

# Ancestral Elements in Malay Indigenous Heritage as Genius Loci

## Abstract

Malay intangible heritage went through numerous stages in its evolution and shaped by an amalgamation of various influences; one of which was the Malay-Polynesian belief system with a strong animistic base. The later emergence of Islam introduced new customs and practices where old *manteras* or incantations are sprinkled with Islamic names and supplications to Islamize, so as to legitimize the rituals attached to some performance. However, the still-existing old belief systems are evidence that Malay arts and culture are rooted in its pre-Islamic past. These ancestral elements are seen as genius loci which can be used in shaping sustainable Malay cultural identity; and also becomes the driven forces for tourism, leisure and commerce. Thus, this paper seeks to highlight and illuminate on the Malay indigenous heritage. With special reference to Kelantan, the paper elaborates on the intrinsic values in Kelantan intangible heritages and also identifies the ancestral elements which need to be sustained as genius loci.

**Keywords:** Kelantan Indigenous Arts, Intangible Heritage, Malay Belief Systems, Performing Arts.

## 1. Introduction

The genius of a place (genius loci) is known as the presiding deity or spirit that gives every place its own unique physical (tangible) and perceived (intangible) qualities. The perceived qualities are very often hidden from view and can be easily overlooked; however, they are significant presence of the abstract quality of a place. These perceived qualities, when transmitted from generations to generation, results in an intangible cultural heritage. According to UNESCO (n.d), intangible cultural heritage are traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. These includes, oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO, n.d.)

For the past two thousand years, Malay intangible culture went through numerous stages in its evolution, shaped by an amalgamation of various influences, both internally and externally; these includes the Malay-Polynesian belief systems with a strong animistic base. Malay culture was

further influenced or as described by Ghulam-Sarwar (2004, p12), “coloured with influences from religions and cultures which entered the Malay Peninsula from Asia and the Middle East at various times from about the 1st century CE.”

Kelantan is one of the most homogeneous Malay states in the Malaysia. It has long been proud of its indigenous art forms such as *Dikir Barat*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Mak Yong*, *Menora*, *Main Puteri*, *Wau Bulan* (kite-flying), *Gasing* (top-spinning), *Silat*, bird-singing activity and handicrafts. The state's landscape is a charming blend of quaint villages, small towns and reveries settlements. Amidst the house built on stilts and covered with thatched roofs, one can revel in the time-honoured Malay heritage and culture. Due to its historical background, you can find a mixture of Thai, Chinese, Indian and Malay in the population (Aziz & Olalere, 2013a).

## **2. Malay Belief Systems: The Infuse of Ancestral and Islamic Beliefs**

During the 13th and 15th century, the Malay world became not only a centre for trade but also religious proselytizing. Muslim traders and missionaries from India and the Middle East brought a new religion (Islam) that shaped the arts, customs and culture of the Malays. Thus, Malays' social and cultural lives which were mainly Hindu-Buddhist in nature were infused with elements of the new religion (Aziz & Olalere, 2013b). Malay sultans and nobles were among the first to embrace Islam and this was later followed by ordinary Malays.

Although the advent of Islam results in Malays being virtually Muslims; however, the elements of their previous animism belief systems still persist. According to Mohd Taib Osman (1989), despite recognizable Hindu and Islamic elements, the Malay belief systems are basically rooted in the retention of the old Indonesian belief in spirits. That is; besides their belief in Allah and other supernatural entities recognize by the teachings of Islam, “the 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 (ancestral) belief in spirits” (Mohd Taib Osman, 1989, p. 75).

While the practice of worship found in animism runs contrary to the teachings of Islam, its core beliefs do not. In animism, unseen beings or spirits (called *jinn* or *syaitan* in Islam) are believed to dwell or located in certain places and objects. Genies, familiars, *syaitan* or whatever names they are given, these intangible beings are clearly mentioned in Islam as creations of Allah, living

alongside human beings (Qur'an, 6:112). In other words, the Malays' animistic beliefs of the existence of these indwelling incorporeal spirits are confirmed by the teachings of Islam. It is the worship or invocation (for help) of these beings that is strictly prohibited in Islam (Philips, 1994). This would amount to committing *syirik* (worshipping other than Allah) which is considered the biggest sin in Islam (Qur'an, 4:48).

However, this prohibition is not fully adhered to due to the irresistible temptation of acquiring the power and ability to change or manipulate events. Islam and traditional beliefs offer the Malays comfort and explanations on events surrounding them. In Islamic teachings, whatever physical efforts put and *doa*'s or supplication offered, the good or bad results encountered are considered as Allah's will, and every person is promised fair judgment and rewards (or punishment) in the hereafter. Traditional beliefs on the other hand, while providing explanations, also offer the possibility of interacting with the unseen forces that are believed to be the source of the problems and the potential to manipulate them.

A farmer or fisherman may have prayed to Allah for a bountiful harvest or catch but if a prolonged period of misfortunes persists, he is bound to be in a dilemma. He may not have the patience or understanding in accepting his fate as Allah's will and that his rewards will only come much later. This sense of 'uncertainty' and 'haplessness' pushes him to resort to magic, which gives him a feeling of 'being in control.' Thus, for generations Malay farmers and fishermen held rituals to appease the relevant spirits to ensure a bountiful harvest or catch.

These spirits are also sought to harm or put others in misery through the practice of black magic or sorcery. The same goes for a person with a sickness or disease incurable through modern Western medicine. He or she may resort to traditional medicine or healing practices such as *main terior mak yong* (Hardwick, 2009). These forms of healing practices require intermediaries called *pawang*, *bomoh* or shaman between human beings and the spirits. These specialists are well equipped with the knowledge and practices needed to influence the behavior of the unseen beings towards humans, thus, enabling them to be cured.

Practitioners of *mak yong*, *wayang kulit* and *main teri* are also known to be shamans. Rituals such *berjamu* (offerings) and *buka panggung* (opening of the stage) are performed by leader of the group prior to any performance to ensure that spirits or ancestors give their 'blessings' and do not disrupt the performance but instead join in and help 'inspire' the performers. Instruments of the *nobat* (royal court ensemble) are also considered sacred by the players and certain rituals are

performed to please the spirits residing in them (Raja Iskandar, 2009). Thus, to infuse these indigenous practices with Islamic beliefs, rituals attached to some performance are sprinkled with Islamic names, while incantations and supplications were Islamized.

### **3. Kelantan Indigenous Arts**

Malay traditional performing arts evolved from simple performances such as storytelling, solo theatre and *berbalas pantun* (verse debates). The earliest forms of Malay music, dance and theatre such as *Bagih* and *Main Teri* developed out of the indigenous healing rituals, still maintained today by the *Orang Asli* or indigenous people, such as the *Temiar* (Roseman, 1991). Due to centuries of cross-cultural exchanges of communities and cultures, Malay performing arts have numerous foreign influences such as from India, the Middle East, China and Portugal. For example, *Mak yong* and *menora* dance theatres are a fusion of ancient animistic rituals, dance movements, acting, and music inspired by Thai-Buddhist texts.

Even among the Malays in Kelantan, new forms of performing arts emerged as a result of religious and cultural influences from the Indian sub-continent and other parts of the Malay Archipelago. Middle Eastern influences are evident in a number of Malay art forms such as the *zapin* dance of Johor and the use of instruments such as the *gambus* or *oud*. More recent influences came from Indonesia in the form of *Gamelan*, *Barongan*, *Kuda Kepang* and *Randai*. Kelantan indigenous customs and performing arts are not spared of those influences. Some of their well-preserved custom, performing arts and pastime activities that are still in practice today includes; *Dikir Barat*, *Mak Yong*, *Menora*, *Main Teri*, *Tari Inai*, *Rebana Ubi*, *Bird Singing Activities*, *Gasing* (top-spinning), *Kite flying Wau Bulan* (Moon-Kite)

#### *3.1 Dikir Barat*

The authentic Kelantan performing art, which is *Dikir Barat*, a dominant traditional song is still being practice and gaining popularity and recognized nationally. According to Malm (1974), *dikir barat* is a style of call and response singing originating in Kelantan. Although there is no actual set size, but is typically performed by groups of ten to fifteen members (Patricia, 2003). It is performed in a group with two leading singers in competitive environments. A group usually sits cross-legged on a platform, sometimes surrounded by the audience. Where the *dikir barat* is

performed competitively, the two competing groups will both be on the stage at the same time (Patricia, 2003).

*Dikir barat* group, which may be of any size, is led by a *tukang karut* who makes up poems and sings them as he goes along. The chorus echoes in response, verse by verse. *Dikir barat* groups usually perform during various festive occasions, and their poems are usually light entertainment and may be about any topic, but are not religious in nature. The chorus traditionally consists of all men, but modern groups, especially those performing on television, often include women. Traditionally, no musical instruments are used; the singing being accompanied instead by rhythmic clapping and energetic body movements. Some groups however do use a pair of frame drums or *rebana*, a shallow gong and a pair of maracas, for accompaniment (Aziz & Wan, 1994). In a typical *Dikir barat* performance, the group will perform in two segments. The first is led by the *tok-juara*, who is often the person in charge of the musical training of the group. This first segment usually contains the more complex musical arrangements, and will likely feature the *awok-awok* singing in unison with the *tok juara*, as well as responsorial segments of singing, similar to what the *tukang karut* does with the *awok-awok*, later in the performance. Though musically more complex than what will follow, the first segment is seen as the "low-key" segment of the performance.

The creative leader of a *Dikir barat* group is the *tukang karut*. The *tukang karut* is usually a former *tok juara* who was promoted for his talent in creating spontaneous lyrics, for his ability to do this that establishes the reputation of the *dikir barat* group. Leading the *awok-awok* (chorus) during the second and concluding segment of the performance, the *tukang karut* sings *pantun*, most of which are likely original and improvised on the occasion of the performance, but some which may be known to the audience. *Pantun* are an oral poetry form indigenous to the Malay region and are not exclusive to the *Dikir barat*. However, *Dikir barat* using *pantun* does not mean that it is a performance of poetry.

The *tukang karut* is expected to compose lyrics that touch upon life, like any poet, but he can also address social issues, legal matters, animal lifestyles, government regulations and human foibles (Zaharan, 2008). The tone can be satirical, sarcastic, or simply humorous, but above all it is expected that it be clever. The *tukang karut* makes up and sings lyrics on the topic of the performance (which may be pre-established or simply the choice of the *tukang karut*), and the *awok-awok* sings the same lyrics back to him. During the performance, members of the *awok-*

*awok* clap and perform rhythmic body movements, which bring energy to the performance (Zaharan, 2008).

The annual competitions organized by the government are evident of people acceptance of the *Dikir Barat* (Fig. 1). Recorded version in CDs can be found in the market particularly in Kelantan. More so the performance is not contrary to the teaching of Islam and in-fact it can be used as a means to propagate the teaching of Islam. *Dikir Barat* is believed to be the peoples past time activity and not the royal court performing arts.



Figure 1: *Dikir Barat* performers.

### 3.2 *Mak Yong*

The *Mak Yong* is a traditional form of dance-drama from northern Malaysia, particularly the state of Kelantan. It is used to be the royal court performing arts during the sultanate time of yesteryears. This dance drama is performed mainly by women troupes (Fig. 2), accompanied by all male musicians who play the rebab, serunai, gongs and elongated barrel drums (Zakaria, 1990). The ancient dance drama of *Mak Yong* is believed to have the Thai influence and can also be found both in Indonesia and Thailand. So is *Manora* which has a strong linkage with the Thailand.

Predominantly only Kelantan dominates among other states in trying to sustain the activity. However the art and act of dancing in *Mak Yong* is contrary to the belief of Islam. A ritual *Mak Yong* performance is more elaborate than that staged for entertainment, combining shamanism, feasting the spirits and dance theatre. It reflects the deep, mystical significance of *Mak Yong* stories and dances, and its original aim to serve as a conduit to the spirit world. Ritual performances are enacted for spiritual healing, to pay homage to a teacher and for the graduation of a performer (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2004).

Naturally with the recent resurgence of Islam the state government of Kelantan discourages this particular ancient art drama. However the federal government managed to put *Mak Yong* as “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” by UNESCO in 2005.



Figure 2: *Mak Yong* dance drama

### 3.3 *Menora*

*Menora* is another dance drama form originally from Thailand and is practised mainly in the Malaysian states bordering Thailand such as Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis. It is also known as *Nora* or *Lakon Chatri* and is performed as entertainment in conjunction with religious rituals and on Buddhist holidays, especially Wesak Day (Tan, 1988). The basic features of the performance include a lengthy invocation, a dance by the main character, and a play or skit. The invocation is enacted by slow rhythmic movements of legs, arms and fingers (Terry & Sean, 2008). Instruments used include a pair of hand cymbals, a pair of small knobbed gongs, a pair of wooden sticks, a barrel-shaped double-headed drum, a reed instrument and a single headed vase-shaped drum (Tan, 1988). Likewise *Mak Yong*, *Menora* is more obvious contrary to the belief of Islam. Thus, to sustain these indigenous arts with Islamic beliefs, performers changed costumes and discards all ritualistic aspects of the performances for religious reasons.

### 3.4 *Main Teri*

*Main Teri* is a traditional theatre often performs for healing sick patient (Fig. 3). It has the performance rituals. Although the performance is meant for healing ritualistically, it also include comedy element intermittently as an interlude. The group comprises *Tok Bomoh*, *Tok Mindok* and musical team. It is perform in the evening and often goes beyond midnight. The stage setup is casual and usually any covered space is sufficient as long as there is space for everybody

including audience. During the performance *Tok Bomoh* and *Tok Mindok* usually goes into trance occasionally and behaves according to the spirit that occupies the body.

*Main Peteri* is considered social leveller and watcher, and there are several groups that practice *Main peteri*. However members of the group usually are old people and there is no succession of young people that shows interest in it.



Figure 3: Main Teri (A traditional healing musical dance)

### 3.5 *Tari Inai*

*Tari Inai* is another type of traditional dance. It is performed at weddings ceremonies, but using a different ensemble (1 *serunai*, 2 *gendang*, 2 *canang*, 2 *tetawak* and *kesi*). The dance tends to feature acrobatic-like stunts such as the dancer bending backwards to pick up paper money (usually RM10 bills) with his mouth.

### 3.6 *Kite flying Wau Bulan (Moon-Kite)*

*Wau Bulan* is an intricately designed Malaysian moon-kite (Fig.4). It is normally decorated with floral motifs and traditionally flown by men in the Malaysian state of Kelantan. It's one of Malaysia's national symbols, along some others being the Kris and hibiscus. The logo of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) is based on this kite. There are many type of *Wau* (kite) in Malaysia, each with its own speciality; *Wau kucing* (cat kite) and *Wau Merak* (peacock kite) are some of them.

However, *Wau Bulan* is unique to the east coast state of Kelantan and the giant flying kites are often as big as a man, measuring about 3.5 meters from head to tail. It is the largest kite around and is capable of soaring to great heights. Not surprisingly, kite-flying here is a sport for men, as some kites require at least two grown up men to handle. Most of the patterns are based on local

flora and fauna like birds, animals and flowers. It is usually fitted with a stringed bow, which emits a soft, wailing sound when flown. Each kite is lavishly pasted with colourful designs and a work of art. Kites are flown throughout the year but especially after the full moon harvest. Indeed, so remarkable is the *Wau Bulan* that the national carrier, the Malaysian Airline System, has chosen it as its logo, symbolizing controlled flight. Annually in Kelantan, kite flying activity is organized by the respective authority at national and international level.



Figure 4: Image of *waubulan*

### 3.7 *Gasing* (top-spinning)

*Gasing* is a traditional game and it is a favourite pastime among the East Coast Malays, especially those in the Kelantan State. *Gasing* is about the size of a dinner plate and may weigh up to 5.5 kg. Spinning one is hardly child's play, as it requires great dexterity and precise timing. After it is launched, the *Gasing* is quickly scooped off the ground with a thin wooden bat and transferred onto a metal receptacle on a short wooden post. An expert top-spinner can make a perfectly balanced *Gasing* spin for as long as two hours at a stretch, although, according to local belief, a top will spin for 24 hours or more if a spirit enters it.

The making of a good top begins with the selection of fine piece of hard wood. In Kelantan and Terengganu, a few species are normally used (Fig. 5). Even then, only the base and upper roots or the portion where a branch joins the trunk are acceptable. The wood takes a few weeks to dry naturally. It is then shaped into a discus. For metal top, the edge has to accurately groove in order to have a good grip of the metal rim. A good top requires perfect symmetry, which is an important attribute to longer spinning time. From start to finish, a good giant metallic top might need four to six weeks to complete



Figure 5: Image of *Gasing*

### 3.8 *Bird Singing Activities*

The popular traditional past time hobby among the Kelantan male folks is bird singing enthusiast. There are several bird species popular among the enthusiast; among them are *burung Merbuk or Ketitir*, locally they are known as *burung Candik*, *burung Tekukur Jawa* respectively. The birds are kept for the tweeting melody and often the enthusiast organizes the singing competition where birds with a good voice and melody can fetch a good price. This activity is still active in Kelantan. The birdcage is also another craft worth preserving because of intricate crafts and design that can be found on it (Fig. 6). The design varies according to species of birds that goes in it.



Figure 6: Bird Cages and bird singing competition

### 3.9 *RebanaUbi*

*Rebana Ubi* is a drum instrument played by the people and is commonly found in Kelantan. This type of *Rebana* is the only *Rebana* with a decorative pattern on the body and the face and the size is relatively big, seventy centimetres (70cm) in diameter and one meter high (Fig. 7). The sound of *Rebana* often accompanies Islamic ritual such as the *zikir*. The name *Rebana* came from the Arabic word *Robbana* meaning "our God". In the early days *Rebana* is used for a distance communication purposes. Normally *Rebana* is placed on the hill-side and play with a different kind of tempo and rhythm for the different requirement and purposes ranging from

marriage declaration and hazard warning. Today *Rebana* is only played for ceremonial occasions besides for past time activity in villages.



Figure 7: Image of people playing *rebana*

## Conclusion

Art is dynamic and fluid in nature; it changes through time, shaped by religious and cultural dynamics of its surrounding. Kelantan indigenous arts that have been in practice for centuries are considered as part of Malay cultural heritage. Although, the rise in Islamic awareness and increased state of religious consciousness has questioned the permissibility of some of these indigenous heritage; however, the recent discarding of the ritualistic aspects and using of Islamic attires by performers in *Dikir Barat, Mak Yong, Menora, Main Teri* shows that the heritage art can be performed well while maintaining the Islamic good values and also sustaining the ancestral elements in the indigenous art. This is seen as Islamization process where the ancestral elements and Islamic beliefs can fuse harmoniously to sustain the Malay indigenous heritage values. The preservation of this intangible heritage will demonstrate recognition of the necessity of the past and the things that tells its story (Tanselle, 1998).

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