

City Culture at the Crossroads

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Abstract

For most Malaysians the State of Kelantan is almost synonymous with Malay arts and craft. The state capital, Kota Bharu is often described as the Cradle of Malay Culture. Despite of this, the cultural capital of Malaysia strictly forbids the performance of traditional Malay-theater. The traditional Mak Yong Theater and the Malay shadow theater Wayang Kulit, both listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, are so unpopular for the region's governmental authorities that they might only be performed for tourists or for research purposes. On the national level the attitude towards the traditional Malay art and culture is quite different. These days, The National Department for Culture and Arts Negeri Kelantan are building up a new Government Cultural center in Kota Bahru and are giving classes in the Mak Yong-traditions to preserve Mak Yong. The center will function as a place to introduce cultural programs and to organize training and talent development in performing arts. The paper will discuss the reasons for the contradictory attitude towards the Malay arts on the national and regional level. I will further discuss the innovations in the forms by creative Malay artists in order to oblige the regions authority and get authorization to perform their art. (The author's PhD studies and subsequent research projects have focused on Malaysian theater.

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Introduction

Kota Bharu is a city in Malaysia.¹ It is the state capital and Royal City of Kelantan, positioned in the northeast of the Peninsular Malaysia, bordering Thailand in the north. For most Malaysians, the State of Kelantan is almost synonymous with Malay arts and crafts, and its state capital is often described as the Cradle of Malay Culture.²

For people taking a special interest in Malay culture a stay in Kelantan and Kota Bharu must be a tremendous disappointment. One of the very few places where it is possible to watch Malay culture is at the local culture center, Gelanggan seni. The center is not open on a daily basis and the activities are very modest. The centre advertise with performances in Wayang Kulit, Dikir Barat, Silat, Rebana and Top- spinning. All are forms connected with the Malay tradition. At Gelanggan seni, performances are rather rare and irregular. The performances do not seem to attract many people either. The audience consists of a small but steady group of cultural workers, while tourists drop by casually.

Local authority's extensive restrictions on Malay Culture and tradition

Outside *Gelanggan Seni*, you can hardly see any cultural activities. Here in the cradle of Malay culture it is strictly prohibited to perform traditional theater forms like Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit, Dikir Barat and Main Puetri. More precisely; it is prohibited to perform the traditional theater unless it is performed for tourism or research purposes. Main Puetri is tolerated in remote areas.

The tough restrictions on or outright banning of the traditional performances of syncretic Malay culture and performances, is a result of PAS politics. Kelantan has been ruled by PAS, the Islamic party of Malaysia, since 1990 with re-elections in 1995, 1999, 2004 and 2008.

During these years PAS has attempted to impose an orthodox interpretation of Islamic Law upon Kelantan. It has succeeded in imposing certain social structures such as single sex lines in supermarkets, separate public benches for men and women and public performances by women.

Malay people who are proud of, fond of and want to express themselves through their traditional cultural heritage are not allowed to do so. Both Wayang Kulit (shadow theater) and the spectacular Mak Yong theater, one of the oldest traditional Malay dance-theaters in Malaysia, are found on UNESCO's world heritage list.

Malay culture and tradition

The attitude towards tradition and *Malay* culture has not always been as negative as it has in the last decades. In the past, tradition has assumed an important role in Malaysian society. Traditions have served as the core of the community's identity and as a source of nationalism. Before discussing the possible cultural future of Kota Bharu it is necessary to look back upon the role of culture and tradition in Malaysia from pre-colonial time up until today. I must also underline that the focus of this paper is the *Malay* culture and the *Malay* tradition. The term *Malay* refers to the anthropological understanding of an ethnic *Malay*.³

The Nation-State

In 1963 Malaysia was proclaimed a nation-state, a proclamation that meant a final farewell to almost 80 years of British colonial rule. During this time the country had gone through a violent process of change. Extensive exploitation of tin and rubber resources had laid the foundation for considerable modernization. Natives of India and China have been imported en masse for the labour force employed in the mines and on the plantations. Malaysia became a multi-ethnic nation. In 1981 the population included of 40% Malays, 40% Chinese, 10% Indians and 10% of other nationalities.⁴

This mass importation of foreign labour was apparent in the lack of Malays running the mines and plantations. The Malays took little part in the process of modernization. They remained in their villages and concerned themselves with primary industry. As late as in 1984 only 2.3% of the capital from mining, construction and the commodity industries were owned by Malays. The Chinese owned 92.2%. In the cooperative sector, the Malays owned 2.4% of the capital, while 34.4% was owned by other Malaysians and 63% was in foreign hands. The Indians and Chinese became concentrated in towns, while the Malays still lived in traditional communities.

The Rural Malay Community

During the colonial era most of the Malays continued to live in the traditional *kampong* occupied with agriculture and fishing. In the rural *kampong* the Malay theater continued to play an important role. The traditional and spectacular Wayang Kulit, (shadow-theater) Main Puetri (a healing ceremony) and the Mak Yong theater (Malay Dance-theater) continued to develop through interaction with local myths, Hindu mythology and Islamic symbolism. It was a living and integral culture with special and important functions. Music and dance played an important role in these performances. The theater included spectacular opening and closing rituals, trance sequences and myth realization. In the *kampong* the traditional performances played a vital role in everyday life. They were intimately associated with weddings and other festive occasions. The theater was important for village life being performed in connection with additional ritual occasions such as healing séances and cleansing ceremonies. The theater was a necessary component in protecting the *kampong* and its population against illness and malign influences. The theater actualized the ancient Malaysian myths and those forces which controlled the world. Religious beliefs in these communities was a mixture of Hindu, animistic and Islamic elements. Hantu (animistic spirits), dewa (hindu demigods) and Muslim saints were all part of this unique synthesis. The peasants did not see any conflicts between their religious practice and Islam. On the contrary, they called themselves good Muslims. This popular understanding of Islam was reflected in the theater. Central for the theater was the concept of *Semangat*, a life force found everywhere in the nature. *Semangat* could be influenced by performance, thus theater played an important role in the societies.⁵

The Nation-State and the National Cultural Policy

The attitude towards Malay culture and tradition took a new turn during the 70s. From the beginning the young nation-state found itself with considerable

problems. The first government was formed as a coalition between the Malaysian UMNO (United Malays National Organization) and the Chinese MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association). Both of these parties were conservative and represented upper-class interests within the two ethnic groups. Collaboration resulted in the Malay aristocracy keeping their political position of power. Malay language, culture and religion were to form the basis of the nation-state. Only Malays were to hold positions in the state apparatus and bureaucracy. In return the rich Chinese kept their positions of power in the economic sector.

The result of this power-sharing unveiled itself in the 1969 election when bloody street fighting erupted between the different ethnic groups. The bloodbath of 1969 clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of the new nation-state, and as a consequence there was an immediate reorganization of economic, political and social strategies that were to help re-establish national stability. The bloodbath was explained as a result of crisis in values rooted in disparate cultures, and the need to create a common national identity to prevent any further development of racial antagonism was stressed. First and foremost this should be the objective of the new cultural policy.

The national culture as it was formulated in the aftermaths of the riots was based on three main principles.

1. "That the base of National Culture is the culture which is native to this region."
2. "That the traits and elements from other cultures which are pertinent may be absorbed to enrich the National Culture."
3. "That Islam as the official religion of Malaysia would play an important role in the formulation of a National Culture."⁶

The Minister of Culture at that time, stated that the goal of a common national identity could only be achieved at the expense of cultural pluralism, and that it was the traditional Malay form that should form the foundation of the new culture.

Malay Culture as the National Identity

Today it becomes obvious that choosing one of the ethnic groups' culture as the foundation of the national culture is problematic in many ways. It implied that the Malay culture was superior in some way, and that the state wanted to ensure that people practiced and emulated the *right* culture. The preferred culture was supported and the other cultural practices were viewed as inferior. This aroused great disaffection among the other ethnic groups who proceeded to cite the cultural policy as an example of the Malay-dominated government's racial hostility.

National Cultural Policy -

Some Immediate Consequences for the Malay Culture and Traditions

At first the government's concentration on the Malay culture led to a flourishing period. A number of programs at universities and schools were designed to collect and document traditional forms of Malay culture. Tradition was to be revived and recruitment to these forms was to be ensured through courses and training.

Students were sent to Kelantan to gather and document material on traditional theater. Costumes and instruments were collected and used partly in teaching, partly as exhibits in museums. One of the great *primadonnas* in the Mak Yong theater, Khatijah Awang, mentioned that during the 70s more than a 100 people contacted her wanting to learn Mak Yong.⁷

One would assume that governmental interest in the traditional culture helped to heighten awareness and pride in the local performers, which would again foster increased interest in the theater and the local communities. But that was only part of the picture in rural Malaysia in the 70s and 80s.

The Rural Communities

One negative effect was that costumes and instruments disappeared from the rural districts.⁸ During my fieldwork in the 80s and 90s many groups lacked costumes. Another negative effect was the clash of interests within theater groups, expressed through an ongoing debate about who was most true to the tradition. A star hierarchy developed between performers and groups. An additional negative effect in the rural areas was the coming of a new understanding and interpretation of Islam.

The canonization of the Malay culture went hand in hand with a new and more orthodox interpretation of Islam. Already in the 1970s orthodox Muslims demanded that Malaysia become an Islamic state, with the constitution subordinated to Islam. Already as early as in 1969 during the state emergency following the riots, orthodox movements were able to carry on with their political activities in rural areas and left their trace in these areas. These groups did not favor traditional theater, because it included non-Islamic elements. UMNO became affected by an Islamic revival and began to portray itself as a Malay nationalist party that was in tune with the Islamic movements. The prime minister himself at that time, criticized the cultural practices as they were performed in the villages. This view had a tremendous impact on the traditional theater in rural areas.⁹

Criticism of the rural theater was mainly directed against the religious view it propagated. Interviews I did during the 80s with Mak Yong and Wayang Kulit performers showed how they feared the authorities' criticism and therefore avoided performing. Official criticism also resulted in dissension in the rural kampong between people defending the traditional theater and those who thought traditional performances represented something wrong in relation to Islam.¹⁰

The National Level

At a national level, the flourishing period for the Malay culture endured only for a short period of time. The government built theater stages in the large towns. Here the traditional theater was performed for a new audience. The government sent performers abroad presenting splendid and spectacular Malay theater traditions for a foreign public. Malay theater traditions were performed on national holidays, broadcasted on television and displayed on modern stages in major towns.

Theater was performed at the invitation of various sultans. Time gave birth to famous, much beloved and decorated “stars” in the Malay Theater; the *dalang*, (puppeteer in the shadow-theater) Hamzdah bin Awang Amat and the Mak Yong group Sri Temmengogn and its leader Khatijah Awang.

On the national level the Malay culture was molded to appeal to a new audience and the authorities’ view of what the national culture should look like. Several factors contributed to a change in the traditional Malay theater.

Removed from its original context the theater had to adjust to modern society and a modern lifestyle. The time-consuming performances of the rural areas did not fit in with the tempo and stress of big cities. The new performances in towns and big cities had to be adapted to workers leisure time and compressed into an evening’s “show.”

While the traditional rural performances demonstrated openness, spontaneity, improvisation, creativity and commitment, the national versions emphasized formal completeness and control, perfection in performance, contrastive richness and virtuosity. Theatrical expression and performance elements were standardized. The music had a fixed number of melodies played with great precision and accuracy. The dance was standardized and reduced to fixed and directed formations executed with dignity. The language was standardized up to a national level. Staging became more spectacular with great focus on the visual representation.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the rural community theater and the theater on the national level was the absence of ritual elements. The opening and the closing rituals disappeared together with the trance-sequences in the Mak Yong theater. In the national forms, trance sequences and ritual elements were considered incompatible with the new orthodox and official interpretation of Islam. The theater became entertainment and lost its healing and magic functions.

Removed from its original context where the theater had been an integral part of a living tradition, the theater no longer was a living form. Transferred to a new societal level the theater no longer represented or served the kampong people’s interest and need for theater. On the national level the theater became an expression for a new group, the Malay government’s or the Malay elite’s use and need for theater. In the new context with a new audience, the theater was not met with the same importance or interest as in the rural communities.

In my opinion, the authorities’ concentration on the Malay culture did not help to protect it. On the contrary; when the culture was defined it seemed a sure way of killing it. It was then left to decay in academia, universities and museums. The flourishing-period for the Malay theater became short-lived, both on a national and the kampong level.

The Cradle of Malay Culture, Kelantan 2010

When I went back to Kelantan and Kota Bahru in September 2010 it became obvious for me that the flourishing period for the Malay culture was definitely over. Maybe this can best be illustrated by help of these numbers:

In 1990 I could register:	In 2010:
6 Mak Yong-groups	No Mak Yong groups
More than 300 puppeteers in Wayang Kulit	5 puppeteers in Wayang Kulit
6 Main Puetri groups	Main Puetri?

Malaysia 2010

These days the slogan of *Hidup Melayu*¹¹ has been replaced by the slogan *Malaysia Truly Asia*.¹² This slogan has been commonly known around the world as part of a large advertising campaign sponsored by the Malaysian government. The slogan is an attempt to attract foreign visitors to the country, and it reflects a governmental wish to capture and define the essence of the country's various ethnic groups and the unique cultural diversity.

In 2004 the former Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism was divided into two ministries, namely the Tourism Ministry and The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. This separation reflects recognition of tourism as a significant factor for the country. It also reflects a movement towards appreciating the value of the country's heritage. This step taken by the cultural authorities on the national level represents a new and increased interest in the Malay culture. The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage described their mission as follows:

“To highlight and popularize the arts and culture. To preserve national heritage and its tangible and intangible form to cultivate patriotism.”¹³

This interest in culture has among other things resulted in that a number of national heritages have been preserved, monuments and historical areas. It has also resulted in building governmental Cultural Centers (Taman Budaya) in several states. The centers function as a place to introduce cultural programs and to organize training and develop talents in the performing arts.

Under the heritage programs The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage describe their activities regarding the Malay culture as:

“Measures will be taken to preserve performing arts which have become obsolete such as the Wayang Kulit (shadow play), *Makyong*, dances and such, and revitalize them for the younger generation through propagation activities.”¹⁴

This obviously shows the Ministry's interest in preserving and taking care of the traditional Malay Culture.

On the other hand, reading their program it might be difficult to see whether the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage promote cultural pluralism or whether they are repeating the former attitude towards culture in Malaysia. The program mentions Chinese and Indian cultural traditions, but define their vision as:

“A cultured nation (founded on the principles) of the Rukunegara and the National Cultural Policy....”¹⁵

Kota Bahru 2010

By way of introduction I already mentioned the local authorities' restrictions levied upon traditional theater. On a national level steps have now been taken towards the conservation of Malay culture. When I visited Kota Bahru in September 2010, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage was constructing a governmental Cultural Center. It was a beautiful red brick building that together with other facilities also included a huge stage. Even though the building was not finished, a Mak Yong class was set up with regular training sessions in the city. The teacher was a former member of the Sri Temmengong group, which was the most famous national Mak Yong group during the end of the 70s and 90s. The training was in accordance with the norms and values that the performances reflected on a national level at that time. This might be the last attempt to save what is left of the Mak Yong theater tradition.

Conclusion

What Will be the Future for the Malay Culture?

It might be considered that before 1970 one could hardly speak of one unified Malay culture. Throughout time a whole range of cultures could be seen in Malaysia. The culture performed by the Malay people in Kelantan was quite different from the culture performed by the same ethnic group in Kedah or in Negeri Sembilan. During the first decades following 1970 the idea of one unified Malay culture was implemented. What happened was that elements and traits of cultures associated with the Malay group were molded and corrected to fit the authorities' views of what a Malay national culture should look like at the national level.

The question is whether the government, represented by The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, will succeed in stimulating the Malay culture and by so doing taking care of the country's heritage. For an outsider like me, it seems unlikely. In my view Malaysia need to develop new attitudes towards artists and artistic expressions on both a national and local level.

From my point of view, it seems unproductive to promote one type of culture at the expense of cultural variety. All over the world, throughout time, artists have been inspired by the environment. Contemporary and historical, foreign and more local forms and expressions, ideas and thoughts, have been reflected in their art. Creative artists have listened, learned and been affected by their experiences of everyday life and their surroundings. In my opinion it is more productive to invest in arts, cultural performances and existing ideas that move in and out of the bounds of cultures. Art and culture has to be rooted in the artists themselves.

I do not think that economical support as such, is a way towards a cultural boom and flowering seasons. On the contrary, for me the history of Malay art and culture has made it clear that financial support that comes along with strong financial strings does not necessarily improve the artistic activities. Most artists suffer in a

climate of censorship and are more productive when they can express themselves unrestricted.

In the era of globalization, culture and traditions are attractive commodities for mass tourism. This has in turn been catalysts for improved local and regional cultural productions. A number of studies have documented how mass tourism not only has contributed with financial support, but also contributed to an increased interest and activity for culture and artistic expression on both the local and regional level. The most important in my opinion, is that art and culture is rooted in the artists themselves.

Meanwhile the 5 local *dalang* that are allowed to perform at *Gelenggan Seni* continue to perform the *Wayang Kulit*-performances. These performances differ a lot from the performances 20 years ago both on the national and local level. The heavy restrictions from the local authorities force the *dalang* to continue to remove Hindu and other elements that are not approved from the performances. This might be seen as meaningless considering that the main repertoire in the *Wayang*- theater are the old Indian epics, the *Mahabarata* and *Ramayana* stories. What is left of the *Wayang Kulit* performances is mainly the clowning scenes.

Cultural workers that I was talking to at *Gelenggan Seni* in 2010 predicted that the *Wayang Kulit* – tradition would die out over the next five years.

References – Endnotes

1. The name means *new city* in Malay.
2. http://www.tourism.gov.my/multimedia/more.php?mul_id=113&mul_cat=3
3. The definition of Malay in Malaysia is defined by the Malaysian Constitution and is used of one who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs. (The Federal Constitution, Article 160). This definitions includes people with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, traditions, and culture.
4. 5th Malaysia Plan 1981:184.
5. Detailed description and discussions of Malay Theater can be seen among others in: Ghulam-Sarwar,Y: *The Kelantan "Mak Yong" Dance Theater. A Study of Performance Structure*. (University of Hawaii 1976) Ghulam-Sarwar, Y: *Panggung Semar. Aspects of Malay Theater*. (Tempo publishing 1992). Malm,: W: "Music in Kelantan: "Some of its Cultural Implications." *Studies in Malaysian Oral and Musical Traditions*. (Center for South and Southeast Asia No. 8. Ann Arbor 1974.) Malm, W: "The Music of The Malaysian Ma'Yong." (Tenggara 1969). Matuscky, P: *Music in the Malay Shadow Puppet Theater*. (Ann Arbor 1980). Wright, B: "Islam and the Malay Shadow Play.- *Aspects of Historical Mythology of Wayang Siam*." (Asia Society, October 29.1979.) Wright, B: *Wayang Siam. An Ethnographic Study of the Malay Shadow Play of Kelantan*. (Yale University 1980.) Ladermann, C: *Taming the Wind of Desire. Psychology, Medicine and Aesthetics in Malay Shamanistic Performance*. (University of California

Press 1991). For a more detailed analysis of the concept of *semangat* see e.g. Endicott, K: *An Analysis of Malay Magic*. (Oxford University Press 1981.).

6. Deraman, A: *The Development of Culture, Communication and Education in Malaysia*. (Kuala Lumpur 1984).

7. Personal interview with Ktijah Awang 1989.

8. This profoundly affected the local theater during the 80s and 90s I interviewed several groups that had handed costumes and instruments over to the museums. The actors financial situation was bad, consequently they were not able to purchase replacements.

9. See: Mathahir, M: *The Malay Dilemma*. (Federal Publication 1982.) Anwar, Z: *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia. Dakwah among Students*. (Penlanduk Publications 1987.) Maaruf, S: *Malays Ideas of Development*. (Singapore Kuala Lumpur 1988).

10. Some of the actors that I interviewed during the 80.s and 90.s expressed their anxiety about the harmony in the *kampong*. I was asked several times whether I could help arrange theater performances in neighboring *kampong* as a way of escape from the disturbance.

11. A slogan used by UMNO in fight for the Malay union.

12. http://kebudayaan.kppk.gov.my/download/MINISTRY_OF_CULTURE.pdf
Downloaded May 15, 2011.

13. http://kebudayaan.kppk.gov.my/download/MINISTRY_OF_CULTURE.pdf
Downloaded May 15, 2011.

14. The Ministry of Culture, Art and Heritage, heritage programmes iv. http://kebudayaan.kppk.gov.my/download/MINISTRY_OF_CULTURE.pdf. Downloaded May 15, 2011.

15. *Rukunegara* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malay_language \o "Malay language" Malay for "National Principles") is the hyperlink "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia>" \o "Malaysia" Malaysian declaration of national philosophy instituted by royal proclamation on hyperlink "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hari_Merdeka" \o "Hari Merdeka" Merdeka Day, 1970. The declaration is based on five principles: 1, Belief in God (Islam). 2. Loyalty to King and country. Upholding the Constitution. Rule of Law. Good behaviour and Morality. Andaya & Andaya: *A history of Malaysia*. (Palgrave 2001).