

# Element the Good Practice in Reviving and Preserving the Value of MTCs

Zainudin bin Md Nor<sup>1</sup>, Zaharah Bt Jaafar<sup>2</sup>, Muhamad Rozali bin Othman<sup>3</sup>  
and Rizal Azni bin Dahaman<sup>4</sup>

1 Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak

[zainudin65@gmail.com](mailto:zainudin65@gmail.com)

[zahar635@perak.uitm.edu.my](mailto:zahar635@perak.uitm.edu.my)

[mrozalio76@gmail.com](mailto:mrozalio76@gmail.com)

[rizerizal@gmail.com](mailto:rizerizal@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the values of the Malay Traditional Costume (MTCs) which have always been said by researches and local cultural as being eroded by the effect of modernization. This research justifies factors that contribute the best practises to revive the values of MTCs in Malaysia. A quantitative and qualitative method was used to conduct the research. The study involves questionnaire survey and interviews. Direct and indirect questions were used as an interview method. The researcher has interviewed 60 respondents who are experienced and expert in their field of the making and styling of the traditional Malay costume; such as old tailors and old dressmakers, fashion designers, industrialist, choreographers, culturalist, researchers and lecturers. The questionnaires were also forwarded to 26 teachers and 380 secondary school students Perak, Kedah, Penang and Perlis states. A small group of the respondents were chosen as a case study as they were able to produce, maintain and restore the traditional Malay costume. The findings showed that there were a significance relationship among five component values for future development and sustainability in the MTCs which are cultural and heritage values, educational values, art and aesthetic values, design and functional values and lastly socio economic values. As a conclusion there were 4 elements they can play a major role in reviving and preserving the value of MTCs; the teaching and learning of MTCs in higher institutes of learning, the involvement of royal families, NGO's and activists. Thirdly is the involvement of local fashion designers, fashion entrepreneur and government agencies. The final factor is the best technique to appreciate MTC as a national culture. This research recommended that integration among these groups are factors that contribute to the creation of model of good practice for future development of Malay traditional costume in Malaysia.

**Key Words:** MTCs, Reviving, Preserving, Value, Good Practice

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH TOPIC**

The word reviving come from the key word revive that means give new strength, improve the condition, bring back, breath fresh life into and restore to life. Preserving in this context is to preserve the old tradition, conserve, keep up, keep alive, keep going, maintain and continue with. In this study, value means the importance, significance, symbolism, meaning and usefulness of art and aesthetic values of Malay traditional costume. Good practise means the best way to revive and maintain the usefulness of MTCs to our culture for future generations.

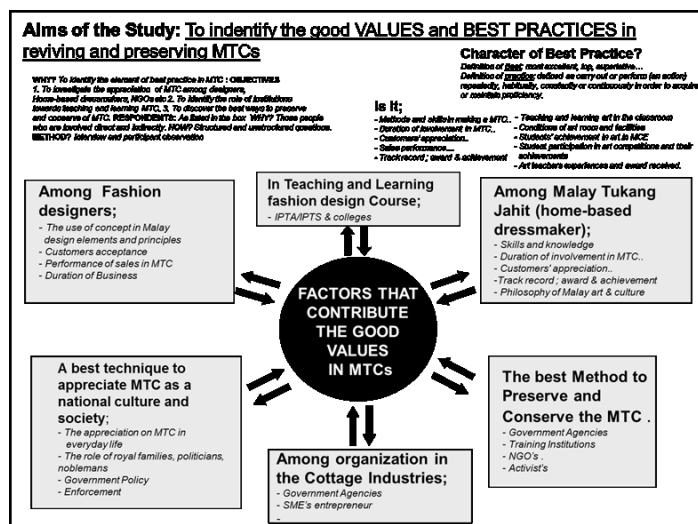
## **ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN MTCs**

There are countries that have experienced cultural erosion in costume creation and styles due to globalization, Malaysia included. History has shown that several measures and efforts have been implemented to contain this problem. However, it still persists and the solution is nowhere in sight. In fact, this issue has been continuously raised by scholars, cultural activists and politicians in seminars and conventions held locally. Among them are Azah Aziz (1985, 1992, 1993), Ramli Ibrahim (1992), Wan Hashim Wan teh (1996), Abdul Ghani Othman (1998), Zubaidah Sual (2000), Iskandar Ariffin (2001), Mohamed Najib Ahmad Dawa (2003), Siti Zainon (2004, 2006), Wan Yahya Abdullah (2005), Hatta Azad Khan (2006).

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study is to identify several factors that could contribute to the good practice for reviving the values of making Malay traditional costume and how practitioners or any organisations succeeded in restoring the values of Malay traditional clothing in their businesses. Figure 1 is the framework of this study.

Figure 1.0: Framework of the Aims of Study



## RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher has focused on the people who are involved directly in this particular job or career (refer to Table 1.0). These respondents are from the pool of participants involved in the quantitative and qualitative surveys. Interviews and participant's observation have been carried out in order to identify level and methods of appreciation among the respondents towards preserving and conserving the MTCs. With reference to qualitative data analyses, the transcripts of the interviews have been analysed according to the three basic steps, which includes open coding, axial coding and selective coding (refer to Figure 2). The transcripts were thoroughly analysed sentence by sentence in order to create a theme, make connections and mapping out propositions before making a conclusion.

Table 1.0: Details Group and Number of Respondents

Respondents Groups	Job Description	Total Number (Projection)	Number for Content Analyses
<b>'PENGHAYAT' (PRACTITIONERS)</b>	Malay Artisan(Home-based dressmakers/Tailors)	18	10
	Mak Andam	6	5
	Fashion Designers	7	5
	Dance Choreographer	5	5

	Garment Entrepreneur (Traditional Clothes)	7	5
<b>MALAY ARTISANS &amp; NOBLE WOMENS</b>	Royal Family and wife of royal family	8	5
	Cultural Activists	5	5
<b>'PENGKAJI' (RESEARCHERS/ACADEMICIANS)</b>	Academician/Researcher	17	10
	Government Officer (Curator/Museum Officer)	11	5
<b>'PENGAMAL' (APPRECIATOR and FOLLOWER)</b>	Development Officers of Felda (In the field of sewing and the making of clothings)	4	3
	Others (Antique Collectors, Students/Buyer)	5	3
<b>Total Number of Respondents</b>		<b>93</b>	<b>61</b>

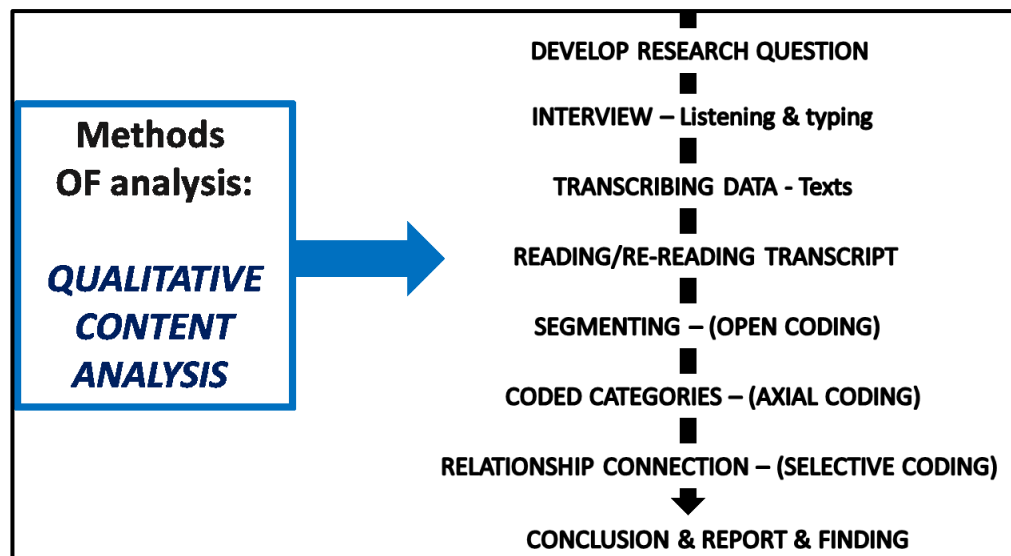


Figure 2.0: Method of Analysis

## FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE THE VALUES OF MTCs

This study identified 5 factors that contribute towards good practices in reviving the value of making MTC's are identified.

### 1. The Role of Higher Institutes of Learning in teaching and Learning MTCs

In general, the education system based on hands-on skill, especially sewing has been introduced to technical/vocational and normal secondary schools. This is to provide opportunity for students who are less inclined towards academic subjects to enter polytechnics and colleges. The techniques of sewing in vocational schools depend mainly on the skills of the teachers. The secondary schools that offered this stream need to follow the syllabus issued by the MoE. However, they are allowed to add and improve it as long as the adjustments do not diverge from its original objectives. The basic syllabus comprised of sewing Baju Kurung, Baju Kebaya and *Cheongsam* (Chinese Traditional Costume). Traditional handsewing techniques such as *tulang belut*, *sebat susup* and tying *ombak mengalum* are taught as per project. However, traditional techniques of making garments such as using finger measurements (*jengkal*, *jari*, *hasta* and others) are difficult to enforce due to the lack of specific evaluation system of student's work. The teaching and learning of technical school focused on the drafting technique or flat pattern. This subject is taught using conventional ways starting with the drafting of pattern followed by toile making, then, cutting and finally, sewing. The teaching part is divided into 70% practical and 30% theory. The curriculum was prepared by Jabatan Pengajian Kemahiran, Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi and it used the modular system. Meanwhile, competency evaluation, which is complete with level markings, is conducted by the Examination Board.

The curriculum of fashion design courses at higher institutions of learning and private fashion colleges has been identified in order to identify the element of best practice in teaching and learning Malay traditional costume. The findings from the questionnaire survey among students showed that the main source of information on MTC is from formal education in college and university (39.3%). This is followed by informal source of parents that is agreed upon by 33.4% of students and 26.8% of teachers. The final source of information is through peers and the media. This is agreed upon by 26.3% of students and 11.6% of teachers. These results illustrated that higher institutions of learning are the main channels of knowledge and information on Malay traditional costume, particularly to the younger generation and to the society in general.

However, there is no particular emphasis on the philosophy and values of the design of MTC in higher institutions of learning whether public or private. According to a Program Coordinator of Fashion Design Department in the Faculty of Art and Design, UiTM, the appreciation of these values depends on the interest and effort of individual students in championing local cultural values. However, this is in contrast to a Professor who teaches art and culture who opined that a Bumiputra-based university like UiTM has the responsibility to

instill the philosophy and concept of Malay culture, especially in the Art and Design Faculty. Another respondent also had similar views and he recommended that the university create a faculty specially to focus on the education of local culture, from its roots until its highest level. He further said that the university needs to veer its attention towards the acknowledgement and involvement of Malay artisans to share knowledge and experience with the academic scholars in universities. Currently, the university only recognized experts who have the paper qualifications. The artisans who possessed high skills and knowledge but lacks the paper qualifications are largely ignored. On this note, a senior lecturer from the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan said that this university had consistently brought Malay artisans into dialogue and discourse events in the campus to promote their talent and not to interfere with their vocation.

The pedagogy of teaching MTC production needs to be created because the basic traditional method is mostly to observe and copy. The knowledge did not pass down easily to the younger generation because the elder Malay did not allow youngsters to ask much, just to follow without many questions. Only those with the keenest interest and self-motivation will obtain the knowledge. It did not occur to the olden tailors to teach formally as their skills were only for the use of their own self and family rather than commercial purposes. However, according to Professor Dr Muhamad Najib Dawa, it is not a problem for the current generation to produce MTC with the use of modern technology. But the main provision is to maintain the traditional element. Actions like combining the *Baju Kurung* and *Kebaya* to form *Baju Kebarung* should not be allowed or condoned. Forms can change but the essence must be preserved. In terms of Malay traditional handicraft, part of its beauty lies in its complexity, diligence and care of the making process. It is sad indeed to just wear, undress, wash and replace a dress without realizing its inner value and beauty.

According to Tan Sri Nazri Abdul Aziz in his speech while officiating a program in UiTM Perak, in 2006, "*Songkok sepatutnya terletak di kepala tetapi ada orang melipat dan meletakkan didalam poket di bahagian ponggong*" (A songkok's place is on the head but some people fold it and put it in the back pocket of pants). This showed a misunderstanding of Malay customs. The head is part of the body that is highly regarded. By putting the songkok behind the butt or at the feet showed signs of disrespect. Every discipline of art (in Malaysia) should re-examine itself and determine its direction. Some are too western-centric as a result of western education. They strived to shock audience with new creations without any regard to traditional sensibilities. According to Prof. Dr Zakaria Ali, luckily the changes on the MTC have not been too shocking so far and the new styles are largely acceptable to society.

Once in a while, some lecturers will insist that the students take inspiration from the tradition and custom of Malay society, including MTC. This is to make them aware and appreciate the value of local culture. It is found that students who conducted research on this subject often produced interesting designs. They showed good response and are committed and highly capable in producing traditional garments and choosing suitable accessories.

The involvement of the education system is important in ensuring MTC is always preserved, practiced and developed according to local culture and custom. Among the respondents, the home-based tailors suggested that sewing skills be taught to children like what Singapore did where pupils as young as Year 1 were taught to sew and make cross-stitch embroidery. They felt that the traditional method of observing and copying without question is no longer relevant nowadays. It is better to establish a systematic approach towards the making of MTC such as an education program with books, references and training. They also felt that there are not enough documents or guidelines specifically in making MTC. The respondents from Johore said that so far, only the Yayasan Warisan Johor has researched and documented the *pringgi* sewing technique.

## 2. The Involvements of Royal Families, NGO's and Acticists

The involvement of royal family in wearing the traditional costume at formal or in formal occasion or showed their interest in making the costume gave a strong impact to the preserve and conserve the heritage values. In the past, royalties in Perlis wear colour coordinated costume that is same color and fabric for top and bottom (sedondon) while commoners wear different colour and fabrics for the top and bottom. The Baju Kebaya Perlis became popular after the Raja Perempuan (Queen) started wearing it in formal functions. She promoted the idea that the costume be adopted as the formal state dress. The Perlis State then, channeled funds to BAIDUNITA (Badan Amal & Kebajikan Isteri Wakil Rakyat Perlis) to hold three sessions of workshop on the sewing techniques of Baju Kebaya Perlis in 14 -17 August, 2006. This was an effort to preserve and maintain that MTC.

Another respondent is a wife of an attendant of Almarhum Sultan Idris (deceased). According to her, the Permaisuri (Queen) of Perak, Raja Mazuin, wore three types of MTCs for formal events. The Kebaya Labuh is for formal functions with state officers and commoners outside the palace, normal Kebaya for functions in the palace and the short Kebaya for everyday wear. The hairstyle was always the same that is hair tied into a bun or two. She rarely wore other types of blouses or the Baju Kurung. The tailor was a Malay employed as the palace tailor. In Perak, the Sultan and his wife have different stylists who prepared and helped with the dressing of the Royal costumes. Raja Malek was for the Sultan while the Queen's stylist was Che Kama. The songket fabrics used for making the royal costumes were specially made in Kelantan and Terengganu.

The values of MTC are also mentioned by Tengku Barizah, a member of the Negeri Sembilan Royal Family. She claimed that her mother, Tengku Awah had amazing power of observation. She was able to copy a dress by only looking at it. In the decades of the 40's and 50's she was active in making MTC in Seri menanti. During those periods, paper to make the patterns was difficult to obtain. During her journeys to the palace, she will often collect old newspapers and placed them under the mattress to flatten them. It was no wonder that at that time she was very popular among the royal family for her skills in making clothes. As for Tengku Barizah, she herself was instructed to help her mother with simple sewing tasks such as hemming since the age of 12 and given 50 to 60 cents as wages.

NGO's are encouraged to hold activities for the purpose of conserving our cultural heritage through seminars, workshops, documentation etc. Examples of these are the sewing workshop on *Baju Kebaya Perlis* organized by BAIDUNITA (Badan Amal & Kebajikan Isteri Wakil Rakyat Perlis) [Tengku Nur Intan], sewing classes for traditional *Baju Kurung* for single mothers held by Yayasan Pembangunan Keluarga Johor [Kak Ros], and the documentation of sewing *tulang belut* using the *pringgi* method as conducted by Yayasan Warisan Johor [Puan Kudsiah]. Another recommendation is that for all home-based tailors involved in making MTC who does not have successors to bring their problem to each state Culture, Arts and Heritage Department; otherwise the Departments' officers actively find and meet with these people.

On the issue of safe-keeping of olden MTC, the relevant authorities need to address this problem and ensure the staffs entrusted with this responsibility are aware and sensitive towards material culture. Government officers who are involved in the national art industry should be more open-minded in executing their portfolios. Artistic activities should not be associated with politics because of its personal nature. The Government should encourage all scholars who have the expertise in traditional arts to contribute ideas towards the development of national arts and heritage.

### **3. The Involvement of Government Agencies in The Home Sewing Cottage Industries**

Community Development Department (KEMAS) one of the main government agencies under Ministry of Rural and Regional to improve the quality of life of the rural communities through programmes and efforts to make the rural area a productive, attractive, developed and profitable area. KEMAS sewing centre was set up and are also facilities that contribute towards the basic knowledge and skill in sewing clothes. The range of participants encompassed all levels of society. The researcher visited a KEMAS centre in Segamat, Johore that was awarded as the most active centre among KEMAS Malaysia that managed to



produce successful tailors. A teacher in the centre has the opinion that the best teaching technique in sewing is to be flexible. In addition to that, the trainers also often guided and motivated the participants after classes and visited them at home or the places they work.

This research found that most of the participants in sewing classes in KEMAS training Centres took contracts and government tenders as well as embroidery work as their main source or side income. However, they are mostly home-based and owning a tailor shop would be a huge step that they cannot afford. According to a trainer in KEMAS, participants who showed high interest in sewing were easier to teach than those who are not. There were also participants comprising school teachers teaching Economy and Home Science attending the sewing classes in order to improve their knowledge and skill in making Baju Kurung.

Another government agencies had been involved in home sewing cottage industries was FELDA. According to Pn Mehat, the efforts of the Government and FELDA organizations to provide sewing workshops, regular services by technicians, subsidies on utility bills and all the machines associated with sewing works are the best way to ensure sewing activities especially in making MTCs sustain and revive.

#### **4. The Involvement of Fashion Designers and Fashion Entrepreneur to Conserve the Values of MTC's**

Professor Muhamad Najib Dawo has the opinion that the current Malay fashion designers and dressmakers do not have a strong spirit on traditionalism. They often modified the form of MTC into contemporary fashion without understanding the original concepts and by disregarding the suitability of fabrics. They are mostly motivated by glamour and popularity. They should instead, be sincere and have integrity if they wished to elevate the status of MTC. The Professor is convinced that the international market is acceptable to new designs whereby some traditional elements such as kekek and pesak are incorporated into modern fashion designs. He further suggested that a specific course on the customs and etiquette of Malay dressing is created.

In Malaysia, the practice and culture of MTC depends on the political system and ultimately, to Malays themselves. There are not enough reasons for other races to uphold the culture of wearing MTC. If this happens, MTC will disappear altogether in the passing of time. He also suggested that in order to maintain and preserve the identity of MTC, fashion shows are held where the theme of traditionalism is enforced as a criterion. He cited one of the most prolific Malay designers, Salikin Sidek as one who emphasized and promoted traditional Malay elements in all his designs whether for local or international use.

Faizal Hamid a well-known fashion critics and one of the senior lecturer at Fashion Department UiTM Shah Alam recommended to the young designers to be creative using traditional elements in contemporary designs. The use of songket cloth to show the Malay culture, maintaining the *Ombak Mengalun* sarong and applying the effects of tying and draping of the samping were to take into consideration. The selection of colour is also important to relate traditional colours to trendy ones in order to fulfill current demands. Another thing is that designers must understand the Malay accessories in terms of originality and its positions on the body. He also said that personally, he felt guilty if he has to urge students to look for inspiration from foreign cultures as this is diverging from the efforts to uphold Malay culture in fashion design. He opined that it is up to the Malay students/designers to find ways to maintain MTC. Every fashion design course should also include traditional elements not only in terms of costumes but also other aspects of Malay traditional handicraft.

Fashion designers in the West often sourced inspirations from other cultures such as Indian, Chinese, Arabian, African and others. This is because they felt their own culture is not interesting enough to show to the outside world. Faizal said that to emerge as a world fashion designer one needs to fortify his identity first based on his own culture that is unique, beautiful and symbolic. Malaysian fashion industry is still young and the opportunity to explore deeper is abundant. The appreciation of Malay traditional art in fashion design is still at the immature stage because most designers create in order to sell their products rather than producing a work of art. It is hoped that Malaysian fashion designers will one day reach the level where their creations are sought after by collectors and museums as what is happening in the West.

He also felt that there are political undertones in the world of fashion nowadays. Many organisations related to the fashion industry are formed by political figures or their cronies. Non-bumiputra companies will elect important people in the Government as their directors in order to fulfill the Bumiputra criteria and secure approvals for their activities and other ventures. Faizal said that this present unfair advantages to them and makes it harder for new and upcoming Malay fashion designers to establish themselves. The Government should play the important role to assist young designers reach international standards based on local self-worth and integrity. They need the industrial attachment at international centres of fashion to showcase their talent and competitiveness.

According to Pn Haslina founder of Dang Anom boutique, the specialty of her design collection in her boutique was to sustaining the original cutting style of MTC. She also believe, the name of “Dang Anom” is also significant as it is traditional Malay name, interesting and symbolic implying tradition and history. Its business tagline is ‘*Budaya Warisan Timur*’ (eastern cultural heritage) with focus on Malay Ttraditional Costume. She believes most civil servants wore a MTC (Kurang or *Kebaya*) and she wants to create high class MTC. Although she was

not trained as a designer, she is a fast learner and able to learn through observation and practice. She believes she has the instinct and self-motivation to learn the business. She also often participates in seminars and business talks. Butik Dang Anom practices off-shore production in Vietnam and Indonesia'. In order to ensure that the Malay traditional elements are maintained, she will send samples of prototypes for the producers to copy. Only when prototypes are approved, production commences. Her Butique was located at Wisma Maju, Ampang. She has been five years in business and has expanded to three outlets in the Klang Valley.

This research also found the interesting strategies of Maroz Tailoring is to offer a package for father and son to buy colour-coordinated (*sedondon*) Baju Melayu. This is to promote the concept of familial purchase. The concept works very well as a new trend emerged whereby every member of the family wear the same shade of colour of *Baju Melayu* and *Kurung/Kebaya* during Hari Raya and weddings. Maroz Tailoring. He confidently stated that his company was the first to produce ready-made *Baju Melayu* according to normal sizes. Among the contemporary features are embroidery on the pockets, close-fitting *Baju Melayu* with shoulder seams, no *pesak* and *kekek*, and mandarin collars.

Benang Kapas Boutique is another company that applies traditional making methods in order to preserve the values of MTC. Puan Habibah, its manager, said that all of her *Baju Kurungs* are completely handsewn (*sembat*) and the *bulan* pattern is used for the neckline. She insisted that she would rather not sell her clothes if the customer asked for the modern style. In fact, she said that due to her insistency to uphold the concept and philosophy of MTC she had gained more clientele. They came after reading her views in newspapers. She trained her workers to follow the traditional methods.

## 5. The Best Technique to Appreciate MTCs as a National Culture

The MTC is one of the material cultures that is still relevant as a three-dimensional identity of Malaysian heritage. Each state should proclaim its own traditional costume as per the agreement of its local society. In order to achieve this the three groups mentioned before need to act accordingly. The Malay artisans (practitioners) need to come out of hiding to find ways to validate theories into facts and help each other to practice and preserve this heritage. The society at large and organizations of all levels are encouraged to hold conservation programs to expose the good values of the MTC in all aspects including the safe-keeping of old costumes.

Research found that, Faculty of Art and Design, MARA Institute of Technology was recommended a good proposal to promote and implemented MTC's as a national identity. They proposed the idea of teaching and learning of

MTC's through the education sector, entertainers and artist from electronic media, fashion show and competition, the involvement of elite class such as royal family, minister and also as an office uniform. Unfortunately it was not fully effective due to lack of monitoring, weak of implementing and cooperation from the society.

There needs an effective approach to ensure the MTC is always preserved such as researching, making and proclaiming the regional traditional costumes. Maybe the government should issue an incentive for all Malay newly-weds to wear the complete ensemble of MTC during their wedding ceremonies (Mahani Awang). Another fashion design lecturer, Anas Musavir suggested an affirmative action by the authorities to provide special allowances for employees to purchase the MTC and wear it on Fridays. He also suggested other steps such awarding contracts to supply the MTC and to declare the status of the MTC. Not long ago, the Government has issued a suggestion for all front-counter staffs of hotels and resorts in Malaysia to wear the MTC. This was the most encouraging move towards preserving the MTC. Unfortunately, this proposal met with failure as not all in the hospitality industry agreed and the proposal was also not enforced properly.

## **CONCLUSION**

Analysis shows that higher institutions of learning play a major role to teach and give information on Malay traditional costume, particularly to the younger generation and to the society in general. The function of home-based dressmakers and fashion entrepreneur were a place to provide an original term and vocabulary traditionally. They also could be share a belief and philosophy of making a traditional method of specific costume according to state and ethnic group culture. In regards to promote the value of the traditional costume in daily life, the participation from the royal family, aristocrat members and fashion designers were really important to sustain and revive in this millennium era. Beside that the government agencies like KEMAS also did a good job to train communities and give a sewing skills knowledge at the rural areas. This research recommended that integration among these groups are factors that contribute to the creation of model of good practice for future development of Malay traditional costume in Malaysia.

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