

Strengthening the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage through Oral History: A Malaysian Perspective.

Suhaida Halamy^{1*}, Rozita Hanapi², Syazleena Yahya³

¹ Faculty of Information Science, Universiti Teknologi Mara Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

² Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

³ Institut Tanah dan Ukur Negara, Kementerian Sumber Asli dan Kelestarian Alam, Malaysia

^{1st} dida@uitm.edu.my; ^{2nd} rozita8282@uitm.edu.my; ^{3rd} syazleena@instun.gov.my

¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9612-0757>; ² <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1418-4000>; ³ <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7865-8550>

*Corresponding Author: dida@uitm.edu.my

Abstract— *Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) refers to the living traditions, knowledge, and practices that communities continuously create and pass down across generations. Today, however, many of these cultural expressions are under increasing pressure from rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, and technological disruption. Around the world, oral history has become an important way to capture community voices that are often absent from conventional archives. In Malaysia, despite a number of valuable initiatives, oral history efforts remain largely fragmented, project-based, and weakly institutionalized. This study examines current oral history practices in Malaysian heritage institutions, identifies the key structural challenges they face, and proposes a framework for strengthening the role of oral history in ICH preservation. Using a qualitative multi-method approach, the research draws on document analysis, focused institutional case studies, and semi-structured interviews with records officers or archivist, museum curators, and community tradition bearers (n = 12). The findings reveal four main constraints namely inconsistent recording practices, limited professional capacity, inadequate digital infrastructure, and weak governance structures. In response, the study proposes a structured framework that integrates policy and governance, standard operating procedures, capacity building, community participation, and digital systems. This framework offers the positions of oral history as a foundational infrastructure for sustainable heritage preservation in Malaysia.*

Keywords— *digital preservation, heritage governance, intangible cultural heritage, institutionalization, Malaysia, oral history*

I. INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses the living traditions, knowledge, and practices that communities recognize as part of who they are (UNESCO, 2003). It includes oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, social customs, and traditional crafts that are passed down from one generation to generation. In a multicultural country such as Malaysia, ICH is more than a collection of practices and it is a shared memory bank that binds communities together and carries indigenous knowledge shaped over centuries.

Despite its importance, ICH is becoming increasingly fragile. Rapid urbanization, migration, economic change, and the global spread of mass media are reshaping everyday life and weakening traditional ways of learning. Young people are often less connected to inherited practices, while many tradition bearers are growing older without their knowledge being systematically recorded. In this situation, oral history plays a vital role by capturing lived experiences, local wisdom, and community voices that are rarely preserved in formal archives.

Internationally, oral history has moved beyond being a supplementary research method to become a strategic tool for heritage preservation, supported by digital technologies, community participation, and policy frameworks (Holmes et al., 2016; Boyd, 2014). In Malaysia, however, most oral history activities remain short-term and project-based. They are usually driven by individual researchers or isolated institutional programs, resulting in poor coordination, uneven documentation standards, and weak long-term preservation planning.

Although earlier studies highlight the value of oral history, few have examined the institutional and governance structures that shape its sustainability. There is still no empirically grounded model that integrates policy, professional capacity, digital infrastructure, and community involvement into a coherent national strategy. This study responds to this gap by proposing an institutionalization framework for oral history-based ICH safeguarding, with insights that are relevant not only to Malaysia but also to other post-colonial and multicultural societies. The objectives of this study are:

- 1) To examine existing oral history practices within Malaysian heritage institutions;
- 2) To identify institutional, technical, and governance challenges affecting ICH preservation;
- 3) To propose a structured framework to strengthen oral history as a sustainable heritage preservation mechanism.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, Malaysian society depended heavily on oral traditions to preserve and pass on knowledge (Abu, 2014). Stories, proverbs, folklore, ritual speech, and performance were not simply forming of expression; they carried social values, belief systems, and collective wisdom across generations. The fragility of this oral heritage became particularly clear during the Japanese occupation (1941–1945), when many colonial and local records were destroyed, creating major gaps in the historical archive (Muhamad, 1996). In response, oral testimony emerged as an important complementary source for recovering silenced histories and everyday community experiences that had never been formally documented.

Early institutional efforts began with organizations such as the Sarawak Museum in 1957 and the National Archives of Malaysia in 1965, which focused mainly on interviewing political figures, educators, and community leaders (Lim & Wong, 1999; Mohamad et al., 2012). Subsequent initiatives by Sarawak State Library, Sabah State Archives, Tun Jugah Foundation, Majlis Adat Istiadat Sarawak, universities and NGOs shifted attention towards indigenous knowledge, customary law, and local cultural practices. However, these programs developed largely in isolation, resulting in fragmented workflows and inconsistent documentation and metadata standards. Despite decades of oral history activity, the recording of everyday cultural life, indigenous ways of knowing, and community memory remains limited (Musa, 2018). Challenges such as difficult access to remote areas in Sabah and Sarawak, language barriers, cultural sensitivities, and inadequate digital infrastructure continue to constrain systematic preservation. While international studies highlight how digital technologies can improve accessibility, interoperability, and community participation (Holmes et al., 2016; Boyd, 2014), Malaysian institutions still rely heavily on decentralized storage, short-term funding, and uneven access policies. Although the importance of oral history is widely recognized, few studies have examined the institutional and governance structures required to transform it from a series of isolated projects into a coordinated national heritage strategy. This study seeks to fill that gap by proposing an institutionalized model that integrates governance, capacity building, community engagement, and digital systems to support sustainable ICH preservation.

III. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative multi-method design was adopted to examine oral history as a mechanism for institutionalized ICH preservation. This approach captures socially embedded practices and institutional realities.

A. Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary methods:

- 1) Document Analysis – Institutional reports, project documents, policy statements, journal articles, and online resources related to oral history initiatives were reviewed. Focus institutions included the National Archives of Malaysia, Sarawak State Library, Sabah State Archives, selected museums, and heritage agencies were purposively chosen because they represent the national breadth of heritage management in Malaysia. These institutions encompass federal, state, and community-level practices, capturing a diversity of operational models, cultural contexts, and documentation approaches that reflect the broader landscape of oral history preservation in the country.
- 2) Focused Institutional Case Studies – Selected institutions were analyzed for recording workflows, community engagement strategies, documentation formats, metadata practices, storage systems, and access policies.
- 3) Semi-Structured Interviews – Twelve participants were purposively sampled: heritage officers and archivists (n = 6), museum curators (n = 3), and community tradition bearers (n = 3). Interviews (45–90 minutes) explored operational challenges, governance practices, ethical considerations, and digital preservation. Thematic saturation determined the final sample size.

B. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Inductive coding identified patterns related to institutional practices, professional capacity, digital infrastructure, and community engagement. Codes were grouped into higher-order themes through iterative comparison. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and audit trails.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The National Archives of Malaysia as the country's central heritage institution, has its own guidelines and consistently implements oral history practices. The National Archives plays a significant role in preserving oral history materials around ICH. The findings indicate that the archive has not digitized many oral history materials. Oral history practitioners report difficulties accessing their own recordings due to insufficient metadata, and guidelines for metadata collection would also be helpful. Holmes et al. (2016) stated that fully interoperable metadata and preservation workflows underpin robust digital repositories. However, in Malaysia, this system does not yet exist, making access to the collection difficult and increasing the risk of long-term information loss.

One solution is to develop standards or guidelines and provide training for oral history practitioners. Musa (2018) said that oral history collections in Malaysia often develop separately from one another because there is no coordinating mechanism at the national level. Oral history practitioners believe that heritage institutions need to improve the processes of searching for and disseminating oral history collections by providing access through comprehensive, user-friendly databases and guidance on sources of evidence.

The findings show that Sarawak State Library conducts oral history consistently each year, despite risk management measures in place throughout the process. This institution has its own guidelines and policies that they refer to. With procedures and policies, they can set standards for conducting oral history. However, some issues need to be addressed, including language barriers, insufficient digital devices, cultural sensitivity, and geographical constraints.

The solution they took was to conduct a site selection to determine whether the location is suitable for oral history. They also ensure that all digital devices are in good condition and usable, preventing disruptions during the process. A cultural briefing is needed for oral practitioners to avoid situations such as inadequate informed consent, breaches of cultural sensitivity that cause distrust, or interview cancellations or no-shows due to travel disruptions, illness, or family obligations. This cultural briefing is essential to maintain sensitivity and ensure the process flows smoothly. According to Lim and Wong (1999), the recording of oral history remains a secondary concern and lacks space for continued development. Some oral practitioners feel unsure about ethics, metadata standards and digital preservation, which is why practices are inconsistent and oral history work is slow to progress.

Meanwhile, in Sabah, according to Pugh-Kitingan (2025), it lacks the latest digital facilities to preserve ICH, and there is no dedicated place to store it. The storage of these materials is scattered and not centralized. The accessibility to the materials becomes difficult. Although the Sabah State Archives is in the process of digitizing these materials, the process will take a long time and is not yet ready for access.

In addition, given the various ethnicities in Sabah, oral history is consistently practiced, as younger generations are not interested in continuing the legacy of older generations. However, insufficient digital materials and underutilized digital storage places result in oral history not well preserved. Each institution uses different storage systems, some of which are old and incompatible, and backups sometimes fail. Therefore, a suggestion to create an exclusive digital archive for oral history to preserve ICH is in line with technological advances, to ensure sustainability and future use.

Oral history in Malaysia is indeed fragmented, recordings are different, staff skills are not the same, digital systems are incomplete, governance is also weak, projects mostly run on their own, not connected to the national system, this problem shows the need for a framework that combines policies, standard procedures, training professionals, community participation and digital systems, if there is this framework, oral history can be more organized, reliable, and valuable for long-term preservation of intangible cultural heritage (Musa, 2018; Lim & Wong, 1999; Holmes et al., 2016; Chan, 2023). While this study is intensive in that it provides a inclusive picture of oral history methodology in Malaysian heritage institutions, it also has a weakness: the number of interview participants was small (n = 12), so general applicability may be limited. Therefore, further research needs to be more comprehensive in scope.

V. PROPOSED INSTITUTIONALIZATION FRAMEWORK

To respond to the systemic challenges facing oral history initiatives in Malaysia, this study proposes an institutionalization framework made up of five interconnected elements that together support the long-term preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). At the core of the framework is policy and governance, which set the strategic, ethical, and legal foundations for all oral history activities. National policies aligned with UNESCO safeguarding principles provide common direction, while institutional governance structures clarify roles, responsibilities, and coordination across heritage organizations (UNESCO, 2003). Ethical safeguards such as informed consent and intellectual property protection ensure that documentation is both accountable and culturally sensitive. This governance layer anchors oral history within sustained institutional programs rather than short-term projects.

Building on this foundation, standard operating procedures (SOPs) bring consistency to day-to-day practice by offering clear guidance on interviewing, consent, transcription, metadata creation, and access management. By reducing variation in how collections are created and managed, SOPs improve interoperability and make materials easier to discover and reuse across institutions (Yan et al., 2025). Alongside this, capacity building focuses on people. Training programs, certification pathways, and continuous professional development equip heritage officers, archivists, and curators with the skills needed in oral history methods, digital preservation, and metadata management, helping to professionalize the field and ensure reliable documentation (Radzuan et al., 2024).

The framework also places strong emphasis on community-centered engagement, recognizing that ICH can only be sustained when communities are active partners. Practices such as knowledge co-creation, advisory panels, multilingual documentation, and participatory governance allow communities to shape their own narratives and retain cultural ownership, in line with international best practice (Radzuan et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2025). Finally, digital infrastructure and sustainability bring all these elements together through the development of centralized repositories, interoperable metadata standards, robust preservation workflows, controlled access systems, and diversified funding strategies. This digital backbone ensures that oral history collections remain accessible, secure, and meaningful over time, while also enabling broader participation and long-term impact (Kong & Kimwah, 2025).

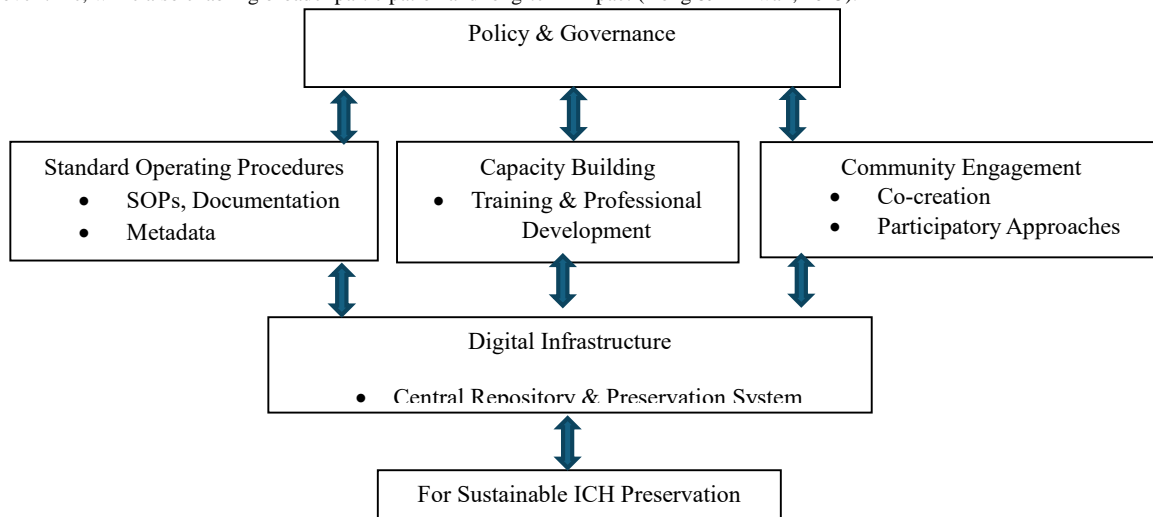


Fig. 1 A diagram of this framework visually represents the layers, Policy & Governance as the foundation, SOPs, Capacity Building, and Community Engagement as operational pillars, and Digital Infrastructure integrating all components to achieve Sustainable ICH Preservation.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Oral history is a vital yet still under-institutionalized tool for preserving Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Although many documentation efforts have taken place over the years, they remain scattered and constrained by limited professional expertise, weak governance structures, and inadequate digital infrastructure. These shortcomings reduce the long-term viability of oral history collections and limit their integration into national heritage strategies. The institutionalization framework proposed in this study offers a practical pathway for moving oral history beyond isolated projects towards a coherent and sustainable national system. By combining governance, standardized procedures, professional capacity building, community-centered engagement, and strong digital support, the framework positions ICH not simply as something to be archived, but as a living and community-owned cultural resource.

The framework also has important policy implications for heritage institutions, decision-makers, and funding bodies. It highlights the need to priorities governance, professionalization, participatory practices, and digital sustainability in heritage management. In doing so, it provides guidance on how oral history can be embedded within formal institutional structures to support long-term preservation, access, and community ownership. While this study focuses on selected Malaysian institutions, it opens up avenues for future research, including cross-national comparisons, quantitative assessments of institutional and digital readiness, and evaluations of how the framework might be scaled. Such work would contribute to developing evidence-based strategies for strengthening oral history as a core instrument in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage worldwide.

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