

# Management practices in two of the oldest museums in Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

The museum industries in Malaysia started in the early 19th century. The first museum started its activity in 1883 by the British in Taiping Perak before Malaysia Day. The Sarawak Museum built in 1888 which holds some of the oldest collections in South East Asia started their collection with natural history by James Brooke, the Rajah of Sarawak, with help of renowned naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace. This collection grew from entomology to ethnology to what it has to the present day. The Selangor Museum, which is the original National Museum today, was established in 1907 and administrated by the Federal Malay States Museum Department. But now the museum was restructured by the local government where they have the full authority of the direction and objectives of the museum's function and activities. This paper will look into the mood and structures of governance of these museums, replenished by the Malaysia Museum Department under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia. There are many similarities in term of management but does it help each museum to define, or in the case of the Sarawak Museum, redefine and establish the kind of identity that resembles Malaysia as a whole?

*Keywords: Museum, antiquity, management, Malaysia, Sarawak, colonialism*

### **The National Museum of Malaysia**

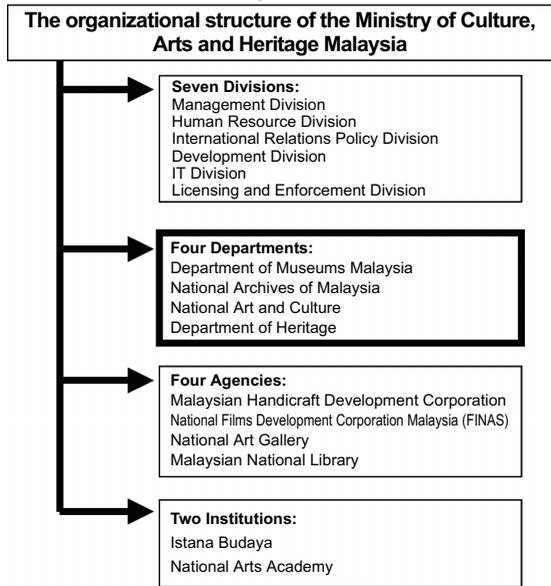
The museum industries in Malaysia started in the early 19th century. The first museum started its activity in 1883 by the British in Taiping Perak and its first curator was Leonard Wray, while another museum in Peninsular Malaysia was in Selangor, established in 1907. In 1910, both museums were amalgamated to form the Federated Malay State Museum, administrated by the Federal Malay States Museum Department. In 1930, these two museums were reestablished as individual museums under the British Colonial Government's decentralization program. In 1959, a permanent building, which is to be the new National Museum, was erected on the same sites that temporarily house the national treasure, small exhibitions, and stored few collections from the old museum that was destroyed by bomb attacks on March 10, 1945.

Declared officially open in 1963 the National Museum is one of the prides of the country with its three storied structure and intricate decorated exterior depicting the various motives in Malaysia's diverse culture. The building that resembles a traditional royal Malay castle was purposely build for a museum, equipped with wide and spacious storage and work areas to cater for the future collection and conservation works. Today the Museum's permanent exhibition features collection on culture heritage, the diverse ethnicity of Malaysia, natural history and ethnography. One of its major exhibitions is the Royal Gallery, which stores magnificent treasures from the Malaysian royal family. Throughout the years this Museum has organized various theme-based exhibitions form popular culture to the ancient culture, and recently one of its most impressive is the treasure from the sea. The success of the department's Maritime Archeology section in undertaking the archeological deposits of thousands of ceramics from the floor of the sea is exhibited.

The present national museum, which is the Museums Negara, is still very much a part of the government institution, which is the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia. The major purpose for all museums in Malaysia is to preserve the national identity and heritage, and to educate the community about it. All State Museums throughout the country are line department museums. There are thirteen states in Malaysia and all are equipped with their own museum that showcases their own local authentic material culture and heritage. Being under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage of Malaysia the Department of Museums, Malaysia is the authority that protects the national history, cultural heritage and natural history in the country, see Figure 1. It is also dictated upon them the responsibility of the enforcements of the 1976 Relic Act Law, and carrying out the restoration work of monuments and historical sites. The bigger task that is given to this department is the responsibility of implementing and formulating a systematical change towards modernizations, of all line department museums throughout the country.

Museums in Malaysia have always devoted their efforts to the preservation of our cultural heritage. In the midst of today's cultural innovation and social change, museums stand as repositories of tradition and heritage, giving physical form, as it were, to our collective memory by bringing together objects out of our past. In general, the work of museums is to collect and preserve the past that generates culture, a function they have continued to fulfill and one that is directly linked to their place and tasks in society. There are over 50 museums in the country at present, managed by the Federal and State governments. There is also a growing number of private museums in the making. The Federal government through the Department of Museums Malaysia is determined to make Museum Negara a base for conducting research, documentation and

Figure 1



preservation and, above all, collecting and displaying the artifacts to the public. It has also sought to make the museum a focal point for education and a vehicle for dissemination of information pertaining to the country's rich history, culture and traditions and its equally varied natural heritage (Mohd. Kassim Ali, 1995, p.83).

Through the years all museums in Malaysia have contributed tremendously to the success of the tourism industry in the country, locally and internationally, and foreseeing the developments the government have injected millions of dollars to provide for the need and requirements of heritage tourism. Their focus has exceeded beyond the museum walls and this brings about the implementation of a different kind of museum experience. The Malaysian 'Heritage Trail's one of the new trends in Malaysian tourism packages. These packages will cater for tourists who prefer outdoor adventures, while experiencing the architecture within their environment, in terms of the conservation of buildings and nature that contain within them various historical information and visuals to be observed and evaluated.

Among the many tasks given to museum professionals is the preservation and

restoration of about 619 known and identified buildings, some of which will be turned into historical complexes. To date, over 134 old buildings have been gazetted under the Antiquity Act of 1976, with the department empowered to preserve their entire historical and aesthetic values. Special attention was also given to the preservation of historical monuments, be it old forts, houses of prominent leaders or any private building of importance to this fast-growing nation of ours. In the past, the tourism industry was not a priority of the government. Since 1990, however, special attention has been given to the industry as it could contribute to cultural revival and economic development. The government has provided a large allocation to upgrade historical buildings and beautify monuments, build cultural activities through various centers where traditional dances, games, pastimes and traditional handicraft are shown. However, while we are all very anxious to make the tourism industry a success using our culture, the other roles of the Museum and Antiquity Department is upholding the authority invested in it by the government (Mohd. Kassim Ali, 1995, p.83).

#### Development in museum's perspective

In general, the updated objectives of the Department of Museums is to be responsible for the preservation and dissemination of knowledge and to constantly build awareness among the public on the importance of conserving and preserving, the historical, cultural and natural heritage of the country. Hence this will help in creating a harmonious society that integrates and assimilate high morality-minded individuals in the multi-racial community consequently, assisting the government in promoting and developing the increasingly imperative tourism industry in Malaysia.

Museums also increasingly have to respond to a further set of what can loosely be termed social pressures, to respond more

effectively to the needs of the plural society. There is pressure from lobbying groups for museums to provide access in its broadest sense to their needs, or to represent more fully their histories in a multicultural society. Perhaps as much if not more pressure for change in these senses is coming from within, from junior members of staff. Such social pressures do not hit the headlines as much, but are a key current challenge to museum management (More, 1994, p.1).

The function of the museum should be fundamentally aligned with the requirement of the ICOM resolution and within the Malaysian context in fulfilling the need of the community at large. Research, collection and conservation of the country historical, cultural and natural heritage are the utmost priority of the department. Collecting and displaying the collections are still very much within the main function of the National Museum although this brings about many challenges with the existence of private galleries in the country with bigger funds, and an unlimited access to technology and other resources, in consequence they are able to have better and much more up-to-date type of displays which incorporate interactive and multi-media into their exhibition.

The modern museum not only preserves a heritage but it also informs and entertains. In order to achieve this goal new museums have had to develop communication techniques which are increasingly sophisticated and which lead to exhibitions which are more attractive, spectacular and up to date in their way of transmitting information and motivating the visitor (Alberch 1994, p.195).

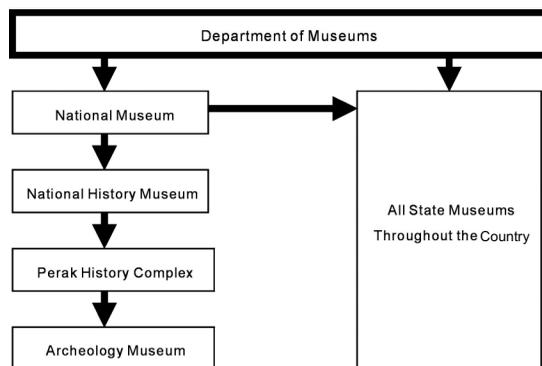
What is clear at the present time is that fairly rapid change is upon us. This situation of change has been resented and resisted in some institutions; others have had change violently forced upon them, while some few museums have been able to negotiate change in a planned and purposeful way. In

all situations of changes, it is of vital importance to be very clear about the philosophy and objectives of the museum, and to be able to articulate with informed precisions exactly why one course of action is more desirable than another. A time of change is also a time of opportunity. Those who are not prepared will find themselves at the mercy of those who are. Those who have researched the logical economic and philosophical arguments may well be able to win the day, and will at least be able to mount a coherent stand (Hooper-Greenhill 1994, p.135).

At present, the National Museum is monitored directly by the Department of Museum that are responsible for replenishing its missions and visions and design its direction and manipulate the course in which this museum is going towards. Besides being responsible for its own museums the museum department also influences the other states museum in the direction of their developments so that they will also become aligned with the government policies and visions and able to integrated museum resolution and objectives accordingly, see Figure 2.

Many governments - national, state, provincial, county and municipal - operate museum systems in which several museums are grouped together to form a museum service. These associations of multiple museums are cost-effective to administer,

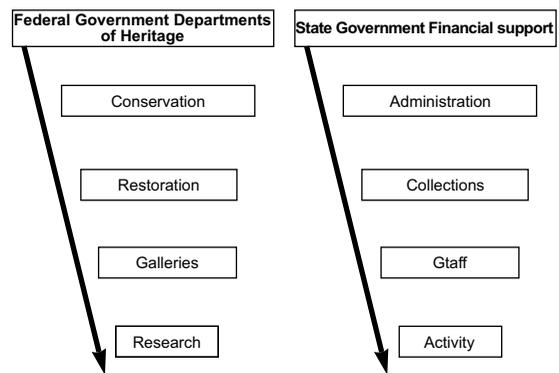
Figure 2



due to the centralization of at least some functions. The constituent museums may share their governing authority's accounting, personnel, maintenance, security or other service, adding only the curatorial and programming staffs that are unique to each museum. Many museum services have found it cost-effective to centralize conservation and documentation functions for all participating institutions, and some cases to erect or renovate non-public collection stores and laboratories. The disadvantages of such services for the participating museums can be loss of independence and difficulty in maintaining a distinct image which may effect fundraising; but if well managed, they can be both efficient and effective in providing a wide range of museum experiences for residents and visitors throughout the jurisdiction of the presiding government (Lord and Lord 1997, p.15).

State museums are run by local government and all staff are recruited by the state government and their staff are civil servants. The state government injects annual allocation for the running of the administration and other matters such as staffing and activities run throughout the year. The Department of Museum acts as an advisory body that distributes secular and other materials pertaining to the administration and service of museum, and any international involvements that may need attendance. The department will constantly monitor activities run by the state museums and supervise in areas such as conservation, restoration, exhibition, and research. In addition to this, financial support is given to any state museums that have proposed projects which relate to the mentioned fields and had gained approval by the department to be carried out during the financial year, see Figure 3.

Figure 3 Fund Allocation



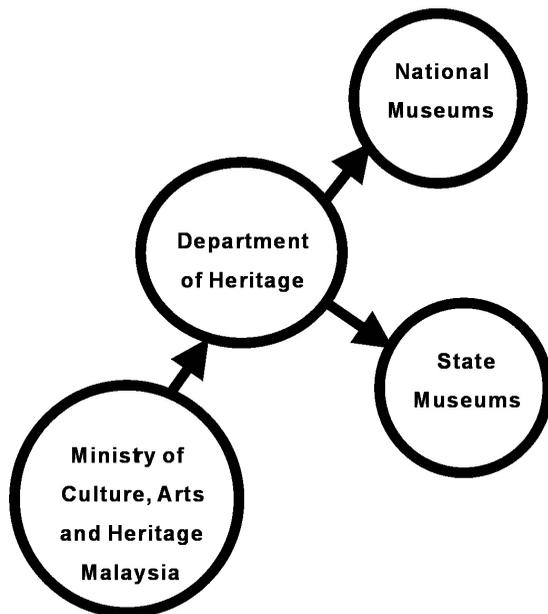
For museums operated by independent non-profitmaking associations, financial management has always been a central concern. In the past few decades, with governments around the world emphasizing increased self-reliance, even for museums that are wholly integrated with their own line departments, ensuring the financial well-being of the museum has become a major responsibility for museum management. The job descriptions and qualifications of museum directors increasingly focus on the skills necessary to manage the finances of the institution, especially fundraising abilities (Lord and Lord, 1997, p.158).

Grants which came from the Heritage Department within the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage will be given to the state museum for the implementation of their projects, therefore the process and progress of the projects will be monitored by the Department of Museum, as well as to approve the consultancy service and contractors that are entrusted to carry out the project, by recommendations of the particular state museums, see Figure 4.

### The Sarawak Museum, Kuching

The establishment of the Sarawak Museum, as one of the oldest museums in Malaysia, has greatly enhanced the historical development of museology in Malaysia; hence the collections either of archeology or ethnology and natural history, stored here have been a source of reference and

Figure 4 Financial Resource



orientation for many scholars and historians from all over the world. All subsequent governance of Sarawak has shown tremendous support and passion towards the development and the enhancement of these institutions that has become the pride and symbol of the rich and diverse culture of the Sarawak people.

The earliest museum recorded in Borneo existed in Kuching in 1868; its collection was established and housed in a room over the Clock Tower building in the town area by Sir James Brooke, the ruler of Sarawak at the time. Their collection started with natural history, when he bought the collection of ethnographic specimens from H. Brooke Low. The Sarawak Museum building erected in 1888 which holds some of the oldest collections in South East Asia came from the idea of the second Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Brooke. He was greatly influenced by the famed co-founder of evolutionary theory, Alfred Russell Wallace, who spent two years (1854-1856) in Sarawak where he wrote his seminal paper on natural selection.

When Sarawak gained its independence through the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the Sarawak Museum was standing on a sound footing and enjoyed international

recognition as a research institute and an institution of higher learning. The objectives of the museum were then as now, to be interested in everything, and to collect everything-plants, snakes, butterflies, as well as, porcelain, art and prehistoric artifacts; to present well-selected exhibits and arrange them in a way that even illiterate people from rural areas can enjoy; to keep changing the exhibits and never let the museum get static or stale; and to explain the collection and museum work, as widely as possible, by giving lectures, and by publishing articles in local publications. *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, published annually, contains articles on a variety of disciplines such as archeology, history, natural and social sciences, including oral traditions, legends, folklores, and other aspects of Sarawak. The journal is distributed worldwide. In addition, occasional papers and pamphlets on tropical and interesting subjects are also published and are cheaply made available to students and tourists (Lucas Chin and Peter M. Kedit, 1983, p.1).

Within Malaysia, the State of Sarawak has developed long plans for the establishment of its collections and museum services. Unlike during the colonial period, the Sarawak Museum under the newly established government and with the guidance of the Malaysia Department of Museums managed to extend its wings to enable its services to reach even the most remote area in Sarawak. Indeed these have been very productive based on the number of the material culture collected within the decade in the storage system of its Antiquity Section and the research papers and articles published in the *Sarawak Museum Journal* every year by the museum staff and researchers from all over the world.

In the area of traditional arts and crafts, the Sarawak Museum is entrusted with taking measures to preserve, develop and promote the indigenous material culture. This means that any work of art, craft, carving, handiwork

or product derived from manual skill which is associated with or which depicts the culture, traditions, customs, way of life and history of the natives and various communities in Sarawak is protected under the new Ordinance. The museum will be undertaking programs to stimulate and promote interest for the rehabilitation of skills in traditional arts and crafts. With the mandate given by the new Ordinance, the Sarawak Museum is geared towards helping Malaysia preserve its rich cultural heritage. This role is not new for the museum, which has been at the forefront in not only collecting and displaying material culture, but also encouraging activities such as workshops in weaving, woodcarving and research projects that have contributed much to Sarawak's cultural scene. (Mohd. Kassim Ali, 1995, p.97).

Today the newly revised aims of the museum is to be the custodian of antiques, monuments and cultural landmarks, archaeological sites, arts, architectural, religious relics and other materials which have high traditional significance and value for the benefit of the State and national heritage in order to bring about perpetual understanding and greater harmony amongst the people of Sarawak. The function and responsibility carried out today slightly differ from 30 or 50 years ago in order to be attuned with the new challenge approaching from all directions of today's global community and high-speed development in technologies and the country's booming tourism industries. The functions and responsibilities of the Sarawak Museum Department are enshrined in the Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance 1993. The Sarawak Museum Department has entrusted the responsibility to be the custodian and keeper of all the historical documents and artifacts of the people of Sarawak and Borneo as a whole. We are also involved in collecting historical items for display purposes, and to provide education on the history of Sarawak

and Borneo to students and the general public.

Over the years, the Sarawak Museum was able to increase the number of its ethnographic, archeological and natural history collection tremendously. More and more categories of collection ranging from seashell to teak-wood furniture were donated to the museum for exhibition and display while some were given because the means of keeping such heirlooms takes too much effort and space for storage. The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia together with the Department of Museums Malaysia ensures that the Sarawak Museum will sustain its activity in the future and maintain its service and other programs such as research and excavations throughout the state.

Today the Sarawak Museum Department administers eight other museums and regional museums all over the state as its contribution and service to the local community, whilst at the same time helping, in preserving and educating the local community, of the richness of their distinctive and reverence cultural heritage, see Figure 5. Like the state museum, the regional museum also enquires their funding from a higher authority which is the Sarawak Museum Department, being under their administration; regional museums obtain its sources for exhibition materials, on a loan basis from the Antiquity Section of the department. Annual allocation for their development are proposed by the department to the ministry and will be

Figure 5

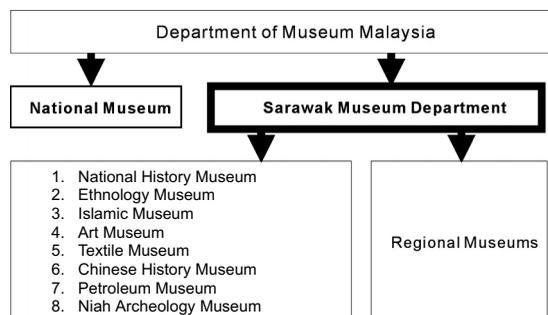
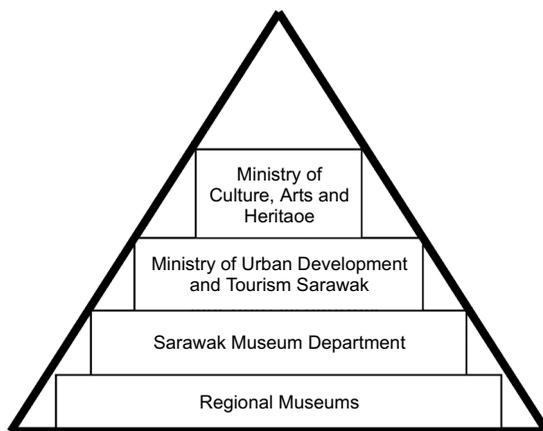


Figure 6 Hierarchical Pyramid



approved as part of the departmental budget, unless there are imperative conservation or restoration works that need to be done on the building, then this shall be provided by the federal ministry level, but again the department will have to extend a proposal for the undertaking of the projects, see Figure 6.

### **The Sarawak Museum Natural History Exhibition**

The biggest attraction of the Sarawak Museum is the natural history collection that had effectively reflects the rich variety of flora and found within the Borneo jungles and beyond for about 120 years. This section is the longest established section in the museum and has accumulated a large collection of 78,848 specimens consisting of skins of all known mammals and birds, wet specimens of reptilians, amphibians, fishes and insects collected all over the country since the inception of the museum. This reference collection serves as a very important and useful source for comparative study. Only 4% of the collection is put up for public viewing. Apart from taxidermy works and studies conducted on the orangutan and marine turtles by the museum staff themselves, other biological and ecological studies on the different species had been exclusively undertaken by foreign scientists in the past (Charles Leh, 1983, p. 12).

To date however, the natural history museum that is going to celebrate its 120 years of existence has revealed that there is a decrease in interest and attention from the general public and international visitors towards its exhibitions, compared to other exhibitions which provide more excitement and interaction provided by the utilization of technology-based exhibitions. This is based on the decline in the number of repeated visitors to the exhibition, excluding non-locals such as West Malaysian and foreign tourists. These problems were faced by most natural history exhibitions over the world that still use conventional ways of displaying their objects that over some period of time become mundane and uncreative, particularly in the new millennium where technology and innovation become increasingly more attractive and provide more challenges in transmitting knowledge and information.

In order to explain process in an enjoyable way we need to resort to the most modern communication techniques. The exhibition must not have the same format as a textbook, nor must it be a substitute for one. It performs a different function, that of making the visitors into an active participant rather than a passive receiver. To achieve this objective, the modern exhibition makes great use of interactive and audio-visual elements that stimulate the visitor and urge him to explore independently. The aim is to motivate (Alberch, 1994, p. 195).

The problem faced by the Sarawak Museum today with the existing Natural History exhibition is centered mostly on the development of the educational method of transmitting information. Today's visitors require more interactive and entertainment based exhibitions, and at the same time still assimilate knowledge in different capacities such as visual, audio or verbal.

Museum and galleries today are striving to develop new relationships with their audience. New ways of working, and new

ways of thinking, are being negotiated in order to modify museums to appeal to people who would not normally visit them. At the same time, museum and galleries are endeavoring to increase their market share in both the leisure and the educational industry (Hooper and Greenhill, 1994, p.133)

The old formula which is basically an object based exhibition, only capable of communicating in one-way communication, which is “look, and read the captions.” These are usually non-descriptive and very plain in term of presentation. Being an old exhibition in a building, which is equivalently old, bring about multiple problems that have to be overcome circumspectly according to the age and exigency of the subject, such as the conservation of the building, the fragile 100 years old showcases and collections displayed inside the building. To remove and rearrange the displays is such a big challenge to the department because of the sensitivity of the collection and the critical condition of the old building that it needs immediate conservation work if the department is to preserve and sustain its grandeur and importance to the Sarawak people.

The aim of exhibitions in natural history museums is to give information about the history of life on earth and about geological and biological processes, which are responsible for the diversity of the natural world. For this, it is necessary to present scientific concepts in a way, which is accessible to the general public. This is an important challenge, especially in countries such as Spain where ‘culture’ has basically humanist connotations. Science, despite its central role in contemporary society, is neither understood nor represented as a laudable activity. It is regarded as boring and not very aesthetic, and it is relegated to the domain of a few specialists. In the same way that the enjoyment of art is seen to be an agreeable and sophisticated activity, the appreciation of science is seen as an

academic obligation, the understanding of which calls for tedious dedication and discipline. The challenge consists of converting science into something worthy and aesthetic. It definitely ought to be such since art feeds on the beauty of nature and this is what science studies (Alberch, 1994, p. 195).

To make up for its incompetence the museum has to make changes. The first step taken by the department is to design a new exhibition space in a newly renovated museum building for the same collection displayed in the old natural history museum. The new space that will be occupied by the exhibition has been made ready by the department. This has been made possible with the appropriate funding injected by the federal government under the Eight Malaysia Plan 2000 - 2005. The execution of the master plan is already completed and in the process of fabricating the exhibition with the suitable equipments and gadgets required by present trends of innovative high-tech and up-to-date information technologies in order to enable it to move forwards or align with other natural history museums in the world. The new museum will be capable of displaying more specimens and more variety of exhibits. The new exhibition will also provide more space to concentrate on the massive natural history collection of the museum that is renown for its wide collection and extensive research on natural history by scientists and naturalist form all over the world such as O. Beccari, A.H.Everett, Earl of Cranbrook, and many more.

For a subsequent distinguished naturalist, Alfred R. Wallace, experience in Sarawak was a formative influence on his understanding of the processes of zoogeography and natural selection. Here he remained for 14 months, exploring and collecting in the Sarawak river area and in the Sadong, where coalmines were being opened. Early during this period, while staying at Santubong, he wrote his first ideas

on the origin of species (Earl and Charles Leh, 1983, p. 15-16).

With the annual grants given by the federal government and state government, see Figure 7, the Sarawak Museum Department was able to sustain its development and proceed with the plan to enhance all its galleries and create other museums which will benefit the state: the recently open Textile Museum and the Art Museum. This is long overdue considering that the fine art movement had been established resolutely in Sarawak since after the Second World War.

One of the aims of the museum is to project and venture into technology-based exhibitions such as launching its Virtual Museum on the Internet. The department is in the process of acquiring new buildings especially for the storage of artifacts and archive materials with appropriate high-end technology in the field. Also plans are underway to do a thorough study on how to develop and restructure all the galleries consecutively to enhance education in every exhibition and to employ information technology extensively at all the galleries based on interactive museum concept; to build a new and modern main museum complex that will house the History Museum, the Children's Discovery Museum, the Governor and Chief Minister Museum, administrative centre and other related facilities.

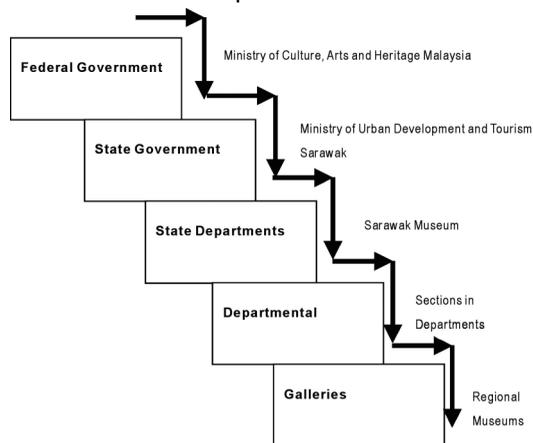
### Conclusions

The museum industries in Malaysia have progress of quite far from its humble beginning, surviving through the Colonial and Japanese occupations with credibility, but then still face yet another challenge that is to strengthen national unity in the midst of the multi-cultural and multi-racial society of

Malaysia. In the case of Sarawak it is even more special because of its uniqueness that is for sure to touch anyone that has the chance to experience its profusion of natural and cultural ethnic diversity.

Creating a mutual understanding in these societies is a never-ending tasks for the government and other organizations involved in the field; thus to build one national identity is crucial, to ensure that the nation stability and harmony is not jeopardized. It is one of the priorities and responsibilities of the curator to ensure that elements such as tolerance and mutual understanding on the variety of cultural distinctiveness is incorporated into the education program run by the museum or projected in their exhibitions and any other activity such as school programs or conducted tours in the museum. The government makes it a great importance to invest millions of dollars into the cultural heritage preservation through museums as the mechanism that are responsible for the assurance and safe-keeping of Malaysia's treasures, whether it is nature, culture or whatever relates to the history of the nation.

Figure 7 Allocation for Sarawak Museum Department



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