission of oral tradition arts.

2.0 Literature Review

This paper adopts a qualitative literature review methodology, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and UNESCO reports using keywords like oral tradition Southeast Asia, Mak Yong, Likay, Wayang Kulit, Gamelan, and intangible cultural heritage. In addition to foundational works, this study engages with recent English-language scholarship published within the last five years to ensure contemporary relevance, particularly in relation to digital preservation, cultural sustainability, and community-centered heritage practices in Southeast Asia.

Since this study is related to oral tradition arts, the domains of Asian nation-states are the most important databases because they contain authoritative materials related to the field of review of this paper. Based on the above criteria, some articles were retrieved. Certain inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to ensure that the selected literature met the research objectives.

The criteria for exclusion are as follows:

- i. Informal Articles: To maintain academic rigor, papers containing extended abstracts, articles less than three pages long, research proposals, oral and visual proposals, and briefings were excluded.
- ii. Lack of Key Requirements: Excluded papers that did not include the key terms Oral Tradition, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Identity, and Heritage Preservation were excluded.
- iii. Lack of Case Studies: Didn't allow this paper to examine data at a micro level, requires detailed and in-depth information for the study of Southeast Asian oral traditions, it is not appropriate and less useful to collect in-depth information about a single case, case studies must collect data from various sources to enable a deep understanding of traditional arts from Southeast Asian countries, to increase the validity and reliability of case studies

Papers that met the key requirements but did not provide a specific case analysis were excluded. For the inclusion criteria, the literature had:

- i. Framework or Development on Oral Tradition; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural Identity; Heritage Preservation
- ii. Case Studies: Any article that includes a concrete case study using oral traditions in artistic and cultural settings. After applying the inclusion criteria mentioned above.

Based on the article Oral Tradition: Dramatic and Theatrical Concepts in 'Bari' Performances, it is stated that Bari performances can also be defined as literary pieces produced from the stories told by figures with the talent of storytelling, recounting folklores and ancient stories. (Mardiana, Lena & Zolkipli, 2023, 582). A collection of essays from Intangible Cultural Heritage in a Globalized World (2025)

provided case studies that presented a focus on grassroots perspectives at the UNESCO level to streamline the conservation and preservation of a regional Southeast Asian tradition.

While existing studies of Indonesian and World Folklore from a Critical Literacy Perspective: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Values and Social Identity (Saiyidinal, 2025) provide valuable documentation of specific oral traditions within national contexts. This study extends prior scholarship by comparatively synthesizing literature across Indonesia, Malaysia and, Thailand thereby highlighting shared regional patterns and divergences that have not been systematically examined in earlier single-country or discipline-bound studies.

In Malaysia, studies often center on Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit, and Pantun as primary forms of oral performance (Zaharul Lailiddin Saidon, 2023). Mak Yong, recognized by UNESCO, integrates dance, music, and storytelling, reflecting Malay cosmology and healing rituals. The literature reviewed reveals several recurring issues that directly inform the focus of this study, including the dominance of policy-centric preservation approaches, limited community agency in heritage decision-making, and the growing tension between authenticity and commodification.

For Indonesia, the literature is expansive, covering Wayang Kulit, Tembang Sunda, and the epic Ramayana and Mahabharata renditions. Scholars like Anna, Henry, and Kathy (2025) have explored how these traditions have evolved across Java, Bali, and Sumatra, blending Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and indigenous influences.

While in Thailand, oral traditions such as Likay and Sepha incorporate storytelling with music and dance. Article The Evolution of Thai Folklore and Oral Traditions: Preserving Narratives in a Modernized Society (Thai Cultural, 2024) emphasizes their role in Buddhist moral education and local identity construction. These challenges underscore the need for a comparative framework that examines how oral traditions are transmitted, adapted, and sustained across different sociocultural contexts, forming the analytical basis for the present research.

The preservation of cultural heritage, particularly oral tradition as a form of intangible cultural heritage, is a vital agenda for many countries, including Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. These traditions, such as Mak Yong in Malaysia, Likay in Thailand, and Wayang Kulit in Indonesia, play a crucial role in shaping and expressing cultural identity, ensuring that the values, beliefs, and historical narratives of communities are passed down through generations. In recognition of their importance, numerous efforts and practices have been implemented globally and regionally to safeguard both tangible and intangible heritage.

These include the development of various charters, conventions, policies, recommendations, and declarations aimed at promoting heritage preservation. Notably, international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have played a leading role in drafting and adopting these instruments. For example, Mak Yong has been inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, recognizing its deep-rooted cultural value and the need for preservation. Similarly, Thailand's Likay and Indonesia's Wayang Kulit have received local and international attention as cultural expressions that must be safeguarded. Such enactments and recognitions are critical in addressing the complex challenges of protecting and sustaining oral traditions, thereby ensuring the dignity and cultural continuity of nations well into the future. It is important to strengthen the local people's identity, build self-esteem, and as a source of income from the tourism industry to the artists (Khan et al.,2023).

3.0 Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on the following 3 phases:

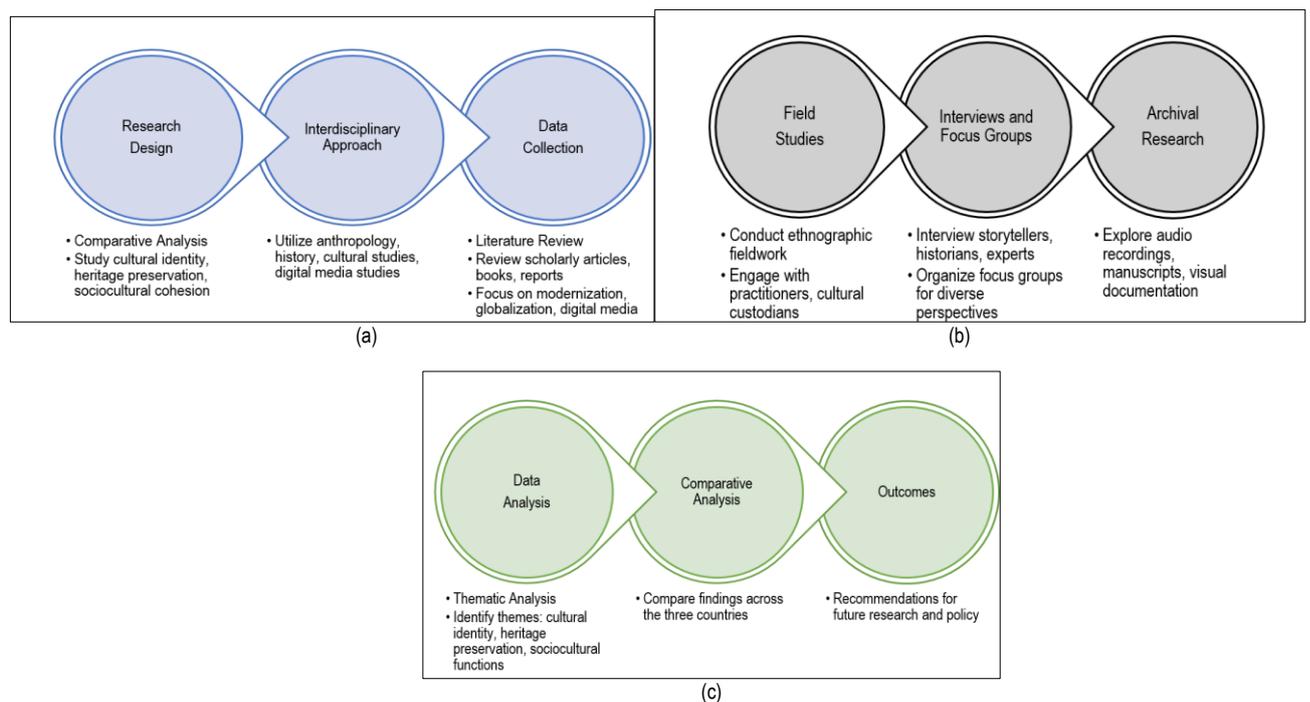


Fig. 1. (a) Phase 1, the research methodology, (b) Phase 2, the research methodology, (c) Phase 3, the research methodology (Source: Own data set)

This study employed a qualitative literature review involving peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and institutional reports related to oral tradition arts in Southeast Asia. Sources were systematically selected using defined inclusion and

exclusion criteria and analyzed through thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns, shared characteristics, and distinctive national features. Cross-referencing of sources was conducted to enhance analytical rigor and reduce interpretive bias.

Alternative methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or surveys were not adopted due to the comparative and transregional scope of the study, which focuses on synthesizing existing scholarly knowledge rather than generating primary empirical data. A qualitative literature-based approach was therefore deemed most appropriate for examining broader regional trends and conceptual issues across multiple national contexts.

4.0 Findings

The findings are organized thematically in accordance with the research objectives and are presented analytically rather than descriptively. The tables summarize key patterns identified across the literature, while the accompanying discussion interprets these patterns to highlight regional commonalities, national distinctions, and contemporary challenges affecting oral tradition arts. The findings of this study are divided according to the three research objectives.

4.1 Objective 1: To identify shared features of oral tradition arts across Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia.

Table 2. Shared Features Across the Region

Feature	Description
Syncretism	A fusion of animist, Hindu-Buddhist, and Islamic elements is visible in both narratives and rituals.
Communal Transmission	Oral traditions are commonly performed in communal settings and passed through apprenticeship models.
Moral Didacticism	Stories aim to teach ethical values, drawing from religious or cultural philosophies.

(Source: Sort by the author)

4.2 Objective 2: To analyze the unique national characteristics that distinguish the oral traditions of each country

Table 3. Unique National Characteristics Across the Region

Country	Characteristics
Malaysia	Emphasis on healing and ritual in <i>Mak Yong</i> and the poetic structure of <i>Pantun</i> .
Thailand	Use of performance for monastic and lay audiences, especially in <i>Sepha</i> chanting.
Indonesia	Complexity of gamelan orchestration in <i>Wayang Kulit</i> and integration of pan-Asian epics.

(Source: Sort by the author)

4.3 Objective 3: To investigate the contemporary challenges faced in the preservation and transmission of oral tradition arts.

Table 4. Contemporary Challenges Across the Region

Challenge	Description
Urbanization & Media Influence	This led to the marginalization and decline of traditional oral forms.
Aging Practitioners	Loss of knowledge due to aging and insufficient transmission infrastructure.
Cultural Disconnect	Some preservation efforts lack contextual authenticity, reducing their cultural effectiveness.
Digital & Institutional Efforts	Initiatives like digital archiving, educational programs, and UNESCO recognition foster revival.

(Source: Sort by the author)

5.0 Discussion

The discussion interprets the findings in relation to established theoretical perspectives, including cultural sustainability, heritage commodification, transmission theory, and postcolonial identity. These frameworks provide a conceptual lens for understanding how oral traditions are preserved, transformed, and negotiated amid modernization, globalization, and shifting sociocultural values in Southeast Asia.

From the findings, three major themes were identified for further discussion, namely: i) Reviving Heritage, ii) Integrating Heritage, and iii) Cultural Survival. Exploring these themes will bring an understanding of the situation that attracts oral traditions to the Southeast Asia Community.

5.1 Malaysia: Reviving Heritage Through Institutional Support

Malaysia has taken significant strides to protect its oral traditions through national institutions like the Department of National Heritage (Jabatan Warisan Negara) and cultural centers like ASWARA (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage). The recognition of Mak Yong as a UNESCO Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2005 was a landmark in this process. However, preservation efforts

have also faced challenges. For instance, Mak Yong was once banned in certain Malaysian states due to religious conservatism, which highlights the tension between heritage preservation and contemporary socio-religious norms. Government and civil society collaborations, such as festivals, community training programs, and digital documentation projects, have helped revitalize interest in endangered forms like Dondang Sayang and Pantun. Nevertheless, more integrative grassroots programs are needed to ensure young practitioners are not just trained technically but are immersed in the cultural meanings behind the practices.

5.2 Thailand: Integrating Heritage in Education and Monastic Life

Thailand has traditionally preserved its oral traditions through integration with Buddhist monastic education. Forms such as Sepha and Likay are often taught in temple schools, with monks acting as both performers and cultural custodians. The Thai government, through the Office of the National Culture Commission, has mapped and documented many folk traditions as part of its Living Human Treasures program. Yet challenges remain, particularly in rural regions where oral arts are overshadowed by mass media and economic pressures. Recent initiatives have focused on digitizing performances and creating regional museums of intangible heritage. The incorporation of oral traditions into school curricula and community radio programs also represents a sustainable model for transmission.

5.3 Indonesia: A Community-Driven Model of Cultural Survival

Indonesia presents one of the most vibrant examples of community-based preservation. Rich in diversity, with over 700 ethnic groups, Indonesia's oral traditions, such as Wayang Kulit, Reog Ponorogo, and Tembang Sunda, have been maintained largely through family lineages and localized ritual functions. The Indonesian government has supported these efforts through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, along with UNESCO nominations. Initiatives like the Cultural Villages (Desa Budaya) and Sanggar Seni (local art studios) empower youth to engage directly with traditional arts. NGOs have also played a key role in bridging generational gaps through mobile storytelling units and digital storytelling archives. Indonesia's model demonstrates the importance of decentralized, community-led preservation frameworks that align with local customs rather than imposing uniform policies. However, regional inequalities and linguistic diversity continue to pose barriers to national integration of preservation strategies.

5.4 Transregional Collaborations and Future Directions

Given the shared cultural and historical threads among these countries, there is increasing recognition of the value of regional collaboration. Institutions like SEAMEO SPAFA (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization – Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts) and UNESCO's Jakarta Office have supported joint workshops, oral history projects, and comparative research across the region. However, there is a pressing need for: Cross-border archives of oral performances; Regional training hubs for cultural practitioners; Multilingual documentation to capture nuance; Policy that empowers indigenous and rural communities as equal stakeholders in heritage conversations. Furthermore, digital preservation tools, such as open-access oral archives, 3D recording of performances, and AI-powered language revitalization platforms, offer promising avenues provided they remain rooted in ethical, community-informed practices.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Oral tradition arts in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia showcase the profound depth and cultural specificity of Southeast Asia's intangible heritage. Despite their shared structural and thematic foundations, each country has nurtured distinctive forms reflective of its sociocultural history. Preserving these art forms requires more than documentation; it demands community engagement, intergenerational training, and policy alignment. Foley (2014) also identified the same issue through an article titled, "*No More Masterpieces: Tangible Impacts and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Bordered Worlds*".

Future research should emphasize participatory ethnographic methods, comparative regional frameworks, and the impact of new media. National and regional cultural institutions should collaborate to create living archives, integrate oral traditions into formal education, and support grassroots practitioners. Despite ongoing efforts to preserve and revitalize oral tradition arts in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, critical concerns regarding authenticity, cultural ownership, and commodification increasingly come to the fore. These issues intersect with broader debates about heritage politics, globalization, and the rights of indigenous and local communities.

Authenticity refers to the perceived "genuineness" or fidelity of oral traditions to their original cultural contexts and forms. As oral arts are increasingly performed on commercial or institutional stages, often for tourists, international festivals, or as part of government-sponsored programs, questions arise about how much of the original meaning, ritual function, and community relevance is preserved. For example, a Mak Yong performance staged for tourists may lose its spiritual and healing functions, becoming merely a visual spectacle. Wayang Kulit adapted to urban audiences may be shortened, re-scripted, or accompanied by modern music, potentially diluting its symbolic depth. These changes, while potentially necessary for survival, provoke tensions between adaptive innovation and

The issue of ownership is particularly complex in oral traditions, which are often collective, inherited, and communally transmitted. Unlike tangible cultural assets, oral traditions lack clear authorship and are deeply embedded in the identities of specific ethnic or local communities. When these traditions are archived in national institutions, performed by outsiders or commercialized by private companies, used in state branding or tourism campaigns, questions arise: Who truly owns these traditions? Do national governments have the right to speak on behalf of communities? Are communities adequately consulted or compensated when their heritage is used

for broader purposes? Increasingly, indigenous and local communities are asserting their rights to cultural sovereignty, demanding more say in how their oral traditions are represented, performed, and protected.

Commodification refers to the process of turning oral traditions into marketable products or objects of consumption within cultural industries or heritage tourism. While commodification can generate income and raise visibility, it also risks stripping traditions of context (e.g., sacred chants performed in secular settings), creating homogenized versions that cater to tourist expectations rather than cultural truth, and prioritizing entertainment value over community significance or ritual integrity. For instance, traditional performances that were once part of seasonal festivals or healing ceremonies may be transformed into daily commercial shows, severed from their original cosmological or social meaning.

To address these tensions, scholars, policymakers, and cultural activists advocate for community-led preservation models, where bearers of tradition are central decision-makers. Ethical frameworks for documentation, performance, and digitization, respecting cultural protocols. Intellectual property protections tailored to communal knowledge systems. Collaborative curation between state institutions and local practitioners to balance visibility and integrity. These measures aim to ensure that efforts to preserve and share Southeast Asia's oral traditions do not inadvertently undermine their authenticity, disempower their rightful stewards, or reduce them to commodities devoid of meaning.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The research is based solely on secondary sources and does not include primary fieldwork or ethnographic data, which may limit the depth of contextual insights. Additionally, variations in the availability and focus of existing literature across countries may influence the comparative balance. Nonetheless, the study provides a valuable transregional perspective that contributes to ongoing discourse on the preservation and sustainability of oral tradition arts in Southeast Asia.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the preservation and conservation of heritage arts and culture with an explicit focus on the oral traditions of Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia and, Thailand. This paper aims to enhance the understanding and dissemination of oral traditional arts among Southeast Asian groups. This integration creates a unique method for protecting this intangible cultural heritage by offering a comprehensive cultural and aesthetic perspective for experts and professionals to create a pragmatic framework for presenting or studying these traditional arts in-depth and re-educating using virtual and augmented reality technologies to generate interactive digital encounters. This framework can drive the field of cultural heritage preservation.

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