THE Petronas Performing Arts Group (PPAG) is the epitome of traditional performing arts in Malaysia if not in the region. It is a benchmark for excellence in performance. To watch a PPAG performance is not only to savour a visual feast, excellent dance techniques and superb rendition of traditional music, but also be a part of the evolution and continuity of our traditional heritage. Petronas has the infrastructure and talent to sustain this artistic tradition, which otherwise will fade into oblivion.

Petronas, being the iconic symbol and landmark of Malaysian success, should be lauded for nurturing and maintaining the PPAG, not only as part of its corporate social responsibility, but also in its role in ensuring the preservation, conservation and continuity of our artistic tradition for the benefit of future generations.

Therefore, I was astounded and perplexed to learn of the impending demise of this illustrious traditional performing arts group. It is supposedly to be phased out this year as part of Petronas’ corporate restructuring to ensure a respectable profit margin.

One begins to wonder whether Petronas has its priorities right. Is the maintenance of the PPAG a drain on its financial resources as compared with sustaining the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra? I believe it would have minimal impact.

But the tremendous impact of closing down the PPAG would be the loss of a par excellence performing tradition that is without equal, for the PPAG is one of a kind in the world.

There are numerous world-class symphony/philharmonic orchestras worldwide such as the one in London, New York, Berlin and Tokyo, to name a few.

These orchestras play the same classical music of Bach, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Tchaikovsky and a host of other western composers. The closure of one or two or even three of such orchestras would not in any way undermine the western classical music tradition.

But by closing down the PPAG, all would be lost for there is no other formal ensemble in the world that plays the Mak Yong Mengadap Rebab, Wayang Kulit Sri Rama Berangkat Masuk Anjung, Ayak-Ayak of Joget Gamelan and other fast-disappearing traditional music pieces.

By doing so, Petronas is guilty of undermining the very basis of our traditional performing arts heritage by short-circuiting the performing lives of our traditional practitioners and their proteges, who could ensure the continuity and survival of our expressive tradition.

One would assume that Petronas would be supportive of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s initiative in preserving and conserving endangered artistic traditions by according world heritage status as was done for the Malaysian mak-yong. Petronas’ intended action of demolishing the PPAG negates the efforts of the Information, Communications and Culture Ministry in the preservation and conservation of traditional heritage.

The continued existence of the PPAG must not solely be based on ringgit and sen but, more importantly, on its contributions as a cultural beacon that humanises society, offering them the opportunity to savour and experience our rich traditional performing arts heritage of yore as well as its transformation consonant with the aesthetic sensibilities of the 21st century.

The Petronas Performing Arts Group must live and prosper.

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