



Unwritten Presence: On Listening, Learning, and the Living Archive

by Pauline Fan

There is knowledge that refuses the page. Knowledge that arrives on the breath, in the bend of fingers, in the hush before a voice takes hold of the air. There is wisdom that cannot be footnoted, pedagogies older than the school—more fluid than text, more precise than numbers.

This is the knowledge PUSAKA seeks: Not to possess, but to bear witness; not to contain, but to imprint through presence. In our work with masters of oral tradition—shadow puppeteers, trance dancers, devotional drummers, ritual healers—documentation is not a gesture of record, but of relation. It is a way of learning through listening, of being transformed by the encounter.

To lean into the murmur before meaning, to gather what slips through the net of language—a tremor in the voice, a flicker in the gaze, the weight of a pause where memory stalls.

To document is not to fix in time. It is to honour time's unfolding. It is to lose oneself in an experience—not of abstract eternity, but of transient timelessness.

To document is not to trap, but to echo. Not to pin the moment, but to let it pass through the body, like smoke through bone, like song through sleep.



A Tok Teri shaman recites incantations during a Main Puteri healing performance in Kelantan.
Photo by Cheryl J. Hoffmann, PUSAKA.

*Pinta aku sampaikan kepada bapa yang awal ibu yang mula
Bapa dari langit ibu di bumi . . .*

I call upon the original father the first mother
Father from the sky mother upon the earth . . .

The healing ceremony unfolds not as a straight line but as a spiral. The tok puteri shaman is a poet of incantation and enchantment. He lays out the offerings. He dances like a sacred serpent. He invokes spirits with the ease of greeting old friends. Children become warriors, women become were-tigers.

The tok puteri invites the patient to dance, to enter a trance-like state of lupa (forgetting). The patient “forgets” the socially constructed identity that inhibits her inner life, so that she may remember, and return to, her essential Self. This is not possession; it is release.

Before words, there is rhythm.
Before rhythm, silence.
Before silence, listening.
Before memory, forgetting.

PUSAKA's work honors the terrain of living traditions. We document not as observers, but as apprentices of sound and silence, light and shadow. Our recordings hum with ambient knowledge—cicadas, the laughter of children, the creak of floorboards beneath crossed legs. Our photographs catch the moment before a hand rises, the intake of breath before a chant begins. Each frame holds space for what cannot be annotated: yearning, wonder, mischief, the scent of the monsoon season.

Not to hold, but to be held.

Not to name, but to recognise our true name.

PUSAKA was born out of rupture.

In the early 1990s, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) swept to power in Kelantan, a state in northeast Peninsular Malaysia that is distinct for its cultural confluence and art forms. The PAS state government soon proscribed the centuries-old traditions of Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong, Main Puteri, and Manora on grounds that they were antithetical to the tenets of Islam. The language used in the rationale of the proscription was accusatory and harsh, highlighting associations with animism as *syirik* (polytheism) and *khurafat* (superstition). The proscription was in essence an ideological attempt to eliminate a part of Malay cultural heritage, redefine the historical identity of the Malay people, and impose a rigid interpretation of Islam.

Wayang kulit (shadow play) performances were restricted. Mak Yong and Manora dance-dramas were silenced in public spaces. Main Puteri healing ceremonies were dismissed as sorcery. But even in retreat, the traditions endured—in backyards, in kitchens, in the soft murmurs of stories told after the evening prayer.

These restrictions drove many traditional art forms underground. At the behest of traditional masters in Kelantan, PUSAKA was formally established in 2002 by journalist Eddin Khoo, after a decade of covering the cultural politics in that state, forging close bonds with master performers, and independently supporting the continuity of their art.

Elsewhere in Malaysia, other traditions met similar fates. In Johor, religious fatwa condemned the Kuda Kepang trance-dance tradition. The body in ecstasy became a site of suspicion. Yet the horsemen still dance in defiance. In villages after dusk, Kuda Kepang elders guide young dancers to summon their *isim*—individual totem spirits. Tiger, monkey, crocodile, eagle, warrior, sage. They shapeshift between the seen and unseen worlds.

In these vulnerable contexts, PUSAKA emerged not to protest through confrontation, but to resist through presence. Our approach is shaped by subtlety, by subversion, by the slow and steady weaving of relationships. We do not challenge authority with slogans, but nurture the flame at its most fragile. We not only document living traditions; we strengthen their economic viability, and encourage transmission within communities.



A Kuda Kepang dancer emerges in a state of trance from a billow of kemenyan incense smoke.
Photo by Cheryl J. Hoffmann, PUSAKA.

What we have built is not a monument, but a wild undergrowth spreading its roots—quiet, persistent, alive. What we document is not merely performance—it is cosmology in motion.

Underlying PUSAKA's work are explorations and interrogations of the nature of culture and human nature—of spirit, temperament, the essential self.

In the academy, knowledge is often stored in structures: books, databases, modules, syllabi. It is abstracted, distilled, referenced. But in oral tradition, knowledge resides in the ephemeral. The body is the archive. The voice is the medium. The story is the school.

What does it mean to learn from someone who is learning from their own forgetting? To learn from a master performer is to enter a pedagogy of intimacy and intuition. A pedagogy of repetition and improvisation. A pedagogy of embodiment and expression.

In PUSAKA's approach, documentation becomes zikir—a cyclical act of invocation and return. It is not the preservation of content, but the cultivation of context. Not the storage of data, but the continuity of presence. To witness is to participate. To record is to reciprocate.

What if education began here? Not in mastery, but in relation. Not in extraction, but in exchange. What does it mean to listen? Not passively, but actively, humbly, with the whole body. To learn through folklore is to understand that knowledge is porous. It leaks, seeps, stains, flows sideways. To document a master is to become their student.



Mak Yong sisters, whose lineage goes back seven generations, enjoy a light moment during a community performance at the border of Kelantan-Terengganu. Photo by Cheryl J. Hoffmann, PUSAKA.

PUSAKA's framework resists the extractive tendencies often associated with cultural preservation and ethnographic studies. We do not seek to dislodge tradition from its ecology or present it as exotic spectacle. Instead, we emphasize kinship—walking alongside tradition, respecting its pace, and allowing knowledge and artistry to unfurl organically. In this paradigm, documentation is not simply archival; it is ceremonial, an offering rather than an artifact.

PUSAKA does not frame the act of documentation as “preservation,” a word too often bound to nostalgia and the industry of “cultural heritage.” Instead, we approach documentation as a living archive—a way into the texture of traditions still pulsing, still becoming. Here, the archive is not a shelf—it is a relationship. The classroom is not a room—it is the circle of bodies gathered under a tree, under a roof of attap, under the wide and listening sky. Learning happens through encounter: between primal yearning and the discipline of lineage.

To learn from tradition is not to master it, but to be mastered by its mystery. Our work offers a model for transformative documenting: one that is slow, situated, engaged, ethical, and embodied.

A model that invites scholars, educators, and artists to reimagine what learning can be—not as accumulation, but as attunement.

To document the oral is to document the breath. To archive the intangible is to trust the incomplete. To learn from the oral master is to become a vessel for their remembering.

Our journey follows the voice back to its origins—the guru asal, or original teacher. It is there, in the pause before speech, in the stillness before recollection, that tradition finds renewal and the cycle begins once more.

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About PUSAKA

PUSAKA is a UNESCO-accredited cultural organization dedicated to researching and documenting Malaysia's traditional and ritual arts. Established to build a comprehensive archive, PUSAKA works closely with masters of tradition in local communities to ensure these living practices are passed on to future generations. Through festivals, public performances, and community-based instruction, PUSAKA creates meaningful platforms that honor the depth and dignity of traditional performers.

In all its work, PUSAKA engages deeply with history and contemporary thought, offering an intellectual context for reflecting on broader questions of culture, tradition, and ideas. In 2024, UNESCO awarded PUSAKA official NGO accreditation in recognition of its long-standing commitment to safeguarding Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage.

All photos by Cheryl J. Hoffmann, PUSAKA.