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Traditional Malay Healing Practices: Expressions Of Cultural And Local Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper looks at the healing practices of Main Peteri, a traditional-ritual form of Malay theatre, as an expression and evolution of local culture and knowledge. The main purpose of this paper is to understand and highlight the uniqueness of local knowledge and culture within the trajectory of its community. The rituals of buka and tutup panggung, the concept of the angin/wind(s) and semangat/spirit/soul are seen within the context of local knowledge and the healing mechanisms of performance. This research situates main peteri as a communal theatre performed not only for the benefit of the sick person, but also for the performers and by extension, the community at large. This study is based on ethnographic investigations and recordings involving phenomenological observations and in-depth semiological interviews with key informants of the main peteri. This research is grounded on structuralism's intricate interpretations of relationships between elements of signifiers and signifieds in order to understand the unconscious mind of the sick persons, the practitioners and the community. This is achieved through a study of the form and the semiotics of the main peteri theatre. The binary relationships between religious restraints/edicts and modernists approaches, the concerns of purists-traditionalists and accommodators-innovators of this theatre form are juxtaposed within the parameters of cultural change, innovation and development. It concludes by analyzing traditional theatre's re-positioning as it confronts an information-technology driven world.

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1. Introduction: Malay traditional theatre forms and the Malay *Gemeinschaft*

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Malaya/sia has a rich array of traditional theatre forms known by these various names: *wayang kulit*, *boria*, *mak yong*, *jikey*, *mek mulung*, *kuda kepang*, *saba*, and the main *peteri*, found in different states throughout the country. These myriad Malay theatre forms exemplify to the richness and variety of different performativities. They all share several common characteristic; they (i) are scriptless, the stories being handed down orally from one generation to another; (ii) do not require a stage or a special theatre building but a performance space is created/demarcated for these rituals; two important rituals of (a) *buka panggung*/opening the stage and (b) “*tutup panggung*”/closing the stage.

The former is to call, involve and persuade the ancestral spirits (*nenek moyang*) to come down, bless and participate in the chosen traditional theatre performance and to ascertain that the performers and the attendant audiences are well protected. A small altar, called the *sakak*, is carefully and ritualistically prepared to worship and pay homage to these ancestral spirits and to the gods. Food must be prepared and arranged on special trays and platters to be served to the spirits and gods. The *Tutup Panggung* Ritual/Closing the Stage is to ensure that there is closure to the performance. The ancestral spirits and gods which have descended, blessed, helped, and participated in the theatre production must now be thanked and sent back to their abodes, else they will continue to taunt, haunt, inhabit the earth or the bodies of the performer(s) or some “chosen” members of the audience and continue to made them ill. (iv) The trance element where some performers and audiences become unconscious, (known variously, as, *mabuk/drunken*, *lupa* /forget, *naik syeik*/become high or *rebah*/fall down), and they morphed into different beings, depending on the type of traditional theatre being performed. Members of the audience also get into a trance. As they become *lupa*, they leave the audience area and run, sashay, saunter or gyrate into the performance area to join the performers.

Malaysia, a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi- religious nation of 30 million people is home to the Malays, Chinese, Indians and others. Although the official religion is Islam, there is freedom of religion and religious practices in the country. Prior to the coming of Islam to then Malaya, the country was inundated with paganism and animistic beliefs, which together with the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, have influenced and impacted the Malay psyche.

Malay belief in the spirits and beings from the nether world can be traced to these animistic and pagan practices when Malays believed that their lives, physical bodies, livelihoods, homes, weather, harvests, everything that they did or did not do, were governed by *semangat*¹ or the soul which resides in all things: in human beings, in animals, in trees and plants, in the earth, in the sky, in rivers, seas, even in inanimate objects. The *semangat* must always be at peace, be balanced, be in equilibrium. It cannot be ruffled, disturbed, deprived, depressed, deranged, and bothered. If the *semangat* is not at peace, man, nature, things will conversely not be at peace either. In the realm of the Malay ethos, the *semangat* is constantly threatened, discouraged, disturbed by malevolent spirits who are ever eager to challenge the equilibrium and disrupt the balance.

The Malays are also governed by the concept of *angin*/wind. One’s *angin* must always be *sedap*/nice. If one’s *angin* is not *sedap* than it is time to have a traditional theatre performance during which these unhealthy *angin*/winds will be dispelled.

¹ I prefer the term *semangat* (which has been the common term used by Malay traditional theatre practitioners) although I am not denying the existence of other Malay terms like *roh*, *nyawa*, *jiwa*. I also prefer the term soul to refer to *Semangat* although various definitions of *semangat* have been suggested by Endicott, Firth, Skeet, Winstedt and Wilkinson.

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