

MAK YONG PATUH SYARIAH: AN ALTERNATIVE HIGHLIGHTING THE ISLAMIC COMPLIANCE IN TRADITIONAL MALAY THEATRE

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Abstract: *Mak Yong is a traditional Malay theatre form that originated in Kelantan state and is comprised of dancing, singing, music, improvisational acting, dialogue, story, and ritual. In 1990, the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS) the Malaysian Opposition Islamic Party won the Malaysian 8th General Election and took over the administration of Kelantan. As a result, numerous traditional Malay practices including Mak Yong were banned as it was believed that the performances have a strong connection to deities and spirits, thus, Mak Yong has not been performed openly to the public in Kelantan ever since. In 2019, National Department for Culture and Arts (Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara – JKKN) initiated Mak Yong Patuh Syariah (Mak Yong Syariah-Compliant) in an attempt to allow Mak Yong to be performed in Kelantan again. This move is crucial for the survival of Mak Yong in its state of origin as the traditional theatre was proclaimed by UNESCO in 2005 as a ‘cultural masterpiece’ under the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Award. This was an enormous step in sustaining the existence of Mak Yong as a national heritage, however, Mak Yong Patuh Syariah has been criticised by scholars and practitioners, as being against the traditional conventional practice because the female actors were not allowed to be involved. This research aims to create an overview of whether Mak Yong Patuh Syariah is expanding the survival of Mak Yong or is destroying the existing form This paper will analyse the advantage and disadvantages of this invention concerning its adherence to Islamic requirements.*

Keywords: *Mak Yong, Mak Yong Patuh Syariah (Mak Yong Syariah-Compliant), traditional theatre, Islamic compliance, Malay cultural heritage.*

Introduction

Mak Yong originated in Kelantan in the 14th Century thereby making it Malaysia's oldest traditional Malay theatre. It is comprised of the elements of ritual, dance, acting, song and music (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 1976) and was considered very significant to the Kelantanese. According to Solehah Ishak '*Mak Yong* is the collective, artistic, cultural product of the Kelantanese Malays, which was created by and for them (2012, p.12). In 1990, *Mak Yong* was banned in Kelantan after the state government was administrated by the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS) which banned *it* due to practices that were seen to have a strong connection to the spirits and deities which is contrary to Islam which holds to the principle of one god that leads everything (Rahimidin Zahari & Sutung Umar RS, 2011).

The political changes in Kelantan affected adversely the Kelantanese performing arts. In 1990, Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, the Chief Minister of Kelantan declared that *Mak Yong* could not be publicly performed because it violated Islamic rules. Firstly, because of the 'exposure of the "aurat" (parts of the body that should not be seen in public) of male and female' (Hardy Shafii, 2015, p. 15). This is related to the costumes worn by the women performers that expose the upper body parts (*berkemban*), especially without proper attire as practised by Islam. 'Aurat' in Islam could be defined as 'something that causes shame so that a person is forced to cover it. Aurat is a part of the body that cannot be seen according to Islamic law, the minimum limit of the part of the human body that must be covered based on God's command' (Muhammad Sudirman Sesse, 2016). In discussing 'aurat' Surah An-Nur (31):

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their "hidden" adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, their fellow women, those "bondwomen" in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet, drawing attention to their hidden adornments. Turn to Allah in repentance all together, O believers, so that you may be successful.

Hardwick explains that the PAS leaders were against the 'prominent roles of women in *Mak Yong* performances, arguing that their presence on stage was inappropriate leading to an immoral objectification of female performers' (2014, p. 41). According to Sripaoraya, the central reason for the Performing Arts & Entertainment enactment and the enforcement of "Siasah Syar'Iyyah" 'is to protect Women's grace and honour from being the objects of the public gaze. Consequently, the act does not permit women to perform dances, sing, or participate in live performances in the open public spheres' (2022, p. 21).

Secondly, *Mak Yong* performances do not segregate the male and female audience and this too was against Islamic regulations. To allow *Mak Yong* to be performed again in Kelantan, this segregation has to be taken into consideration, in creating a performance that divided the gender of the audience. Thirdly, the opening and closing ceremonies of *Mak Yong* performances included ancient rituals that were unacceptable to Islam (2015). PAS claimed that *Mak Yong* performances are *syirik*, or polytheistic. *Syirik*, or polytheistic beliefs in more than one god. Islam is a religion that believes in one god, Allah. The first pillar of Islam is the belief in Allah which there is no one worthy to worship except Allah. However, the ritual practices in *Mak Yong* that were inherited before the arrival of Islam, remain in some of the practices. Therefore,

it was banned by PAS. The practices such as food offerings reciting mantras that are not from the *Al Quran*, and also asking the help and protection from the spirits. The essential philosophy of Islam is to believe in the Oneness of God. ‘There is no one worthy to worship except one God (Allah)’ is the principle of Islam. These practices in *Mak Yong* were considered *Khurafat* or heresy things that are contrary or not to Islamic teachings. Heresy are all taboos, customs, prophecies, worship or beliefs that deviate from the teachings of Islam. Among the characteristics of heresy are old beliefs and customs that conflict with Islam; adoration and supplication to ethereal beings for purposes that are harmful and deviant from the Islamic faith; using certain objects such as graves, trees and so on for a specific purpose; and has negative elements in Islamic faith and syariah. In addition, Forms of Superstition according to the Guidelines issued by the Malaysian Islamic Development Department are: belief in the jinn and asking for help from him is like the custom of worshipping the village. Belief in the increase and decrease of sustenance such as the custom of worshipping the spirit of rice done by farmers such as *bersemah* (worshipping the spirit of rice) and throwing waste in rivers and seas, worship and food offering to the seas,; worship certain objects, spirits of ancestors, graves that are considered saints and so on (Mohd Kamel Mat Salleh, Muhammad Firdaus Abdul Manaf, & Mohd. Asyran Safwan Kamaruzaman, 2021).

The practices highlighted by PAS were created before the arrival of Islam to the Malay peninsula; nevertheless, *Mak Yong* evolved even when the practices and beliefs were being modified to accommodate Islamic ethics such as replacing Hindu and Buddhist mantras with Islamic Quran verses. *Mak Yong* performances were banned from public performance for almost thirty years in Kelantan. In 2019 the National Department for Culture and Arts (JKKN) initiated *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah (Mak Yong Syariah-Compliant)* in an attempt to determine how *Mak Yong* could still be revived within the restriction of the Entertainment Act.

Mak Yong Patuh Syariah (Mak Yong Syariah-Compliant): The Revival of Mak Yong In Kelantan

In 2005, UNESCO pronounced *Mak Yong* a ‘cultural masterpiece’ under the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Award recognizing it as a societal cultural impression that has been handed down from generation to generation contributing to the community and developing its identity. Following UNESCO’s declaration, the Director of the National Department for Culture and Arts (JKKN) Kelantan, Mohamed Raizuli Mat Jusoh initiated *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* which is a modification of the conventional *Mak Yong* as a new art attraction for culture in the state, along with *Wayang Kulit* (Shadow Puppet) and *Dikir Barat* an entertainment for the community. In this effort, JKKN conducted discussions with the Kelantan State Government. About this development, Mohamed Raizuli Mat Jusoh consulted with Datuk Md. Anizam Abdul Rahman¹ about forming *Mak Yong* despite the Kelantan Entertainment Act (Harian Metro Online, 2020). According to Datuk Md Anizam, *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* adjusted the traditional *Mak Yong* by initially portraying only male actors as the performers, secondly, highlighting the Kelantanese folk stories emphasizing morals, and thirdly, presenting Kelantan culture and lifestyle.

On 24 September 2019, *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* made history by re-introducing *Mak Yong* after twenty-eight years of absence and enabling it to be performed openly to the public. Rosnan

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Rahman, adds that there was a performance for evaluation of the committee in May 2019 that was attended by the Deputy of Mufti and the Exco of the Kelantan State Government, however, before opening the performance to the public it had to receive consent from Kelantan Mufti (Rosnan Rahman, personal communication, January 31, 2023). The approval letter by Kelantan Mufti is dated 23 May 2019 and the first performance was on 21 September 2019 (Astro Awani Online, 29 September 2019). In 2020, Rosnan Rahman a prominent *Mak Yong* performer from Kuala Lumpur became the Director of the National Department for Culture and Arts Kelantan (JKKN) from January 2020 until the present. Under Rosnan Rahman's leadership, *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* began its journey by touring numerous areas in Kelantan under the program called *Jejak Warisan & Jelajah Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* in conjunction with Visit Kelantan Year in 2020. *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* has been financially supported by the Kelantan State Government and the launching in 2020 allowed this 'new *Mak Yong*' to be performed in five locations in Kelantan; Kota Bahru, Tanah Merah, Jeli, Machang, Kuala Krai (Siti Rohana Idris, 2020).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study utilizing several methodologies. The primary source was a series of semi-structured interviews, conducted with the activists and *Mak Yong* cultural officers. The secondary source is the literature review focusing on the history of *Mak Yong* and the current issues regarding *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah*.

Results and Discussions

The practice of *Mak Yong* being performed openly in Kelantan lasted for twenty-eight years. The emergence of *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* as an alternative, however, by converting *Mak Yong* from the conventional into the simplified version needs some discussion. Modifications were made to the performers about gender, dismissal of the ritual component and changes in the storyline. Changes in *Mak Yong* were framed by Islamic rules and regulations.

As the Director of JKKN Kelantan, performer and director of *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* performances, Rosnan Rahman, expands *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* to a set of four criteria. First, *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* presents only male actors in the performance, however, in the conventional version *Mak Yong* uses female characters called *Mak Yong* (*Mak* represents female) and one male character, *Pak Yong*. Both genders were played by female actors, so, by changing the original, two decisions had to be made. Next, in discussing the performance structure of *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* the song of *Sedayung Mak Yong* is sung by the female character *Mak Yong* who is the Queen of the King. This song conveys to *Pak Yong* that he must always take care of himself, and come home to be with the Queen again in the palace. However, in *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah*, this section is altered thus leading to the third section which is part of where king *Pak Yong* calls the advisors *Peran Tua* and *Peran Muda*. (The relationship between the queen and the princess is omitted in the *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah*.) The performances include male characters such as the king, his siblings and the *Peran* who was originally *Inang*. Thirdly, the character of the Jinn is omitted and transferred into a character of a giant because the Kelantan State Government banned all supernatural characters. The stories being performed are *Mak Yong Anak Raja Dua Beradik*, *Anak Raja Panah* and *Raja Besar Ho Gading* lasting about one hour and thirty minutes. Fourth, in the notes for the story in *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* added *dakwah*, a light preaching component, and declared it to be hadith which was, at the end of the performance, projected onto a screen for the benefit of their audiences (Rosnan Rahman, personal communication, January 31, 2023).

In all the government's efforts to allow *Mak Yong* to survive in Kelantan with the creation of *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah*, Farouk Zakaria a Malaysian scholar and *Mak Yong* activist argues that *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* is destroying *Mak Yong* as it denies the role of women in the performance (Astro Awani Online, 29 September 2019). According to Rosnan Rahman, there are *Mak Yong* practitioners and scholars who are against this effort, however, he mentions that this needs to be done to bring *Mak Yong* alive in Kelantan. He does not want to destroy *Mak Yong* as he is also a *Mak Yong* activist (Rosnan Rahman, personal communication, January 31, 2023).

Kelantan is a place that is rich in culture and heritage. Rosnan Rahman mentions that, firstly, *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* exposes the current audience, especially the younger generation in Kelantan who had never had the opportunity to watch *Mak Yong* earlier. *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* is vital in allowing the audience in Kelantan to develop their artistic expertise and appreciate the roots of their traditional art. Secondly, it also allows the Kelantanese younger performers of *Mak Yong* to recognize, develop their talent and perform creatively in *Mak Yong*. Thirdly, the *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* program also increases the economics of the traditional musicians, who were adversely affected by the state ban (Rosnan Rahman, personal communication, January 31, 2023).

Conclusion

Mak Yong performances in Kelantan were affected by the state government banning *Mak Yong*. Historically, *Mak Yong* used to be performed throughout the entire state and numerous groups travelled from one village to another to perform where the people would come and bring all their family members as it was the main source of entertainment from the past. The villagers then would set up stalls around the stage to sell food and drinks and the performance could last until late midnight and continue for several nights. Performing *Mak Yong* was the source of income for the troupe but sadly, the banning affected the performers as they then ended up working as farmers, performing duties in the villages, and some moved to other states to teach *Mak Yong* in performing arts centres and universities. In the city of Kuala Lumpur *Mak Yong* is openly performed for the public and preserved by the central government. The modifications made by the National Development for Culture and Arts (JKKN) Kelantan with the support of the Kelantan State Government office, enabled Kota Bharu Islamic City Municipal Council to adapt *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* in compliance with Shariah Laws. With all male actors, the story was directed to highlight the morals and values of Islam. *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* is a compromising effort in making sure *Mak Yong* is revived in Kelantan; it is crucial not to let it die out in its place of origin. Consequently, *Mak Yong Patuh Syariah* is a first step in bringing about the rebirth of *Mak Yong* in Kelantan and the survival of the Malay cultural heritage.

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