CONTINUITY & RELEVANCE OF MALAY TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE ART IN THIS MILLENNIUM

Rahmah Haji Bujang

Introductory Note

Though it is common knowledge that creativity is the creator's own, the product is also the sum of a creative process encompassing the thoughts, emotions, and experience of its time. In time it becomes the signifier and statement of its importance and values for that time frame. By then, together with other art forms, it would serve to express the aesthetic leanings of the time. The resilience of an art form is not only reflected in its life span, but also in the acceptance and recognition of the public at large. This also means that an art form must reach a certain maturity through the test of time and civilization before it can be regarded as an art heritage to be treasured by the nation inheriting it. With art artifacts falling within the mold of fine and visual arts, this recognition is more readily prescribed as compared to the more elusive performance art. However, with the advance of technological knowledge, both visual and performance art can now be recorded, improved, and innovated upon,
and although this technological knowledge can be at the expense of the artistic originality, it has contributed greatly to the posterity of art forms and its artistic endeavors. Structural and socio-cultural studies of traditional performance art has also enhanced its further discussion, and led to its enforcement and significance as a social phenomenon. Perhaps Christopher Norris can help us sum up the societal significance of traditional performances, or any performances for that matter, when he said,

"Structuralism in all cultural systems could be studied from a 'synchronic' viewpoint which would bring out their various related levels of signifying activity." (Christopher Norris, 2003)

However, in this paper it is in the context of traditional art performances which is the heritage of Malays that I will address, and I choose to examine its continuity and relevance in this millennium. My paper falls in with the concept of deconstruction perhaps also best understood in the way Christopher Norris meant when he said,

"The essence of deconstruction is the need to revisit, rethink, reassess.... Deconstruction is rhetorical questioning between the text and the interpreter of the text – a rhetorical interplay." (Christopher Norris, 2003)

In this paper I hope to be able to interpret the significance of Malay traditional performance art in our current day and times.

**Traditional Performances of Malaysia**

Malaysian traditional performances are traditionally staged but not scripted. Within their milieu the forms are part and parcel of a rich oral tradition. It is also through study and research that their dramatic text and context have been documented to contribute to literary heritage. Traditional performances are localized to pockets of indigenous groups that make up the various ethnic groups within Malaysia. Thus we have performances found in one place but not in other areas, or occurring in variations peculiar to a certain region only. In their milieu they become a socio-cultural phenomenon dynamically taking and
contributing characteristics from the society to the form and back. What is significant is that all performances as staged become theatrical and should be theatrically correct for their purpose and function. It is in terms of their significance of occurrence that these traditional performances would share the same reason for their existence.

Thus we have on the one hand, performances of ritual significance needing strict codes of conduct and theatrical enactment, and on the other hand, performances characterized by spontaneity serving to give respite and entertainment to the participants. Whereas the ritual performances must be controlled and unchanging, the spontaneous and popular nature of performances otherwise created for entertainment make for adlibbing, prolonging and tomfoolery so much so that the forms change with the mood and reception of the participants. Sometimes the form also changes by virtue of its presentation style at performance.

For example, performances for traditional medication, investiture ceremonies, performances with religious and rite of passage significance, performances for birth and death ceremonials have remained unchanged in their systematic rendition. Any variations would be only in their parade and pomp as a mark of financial backing or status of the participants enacting it. In the list of performances enclosed, we observe that some forms occur as both ritual and popular performances, but a performance for rites and ceremonies must stay in its true form. However, the very same form and function will change when it occurs by popular demand. This is also true for Malay traditional performance art of which some examples are cited below (see table attached):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BY CATEGORY</th>
<th>RITUAL PERFORMANCE</th>
<th>POPULAR PERFORMANCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Medication, therapy &amp; cure</td>
<td>Bageh</td>
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<td>Sewang</td>
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Continuity & Relevance Of Malay Traditional Performance Art In This Millennium

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ceremonies &amp; ceremonies of rite of passage</th>
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<td>Mani sampat</td>
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<td>Mandi tolak bala</td>
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<td>Bersanding</td>
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<td>Pesta menuai</td>
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<td>Majlis pertabalan raja</td>
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<td>Berinai</td>
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<td>Pesta menuai</td>
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<th>Religious &amp; folk belief</th>
<th>Kavadi</th>
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<td>Berjamu</td>
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<td>Mek mulung</td>
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<td>Ajong-ajongan</td>
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<td>Menora</td>
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<td>Muharram festivities</td>
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<td>Khatam Quran</td>
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<td>Kenduri</td>
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<td>Mek mulung</td>
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<td>Menora</td>
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<td>Boria</td>
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<td>Musabbaqah al-Quran</td>
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<th>Birth &amp; death rites</th>
<th>Melenggang perut</th>
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<td>Puja umur</td>
<td>Kenduri kematian</td>
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<td>Kenduri kematian</td>
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<th>Social happening</th>
<th>Musabbaqah al-Quran</th>
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<td>Festival tari</td>
<td>Festival teater</td>
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<td>Citra warna</td>
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New Endeavors and Contributions

1) Performances for Therapy

In many regions of the world the therapeutic qualities of certain traditional performances have captured the interest of modern science and medicine. The art of performance has permeated the field of psychological, educational, and cognitive transpersonal dynamics, especially for the purpose of stabilizing emotional conflict, enhancing social attributes, correcting social behavior, solving problems, and reducing worries and fears in the process of self actualization and confidence. The therapeutic opportunities in acting and acting out have proved useful in the case of mental patients, in the upbringing and teaching of children, as well as in orienting adults and senility. Art and
artistic therapy have entered the world of professional services. For example in Thailand, art therapy is being used as a medium in the spectrum of analysis and cure of ailments related to mental disorders, disorientation, old age and senility; and this includes the use of art images and media and the creative process. The Malays since traditional times have been capitalizing on art elements as a therapeutic cure for emotional imbalance ascribed to sakit angin. Mak yong, main peteri, mek mulung, barongan, and kuda kepang have all served this therapeutic function to the Malays.

Then again there are also performances enacted only for the spirits. Such performances have a different purpose for they are held as incantations to past performance masters. For that purpose, the performance is done only once a year or once in two years and is called puja guru. For the traditional puppet master of the wayang kulit performance this was a prerequisite they stalwartly held as they believed it was necessary to keep them in good stead for other wayang kulit performances. However, in the wake of recent Islamic revival, the puja guru performance is now frowned upon so much so that only the people oriented performance is the order of the day.

2) Performances for Recognition

The sewang performance of the Orang Asli of Malaysia, once a ritual conducted to cure their members who crossed the path of certain spirits and hence incurred their wrath or displeasure, is still very much practiced amongst the group. However, the form has also emerged as an alternative performance and is now being used to project the uniqueness of the Orang Asli heritage.

Sewang as practiced by the Orang Asli social group is based on the belief that one must have high regards and respect for one's natural surroundings. Thus, in sewang we witness the use of natural elements like leaves, usually coconut leaves because their shape enables them to be woven into many shapes and sizes; wood, usually the softwood variety, carved into various shapes or masks each denoting specific spiritual elements of nature; and bamboo usually used as a musical instrument of the wind or percussive variety. The process of cutting, curing and shaping the natural materials must comply with certain rules and taboos
as the Orang Asli believe that adhering to the beliefs of their forefathers is essential to upkeep the safety and well-being of their group.

Furthermore, they believe that everything involving nature and the natural elements needs to be acquired through proper means and procedures as this would enhance the effectiveness of the sewang performance as a rite for curing the sick among their kind. This is not surprising as the Orang Asli's main means of livelihood is still forest bound. Good fortune for an Orang Asli is very much at the mercy of what the forest can offer. No wonder then that they hold the forest and its contents with such high regard and respect. The sewang participants certainly need to upkeep the regulatory process for the sake of their group's credibility.

Likewise, the performance of sewang as a ritual must only be done at night because the Orang Asli believe that daytime is for humans and nighttime is for the spirits. As night is the time of rest for humans so also is day the time of rest for the spirits. To get the good favors of the spirits they want to invoke they would have to do it when the spirits are awake, which is at night. Spirits as nocturnal beings shun bright lights and sparkling ornaments, and so the sewang performance must not be done in such conditions.

However, when sewang is performed for the purpose and pleasure of other humans, the performance need not adhere to such tight regulatory practices. Nowadays, ornaments made from woven coconut leaves, such as headgears, waistbands, bracelets and chains, is a must because they reflect the creativity of the Orang Asli at handicraft work.

3) Performances for Social Esprit de Corps

Dikir barat is another performance form that has found renewed continuity in modern times. This form, mainly an entertainment participated by males thus ribald jokes becoming its forte, has now included females although still excelling in jokes and songs with sexual overtures. In fact, this is one form that has not changed much with the times in its rendition making it an evergreen performance for the Kelantanese society nurturing it. Although one or two players would come out as the Juara and Tukang Karut, it is very much a group
ensemble and is currently still preferred compared to the stand up comics comprising of a one man show and showmanship we see on television. This is perhaps part of the Malay concept of solidarity in groups, a social esprit de corps as reflected in their dikir barat performance.

Another performance type falling into this continuity and lasting into modern times is the joget lambak, a dance form performed usually as an appendix to Malay weddings celebrated among large family households. Joget lambak is a phenomenon of fun among family members culminating in group dancing after all the hard work of gotong-royong at family weddings and is performed when guests have left and the wedded couple is ready to retire for the night. Often-times the wedded couple would obligingly join in the dance.

4) Performances to Correct Social Demeanors

Another performance form that has met with new endeavors suited to the current times is the boria. Originally belonging to the Malays of Pulau Pinang, the form has perhaps demonstrated the most remarkable versatility in adjusting to the needs of the times. This dynamism is what I found in the boria in my research that resulted in my degree of Doctor of Philosophy which I obtained from University of Hull, England. More importantly, the boria’s form is suited to its function making it the raison d’etre of its evergreen existence in society. This is perhaps made possible by the nature of its performance structure of two separate but interlinked parts of comic skit followed by a choral song dance routine.

The boria as a performance form occurred in the Straits Settlements of Penang Island, Malacca and Singapore where Moslems from India were brought into Malaya as soldiers in the employ of the British colonial rule there. They belong mostly to the Shiite Islamic group having influence from Persia (now known as Iran and Iraq). The Shiite group took pride in the fact that they were followers of Prophet Mohammad who championed Islamic leadership from the lineage. However, their hopes were shattered when the prophet’s only male heir, his grandson, Saidina Hussein, died in the Kerbala war. To commemorate the sad occasion, the performance of ta’ziya was created to fall within the calendar of the incident – between the first and the tenth day of the Muharram Moslem calendar (Encyclopaedia of Islam: Ta’ziya (Arab), The
passion play of the Shi'is, 1934: 711-712). The performance of ta'ziya in Persia has two formats; it is done either by sitting in a room reciting poems about the events in the Kerbala war leading to the death of Saidina Hussein with a gathering of people hearing the story, or, done in the form of a processional performance including the acting out of the story in pantomime or theatrical enactment.

The Shiite group of Indians that came to the Straits Settlements was mostly soldiers. They too wanted the ta'ziya performance included in their calendar of activities. As it turned out, the main motivation for carrying out the Muharram celebrations amongst them was the long leave they could get from the first to the tenth day of Muharram. The Indian derived version of the Muharram festivities as seen in Malaya then were tinged with Hindu elements. New characters from Hindu mythology emerged along with the original characters of the Kerbala skirmish; and so names like Nanak Shah, Jogi Majnun, Balva Ghagri, Boria (Bharbhariya), Ghagriwal, Jalali and Khodungarun featured instead of the followers of Saidina Hussein.

In India these names are characters of Hindu celebration meaning that the form as carried out in Malaya is no more ta'ziya in its pure form. From this performance type emerged the name boria but not without further manipulation and adjustments made in lieu of its performance. In fact, the boria activities that led to the racial riots in Penang in 1867 demonstrated yet another function, that of gangsterism. A judicial inquiry found the boria having similar traits with the Chinese secret society of Ghee Hin and Hai San. As a result, the form in Singapore and Malacca was banned. But in Penang, in view of the fact that most of the informants coming forth during the Riot Inquiry were the boria participants, the British conceded by only confining boria to non-processional performance; a factor that further make for necessary changes to the form.

Thus, the boria performance is perhaps the most versatile in terms of the changes given to its form. In Malaysia the boria started as a version of the Passion Play or ta'ziya of the Shi'ah group, which having come into contact with Indian traditional performances in India had already assimilated some characteristics of the Dusserah festival of India prior to being brought to Penang and the other Straits Settlements by the
Indian soldiers in the employ of the British colonial rule. Its raison d'être for performance in Malaysia was processional revelry as opposed to tragic passion; often ending in ribaldry and gang fights. No doubt the discerning participants of the Muharram festival, as boria was called then, understood the climatic significance of the festivities when everybody must jump into the waters of a river or sea to cleanse himself/herself of last year's ill luck, known amongst locals as mandi tolak bala. Given that the month of Muharram is to the Shiite group a harbinger of lost hope and sadness as marked by the war of Kerbala in Islamic history wherein all aspirations to have Prophet Mohammad's lineage as heir to the leadership of Islam were lost, this significance for the performance of boria in Penang, Singapore and Malacca has become convoluted and individualized to mean ridding oneself of ill luck and misfortune of the past year.

This individualistic perspective to the performance was further enhanced by the competitive spirit inculcated between different groups. At its best, this spirit demonstrated toward the performance makes for better preparation and show during the procession. At its worst, it encourages rivalry and exclusivity. History has shown how due to this rivalry even families have become divided simply because they perform for different groups. Basically two rival groupings emerged symbolized by the color of the white and red flag they used to parade in the procession. Following their involvement in the Penang Riot of 1867, and their amnesty when they emerged as the main informants for the inquiry, the form was given a new lease of life when it was altered for performance and made suitable without the processions. Competitiveness, however, still holds sway and in time the form of boria that we are more familiar with emerged. This new form of boria performance is actively generated for the purpose of gentle social criticism and for poking fun at social misfits or misdemeanors.

5) Performances for National Interest

Performances for national interest came under the auspices of the government with the formation of certain ministries aimed at taking care of affairs centering on art forms, first in the name of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism and lately further demarcated into the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage with tourism matters coming
under the purview of another new ministry in its own right. Under the
banner of culture and tourism, the arts activities that came under the
charge of the ministry were geared more for tourism, both for local and
foreign tourists. Thus, we get the annual centralized and decentralized
performances of Citra Warna which require a big budget as well as a
gargantuan effort to put up. Other performances were also managed and
sponsored by the government, especially those that fall under the name
of National Festivals of Theatre and National Festivals of Dance. When
the Ministry became divorced from tourism and the aspect of heritage
became attached to its responsibilities instead, one hopes to see this as
an enhancement for art and artistic endeavors of visual and performance
art. The creating of the new ministry is indeed seen by many as a further
refinement in its role although we have yet to see any big move to garner
the concept of heritage into any performance and artistic activities
organized by the ministry. Perhaps, it is also too early for the new
ministry which in its second year of existence is still undergoing
previews, planning and strategic stages. In my view, the new ministry
can definitely play a very significant role in defining and enhancing arts
and artistic endeavors, be it fine or visual arts or performance and
cultural arts, especially in gearing them towards national interest and
significance.

In Evidence

One can understand the viability of heritage attached to the craft of
performance arts. Indeed, one appreciates that the forms, both traditional
and modern, are attached to particular social and ethnic groups. The
government of Malaysia through its ministries has carried out its
responsibility towards the arts to a great extent by encouraging its
creativity and providing platforms for competitions. The efforts to
upkeep heritage and encourage creativity occur in tandem. Even forms
ascribed to heritage art forms went through the creative process
depending on the capability of the groups involved in it. I see this
phenomenon as artistic engineering and it is too early to put any value
or concern upon its existence, as only the test of time can prove its
endurance and acceptance. At the same time, there is also occurring a
laissez-faire condition brought about by the mass media entertainment
provided by films, television and videos wherein performances under
the guise of drama and art experiences can influence the society of the future. Media entertainment caters first and foremost to current issues and popular beliefs. Their trend is made obvious by the demand of advertisement and marketing. What is evident is how performances and performance art can coax, beckon and mold, nay even be the bane of society and social groups.

There is also the fact that for the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage the part of performance heritage can encompass by and large most of Malaysia's dominant ethnic origins as well as give priority to performances pertaining more to culture and arts like the annual celebrations of various religious and festive festivals, official, institutional and in-state types of performance set-ups and the likes. One can imagine the kind of stock-taking and strategizing of the ministry officials in charge. Therefore, by virtue of its newness, the present ministry largely responsible for the continuity and relevance of art activities and performances must not only move fast but plan wisely for the viability of its existence as a national policy determinant of the arts.

Notes

1 This paper was presented during the International Performing Arts Seminar 2004 organized by The Cultural Centre, University of Malaya, Malaysia, 25-27 November.


References


VCD about *Sewang, Main Peteri, and Mek Mulung* published by The Department of Museum and Antiquity Malaysia.