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# The Representation of Bunga Emas in Selected National Museums in Peninsular Malaysia: A Case Study of Three Federal Funded National Museums

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## **Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The study explains the representation of Bunga Emas exhibition in selected federally funded national museums in Peninsular Malaysia.

**Methods:** The research focused on Bunga Emas museum texts in the Perak Museum, Kota Kayang Museum, and Muzium Negara. The Bunga Emas was a tribute from certain Malay sultanates to the Kingdom of Siam. The representations on Bunga Emas exhibitions and its descriptive text are national museum elements used by the nation-state to imagine the boundaries and the historical memories of modern Malaysia.

**Results:** The Bunga Emas not only serves as a historical event and memories of the past but also binds the community to recognize it as part of national history. A typology in the research was formulated for The Bunga Emas representation in explaining its similar and differing narratives. The exhibition of The Bunga Emas in Muzium Negara emphasizes its context in colonial period, while Perak Museum emphasizes it as a royal gift. Kota Kayang Museum in Perlis focuses on diplomatic convoys and the journey to Siam.

**Conclusions:** This study contributes to discussions on intersectional analysis in the realm of museums and power, history, and the formulation of boundaries of the northern Malay state. The museum is a microcosm where the mediation of The Bunga Emas into a part of the memories of Nation State.

## **Keywords:**

National Museum, Museum Displays, The Bunga Emas, Siam, Nation State

## **1. Introduction**

The Bunga Emas were precious gifts that were sent by royal convoys from the feudal period Malay sultanate in the Northern region of Malay peninsula that includes the Sultanate of Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Patani. In modern historical discourses, they would orbit around three main arguments. First, it would be argued as a symbol of friendship between the Malay kingdom and Siam. Second, admission of suzerainty/vessel state status to the overlords from Siam. However, this paper's main discussion is to study on The Bunga Emas being an important part of the exhibition in national museum text in Selected National Museums in Peninsular Malaysia. The



selections of the National Museum are taken into consideration as these are the national museums that had exhibitions and explanations on the representations of Bunga Emas. The core of this study is not solely on history. Much more-so on the intersectional analysis between power, Malay identity, museum exhibition narratives and the part of history in a diversified Nusantara. The explanations in this section are served with constructed meaning making from museum texts. These museum texts include description boards and museum displays in three national museums in peninsular Malaysia. These three museums are the federal funded Perak Museum, Kota Kayang Museum of Perlis State, and Muzium Negara. Excluding Muzium Negara, The Kota Kayang Museum and Perak Museum are attached to the border of Modern Thailand, and they carry the representation of The Bunga Emas in the federal level national museum. Moreover, Kota Kayang Museum is located in Perlis State, which is part of Unfederated Malay State (UMS) in the pre independent period.

The objective of the study is to understand how national museums as exhibition complexes produce meaning-making that turn ancient artifacts into museum displays. The Bunga Emas as national museum display that brings imagination of modern territories in parts of Malaysia. Besides that, it is an object that imaginaries on an ethnic past those narratives included diplomacy, coloniality, victimhood and survival.

## **2. Museum Text, Identities and Power Dynamic**

Museums always create space for exhibitions, and it involves the selection of artefacts that turn into museum displays. When selections come into the picture, it conveys that museums are not neutral spaces. Driven by Foucauldian perspective, museums are part of disciplinary institutions that create, enforce, and maintain structured knowledge that influences the classifications and the order of museum objects. At the same time, the normative way to understand past events and reinforce certain ideas. It also marginalizes certain voices in the society (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). From the scholarly research above, museums are institutions that normalize a certain classification based on the current discipline through the narratives of the artifacts. The current knowledge system is categorized based on races, progress, genesis of time measurement, and even the idea of the nation state is normalized as a norm for visualization and interpretation in museums.

Scholarly work by (Mason, 2004) argues that museum is never a neutral space. It is a space where histories and identities are contested and negotiated. History of a place and region are constantly reshaped by involving societal and cultural perspectives. Challenges faced by museums include fragmented storytelling, political neutrality, political amnesia, and inclusivity in defining national identity. Museums, especially national museums are close related to nation-building. Museums renew historical memories in shaping of national identity. Thus, museum displays are not neutral as these artefacts are loaded with meaning-making to construct values via categorizations, exhibition, and curations (McLean, 2007).

### 3. The Exhibition and Narratives of The Bunga Emas in Selected National Museums in Peninsular Malaysia

The primary data in this research is constructed through analysis of museum texts. These museum texts serve as a part of museum exhibitions and one mural that consist of the Bunga Emas. The Museum exhibition included in this research are the museum displays and its narratives in the descriptions board and images. Again, this research is about how the museum texts narrate history in the three national museums in peninsular Malaysia. It would be an intersectional explanation between museum text, power, history, and identities.

#### Perak Museum

In the Malaysian Federal led Perak Museum, the memories of Bunga Emas are manifested through the museum texts on its descriptions as part of Niellowares that were return gifts from royals of the kingdom of Siam in response to the royal gift of Bunga Emas from the northern Malay states. The description board concentrated on mentions of the submission of the Bunga Emas as a part of recognition and protection from the Kingdom of Siam. The mention of “Northern Malay States” are constructed in Perak Museum included Perak, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu that are affiliated with the memories of Bunga Emas. The museum texts in the Perak Muzium had also been influenced by the creation of an imagined modern state territory of the “Northern Malay State” in the Malaysia nation state framework. Compared to the precolonial and pre independent era, Patani Sultanate was one of the boundaries between the Malay world and the mainland territories of Kingdom of Siam.

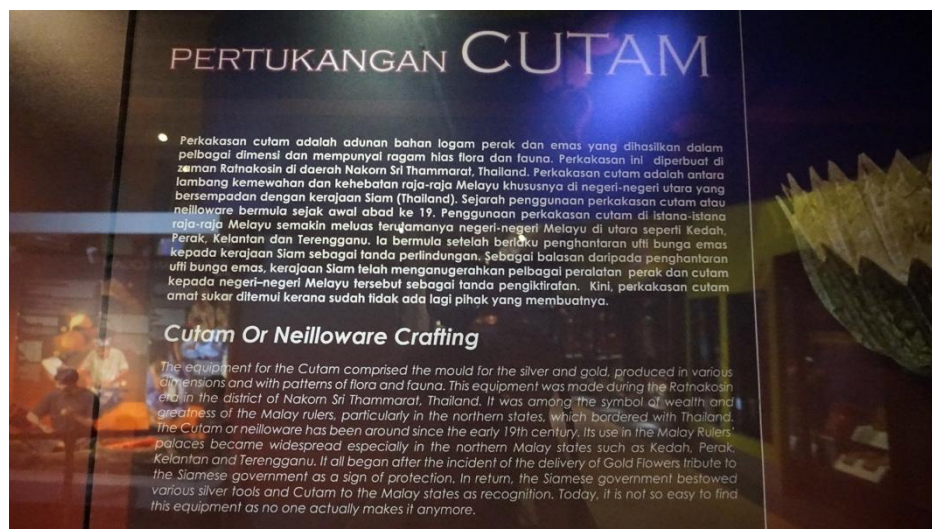


Figure 1: Museum Perak, Cutam or Nielloware Crafting that carried the elaborations with Bunga Emas

The Perak Museum absorbed the historical memories of The Bunga Emas as a narrative as Perak Sultanate in the ancient period is not a stranger to encountering the mainland dominant force, which was Siam. As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam had pressured the Perak Sultanate to include the Perak kingdom into its overlordship. Tribute was suggested, as Siam was keen to influence Perak into its influential sphere (Ceridwen, 2001).

### Muzium Negara, Federal Territory



Figure 2: The Bunga Emas Replica, Muzium Negara

Muzium Negara allocated the replica of The Bunga Emas as a museum display. In the case of Muzium Negara, The Bunga Emas, carries the representation of a constructed meaning on colonial memories. The Bunga Emas is in Gallery C: Colonial Era. Nevertheless, in the Muzium Negara description board, The Bunga Emas had been described as a gift that carried the symbol of friendship between the Sultanates in the Northern Malay States of Kedah, Terengganu, Kelantan and Pattani. Equal gifts from Siam had been granted in return to the Sultanates. However, in the Muzium Negara Gallery C, it marks the representation of colonial period from the arrival of Portuguese forces, Dutch and English. The said gallery is a representation of the march of different forms of coloniality and territorial conquest like the Portuguese and Dutch. As the British is more on the representation of treaty and colonial modernity, compared on The Bunga Emas which in the same gallery, Siam is reduced to a symbol of friendship. However, the

paradox is that the replica had been located in Gallery C which holds representation of colonial period.



Figure 3: An external huge mural outside the main building of The Muzium Negara

Besides The Bunga Emas in Gallery C: Colonial Period in Muzium Negara, The Muzium Negara also has an external mural, and The Bunga Emas convoy is one of the representations of the important historical memories of Malaysia as a nation state. The Bunga Emas convoys are on a boat, represented as on a water way, and on top of The Bunga Emas convoys are the Siam architectural buildings. It is to formulate evidence that The Bunga Emas had been located as one important historical event in the nation state projected history. The Bunga Emas are part of the dominant historical discourse for nation building when come to the state history.

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*Kota Kayang Museum, Perlis State*

Figure 4: The Delivery Route of The Bunga Emas & Bunga Perak

Kota Kayang Museum which located in Perlis state, Malaysia used older maps that tried to reflect the ancient feudal period and a clear route of The Bunga Emas convoy or mission to the King of Siam. The representation focused on the narrative of the route by sea and by land. Ministers involved in the convoys; the royal return gifts from the King of Siam to the convoy of Raja Perlis.

#### 4. Discussion

Museum objects sediment various meanings over time. Interpretations on the museum display are deeply constructed based on background context and cultural perspectives. Thus, it has been used to legitimize dominant national narratives. In this process, a dichotomy of dominant historical memories and certain historical memories are put aside as it has slowly been marginalized. However, inclusiveness in the museum could be made possible (McLean, 2007). The current Bunga Emas representation is put into a nation state narrative as an important state memory on the identification of how far the state boundaries reach in the realm of Malaysia nation state. This is a dominant narrative needed to normalize its society on political geography. However, the national museum could from time to time increase the representation of The Bunga Perak and the *Hantaran* on its narratives. As museum displays as seen as the afterlife of the artifacts, museum narrative could be improved from time to time on its inclusiveness in explanation of The Bunga Emas, Bunga Perak, Royal Convoy and the *Hantaran*.

Nation building is an ongoing process; it brings to the political instrumentalization of Museums for projecting historical consciousness and shaping national identity. National museums are often used by the nation-state to legitimize the current political power to its historical continuity. Museum exhibitions potentially highlight the heyday of



achievements in its past; however, it also admits contestation in exhibiting debatable and conflict-ridden events that affiliated to the nation state (Elgenius, 2015).

Museums are institutes that actively construct narratives on a selection of historical narratives. The active role of the museum could be understood as the institution attempts to legitimize a particular version of national history. The nation state is trying to reinforce the version of history by forming a public consciousness in negotiations of identity construction (Aronsson, 2015). The national museum is a site for negotiations and normalization to create an imaginary state based on the political geography of “the Northern Malay State’ and ‘Siam’”. These incidents in the pre-independence period that has happened in certain Sultanates had become nationalized by amalgamating them into nation state memories to construct its post-independence identity. Scholarly research such as (Day, 2002) pointed out how temple ruins, palaces, and royal regalia from ancient dynasties acted as haunted agents; they serve as reminders to the modern state that its predecessors bear unfinished historical burdens. The restoration of material culture is intended as a symbol of power, offering successors potential claims to address what remains undone. Museum objects of former kingdoms and ruined palaces possess agency, mediating between past lives and contemporary inhabitants. These objects are not only passive carriers of memory; they provide agency for the political legitimacy of current needs. The imagination extends from museums to landscapes, architecture, and territories. They remind us of a powerful historical debt that continuously shadows the current regime, urging us to fulfil its unfinished sacred tasks.

The Bunga Emas replica was produced and displayed in both museums. *Muzium Negara* allocated the replica of the Bunga Emas as an important exhibition item at Gallery C: Colonial Era. It marks the representation of the Bunga Emas as the manifestation of a form of dominance. Kota Kayang Museum shared the display of Bunga Emas in one of the galleries. Another visual illustration and museum text demonstrated the convoys of Bunga Emas and the Bunga Perak to Siam. However, the *Hantaran* was less presented as museum display or museum exhibition texts.

The display of Bunga Emas replica was the sole representation of dominance or a form of coloniality, if referred to the categorizations in *Muzium Negara*. *Muzium Negara* also mark the representation of Bunga Emas on the huge mural outside *Muzium Negara*. The memories of Bunga Emas were represented in a shared history for two historical zone, the researcher proposed mainly on the Kedah historical zone and the Kelantan Pattani Historical Zone which is much more affiliated to these historical memories of the *Bunga Emas*. However, for Perak Museum, the *Cutom* or Nielloware carry the memories of *Bunga Emas* convoys which are portrayed in the museum text in the name of “Northern Malay State” that include four states: Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perak. The description fits in the subnation state framework where the fallen Sultanate of Pattani is not seen in the descriptions.

These shared historical memories are affiliated mostly as parts of a political geography of the northern Malay states excluding Perak. However, the researcher could formulate evidence from the empirical data from The *Muzium Negara Bunga Emas* which was represented as a historical narrative of Siamese colonialism, Kota Kayang Museum which



was given representation as domination of Siam polity. Perak Museum represented Bunga Emas as a recognition of the Malay states.

Table 1: Typology of The Bunga Emas in Federal led Kota Kayang Museum, Muzium Negara and Perak Museum

Kota Kayang Museum, Perlis State	Muzium Negara, Federal Territory	Perak Museum, Perak State
Mainland Route of the Bunga Emas Tributary Convey	The Bunga Emas Replica	Museum description Board: Cutam or Nielloware Crafting board-Nielloware is introduced as a symbol of wealth for the Malay rulers, particularly in the northern states. The Cutam was introduced after the incident of the delivery of gold Flowers tribute to the Siamese government as a sign of protection. In return, the Siamese government bestowed various silver tools and Cutam to the Malay states as recognition (Perak Museum Text).
The Bunga Emas Replica	Architectural-Wall-Bunga Emas on a boat heading to a Siamese architectural building	

The Bunga Emas could be seen as an encounter of the mainland civilization, which is Siam. The Bunga Emas as a reaction to deal with neighbours of a dominant force as a strategic and diplomatic tool. The Bunga Emas is a diplomatic tool for the Malay Muslim Sultanate, as in the early seventeenth century, Pattani Sultanate sent the Bunga Emas to Siam (Ayutthaya period), meanwhile, it also maintains Patani's relationship with Johor and Pahang. It indicated submission, to maintain a balance between the dominant influences by aligning with the Sultanate in the Malay Archipelago (Bassett, 1969). In a way, the maritime based civilization in the Malay Archipelago was struggling in maintaining its autonomy in its struggle for survival. The submission of The Bunga Emas in the national museums in this research had found that it is a representation of friendship, protection and recognition from the Kingdom of Siam. It sparks a debate on the reference to (Winichakul, 1994) for the Kedah Sultanate, the meaning of tribute was



often unclear. Sometimes it was a way to keep the survivals from the overlordship, in order to sustain a degree of autonomy. Although the submission of The Bunga Emas symbolically look voluntary on the surface, it was actually a non-voluntary act.

Meanwhile, The Bunga Emas replica, descriptions in federal lead national museums had been put under a nation state enclaved in formulating the constructions of a historical incidents and memories in construction of the 'Northern Malay States'. The fallen ancient regime of Pattani Sultanate that had been annexed by the Siam had been reduced in national museum exhibitions in the realm of modern nation state of Malaysia. Museums are the cultural institution that holds the dynamic in shaping a particular population in its imagined past. These legitimations of nation thought 'Antiquity' builds a sense of commonness in sharing a 'similar' past nation experience (Anderson, 2006).

The historical incident and memories of The Bunga Emas play an important role in knowledge production and legitimization of the importance of thinking, shaping, and imagining the nation state. As nation state in the world, currently the world order uses delineations and border lines in imagining countries. Before the modern nation state system. In a precolonial, semi colonial period and colonial period; one of the state systems in Southeast Asia is referred to the influential sphere system. This influential sphere that mention Siam's political space and its fluidity. The territorial space is based on the "Mandala System" This influences its regional political influence (Winichakul, 1994). Thus, there would be a need to study the perspective from Siam on the Northern Malay States. It is important to infer that either Siam considered the Northern Malay States as a domain, suzerainty, or as regional alignment partnership. As the British intervention, clear boundaries were made between Siam and it became a clear delineation of state boarder until present. From the influentials Speare of Mandala, until local state system. Now, the invention of clear boundaries is used to set a clear line on both nation states. These are the impacts that shape the representation of imagination of state boundaries, Malay civilization at the 'northern' Malay peninsula in the realm of Malaysia nation state. The national museums projected the representations on The Bunga Emas as a nationalized museum display to imagine the realm within the nation state.

## 5. Conclusion

The exhibition of the representation of The Bunga Emas in selected national museums served a purpose of shaping the selected representation as a commemoration of 'Northern Malay States' and the struggle between dominant power of state in the pre independent era. It also important on normalized certain parts of territories of Malaysia as a modern nation state. Museums are microcosms that face challenges on the limitations of space. Every museum meets the same challenges. Thus, museum selection is not a neutral process. Here, national museums select the historical memories and museum display according to the needs of nation state. They legitimize a particular Malay memory from the interpretations of the Sultanates past that is built into Malaysia nation state framework that had encountered the border between a mainland Southeast Asia country which is the Siam and the polities in certain parts of Malay archipelagos. These historical relations are not only a tributary item, but an influences sphere on the Siamese influence and the diplomatic missions that involved the Bunga Emas and the royal return gifts from



Siam. The Bunga Emas narratives and The Bunga Emas replica as museum text represents an important memory where different forms of coloniality, struggles on state survival, diplomacy and the formation of the boundaries of the modern nation state takes place. It also shapes the importance for Malaysians to think about the 'Northern Malay state' as a concept of political geography, and also the sphere of interactions between Malay Archipelago civilizations and the mainland Southeast Asia civilizations. Back to a Foucauldian interpretation of power and museum, museum is an apparatus in this research to normalize The Bunga Emas as part of the nation state building. The museum text transforms a kind of normalization that is acceptable as the nation state manufacture historical truths to bind people into believing the state projection on the idea of Bunga Emas as symbol of friendship, protections and recognitions. Meanwhile, the annexed Pattani Sultanate by the Siam has been reduced in the museum narrative as it is not part of Malaysia nation state framework. As a suggestion on a museum narrative dimension, The Bunga Perak, precious royal gifts and the return gifts from Siam are also important museum displays that could be added into the federal lead national museums when it comes to the representations of Bunga Emas in the studies. The researcher would suggest in future research to include any state level museum that maintain The Bunga Emas and The Bunga Perak display into the research.

### **Acknowledgement**

All the data used in the research is solely for academic purposes and non-commercial usages. This is in line with the permission granted by each national museum: Muzium Negara, Perak Muzium and Muzium Kota Kayang, to use the data enclosed in aforementioned national museums. The authors appreciate the permission granted for the PhD research and further academic-based non-commercial publications. The publication did not receive any funding and focuses solely on knowledge production. The author wishes to thank the two reviewers of the journal in terms of suggestions on improvements given.

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