

Pantun: an elegant way to communicate



A boy singing pantun. [Photo: Mikha Lumempow.]

The pantun has been around for hundreds of years. NURUDIN SADALI introduces us to this traditional form of Malay poetry.

In traditional Malay culture, it was considered rude or uncouth to be too direct when talking to someone. For example, if a guest asked his host directly for water, it might embarrass his host because he did not offer his guest water before being asked for it. A polite guest would instead talk about how hot the day was, as a hint that he was thirsty. This indirect approach to communication is an important part of Malay culture. In the past, one way to politely and indirectly say something was to use pantun — a form of poetry.

Pantun allows speakers to politely communicate through figurative language and rhyme. It allows them to **elegantly** navigate social situations. This is especially useful when trying to express feelings or give advice. Pantun is often used in music and rituals, as well as to tell stories.

This traditional way of communicating is so special that UNESCO recently added pantun to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This is the same recognition that has been given to Singapore's hawker culture. The UNESCO programme aims to safeguard important elements of cultural heritage around the world.

The list includes traditional ceremonies, foods, music, and art from all over the world.

In a world that is becoming increasingly **globalised**, it is important that we preserve and celebrate these intangible cultural practices so that they are not lost.

History of the pantun

The oldest written pantun dates back to the 15th century. However, experts believe pantun to be even older than that. Pantun was traditionally shared orally, not written down, so it is nearly impossible to trace where and when it was first used.

What is certain, however, is that as the Malay language spread throughout Southeast Asia, so too did the pantun. While we in Singapore and Malaysia are most familiar with pantun written in Bahasa Melayu, pantun can also be found in the many other Malay dialects. For example, the Javanese, Minangkabau, and Batak ethnic groups in Indonesia all speak different dialects of Malay. In fact, pantun was introduced to Western poetry in the 19th century and has evolved into what we know today as the pantoum.

Pantun in Singapore

If Malay is your second language at school, you learn a little about pantun. Thankfully, there are organisations here working hard to preserve this and other aspects of Malay culture. Events organised by the Malay Language Council (MLC) such as Bulan Bahasa (Malay Language Month) and Rakan Bahasa (Friend of the Language) are held yearly.

These events showcase the many rich **facets** of Malay heritage and art such as pantun, calligraphy, and batik.

Some years ago, the MLC and the Ministry of Education (MOE) organised a pantun writing competition for primary school students to commemorate SG50. The best submissions were published in a book titled Pantun Anak Singapura (Pantun from the children of Singapore). You can probably find this collection in your school library. Check with your librarian to see if your school library carries it!

VOCAB BUILDER

elegantly (say “e-li-gent-lee”; adverb) = in a stylish and graceful manner.

globalised (say “glo-be-laiz’d”; adjective) = worldwide exchange of trade, culture, and ideas.

facets (say “fa-setz”; noun) = different aspects of something.

What is pantun?

Pantun can come in many different forms. They can be as short as 2 lines or as long as 16. The most common form consists of 4 lines.

A typical 4-line pantun follows an ABAB rhyme scheme. What this means is that the last syllable of the first line rhymes with the last syllable of the third line, and the second line rhymes with the fourth. Here are some examples:

A pantun by Munshi Abdullah, written in the 19th century:

Malay pantun

Singapura negeri baharu,
Tuan Raffles menjadi raja,
Bunga melur, cempaka biru,
Kembang sekuntum di mulut naga.

English translation

*Singapore is a new country,
Sir Raffles has become ruler,
Jasmine flower, frangipani tree,
A blossoming flower in the dragon's mouth.*

This pantun tells us of the founding of Singapore in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles. Scholars believe that the blossoming flower Mr Abdullah referred to in the pantun is Sir Stamford's wife, Olivia.

This next two pantun (whose authors are unknown) showcase a unique trait of the pantun: the first and second halves have no apparent connection. In pantun like these, the punchline comes in the last two lines. This first pantun is a playful one which would have been used during romantic courtship.

Malay pantun

Dari mana punai melayang,
Dari paya turun ke padi,
Dari mana datangnya sayang,
Dari mata turun ke hati.

English translation

*From where do pigeons fly?
From the swamps to the paddy fields;
From where do you come, my love?
From my eyes straight to my heart.*

This next one is an example of how pantun can also be used as a way of giving advice.

Malay pantun

Anak dara menumbuk pandan,
Membuat kuih hidangan kenduri;
Ilmu yang baik jadikan teladan,
Segala yang buruk letak ke tepi.

English translation

*Young ladies pounding pandan leaves,
Making kueh for a feast;
Good deeds and thoughts are exemplary,
Bad habits, set them aside.*