

# EXPLORING FILM ARCHIVING IN MALAYSIA FOR PUBLIC PRESERVATION, CONSERVATION AND ACCESS OF VISUAL HISTORY

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The Malaysian film industry has entered the digital industry when all production and national broadcasting companies shifted to digital equipment and facilities. In general, this raises the issue on how to preserve local films from here on out regardless of the video recording method and the question on public accessibility on the materials in the archive. While there are some government institutions tasked with digitising and preserving films (negatives) in Malaysia, little is known about the procedure, protocol, and priority of this development while the public could access little to no information about this matter. Through an in-depth interview with key personnel from National Archives of Malaysia (Arkib Negara), the study investigates the fate of Malaysian films especially the ones produced using film format. Finding indicates that while there is intensive work conducted by Arkib Negara as the official Public Record Service to digitise archived films, priorities are given to film documentaries and government-related news coverage thus setting aside the jewels of Malaysian historical and classical feature films towards uncertain future.

**Keywords:** Malaysian films, Arkib Negara, film preservation, film archive

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Movies have documented Malaysia (Malaya) for nearly a century. Since B.S Rajhans and his film production company released *Laila Majnun* (Leila Majnun) in 1933 (Muthalib 2013), the race to produce films has been so rapid that the industry peaked at its golden age just at the tender age of 20 years during the 1950s. Unfortunately, no one had thought about preserving the fragile film reels or in this case 'history cells' from disappearing forever from our history. Today, in ironic turn of event, these historical films are vanishing rapidly each day as the flimsy film reels starting to give in to decay. Some had been lost forever such in the prevalent case of *Seruan Merdeka* (1946-7) which has been regarded as the first Malaysian film to portray patriotism as a core thematic issue.

As we move closer to the Digital Era, these analogue materials are facing more threats as the means to preserve or access them are dwindling (Nation Film Preservation Foundation). It is undoubtedly a great loss to the Malaysian history and heritage since films are great sources of reference for they capture, with the immediacy unique to the moving photography, how generations of Malaysians lived their lives, worked, socialised and dreamt. Preserving these films really meant preserving a century worth of heritage. Fortunately, there have been numerous efforts by the authorities, NGOs and individuals to save the films. The Malaysia National Archive (Arkib Negara) has constructed a building for storing audio-visual materials in recognition of the need to safeguard and preserving the heritage and history of the country. However, films are more sensitive than any other analogue media format such as negatives or audiotapes as films were mostly produced from nitrate-induced material that burns faster than woods (Slinger, 1992). Therefore, this research delves into existing efforts to preserve the films especially with advancement of a new digital era in Malaysia and to further assess whether these efforts are feasible in the long run.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The efforts to conserve and preserve old films by the authorities albeit backed by government fundings, is still currently lacking the awareness on the importance to extend the forces to larger and more transparent scale. This effort is further dwindled since the locals are not delighted by the films as stated by Timothy White, "...they (Malaysians) admit to watching Malaysian films, it is often with a great deal of embarrassment" thus proving the archiving of these films harder all across the nation. To date film preservation in Arkib Negara Malaysia is categorised in 'audio-visual' preservation programs where any material in audio or visual format is archived

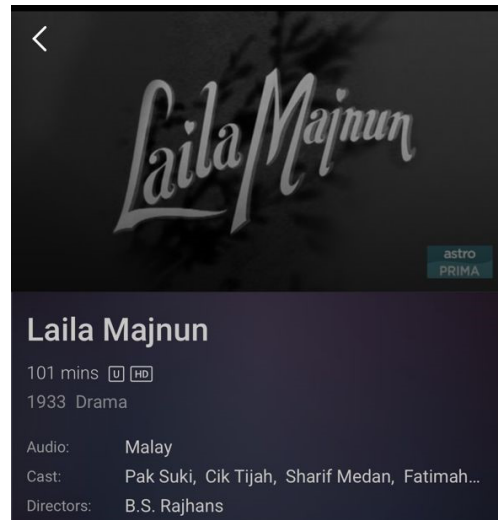
including photograph, images and songs. The challenges of the digital era for film heritage institutions had its fair share of concern over culture preservation on many transitioning countries. "...people can probably envisage what the potential of digital technologies could be, but the awareness of the financial, technological, legal and curatorial challenges inherent in bringing the heritage to the future is still alarmingly low, as is the awareness of the urgency with which these challenges has to be dealt" (Wengstrom, 2013). Wengstrom argues that a lot of countries are racing to submit themselves to the emergence of the digital age without considering the 'maintenance' that comes with it. The process of transitioning is not a trivial matter as it comes with a costly price tag.

According to a report published by The Association of European Cinémathèques (ACE), "...a simple scan of a positive print can be as low as €400 per hour of scanned material". The report further clarify that 'digitizing' costs in one project can be a hundred times higher than indicated. Becca Bastron (2013) has also given the same concern on the cost of digitization in United States of America by quoting report published by The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), "annual cost of preserving film archival master material is \$1,059 per title, and the cost of preserving a 4K5 - digital master is \$12,514". Bastron further states that the best way to guarantee a film's survival is to preserve the actual print – the film reel thus spending and focusing on these materials. In contrary to film heritage institutions in Malaysia, there has been no report published to further analyse the response of these institutions for such process or the cost of digitizing and preserving the film.

In an interview with *The Star* Malaysia, former Director of Arkib Negara Malaysia, Datuk Sidek Jamil, had stated previously that "all films produced by private individuals or private companies are not under the jurisdiction of Arkib Negara". Therefore, Malaysian films during this period were exposed to the risk of destruction as no one is taking care of them.

With no authorised agency or institution to cater to this matter specifically, all the precious films will not be taken in for proper archiving consequently no further studies and research can be done if the aforementioned films were to be lost indefinitely. A perfect example of this problem was evident in an unfortunate blunder made by Astro Prima under one of its special releases of classic Malay films label when one particular film, *Laila Majnun*, has a mislabel on its year of production. The channel states that the film on its listings was produced in 1933. However, in actuality, the *Laila Majnun* in the listing is actually a different version of film with the same name produced in 1962

directed by B.S Rajhans and not the *Leila Majnun* by K.R.S Chisty in 1933 (the year as shown in the channel listing). This misnomer may potentially threaten the very existence of our past as one small inaccurate fact will lead to our national capabilities to safeguard our history.



**Figure 1:** A screenshot of the description on the film *Laila Majnun* as listed in Astro Prima playlist. The film inaccurately labels the film as produced in 1933

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The lack of efforts in preserving Malaysian films has taken its toll on the society as it is difficult to look for most of the classic films especially during the early inception of Malaysian Cinema. This misfortune is further clarified by Timothy White in his paper *Historical Poetics, Malaysian Cinema and the Japanese Occupation*, when referring to cultural influences in film, some are often impossible to prove or pin down "...especially in a film industry such as that of Malaysia, in which records are scarce, films are not always preserved, and about which is very little has been written.". According to White, it is very difficult to study past cultural history of Malaysia (in exception to those with written proof). Much of what has been written about films or other media is based on evidence that is circumstantial at best. As of now, there has been a significant growth on the effort to preserve films, however, there has been low updates on these activities. This problem is also an indication to the lack of records on materials that were used along with the technology during the older days such as the type of chemical used in the film as well substances to maintain their physical condition. As Malaysia is entering the Digital Era, current practices might be obsolete or irrelevant whence new challenges arises thus solidifying the need to reassess existing preservation practices.

Despite having state-in-the-art technology to conduct the whole process of preservation and having a climate-controlled facility to store the materials, little is known about the current workflow of the process. Further studies need to be conducted to ensure continuous and reliable method for film preservation.

Vimala Perumal (2010) asserts that “A filmmaker in Malaysia could use knowledge management to source Malaysian cultural data and experience in order to make more Malaysian-related movies”. Perumal related the Malaysian film industry the *Tacit* knowledge in her study refers to “knowledge derives from whatever the knower has gotten from experience, beliefs, values and such” thus learned from personal, abstract experience i.e cerebral skill and *Explicit* knowledge is “...some sort of physical artefact, namely documents, videos...”. The two types of knowledge are crucial in order to be used as existing references (much like literature review) and to train future filmmakers and film crew for them produce more quality film when combined in perfect unison further proving the need to archive all of our films.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

In depth-interviews were conducted with key personnel from National Archives of Malaysia:

1. Wan Zainon bt Awang as Senior Archiving Officer, Arkib Negara Malaysia represented by her fellow;
2. Nor Azah bt Hashim as Archiving Officer
3. Nurul Nadia Md Naser as Archivist (Multimedia Unit)

The interview focuses on exploring the services and effort (if any) conducted by these institutions in conserving and preserving Malaysian-made feature films especially older films in the form of film reels. The interview also probes into concerning issues wthe archiving works while engaging the public and what feasible recommendations are pertinent to sustain the effort and making the archived materials open to public access

#### **5. FINDINGS**

The Malaysian National Archive undertakes three main tasks: to manage all present records, to manage all records that are moved to Arkib Negara which are identified as national archival materials, and to manage local statement’s memorials and archives. Any archival materials that have historical values are sent to Arkib Negara, provided that the materials fulfil the criteria before submission, which also includes film materials.

These materials are preserved both physically and digitally. The Pandan Tengah Archive Section under the Multimedia Unit in Arkib Negara is responsible at procuring and acquiring any film materials from NGO's, governmental bodies, private bodies, and individuals who wish to send them to Arkib Negara. There is neither by-law nor enforcement on the need for these bodies to send the materials to Arkib Negara as they are entitled to the rights of ownership. Besides, they are protected under the Copyright Act, therefore limiting Arkib Negara the power to attain the said materials.

In terms of facilities in Arkib Negara, there are machines to assist in the process of preservation. These machines are used for checking and cleaning of the raw materials. For instance, the splicing machine is used for reconnecting broken tapes and even those that have tear in them. However, maintenance of these machines is not done at an interval level due to financial constraints but the staff members of Arkib Negara are adamant at applying for the budget to maintain those machines every year that may or not be successful. As of now, the machines are still operational. The machine used for checking of films was given by the Japanese government which was considered "old" is still usable as maintenance is carried out frequently. Other than that, the machine for cleaning films was received in the year 1997 and is still working. The only two latest ones are *Singtel and Black Magic* which were introduced in a conference in Singapore and are only found in Arkib Negara throughout Malaysia.

The cleaning of the film materials is done based on a roster. Some are done once or twice a year as there are many racks of film. The staff members of Arkib Negara will only focus on a rack on a certain month, therefore checking and cleaning is done at a daily rate. Due to the limited number of machines available in Arkib Negara, only a limited number of film reels can go through the checking and cleaning process. Only about ten 35mm film reels can go through mere physical checking in a day, whereas for content checking and its condition, only two or three film reels can be done at a day's time as there is only one machine for 35mm and another for 16mm. This is not the case in The National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) as they own many machines and man-power for these tasks. In comparison to that, both archive assistant and officer in Arkib Negara need to carry out the same task as there are still two vacancies not filled at the moment. Preservation of films carried out in Arkib Negara are physically cleaned before being stored in the depository. The physical condition of the film materials is inspected first before the condition of the content inside. If problems with the physical condition of the film materials like the vinegar syndrome, shrinking, or sticking are present, they will be put through a cleaning process via a film cleaner.

Firstly, the film is entered into a plastic canister as previous steel canister showed signs of corrosion. Then, it is labelled before being stored in the depository. The materials in the depository must be maintained as well as possible because a slight fluctuation of temperature or even humidity will cause damage to the films at a faster rate. High temperature and humidity are known to cause moss and the vinegar syndrome to appear. When moss appears, the cleaning process is done manually by using a velvet cloth to slowly wipe away the moss. However, when the volume of the moss is too high, the cleaning machine is used by using a chemical together with a roller and dryer in the machine. This process must be controlled as too high a temperature can damage the film as well. It is only then that the film is returned to the canister once it is made sure that it is completely dry. These are some of the problems that appear more often, but there are also other problems that take a longer time to appear, namely shrinking, crystallisation, stickiness, and dampness. On the other hand, the digital preservation of the content is done via machines like *Singtel* and *Black Magic*. The raw materials can be scanned physically and converted into digital form. After that, the digitalised material will go through some editing before entering the storage system. Most materials are often given by FINAS but they are all just copies of the master copy as FINAS still owns the materials, per se.

Problems like the *vinegar syndrome* is described as having a pungent acidic smell that might indicate that the film is starting to spoil. When such a case arises, the first thing done is to dry the film by rewinding them to ensure that they do not stick together. This is due to the surface having emulsion and when reacted to heat, it melts. To the untrained, the smell of vinegar can be detected even in unspoiled films as they also contain vinegar but films with vinegar syndrome has a more pungent smell. The pungent smell can be detected from far and can be harmful to the body when inhaled too much. Temperature and humidity are also taken into consideration when dealing with storage of film as high temperature and humidity can cause the vinegar syndrome to appear. Therefore, the films are stored at 18°C and below. Each staff from a department will go through rotation in a different department. So, before being transferred to a different department, the staff must undergo training. This is done every 5 to 6 years. Due to the connection between Arkib Negara, the *Southeast Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives* (SARBICA), and the *Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association* (SEAPAVAA), those who undergo training there will obtain similar knowledge when they takeover different position in the different departments.

Despite the similarity in function of Arkib Negara and FINAS, the main difference is that Arkib Negara functions as custodian, while FINAS are producers of films. No payments are needed to keep their films in Arkib Negara. That is why FINAS will usually submit copies of their original films for preservation. Also, they will produce another reel for the researchers at Arkib Negara as one of the focus is to provide materials for research purposes. FINAS has control over the materials submitted to Arkib Negara in terms of accessibility. The materials are tied to the donor agreement giving FINAS control over making the films available for research anytime at their discretion. Thus, not all materials that FINAS owns are found in Arkib Negara.

In line with digitalisation, Arkib Negara has already taken steps towards the effort to store physical film reels in digital form. The acquisition of the Singtel machine in 2016 has played a big role in this effort. The digitalised films are then amassed in the *Media Asset Management System (MAMS)* which is connected to the referencing system in the Education Hall – the system compass which also functions as an online finding aid. So, researchers will be able to access the materials on the system compass in the Education Hall. They can be accessed via MAMS which is integrated with OFA and Compass. This has been an ongoing effort by Arkib Negara which is also in consistent with the flow of time. It is also apparent that digitalisation has become the main topic in conferences all around the world.

Every staff at Arkib Negara are expected to master the skills needed for the perseveration of films. Ms. Nadia is known for her skills as her job requires to be hands-on on a daily basis. Other than that, the staff also have to explain to other staff from different department on their current undertakings while on the job due to the rotation of staff between departments. Therefore, all staff need to always be in-the-know. Besides, staff in the Pandan Tengah Archive Section will usually be sent to SEAPAVAA/SARBICA and conferences to contribute inputs on film preservation. Only those from the Reprography Section stays in that department start until retirement but may sometimes be borrowed to do work at the archive department. The types of training staff undergo are from both internal and external. For instance, internal training will involve inviting vendors from whom new machines were bought to provide hands-on training on how to operate the new machinery. Mick Newham, former president of SEAPAVAA was also once invited to give live demonstration using the equipment and materials available at Arkib Negara. External training will involve sending staff to the archive at Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Thailand. However, sending staff abroad for training requires higher budget and approval from the ministry which may or may not



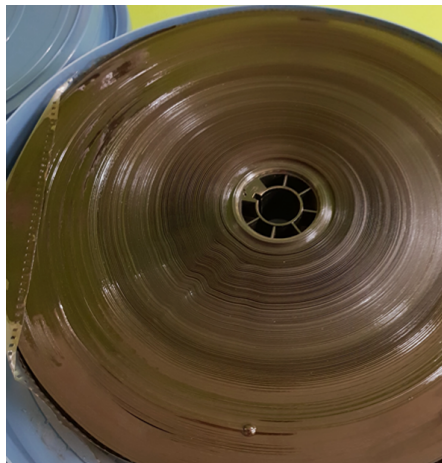
be approved based on the justification provided. It is said that preservation of films in other countries is an independent effort by film agencies unlike in Malaysia where there are film agencies like FINAS but they are not an archive. So, it is a golden opportunity for staff at Arkib Negara to go for workshops abroad via SEAPAVAA/SARBICA/IKROM/LCC, but it all again depends on the approval of the ministry. All staff including the officers and assistants of Arkib Negara has the chance to get training internationally depending on the priority given as well as the budget allocated. There are some who had gone to US for a month, Ms. Midah was sent to Vietnam recently, and Mr. Fariz to India.

In terms of qualification, most staff at Arkib Negara come from record management and history background. Of record management, it is mentioned that the syllabus covered everything on archiving from file management to preservation of materials. In fact, Arkib Negara has had students of record management intern for 2 weeks to as long as 3 months to learn about preservation of materials. Some staff are from chemistry background as there are chemicals involved in the job. Also, there are those who are from law background to deal with the Copyright Act from whom a known staff is named – Ms. Hajar. Staff recruitment is usually done via JPA with SPM leavers being assigned to the Grade 19 posts with no working experience or training from overseas. They will usually be assigned as preservation assistant where the focus of their job is on paper-based preservation.

Arkib Negara has been actively conducting roadshows and events in promoting public engagement in film or any material with historical worth. For films or video (including reels, negatives, VHS etc.), the donated artefacts might sometimes be damaged upon acquisition. So, efforts to salvage the film will be undertaken. Sometimes, there will be loose films – negative only, no audio or no image which will require merging. The process of merging is complicated – Arkib Negara does not own the equipment for merging and can sometimes further damage the film. Unsalvageable films will be disposed-off but with permission of the donator with justification provided to them. Disposed films are crushed, buried and handled by the Department of Environment as incinerating films can be dangerous due to flammables like nitrate found in film reels. This method of disposal is also suggested to other film agencies and are advised to liaise with the Department of Environment who has the proper disposal ground and tools. On damaged films that are successfully restored, the usual preservation steps are taken. If problem arises during checking like jumping, reconnection will be done.

This is a process done on a daily basis. Then, digitisation will occur and then entered into the system server. The system server is also constantly maintained. There will be an IT officer to assist in digitisation while using SingTel where Ms. Nadia will be sitting next to the officer. The officer will create the metadata for the film and then maintain it in the server. This server is backed up by Compass which also acts as the Online Finding Aids (OFA) for easy accessibility.

Older films like P. Ramlee's are provided in form of VHS, which has been digitised, while most old films are documentaries from FINAS which has been transferred from film to VHS. So, Arkib Negara will convert the film from VHS to digital format. There are also acquisition from the Mandarin Lab in Hong Kong, mostly fiction films. These are in loose items with the negative, image, sound, and subtitles in each of their own separate reels which can at times reach up to 10 reels just for the negative alone, with a total of 60 reels just for a title. Negatives are converted to positives by the Mandarin Lab as Arkib Negara lacks the equipment to do so. Mandarin Lab has offered to give the films to Arkib Negara as they are Malaysian products which holds no value to them but it does to Malaysia, so Arkib Negara has quite a collection from the Hong Kong agency. These loose items are brought back to Malaysia for preservation.



**Figure 2:** A film reel showing signs of *vinegar syndrome*. The film will stick to itself in the reel and becomes frail and easily flaked while emanating foul smell



**Figure 3:** A film reel becoming host to common mould. This can potentially destroy the negative permanently rendering digitisation process useless



**Figure 4.** Two samples of old and possibly terminally damaged Video Home System (VHS) tapes afflicted with crystallisation and mould respectively

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that there are existing efforts from at least 2 authorised government-backed repository institutions in Malaysia namely Arkib Negara and FINAS to preserve and conserve. With the former having predetermined job scopes and ultimately limited to financial subsidies set aside by the ruling government. Arkib Negara being the sole and central Government Record Management elected to oversee essential government documents since 1957 was placed under Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage in 2004. With a substantially huge responsibility as a repository centre in Malaysia, the agency is theoretically held accountable to keeping all the records on arts, culture and heritage nation wide. With budget cuts and mountains of tasks at hand, it is nearly impossible to complete the job even with available proper experts and decent equipment. Arkib Negara is only set to keep (i.e becoming custodian) assets that were assigned to them by the relevant government bodies or receiving materials donated by volunteers - leaving independent film companies being reluctant to contribute their films at all.

Since they are not specialized to digitise or process video content, they receive less budget for the work. However, both FINAS and Arkib Negara do work hand in hand most time in order to complete their tasks such as lending machines and expertise from one another and staff from both institutions will always participate in archiving-related program such the ones organized by SEAPAVAA and SARBICA. In due course, there is so much that FINAS and Arkib Negara can do to preserve and conserve our visual history through film, however the most important support would be coming from the public and Malaysian as a whole to come together and spread more awareness on the importance to preserve and conserve our films.

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