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# The Kelantan Mak Yong: Dancing Towards a Compromise Between Culture and Religion

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## Abstract

Throughout the timeless centuries before the modern era, the people of the proud state of Kelantan enjoyed 'Mak Yong,' a traditional form of entertainment. The 'Mak Yong' performance brought the people together to view this folk dance-drama, largely because it was created by their ancestors and represented continuity and cultural heritage. This dance also served to heal illness, performed by mixed-gender entertainers. Significantly, this authentic performance was worldly inscribed in 2008 on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. However, due to the interpretation of the politicized religious aspect of Kelantan state government, this performance was reconstructed by eliminating the female components. The new form of male Mak Yong was created. This research aims to discuss the contemporary issue of Kelantan Mak Yong and to propose the safeguarding method that compromises between culture and religion by reflecting the lessons learned from three participation anthropological fieldworks as a Mak Yong practitioner, a traditional dance-drama researcher, and a traditional dance-drama lecturer from 2014 until the present day. This study applied multi-disciplinary approaches such as performing arts and dance studies, anthropology, and gender analysis to investigate and collect the data. The results found that, instead of eliminating the female components, Kelantan Mak Yong can be utilized as a means for cultivating gendered behaviour, inculcating the religious doctrine, transmitting the moral-coded, and enhancing self-empowerment for Kelantan society by incorporating the guideline of the state arts policy (Dasar Kesenian Kelantan) to the performance's components.

**Keywords:** Mak Yong, lesson-learned, safeguarding

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## INTRODUCTION

Beyond modern state borders, Mak Yong is considered a "folk theatre" and a "ritual dance-drama" belonging to Malay cultural-ethnic groups, representing their shared culture. It can be found in Southern Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia's Riau Islands. Yousof (1976) and Hardwick (2009) have described Mak Yong as a folk

theatre and a ritual dance drama. As a folk performance, Mak Yong consists of storytelling, singing, and dancing through the three main characters: *Pak Yong* (a king or a prince) - a male protagonist; Mak Yong (a queen or a princess) - a female protagonist, and *Peran* (a hunter) - a persona or a jester who also plays the part of the male protagonist's counsellor. As a ritual dance-drama, this performance takes the important

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part in *Main Puteri* (so-called *Teri*), a folk healing ritual derived from an ancient belief system. In the ritual process, a patient will be diagnosed by *Tok Bomoh* (the healer) of his/her symptom; if ancestral spirits cause one's disease, Mak Yong's divine mentors, non-retrieving personal spirit (*semangat*), imbalance of wind element inside the body or any mental disorders affected by suppressed desires (*angin*), the patient needs to participate in *Mak Yong* theatre: Dressing up, role-playing and dancing in order to release the patient's tension or cure mental conditions (*pelapas*) under the supervision of *Tok Teri*, the spirit medium who diagnoses the illness, and *Tok Minduk*, the spiritual mediator.

Even though the origins of Mak Yong cannot be clearly traced back, it long ago became both folk theatre and ritual dance-drama with eminent functions in several Malay ethnic groups, it has been stated (Yousof, 1976, pp. 49-50) that in this theatrical performance remains very popular in Kelantan, where it was once supported and patronized by the Kelantan Sultanate as a royal performance during 1886-1935.

Being a kind of royal regalia, Hardwick (2009) addressed that Mak Yong has been elaborately "developed" to serve the royal preference by making more magnificent costumes imitating royal garments, refining graceful dancing, composing a panygyric named *Mengadap rebab* for symbolically referring to the state establishment, administration and rulers' functional roles and reiteratively representing royal authority and exceptional powers. It has been noted (Sripaoraya 2017, pp. 363-374) that these powers could belong either to 'king' or 'queen'. After the fall of the Kelantan Sultanate, the royal-style Mak Yong was preserved by former Kelantanese court dancers. From that, it has been transmitted with the sense of the royal-figured continuation by some common people's theatrical communities, for instance, *Kumpulan Bunga Emas Sri Panggung*, the Troupe of Universiti Malaysia Kelantan and *Kumpulan Mak Yong Kijang Emas*, the Troupe of The National Department for Culture And Arts, Kelan-

tan (JKKN Kelantan), which run parallel to the folk-style presentations.

However, after a political party named *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) won the election in Kelantan in 1988, the party turned Kelantan into an Islamic State under the Islamic Reformation Policy, or "Islamiization." Cultural activities and pre-Islamic performances such as Manora dance, shadow puppet show, Mak Yong, and many folk theatres were declared contrary to the religious principles of Shariah Law. These performances were prohibited in public places as Islamism defines them as characteristics leading to unethical behavior.

Although Mak Yong theatre has been forbidden in public spaces in Kelantan for several decades, it was put forward to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a national performance of Malaysia and proclaimed as an intangible cultural heritage in 2005. Three years later, it was officially inscribed and registered as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, declared as a prominent ancient theatre belonging to the indigenous Malay's ethnic groups with two main cultural functions: entertaining and therapeutic functions. The contrasting situation between its conditions today in Kelantan and the cultural values mentioned in documentary sources leads to the ambiguity of Kelantan Mak Yong. The documents state that the performance is significant among Malay communities' dramatic arts, but the communities cannot appreciate it freely in real life. Hence, the Kelantanese Mak Yong communities attempt to maintain their survival by changing the drama's functions and searching beyond the state borders to find its new permanent performance space.

The Kelantan state's traversing further was described (Gonzales 2017a; 2018b; 2021c) that, Mak Yong had access to its new realms: academic institutes and cultural organizations. In the educational sphere, Mak Yong was offered for the Malay traditional media subject (*Teater Tradisional Melayu*). Kelantanese Mak Yong performers since then have changed their

roles to become special lecturers (*adiguru*) to give lessons theoretically and practically. With this role, the Mak Yong veterans have shifted their teaching process from the traditional experience-gathering process to the class-attending one, emphasizing students' performance skills measured by theatrical productions, with the integration of contemporary techniques, in modern theatres. In the cultural space, several organizations started widely opening for Mak Yong, for example; The National Department for Culture and Arts (*Jabatan Kesenian Kebudayaan Negera*) and The National Department for Culture and Arts, Kelantan (*Jabatan Kesenian Kebudayaan Negeri Kelantan*). Directly at that time, both academic and cultural-organizing systems took responsibility for supporting and maintaining art and culture persistency; they created, produced, and managed Mak Yong performance along with a workshop seminar. Additionally, Pusaka, a non-profit organization from Pasir Puteh, Kelantan, sets up a cultural space for the state's dramatic arts to disseminate and preserve the precious knowledge through a knowledge-sharing process between local instructors and learners in local-cultural contexts.

Even though many sections paid much attention to seeking Mak Yong's survival and performing space, all activities served only for promotion and network connections under restrictive state laws. Mak Yong was still set apart from its own cultural ecology. The PAS's Islamization policy inaccurately identified its "worth" and "value", so it seemed quite impossible to revive this traditional performance as cultural heritage. That challenging situation kept continuing until UNESCO took action for Mak Yong communities' participation.

The Islamization Policy of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Kelantan State's Organization, brainstormed with other sections for a solution by suggesting new performing norms, the Islamic ones. Eventually, the governing parties have legislated rules to monitor folk theatres such as shadow puppet shows, Manora Dance, and Mak Yong from openly performing in Kelan-

tan. From the government's viewpoint, the theatrical arts mentioned above are "syirik" or "un-Islamic" because all were created before the advent of Islam to the Malay Peninsula. These performances showed the polytheistic concept of interweaving among the animistic belief, the local faiths and the Hindu-Brahman which is against Islamic doctrine. Simultaneously, the Performing Arts and Entertainment Act, so-called "*Siasah Syar'lyyah*," the integration between Al-Hadith principles from Al-Quran and Shariah Laws, has been enforced to these theatrical activities. Henceforth, the "new-normal" style (*Mak Yong versi Baru*) of this dance-drama, which is permitted in public areas, is conceptualized by Shariah Laws in the name of Mak Yong Kelantan *Patuh Syariah* (A Mak Yong Syariah-Compliant). It is under the supervision and responsibility of the cultural, tourism, and religious sectors of the Kelantan state government.

It has been stated by Abdullah (2019) that the new Mak Yong was permitted to be performed publicly on September 25, 2019, under the following regulations: female dancers are not allowed in any public show; male and female dancers have to separate from each other; the performers have to dress appropriately depending on Islamic principles, and non-Islamic worship is forbidden. This remade Mak Yong performance was firstly arranged as a serial show entitled "*Jejak Warisan dan Jelajah Makyung Patuh Syariah*". It traveled to showcase throughout several districts, including Tanah Merah, Jeli, Pasir Mas, Kuala Krai, Kota Bharu, and Machang. The stories were selected from the ancient male-only tales, as well. Selectively, Mr. Rosnan bin Abdul Rahman, a famous Pak Yong dancer (who has been promoted into the position of Director, National Department for Culture and Arts, Kelantan, a position he retains today) played the Pak Yong role with supportive performers from the state art and culture institute and alliances from other sections. Hardwick (2020) highlighted this new Mak Yong as a male performance; all-male performers were re-

quired to appear without stage makeup.

Profoundly considered, although this "New Mak Yong" seems like a compromising way to revive this classical dance-drama by being publicly permitted in wider spaces under the state policy, the performance actually distorted its own traditional value, the bonding with indigenous Malay's long-standing history. Besides, this redefining performance isolates the historical-cultural roots that originated with shared culture and folk beliefs. Women's characters, even Mak Yong (the female protagonist) herself, are also forced to fade away by being given lesser and lesser importance or even "being removed" from the stage. From the structural-functional perspective, power has moved from the local people's hands to the state government's authority. Thus, both the performers and the audiences, who once could freely recreate and dynamically adapt this dramatic art themselves, are now forced to hand creative choices over to the academic institutes or government cultural organizations. Being detached from its actual performing context and "free space" may ruin this inestimable cultural heritage, gathered by people's recollection. As Hardwick (2020) addressed, the new male Mak Yong does not represent its true importance as communal intangible cultural heritage, but turn it into a politicized Islamic performance where the socio-political parties attempt to redefine traditional Malay Muslim gender roles, further confining the historic public, economic and politically powerful roles of women.

Accordingly, Mak Yong, the Malay ethnic folk theatre and ritual dance-drama with all its cultural values and meanings, is "reformed" (or even "deformed") by the state government, which reinterprets this performing art to serve religious and political contexts. Superficially glimpsed, the new Mak Yong seems like a practical compromise with the ethical will of the state. Profoundly considered, on the contrary, some controversial issues will be pointed out in this paper:

- Without "Mak Yong," can the theatri-

cal art be called "Mak Yong" any longer?

- Without "Mak Yong," how can we perceive the representation of Malaysian-Malay Women?
- Without "Mak Yong" does "herstory," through this female protagonist's own aspect, still exist?
- Without "Mak Yong," is the women's glorious role as the leaders removed from both today's society and people's memories?

The questions above lead to lessons learned about the current situation of Kelantanese Mak Yong in preparation for seeking and finding the most suitable compromises to create theatrical art within the state legal framework while maintaining its "value" and "worth" as an inherent cultural tradition. To approach the problem solving, the researcher investigates the relevant literature. The recorded performance especially the archival record of Mak Yong from various sources together with the participatory-observation fieldwork for studying the problem and conflict that occurred between "state law" and "cultural practice" and between "supervisors" who authorize the law and "performers" who exercise the tradition. By expecting that, the result of this study can provide "a compromising place", for the female characters, and the female performers to stage the Mak Yong performance that sustain this invaluable culture "smoothly" and "dynamically" corresponds to Islamic principles.

## METHOD

This study is qualitative research with diverse methods. The primary sources are the Kelantan Mak Yong performances that have been staged, altered, and modified since 2014. The participatory observation in Mak Yong fieldworks was initially cumulatively conducted to deepen the understanding. Researchers has engaged with the Mak Yong performances in various roles, including a Mak Yong practitioner, a traditional dance-drama researcher, and a traditional dance-drama lecturer from 2014

until today. With this participatory observation technique, the researcher can decode Mak Yong's significance from the emic's perspective. The additional methods used for carrying out this study are observation and interview. The researcher employed this observation technique to interpret the message and the hidden message of the onstage components, especially the role of female performers that rendering through storytelling and female characters and the interaction between the performer and the onlookers. Besides, the researcher conducted the interview with two techniques - an in-depth interview for the purposive sampling, including the Mak Yong activists, the Mak Yong dancers, and the cultural officers, and a snowball sampling for the audiences and onlookers that attended the Mak Yong performances in different occasions. The interview data can be used to strategize the safeguarding method for Kelantan Mak Yong performance.

The secondary sources of this study are the literature materials. Two main approaches are based on literature review and Mak Yong's state of knowledge investigation from related articles, academic papers, news, theses and dissertations, along with the archival resources and recorded performances. Laws, acts, and principles toward performing arts and cultural activities in Kelantan are examined to analyze how Mak Yong is "produced-reproduced and (re)constructed" from the past to the current politicized Islamic context. To analyze the data, the multidisciplinary approaches were integrated. The performing arts and dance studies approach were used to decode the traditional value and the hidden message interweaved in the Mak Yong structure. The anthropological perspective was applied to deepen the functions and relations of Mak Yong and Kelantanese community. The gender approach was examined the gender issues found in this Kelantan Mak Yong performance. The lesson-learned method, from both document-reviewing and field work experiences, has been applied in the analytical and synthesizing processes to search for appropriate

suggestions for safeguarding and compromising the Mak Yong performance.

To collect the data, the researcher firstly conducted the participatory-observation fieldwork about Mak Yong in 2014 as a role of cultural researcher. At first, the perception about Mak Yong was just a pure entertainment art form performed by the Muslim communities who live in the three southern Thai provinces. But then the researcher had a chance to conduct anthropological fieldwork at Than To district, Yala province, with the Mak Yong troupe led by Mr. Saman Dosormi, the cultural activist of Raman village, Yala province. During that trip, I discovered that this dance drama is a remnant of historical, political, and cultural practice intertwined between Malay traditional beliefs and Islam. Under his supervision, I gained crucial information about Mak Yong in Thailand, where there is a conflict between traditional and modern practice. From his point of view, Mak Yong is a culture of its own that can be played and practiced traditionally to present generations. In contrast, the religious perspective marks Mak Yong as 'Haram' or 'forbidden' because the practice significantly demonstrates outdated superstitions. However, to compromise between these two viewpoints, Mr. Saman practiced maintaining the essence of Mak Yong as a cultural heritage while replacing animistic elements with Islamic practice.

The Mak Yong performance in which I participated at Baan Than To was a 'village Mak Yong' (Mak Yong *kampung*), conducted and performed by local activists by memorizing an oral transmission from their forefathers. The critical circumstances for this traditional Malay performance involve a lack of onlookers, being undocumented, and being marginalized when it comes to government sponsorship. The Mak Yong that struggles to live on is self-supported. To explore what remains of the Mak Yong in its glory days, Mr. Saman advised me to view the Kelantanese Mak Yong performance as it had been refined and polished under royal patronage. His guidance inspired me to cross the nation-state borders. And so,



I came to Kelantan. Searching for the Mak Yong troupe brought me opportunities to learn and perform the 'Mengadap Rebab' (The salutation of rebab), the opening performance of Mak Yong. My first performance as a Mak Yong dancer was with The National Department for Culture and Arts, Kelantan, in June 2014 for the Traditional Arts Showcase 2014 at the JKKN Wilayah Theater, Kuala Lumpur. My second staging was with the "Bunga Emas Sri Panggung" Troupe for "the Largest Mengadap Rebab" at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia in September 2014.

While conducting participatory observation as a dance practitioner, I discovered the essence of Mak Yong performance as formed by traditional beliefs and socio-cultural-political codes. These significant points shifted my interest from being a dance practitioner to becoming a dance researcher, integrating the anthropological perspective to investigate dance as a cultural expression of each community. This turning point inspired me to deepen my study of the cosmologies, concepts, and philosophies that structure the performance's components. By using multi-disciplinary approaches for analyzing dance, my findings (2017) explored the 'share-cultural roots' and 'similarities' that have been naturally intertwined across a state demarcation. Those crucial findings have reflected the role and status of women as remnants of a matrilineal community and a respect for Nature as a great source of living. The result tended to show the political structure of the Malay society in the past.

My involvement in the Mak Yong field was significantly shifting from a dance practitioner to a traditional dance lecturer at Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. In this role, I have taught students to explore the Mak Yong and Malaysian dance performing by incorporating knowledge from 14 weeks of classes, each one hour of theory and three hours of practical studies. My pedagogy didn't mainly direct students to become dance professionals but to appreciate the intrinsic value of dance as a part of

intangible heritage. Theoretically, students have been instilled with philosophical knowledge by integrating with Dance Anthropology and Performing Art concepts. Practically, I have transformed the dance studio into an experimental space where students are able to explore, challenge, and develop their psychomotor and dance skills.

With this experimental class, the students have been exposed multi-level skills through cognitive learning, soft skills, and affective enhancement. By practicing the dance and staging the performance, self-confidence was cultivated. At the end of a 14-week course, their perspective is unlocked, they enjoy their self-discovery. They are also enthusiastic about challenging themselves on stage for cultural events at the university and they respect their classmates.

Knowledge gained from examination and participatory observation fieldwork sharpened my understanding of Mak Yong performance. Mak Yong performance is not only a cultural expression but also remains of historical, political, and religious practice that interwoven, between Malay culture, the traditional beliefs, and Islam. The discussion and suggestion for the safeguarding method of Kelantan Mak Yong will be addressed and elaborated on in the following section.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aims to address the significance of Mak Yong performance as a cultural-religious practice in which both men and women can participate. Instead of eliminating the female stage performance, this paper provides a negotiated aspect that the Mak Yong dance can be valued and appreciated significantly by adhering to and integrating Malay customs with Islamic principles. In surveying state legal documents, I discovered that although the Kelantan state government interprets to ban the female Mak Yong performance. The state has also imposed the arts policy (*Dasar Kesenian Kelantan*) as a guide for performers. Regarding this matter, the rese-

archer suggests a compromise solution for safeguarding the Kelantan Mak Yong by highlighting the significance of women and female components as a remnant of patriarchy and proposes the concepts of 'personal development toward Islamic-based art appreciation' and 'integration of Islamic principles with folk arts' from the state art policy to empower women, culture, and religion.

Discussing these crucial points will be initially accentuated followed.:

### **Mak Yong: from the Historical Remnants of Matriarchy Society to the Women Empowerment**

"Folk theatre" is a creative product by humans. Most play narratives are embedded with virtuous, moral, and ethical concepts or with suggestions of appropriateness and socio-cultural manners. Local belief and religious morality are, perhaps, reflected or represented in the same tale, which can be either a revealable or unrevealable one. An untold (or unable to be told) story, likewise, is possibly revealed through the semi-real theatrical narratology. On the one hand, the play scripts may glorify the heroes' or heroines' greatness (either the historical or mythological characters).

On the other hand, the performed stories may criticize the oppression caused by society or rulers and even remind people of a critical time. The selection of "tale" and "teller" brings about a selective aspect. It can create meaning and form an understanding in one direction. By changing the storyteller, especially from a man to a woman or vice versa, the essence of that tale can be changed, put amiss, or distorted from its actual meaning. In the worst case, it misleads the audiences by a binary-opposite understanding.

Azman bin Mohd Daham, Vice-Director of Public Relations Office, Kota Bharu Islamic City Municipal Council informed that the main purpose of the enactment and enforcement of "Siasah Syar'lyyah" is to protect Women's grace and honor from being "the objects of gazing" in public areas (interview on May 20,

2019). The act, therefore, does not permit women to freely perform dances, singing, or any live performance in the open public spheres. A mixed-gender performance is allowed only if female performers are under the age of twelve. Female dancers have to dress properly according to Islamic principles if they are Muslims; if not, they can wear national costumes with great concern about suitability in each occasion. Nevertheless, female performers are allowed in only "close spaces" or "female preserving areas" without any male participants. Importantly, all theatrical activities require written permission from the Municipal Office at least fourteen days in advance. The project detail is obligatorily attached, too. If a non-permitted mixed-gender or any inappropriate performance is informed, the officers in charge can report and comparatively fine anytime.

This law has been strictly upheld for all cultural performances in Kelantan, the Malay Muslim community, and all minority groups. The only exception will be if the show is performed in the religious realm for ceremonial purposes. In addition, the performance has to be conducted at a particular hour, avoiding the five daily prayer times as well as not conducting any performance between 6 pm Thursday and 6 pm Friday, the main religious day for Muslims.

It seems indisputable that both the *Siasah Syar'lyyah* Act and the state law enlarge the unpleasant effect on local artists, performers, and cultural practitioners. Having no free space for stage performance leads to a lack of cultural productivity, so the performing arts, which should have dynamically been created and developed by the owners, are "forced to be frozen". Some folk performers, driven by economic need, leave their stage unwillingly to start new jobs to earn a living. This erosion means that cultural knowledge of the traditional Malay heritage and wisdom starts to slide through the lack of transmissive opportunities. The extinction of a sophisticated art form is becoming more likely since it cannot resist the huge surge of globalizati-



on, digitalization, and the 4.0 industrial revolution in the modern world.

Looking from the opposite viewpoint on female prohibition (which should be more accurately put as “to disallow women to tell herstories”) in public performance, the “protection” may be re-interpreted as “prevention”: to reject women’s potentiality and capacity on the stage. In fact, due to some historical remnants, Mak Yong possibly originated from “women” in matriarchy society (that is still traceable in this dance drama up to today). Yousof (1976a; 2017b; 2019c) addressed this crucial point, who remarked that Mak Yong was probably a ritual conducted among the peasant communities. In his study, the word of Mak Yong may originate from Mak Hiang, the ritual for appeasing the rice’s soul (*semangat padi*) based on animistic-spiritual belief. This statement was also accented by Kanha Sangraya (cited by Satyawadha, 2020, pp. 491-494), who related the ritual of Mak Hiang as ceremonial worship for Dewi Sri, the female rice goddess according to the Malay traditional belief. Based on the interview of Mr. Saman Dosormi - a Thai-Malay Mak Yong performer, Sripaoraya (2017) pointed out that Mak Yong refers to the noble lady. The word Mak denoted mother, while Yong referred to the honorable status of women. Her study of the Mengadap Rebab verses further emphasized this statement by analyzing and interpreting the verses in-depth. Her studies assumed that Mak Yong might be constituted by “woman” or the “female-queen” in the past matriarchy society during the glory day of Patani kingdom.

Regarding the linguistic approach, the word Mak Yong was deeply investigated by Satyawadha (2019). Her study related the origin of Mak Yong with *Ma Rong*, a woman who possessed the highest status of her clan in Tai/Thai/ Dai traditional communities. Therefore, in her viewpoint, Mak Yong presumably signified the ritual or ceremonial activity for the veneration of matrilineal ancestors.

Shifting the analysis of Mak Yong term to the Mak Yong story,

Sripaoraya (2017) examined the ritual Mak Yong story called *Dewa Muda* (the Young Prince) compiled by Yousof (1976a; 2017b; 2019c). Her investigation elaborated on the three female characters who play critical roles in this story.

*Dewa Muda* was a young prince who dreamt about a white deer with golden horns. Once he awoke, he and his servants went to the forest to hunt that deer, but no one found it. He got lost and tried to find the forest pond to cleanse his body. He then found the petal’s flower with the message written by the sky princess named *Puteri Ratna Mas* inviting him to come up to the sky. The young prince fell in love and forcefully endeavored to meet the princess. He went back to his palace, asked for the magic kite owned by his mom, and flew up to the sky. When they met each other, the princess disguised the young prince as a white flower and put on her headdress. She took him to her palace, and they lived together until her servant noticed the mistresses’ behavior. One day her servant saw the prince, and she fired an arrow to kill him. The prince became unconscious, and his body was brought down to the earth for cremation. While the funeral was prepared, the princess came to revive his vital life. Eventually, the prince revitalized; they both returned to the sky and lived together forever.

Even though this folktale narrated the young prince’s journey, her research discovered that this story could not be recounted. Applying the Thompson motif’s study, the tale of *Dewa Muda* has meaningful motifs that indicate the critical roles of female characters. For instance, the Female Creator - the beautiful princess wrote the message on the petal of a flower, Magic Object received from Mother - the magical kite owned by the young prince’s mother, Women gain exceptional knowledge and mystical power - the princess employed her magical knowledge to disguise the prince, and revive him from the dead. These essential points show the essential roles of female characters that need to be sustained. Selecting only the male Mak Yong story to

perform is banning the female performers and eliminating the female characters in the male story. Therefore, how does this performance called Mak Yong without the Mak Yong character?

Another point that needs to be discussed is about the crucial role of female performers. It cannot be denied that the Kelantan Mak Yong performance became very well-known because of the performance by women. For example, Khatijah Awang (1941 – 2000), the primadonna Mak Yong, Ruhani Mohd Zin, a Mak Yong activist who led the Mak Yong troupe of JKKN Kelantan, Zamzuriah Zahari, a distinct Mak Yong activist for both traditional and contemporary stages, and Noor Hayaki Zakaria, a troupe advisor for the Mak Yong troupe of Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. These significant roles of women contribute to Mak Yong's performance as a female performer.

Historical remnants above emphasized the significance of women that should not be removed or declined. The existence of women should not be forgotten or retold by the non-female performer. Women should be encouraged to narrate a rightly named "herstory." Instead of "deleting" them from the legends, appropriate storytelling can be selected and revised by a state authority. The aim should be to cultivate the respect of women as a mindset in the thinking of all citizens. Care must be taken regarding the application, integration, and insertion of Islamic principles, Malay customs and local philosophies in the play script, and traditional socio-cultural values. Finally, if the play is properly "composed" and "performed" by female performers, women's honor and rights will be honorably encountered and recounted.

### **Mak Yong: Performing Arts and the Self-empowerment**

As a traditional dance lecturer who takes responsibility for training inexperienced students to better understand performing the art, including Mak Yong, practicing and performing dance can enhance self-esteem. Exercising dance is not to expose or reveal the body in any sense of

disgrace. Contrarily, the art of dance is "a set of cultural codes" constructed by dance motifs and movements, which reflect cultural values and reveal deep structures within society that dance performers and audiences can absorb into their way of life.

The study of Malay traditional dance gestures and motifs as a reflection of socio-cultural practices was initially analyzed by Nazaruddin (1995). His study interpreted the "Malay convention" performed through dance performers' dance movements and characteristics that the bending posture indicates the Malay's humbleness. The modest movement with mindfulness is related to politeness and good manners. The continuation of the movement shows up the group's unity or the 'togetherness' of the community. The curvedness or fluidity of movement symbolizes the harmonious nature of a community where everyone lives interdependently. In addition, Gonzales (2018) furthered the eminent characteristics of male and female dancers, respectively, demonstrating leadership and followership. Ideally, a man is a leader of a family and is the breadwinner. In a binary position, a woman plays an important role as a supporter, responsible for household duties and the socializing of her children. These idealistic characters are appropriately projected in the Malay traditional dancer's body. The male dancer exhibits a straight back position with widened shoulders; the female dancer shows her gracefulness by bending her knees with steady and controlled movements. Apart from the Malay customs, the Islamic principles, both the 'halal' and 'haram', are crucially "interpreted" and "represented" through the concepts and theatrical movements. For instance, each performer must wear his/her attire as appropriate under the religious code. At the same time, they have to control their thought, minds, eyes, and feelings, expressing them only as befits appropriately 'halal' or 'allowed' in Islamic practice.

Whenever religious concepts are "identified" in accordance with the appropriate masculinity and femininity of

male and female dancers, their “meanings” and “intangible values” are vividly and magnificently emphasized. Since dance, including the prelude (*Mengadap rebab*) and the epilogue (*Tarian ragam*), is the most important and inevitable feature of Mak Yong, it should be freely allowed in an aesthetical performance. In addition, this performance can be a means to impart the cultural code, the religious concept and philosophy, especially the gender perspective to prevent encoded values and meanings from being misrepresented by replacing female dancers with male or ‘non-male non-female ones.

Investigating the study of dance in Islamic culture, the study by Faruqi (1978) and Faruqi (2014) revealed strong correspondence to Islamic notions of beauty and truth. Their studies disclose the five basic characteristics of the dance of Islamic culture: dance as abstract art; dance as improvisation; dance as small, intricate movement; dance as serial structure; dance as a series of mini-climaxes.

To further discuss the forms of expression of Islamic art and culture, the analysis highlights the existence of geometric patterns, vegetal and floral calligraphy, and abstracts in Islamic art forms. These concepts seem irrelevant within the art of stage performing if we consider dance as meaningless entertainment. Indeed, from my perspective, dance can be a ‘means’ to convey the conceptual message throughout its components. Visualizing the abstract message such as the religious ideals or socio-cultural code into a story and dance movements or characters can indirectly command the attention of society, especially teenagers who are required to adhere to moral values. From a conventional gender perspective, ethical concepts as suitably performed by a female dancer to stress the role of a traditional Malay woman can convey tolerance, devotion, and discipline. On the other hand, Backer (2018) stated that in the post-modern interpretation, a woman is able to characterize her strength regarding the contemporary issues such as resisting, dialoguing, or negotiating with

the male-dominant society by rendering a contemporary, inspirational dance form. At this crucial point, Malay women also can utilize this performance on-stage to expose the reality of their existence to public view. The Herstory issues will be addressed, noticed, heard, and respected by performing female aesthetics that combine a strong personality, devotion, determination, herself, and voice.

Apart from philosophical and aesthetic knowledge, the study by Harrington (2019) showed dance could empower self-esteem, especially among females. This enhancement has gradually formed from an internal examination; self-esteem, perseverance, endurance, and self-responsibility toward themselves and others as a form of harmonious teamwork and team unity. Due to the classroom lesson learned, I discovered that practicing dance is a means of cultivating students’ self-development. My students have grown to be professional stage performers who accept responsibility and always pay strict attention to their onstage commitments. They also have a second role as qualified audience members who provide supportive comments and encourage their classmates during dance exercises. As most of my students are non-skilled dancers, I motivate them to challenge themselves. I turn the dance studio into an experimental space where they can actively become involved, correct mistakes, and engage in self-observation. At particular times, the outdoor space was used to conduct the dance classes to slightly build up students’ self-confidence.

My method of teaching dance is not about beautifying every step for perfection in looks but coaching them to enjoy dancing through self-practice with supporting teamwork. I positioned myself as a facilitator. In the beginning, I demonstrated the movements, then assigned students to repeat by viewing my reflection in the mirror. When one student is able to memorize and follow the movement, that student has to be a coach to teach another; then, they switch roles. As Harrington (2019) stated, working in a group by switching

roles emphasizes a sense of involvement and a communal spirit. This exercise significantly enhances self-empowerment. Individual students challenge themselves to follow the guidance of other students, making them forget that 'being gazed at' feeling. Any sense of discomfort or concerns about being objectified is blurred and diluted. Self-confidence becomes fostered progressively. Exercising through dance in a mixed-gender group, students adopt an appropriate gendered behavior as they indirectly learn and adopt the religious teaching and the socio-cultural practices that are coded in the dance performance. How can teenagers learn to adopt, practice, and cultivate gendered behavior in their everyday lives by prohibiting or banning female performance?

Dance can be used to communicate acceptable behavior by choreographing appropriate socialized movements and gestures. Dance should be promoted as an efficient means of conveying knowledge for cultivating people's attitudes, behaviors, personalities, and emotional intelligence. Dance leads to other aspects of human value development. Instead of banning the female stage performance, Mak Yong performance can be utilized for cultivating the appropriate manner, indoctrinating the traditional moral, mores and religious teachings together with inculcating self-respect for every gender. With the dance performance, the young generation will instill to act, interact and socialize decently.

### **Mak Yong: "Ritual Dance-Drama" and Crystallization of Historical and Cultural Knowledge**

Mak Yong narratives and narratology are priceless human heritage making a precious contribution to folklore, anthropology, and cultural studies. This theatrical knowledge also reflects, emphasizes, and reveals historical evidence of each period's social, religious, cultural, political, and economic conditions. After decoding its story play, dance structure, and theatrical features of the performance, I can say these signify people's long-lasting shared

cultures, which existed in Southeast Asia before establishing "modern states." This is especially true of indigenous beliefs: the respect for nature, the belief of the existence of a human's soul' or personal spirits, the female rice spirit's fertility cult, and other ancestral concepts. In addition, Mak Yong performance consists of intangible cultural heritage, folk knowledge, local wisdom, and traditional craftsmanship, which belong to one person's clan and the whole community. The dance-drama, therefore, should be studied and documented as a part of cultural history.

Based on the results, it is suggested in this article that the complete knowledge of traditional Mak Yong should be carefully managed before editing, adjusting, or eliminating any parts. This important and unique cultural heritage in the future will become a worthy living history belonging to Malay communities and the whole nation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout the documentary and fieldwork research methods, this research article forms a pioneering lesson to seek the safeguarding method for staging the Mak Yong performance in Kelantan by compromising religion and culture. The result of this study found that by applying the Kelantan state government's arts policy as the main key to "interpret" this traditional performance, Mak Yong performing space can be regarded as "a compromising space" where both male and female performers dynamically practice the culture and religion. This study discovered that instead of rejecting the existence of women, Mak Yong performance should be encouraged to perform as a cultural-religious practice by both men and women. It enhances gendered behavior, imparts the religious doctrine, emphasizes the moral coded, and encourages self-esteem in Kelantan society. So that the value of Mak Yong will be permanently and dynamically safeguarded.



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