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**Malaysian Traditional Healing Performance  
Practices: Issues and Challenges**

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## **Malaysian Traditional Healing Performance Practices: Issues and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional healing practices have long been the focus of study and documentation in western academia as various agencies recognise the importance and efficacy of indigenous traditional and cultural practices in maintaining the health of its adherents.

The scenario in Malaysia however presents an entirely different picture, where indigenous healing is often incorporated into the performance structure. The decline in interest can be related to several factors, primarily the socio-political development the nation has taken since independence. This paper will present an overview of socio-political developments in Malaysia and their effect on local cultural practice, followed by a description of general characteristics of Malaysian traditional healing practices in order to construct a general model of local healing performance. It will then discuss issues and challenges faced by the community of practitioners and believers of such performance healing practices to try to explain the decline in their popularity. The central question that this paper hopes to address is whether such healing practices through performance are still relevant in Malaysia today and if so, how they can be “rehabilitated” and conserved for future generations.

**Keywords:** Traditional Healing, Malay Traditional Performance, Sustainability

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## Introduction

During the last decade, alternative medicine and traditional healing has generated much interest among Western academics. Researchers have studied indigenous healing in North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, where traditional healing practices are still in evidence. While researchers note the difficulty of defining the term indigenous traditional healing (Robbins & Dewar, 2011),<sup>1</sup> Moodley et.al (2008)<sup>2</sup> note that middle-class North Americans access a wide range of alternative healing practices (alternative that is, to Western or conventional medicine), while previous research found that respondents are comfortable consulting both conventional doctors and traditional healers (Hilton et. al, 2001; Kumar, Bughra & Singh, 2005; Rao 2006). Other researchers cited by Moodley et.al. reported that respondents used traditional healing methods concurrently with Western approaches (Nathan, 2005; So, 2005). This interest has also been reflected in academia, via research into indigenous healing such as (Hill, 2008)<sup>3</sup> who presented an in-depth analysis of traditional healing from the perspective of Canadian indigenous practitioners and Sanson's study of contemporary shamanic healing in New Zealand (2012).<sup>4</sup>

In Malaysia, traditional and indigenous healing often contains performative elements as the healing process is embedded within certain traditional performance structures. The performances in question include *main putri/peteri makyung*, *ulik mayang*, *kuda kepang*, *sewang* and *bobohizan*. Researchers have investigated these traditional and indigenous performance forms from socio-cultural, aesthetic and anthropological perspectives, but little attention has been paid to the psychological or healing elements of these performances. Csordas and Lewton (1998)<sup>5</sup> cite Laderman (1991, 1996) and Roseman (1988, 1991) who studied Malaysian shamanistic performance in the *Main Peteri* ritual and Temiar ritual respectively. Both researchers focused on the aesthetic dimensions of the ceremony – Laderman examined smell, sight, touch, taste and sound and pointed out that the sense most intensely involved is hearing as this is the sense that mainly helps the patients in *Main Peteri* achieve trance while Roseman investigated the Temiar cosmology which

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<sup>1</sup>Robbins, J.A, Dewar, J. (2011). Traditional Indigenous Approaches to healing and the modern welfare of Traditional Knowledge, Spiritually and Lands: A critical reflection on practices and policies taken from the Canadian Indigenous Example. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 2(4). Retrieved from: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/iipj/vol2/iss4/2>.

<sup>2</sup>Moodley, R., Sutherland, P. & Oulanova, O. (2008). Traditional healing, the body and mind in psychotherapy. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 21:2, 153-165. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515070802066870>

<sup>3</sup>Hill, (Gus) Louis Paul. (2008) "Understanding Indigenous Canadian Traditional Health and Healing". *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*. Paper 1050.

<sup>4</sup>Sanson, (Irene) Dawne. (2012) "Taking the Spirits Seriously: Neo-Shamanism and Contemporary Shamanic Healing in New Zealand". PhD thesis, Massey University, New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup>Csordas, T.J., Lewton, E. (1998) Practice, Performance and Experience in Ritual Healing. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 35(4), 435-512. Retrieved from :<http://tps.sagepub.com/content/35/5/435>.

believes that bound souls can be liberated as unbound spirits during dreams, trance, and illness. Csordas and Lewton summarised Roseman's findings as follows: "As unbound spirits these entities are capable of engaging humans either in benevolent interactions as spirit guides, or malevolent ones, as illness agents... To heal the illness, a medium enters a trance to reach the plane of interaction between the spirit guide and the illness agent." This description is useful, as it aptly explains, according to the Malay worldview, the role of the traditional healer who acts as an intermediary in traditional performance healing rituals.

To understand the Malay worldview it is useful to trace its evolution. As noted by Shuaib and Raja Halid (2011)<sup>1</sup>, Malay performing arts has gone through various stages of evolution, shaped by an amalgamation of various influences; largely shaped by Malay-Polynesian belief systems with a strong animistic base and "coloured by influences from religions and cultures which entered the Malay Peninsula from Asia and the Middle East at various times from about the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE." (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2004). They cite Mohd Taib Osman (1989) who has previously pointed out the hybrid basis of the Malays' belief system:

Malay folk beliefs... in spite of the recognizable Hindu and Islamic element...are basically rooted in the retentions of the Old Indonesian belief in spirits. Besides their belief in Allah and other supernatural entities recognized by the teachings of Islam, 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.

Shuaib and Raja Halid astutely note that the animistic basis forming the core belief system underwriting traditional performance healing do not actually contravene the teachings of Islam, for *jinn* and *syaitan* and such supernatural beings are acknowledged as creations of Allah; it is the worship or invoking of these spirits for help that is prohibited in Islam.

### **Malaysian Socio-Politics: An Overview**

Prior to independence in 1957, British Malay was a "nebulous constitutional concept"<sup>2</sup> consisting of the Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka and Singapore), and nine Malay states, which had treaty relations with the British. Each of the Malay states was headed by a sultan who had signed a treaty providing for British protection and assistance

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<sup>1</sup>Ab. Aziz Shuaib, and Raja Iskandar Raja Halid. (2011) The search for the middle path : islam and the tradisional malay performings arts. In: Sharing Cultures 2011 - 2nd International Conference on Intangible Heritage, 04 Julai 2011, Tomar, Portugal. (Unpublished)

<sup>2</sup>Eng Kiat Koh. (1965). "American Educational Policy in the Philippines and the British Policy in Malaya, 1898 – 1935". In Comparative Education Review, Vol. 9, No.2 (June 1965) pp. 139-146.

in the administration of his state. In 1896 four of these states were grouped together under a kind of collective administration, namely Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang to form the Federated Malay States (FMS). They were each administered by a Resident who acted as an adviser to the sultan but in reality ran the administration of the state; while a Resident General had jurisdiction over all the Residents. The remaining five Malay states were known as the Unfederated Malay States (UMS) and consisted of Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Johor. These states had British Advisers who were more willing to consult the sultan on any matters and were mindful not to go against the wishes of the predominantly Malay population. The British administration is said to have cultivated the upper class Malays yet kept the majority of the Malay populace within their agrarian roots, separate from the Chinese migrant labourers (who came to Malaya to escape the harsh life in China and at the same time, to man the tin mines) and the Indian migrants who were confined to the rubber estates. Despite this segregation Malaysians made a successful bid for independence in 1957 following the overall growing Asian political awareness following the end of World War Two.

Some twelve years after independence, Malaysia experienced bloody race riots involving mainly Malays vs Chinese clashes broke out in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur on 13 May, 1969. Following these clashes, measures were instituted by the government to correct the economic imbalance that ensued following the educational and administrative policies of the British. These included policies that accorded preferential treatment to certain segments of the population deemed to be more indigenous than others, involving the setting of quotas allocating scholarships and educational and economical perks to the *bumiputera* (lit. sons of the soil) population under the aegis of indigenous 'special rights' in accordance with the special position of the Malays provided in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Article 153) which states that "It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article." Article 160 then defines a Malay as follows: one who "professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs and is the child of at least one parent who was born within the Federation of Malaysia before independence of Malaya on 31 August 1957, or the issue (off-spring) of such a person." 'Malay' was henceforth equated with 'Muslim' following this provision in the Malaysian Constitution.

Realising that the enforcement of the special rights could be a divisive move, a National Culture Congress was convened in 1971 to formulate a Malaysian national culture that was supposed to unite the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. The Congress thus recommended the following principles for a National Culture Policy:

- i. The Malaysian National Culture would be based on the indigenous cultures of the inhabitants of this region.

- ii. Other cultural influences could be incorporated if they were found to be suitable.
- iii. Islam was to be an important component in the formulation of the national culture.

A further proviso was given, namely that clause (ii) would apply only if it conformed to the terms spelt out in clauses (i) and (iii). Two defining characteristics of national culture would thus be 'indigenous' and 'Islam'.

Meanwhile, in the 1970s there was already a movement among Malay intelligentsia condemning Western secularism, viewing it as a threat to Muslim society. Coupled with the move to institute the primacy of Islam in Malay culture and identity, it was only a matter of time before repercussions would be felt in the Malay traditional performing arts, and in the realm of Malay traditional healing.

### **Common Elements in the Structure of Malay Traditional Healing Performances**

Ishak and Nasuruddin (2014) outline the common traits of traditional Malay healing ritual performances: they are performed in specially made stages known as *bangsal* and include rituals to open and close the stage (*buka panggung* and *tutup panggung*). The *buka panggung* is to "welcome and ceremonially invite the supernatural beings... to participate in the theatre performance, to request their permission and to seek their blessings... to ensure that these beings will not disrupt the performance or disturb the players and the audiences."<sup>1</sup> Mantras are recited and special food is prepared to appease the spirits. The healing process involves an intermediary (*bomoh/shaman*) who communicates with the spirits and seeks their guidance or intervention to heal the 'patients'. These patients usually suffer from maladies related to 'angin' (psyche) and in order to be healed, they often enter into a state of trance during which they participate in the performance through which healing occurs. The performance usually involves the burning of incense (*kemenyan*) which according to the Malay belief system is the food of *jinns*. The healer will also recite mantras and offer turmeric rice to the spirits before beginning the performance healing, which always incorporates music from traditional Malay musicians. The healing segment normally takes place after narration of familiar local myths or stories, meaning that the performance is placed within a narrative structure. During the performance, there is an audience who witnesses the performance and sometimes even participates in the dance or trance. Traditional healing performance thus also becomes a community activity.

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<sup>1</sup>Ishak, S. and M.G. Nasuruddin. (2014). "Healing Performances: Ethnographic Concepts and Emic Perspectives."

**Figure 1.** Offerings for the “Buka Panggung”



**Figure 2.** Offerings for the Spirits are placed in specially made receptacles





## **Challenges to the Sustainability of Traditional Malay Healing Performance**

As hinted at above, major challenges to the continued existence of traditional healing performance have appeared in the form of the modernising process. Younger generations of Malays have little interest in this particular aspect of their heritage due to modernisation, education and Islamisation. As noted earlier, Malay society underwent widespread Islamisation due to cultural-political developments at home and abroad which raised the collective consciousness against superstition and practices that might be deemed *syirik* (blasphemous). Although Islam recognises the existence of spirits and *jinn*s as God's creations, Islam expressly forbids its practitioners to worship these spirits or involve them in humans' dealings, including healing. This is because all life and livelihood comes from God; as such Muslims are told to only worship Allah and seek His help when faced with any problems. The act of making offerings to the spirits to seek their protection is similarly considered blasphemous as in so doing those who make the offerings imply that these spirits have the power to cure human ailments. To add to the challenges, Malay traditional performance such as *Makyung* and *wayang kulit* which was largely found in the northern state of Kelantan suffered the additional fate of being officially banned when the Islamic opposition political party came to power in Kelantan in the early 1990s. Not only was the public performance of the traditional theatre form banned, young people were also forbidden from learning the art form; in essence the state government was ensuring that the 'offending' performance forms would eventually die off with the demise of its existing practitioners. Local cultural commentator Eddin Khoo however has suggested that the banning of traditional performances and narrowing of acceptable Malay cultural practice has actually resulted in an identity and existential crisis among Kelantanese youth which they deflect by resorting to deviant and antisocial behaviour such as drug abuse and hell riding.<sup>1</sup>

## **Conclusion**

To circumvent the regulatory gaze of Islamisation which will eventually lead to its extinction, traditional performance healing needs to reinvent itself in order to prove the efficacy of its healing methods. Nasuruddin has suggested that the trance state which enables healing would be investigated through collaboration with neuroscience experts, in order to update the healing process via science. At the same time, the spiritual dimensions of the ritual could be

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<sup>1</sup>Low Abdullah, Nurul Farhana and C.S. Lim.(2010). "Shakespeare in the Shadows". In *Replaying Shakespeare in Asia* eds. Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta. London & New York: Routledge.

removed from the performance structure, focusing instead on the practical aspect of the healing process.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, traditional Malay performance needs to be “de-mystified” and familiarised by incorporating its form into modern (read Western) theatre; for example, *makyung* or *wayang kulit* and Shakespeare (both of which have been attempted) in an effort to gain a wider audience for local traditional theatre. All this presupposes, of course that the community feels it necessary to preserve this aspect of Malay culture. The fact that *Makyung* was acknowledged by UNESCO as a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage or humanity in the year 2004 speaks volumes for the importance of its aesthetic form as a heritage of Malay culture yet the fate of traditional Malay performance ultimately lies with those who inherit this form of local, indigenous wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup>Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin. “Strategy for the Preservation, Conservation and Rationalisation and Transformation of Local Knowledge for Current Needs”. Unpublished article.

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