

SUSTAINABILITY OF WAYANG KULIT AND MAIN PUTERI CULTURAL PERFORMANCES AMONG THE MALAY SOCIETY IN EASTERN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

Wan Nor Jazmina Wan Ariffin
Faculty of Applied Social Science
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, Terengganu
(wannorjazmina@gmail.com)

Nor Izzati Abdul Ghani
Faculty of Applied Social Science
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, Terengganu
(norizzati86tie@gmail.com)

Ramle Abdullah
Faculty of Applied Social Science
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, Terengganu
(ramle@unisza.edu.my)

ABSTRACT

Wayang Kulit and Main Puteri are among the Malay cultural performances that are still actively being performed in various parts of Malaysia. Although this performance is a part of Malay culture, this art form is also appreciated by the non-Malay society, especially those residing in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. According to Jabatan Kebudayaan Negeri Kelantan (the National Department of Culture and Arts, Kelantan) (2011), only two of the eleven registered groups of wayang kulit are still actively performing. A similar situation is happening with main puteri, where challenges are faced in sustaining interest in this traditional art form among the younger generation. Both individually and in groups, those involved in these art forms are striving to ensure that the traditional performances are preserved and do not become extinct due to modernity. Therefore this study focuses on the factors that influence how this art form is able to survive until today. The study was carried out on two wayang kulit groups named Kumpulan Sri Campuran and Kumpulan Suara Emas, and one main puteri group named Kumpulan Seni Warisan Melayu, all of which are still actively performing in Kelantan and Terengganu today. Interviews and participative observations were the two main techniques carried out to collect data used in this study. The study found that the existence of strong influences from popular culture affected how frequently this group gets to perform. However, there are several factors that continue to drive these groups to stay active in performing and preserving this traditional art form for the future generation, which will be discussed further in this paper. These include demand from society, government policies, government programs, the influential people who are also actively participating in these traditional performances and demand for them for medical and healing purposes.

Keywords: Main Puteri, Wayang Kulit, Sustainability, Culture, Performing Arts.

Introduction

Culture has a very broad definition that includes values and ethics, customs, traditions, rules and taboos, education and training, medicine, games, sports and various branches of art (A. Aziz Deraman 2003). Meanwhile, art is a form of culture that is divided into various elements. These consist of dance, music, drama, architecture, handicrafts, weaving, pottery and carpentry (Mohd Ghouse Nasuruddin 2003).

Art is a human expression that can reflect various aspects of life, document the order of life, thoughts and desires of a particular community (Mohd Ghouse Nasuruddin 2003). It is not merely superficial, but has internal content that consists of a value system, morals, philosophy and education practiced by a society. Traditional art performances are a form of traditional entertainment inherited from one generation to the next. It is something dynamic, not just a form of narrative, singing, music and acting but also consists of ritual elements. All of these help to sustain interest in a certain art form until today. However, it cannot be denied the existence of a variety of modern popular culture and entertainment affects the sustainability of these cultural art performances.

In the Malay society, art is highly correlates with the deep appreciation to the value of history, humanity, society, nature, divinity and life as a whole (Haryati Shafii 2010). Cultural art performances are highly valuable cultural treasures when viewed implicitly. Historically, the development of the performing arts is closely related to the daily activities of those mostly involved in subsistence economy such as agriculture. They lead a simple life and have leisure time, allowing them a lot of opportunity to play and entertain themselves. *Ulek mayang, wayang kulit, rodat, mek mulung, menora, main puteri, gamelan, zapin, kompang,*

dikir rebana and *mak yong* are a few examples of cultural art performances created by the people fill up their spare time after finishing their work (Wan Abdul Kadir Wan Yusof 1988). Each of them has its own uniqueness and is related to the local traditional values and culture. Some of these art performances have relations to rituals and ceremonies that involved the worship of spiritual elements, while others were created solely for the purpose of entertainment during leisure time or to enliven festivities. In Malaysia, traditional cultural performances such as *wayang kulit*, *mak yong* and *dikir barat* are still performed in certain ceremonies and events. Even though seldom, these performances get attention not only from the Malay community but also from non-Malays.

These traditional performances were a form of escapism, a medium for them to entertain themselves after a hard day's work. *Wayang kulit*, *menora*, *mek mulung* and *kuda kepang* are a few traditional theatre performances that relate closely with healing ritual ceremonies and beliefs. However, the tradition of Malay society in terms of entertainment gradually changed with time, causing most of these to be no longer associated with ritual beliefs. These performances were then only performed for entertainment purposes and as a way of preserving cultural heritage. Traditional performances such as *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* has been forgotten due to several factors. Not many individuals or groups that are actively perform *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* as well as the audience response was not encouraging. Most of the cultural art group which still survive has taken several initiatives itself to ensure that the arts performances will sustainable. This effort is also driven by several other factors that will be discussed further in this paper.

Main Puteri Performance. There are several traditional and cultural performances that can be classified as an alternative method in traditional healing, and these include *main puteri* and *wayang kulit*. Ancient Malay society not only considered these performances as entertainment but also as healing rituals that use psychotherapeutic methods, which treat patients with psychiatric healing (Fauzi Yaacob, 1993). In a *main puteri* performance, patients with a faint heart, exorcism, and lost the memory will be healed through the ceremony (Abdul Aziz 1965; Kramer 1970; Gimlette 1971; Chen 1973; Laderman 1988; Fauzi Yaacob 1993).

Main puteri is a healing method that uses the technique of psychotherapy. According to Fauzi Yaacob (1993), *main puteri* is a native psychotherapy of Kelantan that has been practiced since ancient times, in which this method reflects the notion the Malay society had regarding physiological symptoms and healing, that is illness and treatment. This view was also supported by Chen (2010), where he argued that the *main puteri* performance places more emphasis on the psychological aspect. He also stated that this ceremony is a form psychotherapeutic healing used by the Kelantanese people that is based on methods that involve not only the patient but also the public.

In a *main puteri* performance, Banks (1976) states that magic practitioners would usually be taken over by supernatural beings where this reflects the presence of good spirits that know the cause of the disease suffered by the patient. However, this statement differs with Firth (1976), who mentions that there have been elements of the arts in the healing ceremonies. In a *main puteri* performance, not only are the actions significant in the treatment to cure the patient, but the method or process used by the practitioners, using the spirit to perform the healing process, is also considered significant. This reflects the valuable art of healing that is dependent upon the skills of the practitioners. A study by Down (1958) looked at the symbolism aspect of the *main puteri* performance, where he stated that when the body of *Tok Teri* (leader or main person in the performance) has been taken over by supernatural beings, the *Tok Teri* would then shake his head and hips, with the intention of frightening the spirit that is affecting the patient.

Wayang Kulit Performance. *Wayang kulit* is an intangible cultural heritage that uses the principles of light and shadow (Umi Abdullah 2003). This traditional performance is one of the forms of entertainment in the early stages of the Malay civilization, when the Malays still believed in animism. The mindset and belief regarding the existence of spirits and supernatural beings led to the creation of performances such as the *wayang kulit*. The *wayang kulit* can also be considered as a type of Malay traditional theatre because of the elements of music, acting and singing that exist in the performance. This kind of theatre in Malay society initially related closely with the religious actions and spiritual procedures (Said Halim Said Nong 1988). At this time, Malay drama or theatre was more towards the spiritual purpose of placating the spirits of ancestors who have died, rather than to entertain an audience. The belief in the existence of spirits in all things and the need for worship rituals was still prevalent among the Malay society at this time. This led to the many rituals that were believed to be needed to link the real world and paranormal world, known as *magico ritual*.

Wayang kulit performances acted as an attempt or effort to call spirits for help and to drive out spirits that disturb weak-willed children (Said Halim Said Nong 1988). Gradually this performance became a favorite among the Malay society and eventually this ceremonial performance became a catalyst for the arts of the Malay community. *Wayang kulit* is a form of traditional theatre that reflects the cosmological beliefs within Malay society formed by animism, Hinduism and Islam (Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin 2003). The influence of other cultures found in the stories of the *wayang kulit* performances show that there are many elements of foreign cultures being absorbed into the daily life of Malay society. *Wayang kulit* also presented stories which were relatable the audience and accepted by the society. Thus, the stories were capable of describing the way of life of the Malay society from various aspects, including their mindset regarding their beliefs. It can be concluded that *wayang kulit* not only serves as a form of entertainment but is also loaded with messages about moral values in the Malay community.

Sustainability of Malay art performance. The sustainability of culture is a contradiction in terms of concept, due to the fact that the characteristic of culture itself is dynamic. Sustainability of culture can be understood or referred to as the attempts by a group of people in maintaining the practice of their culture in line with world developments without changing the core values of the culture (Ahmad Hakimi and Ahmad Zahir 2006). Malay cultural heritage consists of material and immaterial aspects, which

can be seen in the customs, beliefs, manufacture of goods, politics, social issues, economy and the arts (A. Aziz Deraman 2001). As how the nature of culture itself is frequently changing, most of Malay culture has transformed over time. Some of it are maintained, some have changed, and there are also some of it that have disappeared to become part of history. Not all cultural elements can be maintained and carried on by the new generation.

In a smaller scope of discussion, sustainability of cultural arts performances refers to how these performances, with themes based on local traditional culture, can continue to have a place in the hearts of the people without having to change the basic structure of the performance. The state of cultural arts performances is very unsecure due to the many challenges faced in ensuring continued interest from the people and in having these performances constantly being performed. The emergence of popular culture and the power of the entertainment industry have also made it more difficult to sustain the traditional forms of entertainment in today's society. The situation is more challenging with the all the external obstacles, especially in terms of modernization and globalization.

In order to preserve the elements of traditional culture, the young generation plays a very important role because cultural sustainability is in their hands. In the process of preserving culture such as art performances, one of the solutions to ensure its survival is to create a new generation of performers that can learn and be fully involved in performing arts activities. Each part of society should ensure that the young generation is aware and eager to preserve these cultural elements with deep appreciation (Humairah Hamzah et al. 2015). The process of cultural sustainability requires the collaboration from all parties including the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), arts organizations and other agencies in the form of campaigns, organizing of artistic programs, contests and other activities that will help ensure these art forms do not disappear. Cultural art performances have to receive more attention from the public. Today's phenomenon shows that the traditional arts are not given priority, and sometimes even ignored, because of the perception of some people who see these as old trends and no longer practical to be performed. Negative perceptions like this will complicate the process of preservation of the Malay traditional arts.

Research methodology. This study was conducted in several areas in two states, Terengganu and Kelantan. There were three performance groups involved in this study: *Kumpulan Seni Warisan Melayu* from Kampung Padang Luas, Besut, Terengganu, *Kumpulan Sri Campuran* from Pasir Mas, Kelantan, and *Kumpulan Suara Emas* from Bachok, Kelantan. These groups were selected because they are still actively performing. Informants selected were from the group of performers such as *Tok Teri* (the leader in *Main Puteri* performance) known as Pak Su Rani, and also *Tok Dalang* (the leader in *wayang kulit* performance) known as Pak Mat from Kumpulan Suara Emas and Pak Cu from Kumpulan Sri Campuran. The selection was made based on those who would be able to provide cooperation and information while the research is conducted.

The main issues that will be discussed in this paper are the factors contributing to the continuity and sustainability of the *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* performance. Therefore, this paper is not only to study in more depth about the structure of these performances but also to identify how this cultural performance can survive while facing the challenges of modernization and the existence of today's popular culture.

This study was conducted using qualitative methods. The use of this method is expected to uncover and give an understanding of what has happened relating to a lesser known phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin 1998). According to Zoltan (2007), qualitative data can describe and explain in detail regarding a particular phenomenon. In this paper, three techniques used in order to gain the primary data were namely participant observation, interviews and document review. Interview is one of the data collecting techniques that helped the researcher obtain information from the informants using questions related to the objectives of the study. Through the interview process, information was gained directly during the conversation.

Participant observation was the second technique used in this study. By using this technique, the researcher observed and also participated in some of the activities with the local community regarding to the subject of study. Participant observation assisted the researcher in getting a real view of the subject of study. This method was divided into two parts, observation and participation. Observation is a research technique that is often used in research to obtain preliminary information required by the researcher (Rolfe, 2001). According to Rohana Yusof (2003), this technique is a basic technique for data collection. During the *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* performance, the researcher observed continuously the structure of the performance, the behavior and character of each member of the group (especially during the actual performance). By using this technique the researcher was able to get feedback and opinions from the informants during conversations with them. Participant observation gave the researcher the opportunity to get involved in the arts activities in two levels of participation, namely passive participant observation and moderate participant observation. As a passive participant, the researcher was merely as an observer who would observe the behavior of community members involved and also watch the *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* performances from beginning to end. In the moderate level, the researcher not only observed but also participated in the activities carried out. Being a moderate participant required the researcher to assist the team members when performing such as preparing the necessary equipment and other backstage tasks.

The last technique used in this research is document study, which is very necessary to explain further about the subject of study as well as being the basis for the data gained in the research. Some of the documents that were been used for reference include books, articles, theses, research reports and websites regarding *main puteri* and *wayang kulit*.

Findings. *Wayang kulit* and *main puteri* performances are two Malay traditional types of entertainment created as a form of escapism for leisure. Although the origin of these performances was for healing purposes, it has transformed and evolved into

entertainment, especially *wayang kulit* that is now widely known as a traditional performance. However, this differs a bit with the *main puteri* performance which is performed with two purposes: entertainment and healing.

Both *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* activists face the same challenges in terms of sustainability. The main problem is the difficulty in finding a new generation of performers and activists among the young people to intently learn and inherit the skills of the performances. From the interviews conducted with the *tok dalang* (*wayang kulit*), *tok teri* (*main puteri*) and also a few other members in the performing groups found that the young generation today are not interested in watching these traditional performances, much less to delve into and learn the art form. The informant also shared that some parents themselves did not encourage their children to get involved in these traditional performances. The reason the parents are unsupportive is their negative perception about the potential of these performing arts activities. Most of them assume that participating in traditional arts performances is not profitable and will not ensure a bright future for their children.

The informants also agreed that Malay cultural performing arts such as *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* will slowly become extinct if no effort is made. One of the *tok dalang* from group *Suara Emas* said that he once even took the initiative to gather some teenage school dropouts to be trained in the skills of *wayang kulit* but unfortunately his effort did not succeed. This was because the teenagers were not really interested to become involved in the field of cultural performing arts as well as discouragement from their family. Similarly to the *main puteri*, from interviews conducted with *tok teri* and their team members, most of them think that the financial factor is the reason for most teenagers to not be attracted to this cultural art. In addition, all respondents strongly agree that traditional cultural performances today face competition with the influence of today's popular culture, causing it to become harder for traditional forms of performances to get noticed among the younger generation.

Despite all the challenges described, *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* performances still survive to this day, even if merely in a small community. There are several factors that led to the survival of these cultural performances. The first is the demand from the society for certain purposes. There are still a few of people interested to have these cultural performances to be played in certain celebrations. These invitations become a source of income for these arts groups. The *tok dalang* said they always get invitations to perform at various occasions such as weddings and festivals organized by the government (beach parties, cultural nights).

Such events often request of the *tok dalang* to present the *wayang kulit* in the form of modern-themed stories, related to current issues and comedy. Spiritual elements through traditional characters such as *Sri Rama*, *Sri Dewi* and *Laksamana* are not presented. However, invitations to perform such as these contribute positively in preserving *wayang kulit* as a traditional form of entertainment.

In contrast, for the *main puteri* performances, the main factor that makes people interested to invite their group to perform is for medical purposes. Some people in the society still believe that *main puteri* as an alternative method to treat diseases. Although modern medicine provided by hospitals and clinics are readily available and accessible, some people still prefer alternative medicine to heal spiritual afflictions. This is closely related to the society's belief about the concept of spirit in the human body. A survey conducted by the researchers found that the healing process of *main puteri* is done in the open and viewable by the public. Because this healing process also consists of entertainment, music and Mak Yong performances, it has attracted people to watch and participate in the show.

The team leader of *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* are influential people in their community. *Tok Dalang* and *Tok Teri* are well-known and respected in their community because of their skills and knowledge in their field. This proves that those who engage in Malay arts are still respected by those around him. This phenomenon gives a favorable effect on the traditional cultural performing arts.

Recommendation and Conclusion. *Wayang kulit* and *main puteri* are part of our artistic heritage inherited from previous generations. Cultural elements such as the arts always change over time as society itself changes. The challenges coming from modernization and the existence of popular culture today threatens the preservation of traditional performances such as *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* in the Malay society. Recognizing this situation, various attempts have been made by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academicians and arts organizations in order to preserve this heritage from disappearing and becoming extinct. Each of artistic heritage should be preserved even more so when dealing with today's modern world. All parties must play their respective roles, particularly in building awareness among young people about the value of a cultural heritage. The Malay society needs to realize the importance of preserving cultural arts which not only provide entertainment but also contain hidden elements that reflect the Malay identity and culture.

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