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From the Lens of Constructivism: The Culture & History of Johor in International Relations via the Johor Heritage Foundation

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Abstract

Why are certain state actors actively promoting their cultural and historical heritage to others?. While many scholars in the field of international relations (IR) often stress the importance of national interest in understanding a state or country's behaviour, IR is a multifaceted field that cannot be fully comprehended from a single perspective. Therefore, this article explores the significance of culture and history within international relations by examining key concepts of Constructivism, an IR theory, with Johor, a prominent southern state of Malaysia, as a case study. The primary objective of this article is to explore the Constructivism perspective on the role of Johor's culture and history in its international relations. Additionally, the article comprehensively discusses the role of the Johor Heritage Foundation (JHF), a statutory body under the state government, in preserving the culture and history of this state. For findings, Johor through JHF is a significant state which highly emphasized on the importance of culture and history within its rapid development. The qualitative methodology and relevant themes were analysed and categorised to illustrate the different components of the role of Johor's culture and history within international relations from the perspective of Constructivism.

Keywords: Constructivism, Cultural History, Johor Heritage Foundation, International Relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies on international relations (IR) generally emphasise on national interest to comprehend the behaviour of a state or country. However, IR is too complex to be comprehended from one perspective only. Within IR, there are multiple factors that become the catalyst for influencing the relations between global actors. The combination of emotions and thinking produces various social outcomes. In this context, social outcomes will influence human behaviour. One of these social outcomes is a combination of culture and history, which is inseparable from the people. According to Bhat and Rajseshwari (2022), culture and history play a highly significant role in influencing the behaviour of a country within the context of international stability.

This article aims to investigate the role of culture in international relations from the perspective of Constructivism to answer the following questions:

1. What is Constructivism all about?

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2. What is the role of Johor's culture and history within the context of its international relations from the perspective of Constructivism? And

What are the responsibilities of the Johor Heritage Foundation (JHF) as the main gatekeeper of Johor's culture and history?

This article is divided into four parts. Firstly, it illustrates the concepts of Constructivism. Secondly, it examines Johor's culture and history from the perspective of Constructivism. The third section demonstrates the role of JHF as the main gatekeeper of Johor's cultural history, and the final section is the conclusion. It is hoped that this article will add to the corpus of knowledge on Constructivism and the role of culture and history in international relations for a better understanding of contemporary world situations

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theory Of International Relations: Constructivism

The idea of "No direct access to reality" unites a broad range of academic viewpoints under the term "Constructivism." Social relationships shape the social environment that is available to us, whereas the creation of a "social world" is shaped by the experiences and perceptions of it. It espouses the belief that ideas and the social environment are mutually constitutive. Within the academic field of international relations (IR), Constructivism contends that ties between state or countries are regarded as social constructs (Adler, 2013). Human contact in the social environment gives rise to states, alliances, and international institutions. All of these elements are created by human behaviour that is infused with language, norms, identity, and social values.

In 1989, Nicholas Greenwood Onuf introduced the word "Constructivism" for the first time to the field of IR in his book, "Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations". Constructivism in IR quickly gained popularity thanks to the writings of Alexander Wendt, particularly through his article titled "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics" in 1992. In 1999, he wrote a book titled "Social Theory of International Politics". Through his explanation in the book, Wendt's state-centric, structural interpretation of Constructivism made it easier for this theory to fit in with the other theories of IR such as Realism, Liberalism and others.

Constructivism is an approach to IR that combines social theory, metaphysics, and IR theory itself into three layers of analysis (Greenwood, 1989). Academics who approach Constructivism as a metaphysical position aim to investigate and decipher the true essence of IR. In terms of social theory, Barnett (2011) stated that Constructivism is a social theory that emphasises the significance of knowledge and informed agents in shaping social reality. Stated differently, Constructivism explains how discourses and mutual understanding shape international interactions. The concept of shared understanding refers to how individuals or nation-states view one another and the social environment. Perceptions of one another (individuals or nation-states), as well as interactions in society and international relations, contribute to the formation of this shared knowledge (Wendt, 1992). Wendt (1999) further added that social reality is constructed by the knowledge that is acquired through our interactions and impressions of one another. Thus, our interactions and impressions shape the knowledge we have about social reality.

Constructivism, as an IR theory, lastly aims to investigate good social ontological and epistemological underpinnings. Stated differently, Constructivism maintains that as

international relations are a social construction, certain methodologies must be used in the analysis (Fierke, 2013). Constructivism also expands the scope of ideational components like culture, history, identity, norms, and rules within the framework of IR. For example, such studies focus on how identities and norms shape national interests and how new territorial and non-territorial transnational regions are socially constructed.

In the context of IR, culture and history is an important source for soft power. Joseph Nye stated that culture and history are the best examples to describe the way a country uses soft power to manage its relationship with other countries (Li & Leng, 2021). Constructivism views cultural history as the manifestation of power. From the perspective of Constructivism, the concept of power cannot be understood as the way of cohesiveness since it is the way of cooperation. Culture and history are viewed by Constructivism as a display of power. The concept of power is not seen by Constructivism as a "coercive" mechanism, but rather as a "cooptive" one. Constructivism believes that power operates in the mind or psychology rather than the physical world, in accordance with Nye's theory. This is in line with the beliefs of Gramscian Critical Theorists, who contend that legal tools such as established governmental institutions can be used to manipulate people's minds (Drolet & Williams, 2022). Constructivism also views power in terms of the capacity to create and reproduce meaning. According to Baumann (2022), this view is on the same page with the perspective of Foucaultian postmodernists, who contend that power is constructive rather than coercive. Hence, culture and history can be seen as a means for nations to both create their own sense of identity (image construction) and to define that of other countries (image labelling).

To what extent do culture and history influence IR? Constructivism offers valuable insights into this question, particularly when examining Johor as a case study due to its proactive efforts in preserving its cultural and historical heritage. According to Constructivism principles, which posit that culture and history shape policy decisions, Johor's proactive stance cannot be separated from its deeply rooted cultural and historical legacy. The concept under consideration here is referred to as "strategic culture," encompassing a set of beliefs, symbols, and narratives that have evolved over time and influence the behaviour of states and nations. The Constructivism argument suggests that Johor's active engagement can be attributed to the richness of its cultural and historical legacy, which spans centuries of existence.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Johnston (2017), secondary data analysis is an empirical process that applies the same fundamental research principles as studies that use primary data and adhere to the same procedures as any other research method. As a result, this study analyzes secondary data, which was gathered from a variety of sources, including journals and articles. These text sets are relevant to the topic of this article, which is international relations theory that examines culture and history through the lens of Johor, a well-known state in southern Malaysia. Many journals and publications are another source of secondary data. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are applied in this article to evaluate and select the relevant data.

The data must be connected to Constructivism, Johor, and the Johor Heritage Foundation to meet the inclusion criteria. However, the evidence for the exclusion criteria shouldn't come from the other theories of international relations.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Constructivism, Culture and History Of Johor

Johor Darul Ta'zim, West Malaysia's southernmost state, has undergone a tremendous transformation over the last decade. With a total land area of 19,016 square kilometres, Johor is the fifth largest state in Malaysia and is also the third most populated state, boasting 4,100,900 million-strong population (City Population, 2023). Over the last 30 years, Johor Bahru has experienced rapid development, becoming the de facto commercial hub of southern Malaysia. It is currently the second largest city in the nation behind Kuala Lumpur. Furthermore, Johor borders Indonesia, one of the world's most populous countries, and Singapore, an economic powerhouse in Asia. From Realism standpoint, Johor's location is strategically important geographically because it acts as a major collaborator between these nations, which view one another as reliable economic partners. Realists argue that Johor holds a strategic advantage due to its economic growth, allowing it to assert its power and compete effectively with neighbouring states.

In contrast, Constructivism suggests that while structural conditions play a role in shaping state behavior, they are not the sole determinants. Other factors, such as Johor's rich cultural and historical heritage, also carry significant weight. For instance, the proactive efforts of the Johor State Government to elevate Zapin Johor, a traditional dance form, signify the recognition of the cultural value of Johor on an international scale. This initiative has not only garnered support from within the Malay community but also from neighbouring communities in Singapore and Indonesia. Initially focused on cultural preservation, this endeavour has evolved to foster closer economic cooperation and collaboration over time, as Zapin Johor has become a major attraction for tourism in Johor.

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, Zapin Johor embodies the daily practice and cultural identity of Johor, enhancing its significance in both domestic and international contexts. The heritage objectives and planning carried out by the Johor State's Government through Zapin Johor's conservation efforts have formed a strong medium for its international relations. Zapin Johor has become the soul of Johor in dealing with its neighbours such as Singapore and Indonesia. The cultural similarities shared among Johor, Singapore, and Indonesia have fostered closer collaboration to garner public interest and support, thereby shaping the ideational structure represented by these social bonds.

Within the framework of Constructivism and the historical context, Johor has cultivated a distinct national identity that distinguishes it from both Singapore and Indonesia. In the historical narrative of Johor, Sultan Sir Abu Bakar played a pivotal role in establishing a unique Johorean identity in the 19th century, distinct from the European colonisers he engaged with (Nishio, 2011). This marked the inception of Bangsa Johor, a concept born from the unification of indigenous peoples regardless of their ethnic backgrounds who were resistant to European influences (Hutchinson, 2016). Despite its nascent expression at the time, this identity portrayed Johor as a multiracial entity, a characteristic still prevalent in the modern Bangsa Johor identity embraced by the state.

Reflecting on Johor's history, it is notable that Sultan Sir Abu Bakar achieved international recognition in 1885 amidst challenging circumstances, largely attributed to Johor's transformation into a commercial hub, with economic pursuits eclipsing traditional military endeavours. Johor's commitment to preserving its culture and history is demonstrated by the establishment of the Yayasan Warisan Johor (Johor Heritage Foundation) in 1988, serving as a testament to its dedication. The role of JHF as Johor's cultural diplomat will be briefly elaborated upon in the following section.

4.2. Prelude Of The Johor Heritage Foundation As The Cultural Diplomat Of Johor

Memelihara Warisan Budaya. This is the motto of Yayasan Warisan Johor or the Johor Heritage Foundation (JHF), which was established in 1988 with the primary responsibility of safeguarding and preserving the rich history, heritage, arts and culture of Johor. The State Government of Johor has entrusted the JHF with the responsibility of realising a vision aimed at fortifying Johor's identity through preserving its culture, heritage and history. In order to implement this mandate, JHF has solidified its action via numerous initiatives and programs. The heritage of the Zapin Johor, for instance, holds significant cultural importance in Johor, making it a flagship preservation agenda for JHF. Through initiatives focussed around the Zapin Johor, JHF has magnificently showcased Johor's vibrant cultural heritage and consequently fostered a deeper appreciation of this tradition within Johor's community and beyond (Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2023).

In the context of culture, history and heritage preservation, JHF is advocating the philosophy that state development and international relations should be well-balanced in a holistic manner by taking into account not only economic factors, but also aspects such as social and cultural factors. JHF believes that with a comprehensive approach, more inclusive and sustainable advancement can be made while benefitting the richness and diversity of state's heritage. Over the years since its establishment, JHF has positioned itself as a highly regarded statutory body in Malaysia as the main gatekeeper of matters of Johor's culture, history and heritage. The presence of JHF as the cultural diplomat of Johor at national and international cultural showcases and promotional activities is vital to enhance its international relations whilst further advancing Johor's interest abroad. Table 1 below illustrates the involvement of JHF at the national and international level in recent years (2018-2023).

Table 1.

The Involvement of JHF At the National and International Level (Illustrated by the authors, 2024)

Descriptions	Involvement
International Cultural and Diplomatic Events. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation by showcasing Dance, Traditional Costume and Johor's unique heritage. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural Performance in Bahrain (2018) Malaysia Fair in Japan (2019) Korea and Johor Friendship Day (2023) Wonderful Nusantara Festival (2022) Malaysia Day Celebration in Singapore (2023) Asian Gala Night by High Commissioner Office of Malaysia in Singapore (2023)

To be continued Table 1.

Heritage Festivals.

- Annual festivals and cultural fairs that showcase the diverse cultural heritage of Johor. It includes exhibitions, demonstrations, workshops and performances.

- Jom Jenguk Kampung (2021-2023)*
- Karnival Riuh Ek (2023)*
- Culture Heritage Festival MAKSAK at Perak (2022) and Putrajaya (2023).
- International Museum Day at Sarawak (2023)

Descriptions	Involvement
<p>Traditional Music and Dance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusive traditional Johor Music Dance, <i>Ghazal</i> and <i>Zapin</i> event. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Festival Tari Rakyat Johor</i> (2019-2023) 2. Wonderful Nusantara Festival (2022)
<p>Cultural and History Research, Talks and Seminars</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Platforms to gather scholars, experts and practitioners to share knowledge on related fields. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Talk session with YB Dato’ Dr. Hj. Abdul Rahim Ramli, President of Johor Council of Royal Court (2020 & 2023). 2. Talk session with YB Prof Dato’ Dr Kassim Thukiman, Advisor of Johor Council of Royal Court (2020).
<p>Arts Exhibitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showcasing visual arts including traditional heritage or contemporary artworks in Johor Art Gallery and museums. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Lokaratna</i> (Gem of The World) Art Exhibition (2023) 2. <i>Saub</i> Art Exhibition (2023) 3. <i>Bangkit</i> Art Exhibition (2023)

With a vision to fortify and unify Johor's identity, Mohamed (2008) highlighted the efforts of JHF in conserving, maintaining, and preserving the region's culture and history. JHF has embarked on a journey to measure its performance based on 4 key indicators outlined as follows: (1) research and development of cultural arts, (2) performance arts, (3) preservation of valuable materials and artifacts in heritage curation, and (4) production of historical and literary materials (Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2023). By promoting and prioritising these activities, JHF actively organises programs and initiatives aimed at strengthening its presence and effectiveness in preserving Johor's culture and history. Leveraging technology and digital platforms, JHF has contributed by producing digitised content encompassing culture, history, and the arts.

In 2023, a total of 30 articles were generated based on JHF's implemented programs and initiatives (Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2023). The media coverage and articles serve to disseminate knowledge and information regarding specific topics related to the arts, culture, and history of Johor for public reference. All content is readily accessible online for reading and downloading at one's convenience (Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2023).

Ensuring the authenticity and originality of cultural traditions or heritage materials, JHF makes this information available to the public for reference purposes following thorough research. In 2023, the dissemination of digital content via JHF's official social media platforms and various online channels comprised a total of 10 segments.

In terms of tourism, JHF has achieved a record number of 70,608 visitors in 2023 to its complex, Kompleks Warisan Sultan Abu Bakar (KWSAB) through the package of Let's Visit KWSAB (Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2023). This remarkable success was initially mooted by an idea to have and host Johor's cultural heritage promotion within a single venue, and the idea eventually marked a great achievement on the part of JHF. This package offers 4 attractive checkpoints for both local and foreign visitors. The checkpoints are the Johor Arts Gallery, Johor Weaving Gallery, Rumah Limas Johor and Rumah Zapin Johor. With this strategic advantage of having 4 significant places to visit in one compound, JHF aims to uplift KWSAB as the centre of excellence in terms of Johor's culture, arts heritage and history. As a visionary institution, JHF has made several strategic plans and initiatives for the coming years as the cultural diplomat of Johor's

State Government. The next sub-section comprehensively explains the prospects of JHF.

4.3. Crafting A Visionary Way Forward For JHF

JHF is actively advancing its initiatives, notably by proposing Zapin Johor for inclusion under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Zapin Johor, renowned for its rich traditional history, encapsulates the cultural essence and legacy of Johor's inhabitants. Over its history, Zapin Johor has instilled a perception that the people of Johor are receptive to change while aspiring for progress and development. In its endeavour to preserve and document Zapin Johor for UNESCO evaluation, JHF has achieved significant milestones, including the creation of 5 learning syllabi, 15 in-depth research transcripts from respective heirs and successors of 15 variations of Zapin Johor, organising 40 workshops and seminars, and hosting 44 Zapin Johor and other dance competitions. Additionally, JHF has developed two systems of footprint notation for Zapin Johor transcription, namely Foot Notation and Vertical Notation. This achievement underscores JHF's pivotal role in Johor's cultural landscape, enhancing public awareness and recognition. The ongoing preservation efforts for Zapin Johor demonstrate JHF's commitment to further engage with Zapin Johor practitioners, communities, and stakeholders. As for KWSAB, JHF is making significant strides toward establishing a centre of excellence, evidenced by its recognition as the Best Cultural, Heritage, and Historical Destination in Johor at the Majestic Johor Tourism Award 2023 (Yayasan Warisan Johor, 2023). Recognising the potential of heritage tourism, JHF aims to transform KWSAB into a focal point for expertise, research, education, and collaboration, with the objective of safeguarding and promoting Johor's heritage for future generations.

V. CONCLUSION

Constructivism serves as a reliable analytical framework for comprehensively explaining the ramifications of culture and history on inter-country relations. In the context of Johor, culture and history stand as foundational pillars, wielding significant influence across various dimensions. From Johor's modern era to the present day, its international relations (IR) have been intricately intertwined with the strong influence of its cultural heritage. The distinctiveness and profound impact of Johor's culture and history underscore its paramount importance in shaping its international engagements.

Through the establishment of JHF, Johor demonstrates a firm belief in its capacity to effectively safeguard its cultural, historical, artistic, and heritage assets as pivotal elements of its IR strategy. Consequently, substantial investments are imperative for the professional development of JHF staff, particularly in areas such as research and development, history, archaeology, and conservation efforts.

Embracing digitalisation and IT tools can streamline operations, save time and enhance accessibility for future reference of heritage documentation, archives, and exhibitions. Furthermore, fostering partnerships and collaborations presents avenues for additional investment in infrastructure and facilities to bolster JHF's activities, including workshops, events, and other public engagement initiatives. These strategic initiatives represent pioneering endeavours for JHF, with a strong emphasis on preservation activities, leveraging Kompleks Warisan Sultan Abu Bakar (KWSAB) as a centre of excellence, and prioritising capacity building. It is anticipated that these concerted efforts will empower JHF to uphold its pivotal role and responsibilities as the guardian of Johor's rich cultural and historical heritage.

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