

# Heritage at home or abroad?

## The dilemma of repatriating Malaysia's historical manuscripts

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**PETALING JAYA:** There are many challenges in repatriating historical items from abroad, say experts.

Social and intellectual history professor Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Murad Merican (*pic*) said one of them was a lack of proper facilities and skills for the conservation of such items.

"We can bring the items back, provided we can preserve them properly.

"I have seen some libraries that did not keep old books, aged hundreds of years, properly. We are not very good at conserving such artefacts," the professor at International Islamic University Malaysia's International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC-IIUM) told *The Star*.

"While many of these manuscripts are part of our heritage and were taken away and kept in foreign libraries, I don't believe it's necessary to repatriate it back to our country."

He said such artefacts were fragile and aspects such as preservation technologies, ventilation systems and archival methods were crucial.

He said that when those items, such as historical manuscripts and texts, were already in the country, an organised system must also be created for their accessibility.

"We need to figure out whether or not the manuscripts will be made publicly accessible to be studied," said Prof Ahmad Murad.

"We need to develop a compre-



hensive system for accessing these materials and ensure that the public is informed about how to use them."

He suggested that to ensure the survival of the manuscripts, the original copies be kept abroad where there are better facilities such as climate control.

"What Malaysia can do is to digitise the manuscripts and own the copyrights.

"This way, we can preserve the content and have digital copies available for global research and education," he elaborated.

He said it was important for the government to secure specific rights to store and distribute authenticated digital versions through Malaysian institutions.

There should be an agreement with institutions holding such manuscripts to grant Malaysian scholars priority in access and usage, he said.

"We might as well let the foreign organisations keep them, unless they want to dispose of the ancient materials. Then we can reclaim them," said Prof Ahmad Murad.

He said that among the thousands of manuscripts being kept

abroad were the Raffles Letters, Hikayat Hang Tuah, Malay Annals, as well as writings about various Malay sultanates.

Former International Council on Monuments and Sites (Icomos) chairman Datuk Hajeedar Abdul Majid said the repatriation of the items should be done for free.

He emphasised that the historical documents or artefacts belong to Malaysia and that countries having them should return them.

"This is where diplomacy comes in. Our government must be able to repatriate the items without any cost.

"We need to learn from our neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, which managed to reclaim its historical artefacts without any cost," said Hajeedar.

Since 1998, Cambodia has managed to reclaim more than 1,000 looted cultural and historical antiquities from countries like the United States, France, Australia and Britain.

Hajeedar said Malaysia should also ensure that it has the proper infrastructure to keep the delicate items when repatriation was successful.

According to Universiti Sains Malaysia History Division senior lecturer Dr Azmi Ariffin, Malaysia does have the appropriate facilities, especially under the National Archive Department.

However, he cautioned that the repatriation process should not be initiated hastily.

"The National Archive has the facilities, but improvements are needed. We don't need to rush this as it will cost a lot," he said.

Referring to the hundreds of ancient Malay texts kept in the

British Library, Azmi said the documents should have been returned after independence.

"If they want to study our materials, they should come to us, not the other way around," he said.

Despite the hurdles, the experts agree that repatriating historical items from abroad is needed for Malaysians to learn about their rich history.

Last week, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said efforts to reclaim these historical documents and artefacts were being hindered by budget constraints.

He said initiatives were underway to retrieve these items from various sources, including museums and private collectors.

He asked government-linked investment companies and government-linked companies to assist in the financial aspect.

Checks on the British Library's website found that its collection of Malay manuscripts consists of about 100 volumes and over 300 documents.

"These manuscripts originate from all parts of maritime South-East Asia, including present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the southern regions of Thailand and the Philippines, and range in date from the 17th to the early 20th century.

"The collections are in the fields of literature, history and law, and include some exceptionally significant items such as the oldest known copy of the earliest Malay history, *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (Or. 14350), and one of the finest illuminated Malay manuscripts, a copy of the *Taj al-Salat* (Or. 13295)," the website said.