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Department of Heritage Studies,
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Email: jpwsych@gmail.com
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Neither Thai nor Malay: The Cross-Cultural Identity of Menora Performance at Kelantan

Kanit Sripaoraya¹, Raja Iskandar bin Raja Halid²
Universiti Malaysia Kelantan¹&²
sripaoraya@umk.edu.my¹, rajaiskandar@umk.edu.my²

Abstract

Over many generations, the ‘Menora’ dance, also known as ‘Nora’, has become well-known among communities in Southern Thailand and Siamese-Thais across the border in Malaysia. At first, this performance served as a ritualistic communication involving petitioning ancestors, based on traditional Southern-Thai and Siamese beliefs. As demarcation mapped national borders, the Menora in Kelantan has been reshaped in more recent times by the political, cultural, and socio-economic context of Malaysia. This study elaborates on the cross-cultural identity of Menora as performed in Kelantan, where it retains contemporary purpose, sustains traditions and unites communities. By revealing the individual components of the performance, the study finds a distinct cross-cultural process between Southern Thailand and Kelantan. This interaction of cultures applies not only to the structure of the performance, but also to the role of Menora dancers and the ecology of each performance. When it comes to societal implications, the effects of cross-cultural activities become evident as the traditional practice, intended to be a sacred communal ceremony, is showcased as a cultural performance for modern audiences. This study, involving the examination of historical literature, in-depth interviews and participatory observation method within the dance community, reveals the full extent of the shared Menora culture.

Keywords: cross-cultural identity; Menora; Siamese community

1. Introduction

Menora is a ritual practice performed by traditional Southern-Thai and Siamese communities to pay respects and worship of the Nora spirits of their ancestors. In the perception of Thais, Nora represents the pride of Southern Thais because it portrays the Southern Thai identity. Today, Menora is a living art that serves the Southern Thai community in various functions. Traditionally, it ritualises ancestral worship and also serves contemporary society as a secular performance for social activity. Across the border in Malaysia, this kind of performance is being recognised as representing the cultural identity of the Siamese minority, incorporating ritualistic elements with a traditional stage performance of local folktales. Various scholars and cultural activists discussed the origin of Menora by investigating the components of the performance.

Menora is believed to have originated through historic interpretations of dance and ritualistic elements. Thewasaro (1965) suggests that Menora was created in order to worship the Hindu-Brahman gods, when Brahmanism spread to Southern Thailand. Other opinions by M.R. Boonleua (1972); Niyada (1972); Dhanit (1973); Boonleua (1972); Surapon (2000); and Malinee (2000) address the theory that this performance had been created as part of Indian civilisation, which included the Indian
Treatise ‘Bharata Natyashastra’, the Indian Mudra, and other types of performance. On the other hand, Mattani (1996) pointed out that the Ceylonese Kandyan has influenced the dance gestures of Menora since migrating to this kingdom during the Sukhothai or Ayuthaya periods. Discussion from Thai scholars such as Somdej Kromphraya Damrong Rajanubhab (1963); San (2005); Udom (1993) claim the origins of Menora arose from Central Thailand, whereas Srisak (1992); Srisurang (1998); Preecha (2004) suggest the Menora performance is an art form created through cultural interaction between local and external cultures. The latter opinion is emphasised by Dowsey-Magog (2002), who describes the areas around the Malay Peninsula and the southern part of Thailand as a “melting pot” where cultural integration took place and developed, adding that ancient communities probably inherited segments of Eastern civilisation from seafaring Chinese merchants and Southern India. Influential aspects of Java-Malay culture survive today, having been derived from the Majapahit Empire. Dowsey-Magog adds that Siamese civilisation, which came via land routes at a time when Sukhothai and Ayutthaya political authority ruled throughout nearby regions, merged Buddhism and Hinduism with local indigenous beliefs. This area, then, embodies several cultures from several threads of civilisation.

This paper does not fully discuss the origins of Menora but examines the structure of Menora itself, it can be said that the Menora performance is an art form created by interaction, negotiation and compromise between cultures, traditional beliefs and religion that also interacts with socio-politico-economical contexts. The Menora Kelantan is an outstanding traditional performance that presents cultural identity formed by a cultural hybridity that is not pure Thai or Malay. This paper examines the hidden structure and decodes the stage performance’s components to address the cross-cultural elements that have merged in the Menora Kelantan.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To identify the cross-cultural elements of Menora Kelantan, this research conducts a multi-disciplinary approach. The researcher investigates relevant materials from Thai and Malay references and archival records from the previous studies in the field. To interpret the performance in depth, Menora documentaries and recorded videos are analysed. This fieldwork and in-depth interviews with two Menora masters, Menora Chanisa Sangchan (the daughter of Menora Chom Sangchan) and Menora Atit Bukit Yong enlighten and inform the creation and development of Menora Kelantan. Elaboration follows in the next section.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout this study, the cross-cultural identity of Menora Kelantan can be detected and described from the genesis of Menora, the performance’s structure and the Menora performers themselves.

3.1 Herstory of Menora and the locals’ tales

‘Nora’, ‘Menora’ or ‘Manohara’ are the terms ordinarily believed to be a shortened form of a Pali-Sanskrit term, Manohara. In Buddhist folklore, the story of ‘Menora’ surfaces in the Pannasa-jataka, which comprises of Fifty Buddhist folktales, gathered or written by a
Buddhist monk in Chiang Mai around 1450-1470 A.D. The story centred on a beautiful princess, born as a mythical creature, a half-bird half-woman, named ‘Nang Manohra’. She is the seventh daughter of the Kinara King, who resided in the sacred Himavanta Forest. One day, she and her six older sisters flew down to Earth, intent on taking a bath in a pond amid the forest. Spied by a hunter in the forest, she became his captive and was destined to be delivered to the prince, Phra Sudhana. On first meeting, the prince fell in love with the sprite and married her. Misfortune and ill-fate that occurred while the prince was away at war were blamed on Nang Manohra. She sought restoration of her wings and tail, transformed herself back into a mythical sprite and flew back to her sacred forest. Later in the story, Phra Suthon struggles through a long and adventurous journey to pursue and confronted many challenges to his courage, fortitude, and wisdom before he eventually traces the princess. They live happily ever after (Cholthira, 2014, 168-169).

Herstory of Nang Manohra retells and transmits across Southeast Asia with the integration and adaptation of various contexts. For the Southern Thai and Siamese communities, herstory was interwoven with local tales. The most meaningful story that indicates the origin of Menora performance refers to the princess named ‘Nang-Nuan Thong Samli’ and her son ‘Khun Si Sattha’. The tale links to the late kingdom of Phatthalung province named ‘Muang Bangkeaw’ where ‘Phraya Saifah Faad’ was the king. He had a beautiful daughter named ‘Nang-Nuan Thong Samli’ who was unexpectedly pregnant. Out of shame, the king exiled his daughter to the ‘Ka-chang’ island, a small island located at Songkhla lake, where a prince named ‘Gumaan Noi’ (which means ‘Little Prince’) was soon born. One night, the princess dreamed of the beautiful dance performed by the Dewa and unheard sounds. She then asked her servants to seek instruments in order to imitate that rhythm. She taught her son and her servants the dance gestures by looking at the reflections from the water’s surface. Later, when her son mastered this dance, he travelled to perform in many places until the king heard of his reputation and invited the troupe to perform at the palace. He suddenly realised that the performer was his nephew. He titled the prince ‘Khun Si Sattha’ and patronised the performance by granting royal costumes, offering land as well for staging the performance. The king then called his daughter back to the palace. Later, this performance was called Nora and transmitted to the Southern-Thai and Siamese communities until the present day.

Apart from this Southern Thai’s well-known version, there are other versions of ‘Nang-Nuan Thong Samli’ passed down among the Menora troupes in Malaysia. According to Lim Swee Tin and Eh Deng Eh Chik (2018) in a collaborative study, Nora dance fundamentally originated from “rhythmic sounds” and created by women.

In another version, it is believed that a Siamese princess named “Mae Sri Mala” is the creator of Nora art. While walking by the sea, she heard the sounds of waves hitting the shore. Mesmerised by the ocean beats, she started dancing; the movements later evolved to be Nora dance followed those unique sounds - the rhythms of the sea, the shore and the rocks. Then, female residents and the women nearby were invited to practice the dance, with just a coconut shell used as a tapping percussion. Being admired by the court, proper musical instruments were supplied soon after. In appreciation of this significant contribution, she was characterised as “the first Nora teacher-the dance creator”. From this myth, it can be deduced that the art of Nora primarily originated from geographical surroundings as the prime motivation of Princess Sri Mala (Mae
Sri Mala), the female creator”. Nevertheless, a second version is orally recounted amongst the Siamese-Kelantan communities. It goes like this: once a monk overheard unfamiliar rhythms he had never heard before. In curiosity, he asked the neighboring villagers to play each musical instrument until a similar sound successfully occurred before urging them to create the dance movements, which later became today’s Nora art. (Lim Swee Tin & Eh Deng Eh Chik, 2018, 2-7) Unlike the first tale, the second myth regards “the monk”, the spiritual leader and cultural protector, as the Nora inventor.

Both versions reflect a similar idea that the art of Nora stemmed from its “vocal origination” – either the natural sounds or man-made music, before the creation of its artistic dance movements. On the one hand, the southern Thai Nora and the Siamese Malaysian (Orang Siam) regard Mae Sri Mala as their “Nora Creator-Inventor”. On the other, the second myth -- a monk who created Nora music -- exists only in the Orang Siam communities. The Southern Thai focus is on “The Deva” who appeared in Mae Sri Mala’s dream. Both versions indicate that Nora Art originated by “the sacred spirit”, either a divine being or a religious leader.

3.2 The Ritual of Menora and the Menora Show

The myths of Mae Sri Mala and Khun Sri Sattha are upheld by Nora believers as they respect Nora as their ancestor. To stage Nora theatre is actually to worship the Nora spirits, the legendary creatures who still gaze upon their heirs. In order to communicate with their forebears, the descendants will conduct the Nora ritual to appease or pacify, ask for a blessings, or, in contrast, for forgiveness. Generally, for the Southern-Thai and Kedah practices, the ritual of Nora is traditionally performed during the 5th -7th and the 9th lunar month. The auspicious moment for conducting the ritual is from Wednesday to Friday, or Saturday. This ceremony can be classified into a complete three-day grand ritual (Rong-khruu-yai) and a one-night excerpt ritual (Rong-khruu-lek). This ritual cannot be omitted or discontinued because it symbolises a spiritual commitment between the living and their forefathers. However, for the Menora Kelantan, the state law and the isolated environment are factors that affect the ritual practice. In recent times, to avoid conflict, Menora masters decided to shorten, simplify or even remove the spiritual sequence in appreciation of the sensitivities of Malay participants who support the troupe and its performance as musicians or Menora dancers, or as supportive audiences. At this crucial point, a Menora master utilises his cross-cultural language skills to attract mixed cultural viewers.

Dissimilar to Mak Yong that needs only the local Malay language, Menora requires the use of local Siamese language and it became necessary for today’s performers to speak at least three local languages fluently – Malay Kelantan dialect, Chinese and standard Thai to please the hosts on any occasion. This researcher noticed that Menora dancer himself switches his identity back and forth while staging the performance. As a Siamese native, he uses his mother language to recite the Menora verses to communicate with the Nora spirits for the ritual ceremony. The Chinese, Malay and Thai languages are compulsory for the Menora to understand in order to sustain the troupe’s economy and reputation. Likewise, Menora who qualifies as ritualist must be Buddhist and passes the religious rite of passage, goes deep into Menora magical and artistic knowledge, and be accepted by the Menora community. The cross-cultural identity of Menora Kelantan is still
shown by the synchronisation of Malay and Siamese-Thai musical patterns, dance gestures and movements, the story play and costume. It can be said that the cross-cultural identity of Menora is actually constructed by the negotiation, resistance and compromising of culture which will be elaborated and discussed further.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows the diverse identity of the Menora as performed in Kelantan that has been shaped and formed by a cross-cultural embrace involving Siamese, Southern Thai and Malay. The finding presents the fluidity of identity that dynamically changes through interaction with socio-cultural and economic contexts.

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