

THE SEARCH FOR THE MIDDLE PATH: ISLAM AND THE TRADITIONAL MALAY PERFORMING ARTS

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Abstract

The 1991 banning of the Malay traditional performing arts of *wayang kulit*, *menora* and *mak yong*¹ in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia by the ruling opposition Islamist party PAS created a furore among Malay cultural activists and sparked heated debates among politicians and academicians. The recent religious 'fatwa' banning the *kuda kepang* dance in the Johor state left many speechless, but for some, they saw it coming. There is growing alarm of an impending extinction of Malay intangible heritage, especially the performing arts, due to the rising tide of Islamization in Malaysia. For religious authorities, remnants of the old animist, Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and practices found in these arts are the main problem. Is Islam on a collision course with traditional performing arts? Is there room for compromise between religious authorities and traditional performing arts activist? The recent announcement by the government of Kelantan about revising the ban gives a glimmer of hope to the future of these ancient Malay art forms. This paper attempts to look into the Islamization of the performing arts and how artists are put in a dilemma between being practicing Muslims and preserving a heritage deemed 'unIslamic'.

Origins and History

For the past two thousand years, Malay performing arts went through numerous stages in its evolution, shaped by an amalgamation of various influences, both internally and externally. It is largely influenced by Malay-Polynesian belief systems with a strong animistic base. Malay performing arts is further influenced or as described by Ghulam-Sarwar (2004), "coloured with influences from religions and cultures which entered the Malay Peninsula from Asia and the Middle East at various times from about the 1st century CE" (pp. 12). The earliest forms of Malay music, dance and theatre such as *Bagih* and *Main Puteri* developed out of the indigenous healing rituals, still maintained today by the Orang Asli or indigenous people, such as the Temiar (see Roseman, 1991). New forms of performing arts emerged as a result of religious and cultural influences from the Indian sub-continent and other parts of the Malay Archipelago. Middle Eastern influences are evident in a number of Malay art forms such the *zapin* dance of Johor and the use of instruments such as the *gambus* or 'oud. More

¹ In 2005, Mak Yong was declared by UNESCO as a world intangible heritage and described as a "Masterpiece Of The Oral And Intangible Heritage Of Humanity"

recent influences came from Indonesia in the form of *Gamelan*, *Barongan*, *Kuda Kepang* and *Randai*.

Beliefs

Although Malays are virtually Muslims and have been so for centuries, elements of their previous belief systems still persist, especially animism. According to Mohd Taib Osman (1989):

“...Malay folk beliefs which, in spite of the recognizable Hindu and Islamic element in them, are basically rooted in the retentions of the Old Indonesian belief in spirits. Besides their belief in Allah and other supernatural entities recognize by the teachings of Islam, the Malay villagers have held fast to the belief in other supernatural beings left in legacy by their past history and beliefs. Many of these supernatural entities bear Hindu and Islamic appellations, and are beyond doubt derived from Hindu and Islamic sources, but they appear within the framework of the indigenous belief in spirits” (pp. 75).

While the practice of worship found in animism runs contrary to the teachings of Islam, its core beliefs do not. In animism, unseen beings or spirits (called *jinn* or *syaitan* in Islam) are believed to dwell or located in certain places and objects. Genies, familiars, *syaitan* or whatever names they are given, these ‘supernatural beings’ are clearly mentioned in Islam as creations of Allah, living alongside human beings (Qur’an, 6:112). In other words, the Malays’ animistic beliefs of the existence of these indwelling incorporeal spirits are confirmed by the teachings of Islam. It is the worship or invocation (for help) of these beings that is strictly prohibited in Islam (see Philips, 1994). This would amount to committing *syirik* (worshipping other than Allah) which is considered the biggest sin in Islam (Qur’an, 4:48). However, this prohibition is not fully adhered to due to the irresistible temptation of acquiring the power and ability to change or manipulate events.

Islam and traditional beliefs offer the Malays comfort and explanations on events surrounding them. In Islamic teachings, whatever physical efforts put and *doa*’s or supplication offered, the good or bad results encountered are considered as Allah’s will, and every person is promised fair judgment and rewards (or punishment) in the afterlife. Traditional beliefs on the other hand, while providing explanations, also offer the possibility of interacting with the unseen forces that are believed to be the source of the problems and the potential to manipulate them. A farmer or fisherman may have prayed to Allah for a bountiful harvest or catch but if a prolonged period of misfortunes persists, he is bound to be in a dilemma. He may not have the patience or understanding in accepting his fate as Allah’s

will and that his rewards will only come much later. This sense of 'uncertainty' and 'haplessness' pushes him to resort to magic, which gives him a feeling of 'being in control.' Thus, for generations Malay farmers and fishermen held rituals to appease the relevant spirits to ensure a bountiful harvest or catch. These spirits are also sought to harm or put others in misery through the practice of black magic or sorcery.

The same goes for a person with a sickness or disease incurable through modern Western medicine. He or she may resort to traditional medicine or healing practices such as *main puteri* or *mak yong* (see Hardwick, 2009). These forms of healing practices require intermediaries called *pawang*, *bomoh* or shaman between human beings and the spirits. These specialists are well equipped with the knowledge and practices needed to influence the behavior of the unseen beings towards humans thus enabling them to be cured. Practitioners of *mak yong*, *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* are also known to be shamans. Rituals such *berjamu* (offerings) and *buka panggung* (opening of the stage) are performed by leader of the group prior to any performance to ensure that spirits or ancestors give their 'blessings' and do not disrupt the performance but instead join in and help 'inspire' the performers. Instruments of the *nobat* (royal court ensemble) are also considered sacred by the players and certain rituals are performed to please the spirits residing in them (Raja Iskandar, 2009). These rituals of asking help and guidance from unseen spirits, either for entertainment or healing purposes are the heart of the conflict between Islam and the Malay traditional performing arts.

Types of Performing Arts

Malay traditional performing arts evolved from simple performances such as storytelling, solo theatre and *berbalas pantun* (verse debates). These elementary forms of theatre are still being performed in certain parts of the country, although some are nearly extinct. It later became more elaborate with the arrival foreign epics such as the Ramayana, and the development of local indigenous stories. These stories are being used in the *wayang kulit* or puppet theatre performances of Kelantan and Terengganu. Malay dance and dance theatre evolved through centuries of cross-cultural exchanges of communities and cultures. *Mak yong* and menora dance theatres are a fusion of ancient animistic rituals, dance movements, acting, music and inspired by Thai-Buddhist texts. The synthesizing of numerous foreign influences such as from India, the Middle East, China and Portugal produced a variety of popular Malay dances and music such as *zapin*, *inang* and *joget*.



Main Puteri healing performance

Islamic Resurgence

During the 13th and 15th century, the Malay world became not only a centre for trade but also religious proselytizing. Muslim traders and missionaries from India and the Middle East brought a new religion that would shape the arts, customs and culture of the Malays for generations to come. Malay sultans and nobles were among the first to embrace Islam and this was later followed by ordinary Malays. Court customs and ceremonies, which were largely Hindu-Buddhist in nature, were infused with elements of the new religion. For centuries Islam continued to play a role in the political, social and cultural lives of the Malays. Although centuries of European domination failed to Christianize the Malays, it managed to secularize the political and education system of the country by the early 20th century. New breed of secular, Western educated Malay elites began to emerge and later chosen as leaders. Malay performing arts were also influenced by Western music and culture, especially in urban cities such as Penang and Singapore. Musical instruments such as the violin, ukulele, guitar, accordion, bongo, double bass and piano became part of the Malay orkes of the 1940s and 50s.

In the early 1970s there was already a movement among the Malay intelligentsia condemning Western secularism and viewing it as threat to Muslim society. Chandra Muzaffar (1987) argued that this rejection to Western secularism was in a way a rejection of Western intellectual dominance and “had something to do with the birth of Islamic

resurgence especially in institutions of higher learning” (pp. 21). This rise in Islamic consciousness or Islamic resurgence among the Malay populace is evident everywhere in the country. For the past three decades there was a marked increase in women adorning the *tudung* or headscarf and men growing beards to emulate the Prophet Muhammad and his followers (*ibid.*). This was seen as a response to development and modernization and an effort to implement the Islamic way of life in its entirety, guided by the Qur’an and Sunnah of the Prophet. The Islamic resurgence was also being manifested in the setting up of the International Islamic University, Bank Islam or *syariah* compliant Islamic banking and an increase in dietary concerns among ordinary Muslims. It permeates into the various spheres of everyday life, from fashion to education and politics to entertainment.

In the 1990s, Islamic singing groups began to emerge creating a new musical genre called “*contemporary nasyid*”. Groups such as Raihan and Rabbani gained tremendous success not only locally but also internationally. It was during this time that the political side of the Islamic resurgence gained momentum when the opposition Islamist party PAS took over the state of Kelantan. According to Brennan (2001), PAS is one of the political agencies representing this ‘movement’ of Malays in search of a ‘truer’ interpretation of Islam, “freed from the syncretism found in Malay village traditions” (pp. 303). In the general elections of 2008, PAS managed to wrest Kedah and helped the opposition alliance or Pakatan Rakyat took over Penang, Selangor and Perak (which was later taken over by the ruling coalition). While the emergence of contemporary nasyid is welcomed by the majority of Muslims (based on album sale figures), the rise of what is viewed as ‘political Islam’ worried not only the non-Muslims but also many Muslims, especially those involved in the performing arts.

Conflicts

When the opposition ruled state of Kelantan imposed a ban on *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* in 1991, it sparked heated debates. Cultural activists were up in arms against what they view as a threat to the survival of some the oldest surviving art forms in the region. Critics argue that PAS’ policies border around a narrow interpretation of Malay culture and an affront to the sanctified customs, values and identity of the Malays. The authorities argued that they were not against the performances per se, but certain ‘unIslamic’ conducts and rituals associated with them. Reports by the New Straits Times (1995, 1996), Nik Mustapha Nik Loding, the Kelantan State Culture Arts and Tourism Committee Chairman was quoted as saying that *mak yong* was considered un-Islamic due to the participation of both male and female performers, and was banned from being performed in public. He was further quoted as saying that *wayang kulit* performances could be allowed to be performed provided that rituals considered *syirik* was discarded. Performances that use profanities were also banned in Kelantan and one such performance was *dikir barat*, a hugely popular

art form that was temporarily banned and was later allowed to be performed provided that certain guidelines were met. However, the 'older' art forms such as *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* are still banned until the 'conflicts' are resolved. Recently a fatwa (religious edict) was passed by the Johor religious authority banning the performance of *kuda kepang*. However, unlike Kelantan, the Johor government has yet to impose any rulings on the matter. These 'conflicts' are yet to be resolved, and the chances are rather slim.

The Middle Path

In 1999, a symposium was held in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the future of *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* in Malaysia. The panels included the late *dalang* Hamzah Awang Amat and *mak yong* artist Khadijah Awang. Some of the issues raised included the banning of *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* in Kelantan and the preserving of certain old practices. The effort to Islamize traditional arts by the state government of Kelantan was viewed with caution, although not totally rejected. Khadijah Awang was open to the idea of *mak yong* costumes being changed in accordance with Islamic teachings. More than a decade later, during a personal interview with Che Mat Jusoh, a renowned *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* musician, he refused to demonstrate any of the *mantera* or incantations used in the performances for religious reasons. Recently, Pak Yusof, a *dalang* from Tumpat, Kelantan, too has discarded all the ritualistic aspects of his performances for the same reasons. This heightened state of religious consciousness among a number of current practitioners is in contrast to the stance taken by some over a decade earlier, although this may not reflect the overall views of others. Could this be the start of the Islamization process of the *mak yong* and *wayang kulit* from within? Or could this be the effect of the current banning of the art forms in Kelantan?



Students involved in a *Mak yong* dance performance

Recent *mak yong* performances by students of Universiti Malaysia Kelantan showed that the art form can be performed well without the need for certain rituals while donning Islamic attires, although these recent developments may not go down well with purists who are clinging to the old traditions. The same goes for other performances such as *dikir barat* and the *zapin* and *inang* dances. This is further encouraged by the university in instilling 'good values' among the student.

Conclusion

Malay arts and culture are still rooted in its pre-Islamic past. Although the coming of Islam introduced new customs and practices, the old belief systems still exist. Old *manteras* or incantations are sprinkled with Islamic names and supplications to Islamize and legitimize the rituals attached to some performances. This practice has been around for centuries and considered part of Malay culture and heritage, until a heightened state of religious consciousness started to question its permissibility in Islam. The banning of *wayang kulit* and *mak yong* was like a final blow the already dying art forms. Efforts by the federal government in trying to revive *mak yong* are slowly bearing fruit.

Art is dynamic and fluid in nature. It changes through time, shaped by the political and cultural dynamics of its surroundings. The rise in Islamic awareness can't be denied or brushed aside and it is not the work of a single political party or a result of certain policies. It

is a long and complex process that pervades throughout the society. To sustain or revive the traditional Malay performing arts, a middle path is needed. Policy makers and artists need to consolidate their efforts in trying to find a solution for the benefit of all, to preserve whatever is left and moving forward towards shaping a sustainable Malay cultural identity.



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