

Azeem Shah Fellowship Report

Introduction

My three-month fellowship in London was a multifaceted experience that blended academic research, artistic expression, and collaboration on cultural repatriation. This report chronicles my journey, from establishing myself in the city's rich archival landscape to crafting a creative work based on my findings.

Laying the Groundwork

Upon arrival, I focused on acclimating to London's archival resources. This involved securing housing, obtaining access cards, and familiarizing myself with institutions like the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the British Library (BL). My initial research involved searching for materials related to Malaya/Malaysia, utilizing strategic keyword searches and consultations with library staff at the BL. Navigating the BL's website proved challenging, but the staff was very willing to help me in searching and listening to relevant audio materials. However, limitations on digitization and copyright restrictions hampered access to audio materials for creative projects, especially when it comes to audio sampling for my composition.

Deepening Exploration

Building on the foundation laid in the first phase, I delved deeper into archival resources. Intensive listening sessions at both BL and SOAS provided valuable insights into Malaysian folk recordings. Collaborative efforts with staff, like Farzana at SOAS, facilitated access to rare materials. However some materials were not accessible as there were malfunctioned equipment at SOAS and limited access to library computers slowed down my research.

Expanding Engagement

October marked a shift towards deeper engagement with archival materials and collaborations focused on repatriation. Following extensive listening sessions, I broadened my research to explore Malaysian soundscapes and local interviews, enriching my understanding of historical narratives and musical influences. This included a tour of unshelved BL materials with Paul Wilson, curator of Radio Broadcasts, who then introduced me to Michele Banal, the first person I connected for my repatriation efforts.

Repatriation Efforts and Composition

The final phase saw the culmination of my research and initial steps towards creative synthesis. After completing a paper on the Temiar people of Malaysia, I connected with people from BL and the Malaysian National Archives, to discuss about potential repatriations, the materials to be repatriated, and the suitable date and time for the meeting. The bureaucratic hurdles and lengthy repatriation processes made it difficult to remain motivated or hopeful in any form of repatriation, but I managed with the help of my supervisor and the eagerness of the Malaysian National Archives team.

In mid to late November, my focus shifted to creatively synthesizing my findings. I used Malay Ethnic Pop as the genre for my musical composition.. Choosing Malay Ethnic Pop as the genre for musical composition aimed to bridge traditional heritage and contemporary sensibilities, blending instruments like the *gendang* (two-headed drum) and *serunai* (Malay flute) with modern sounds. The composition is further enriched with cultural elements encountered during archival research, such as indigenous chants. However, producing the composition without my usual studio setup proves challenging. However, with basic equipment I brought from Malaysia such as my MacBook, Logic Pro and a small MIDI keyboard, I was able to bring my artistic idea and present it to my colleagues.

Unforeseen Challenge- British Library Hack:

My research, composition and repatriation endeavours were disrupted by the British Library hack. The resulting limitations in accessing on-site systems and materials made it difficult to revisit crucial resources for my composition which made me rely more on memory and intuition than desired and made it difficult for the repatriation meeting to be set up as BL team could not access the files that was planned to be repatriated.. This incident highlighted the vulnerability of archival access and the importance of contingency plans in research undertakings.

Conclusion:

My fellowship in London exemplifies the symbiotic connection between scholarly inquiry and creative expression. It underscored the transformative potential of interdisciplinary exploration. As I depart London, my work leaves a lasting impact on both academic discourse and artistic expression, showcasing the interplay between archival research, cultural repatriation efforts, and creative synthesis.