

# The Thai *Menora* in Malaysia: Adapting to the Penang<sup>1</sup> Chinese Community

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## MESI MALA AND THE THAI *MENORA*

“... There was once a princess in Thailand named Mesi Mala. She was always singing and dancing to herself. Worried about her health and state of mind, her father, the king, sent a shaman to look at her. The shaman concluded that the child could not be kept in the country. He told the king, ‘If you keep her here, some misfortune will occur. This country might be hit by storm, flood, illnesses, or warfare.’

Mesi Mala was sent away on a raft together with a few warriors and the king’s minister Phran Bun. The group finally landed on an island called Kuo Si Sang. Missing her very much, Mesi Mala’s nursemaids, Menang Dok Mai and Nang Ho Mok Ren soon joined Mesi Mala on the island.

Mesi Mala and her group on the island started producing their own music in praise of the gods. They imitated the sounds they heard in the forest. When played, the drum *klong* sounded like fruits falling on the water

[dum dum dum dum dum dum dum dum dum dum].

The sound of the *kreĳ*

[kreĳ kreĳ kreĳ]

resembled that of bamboo trees swaying in the wind. The other

instruments sounded like the cries of animals in the forest. Mesi Mala's group also practised dancing. They began performing in several nations in the region.

When Mesi Mala's father heard about this extraordinary Menora, he yearned to know about it. His ministers urged him to invite the troupe to perform in the country.

So, after many years, upon the invitation of her father, Mesi Mala and her entourage returned home. For fear that he would be recognized, the king's minister Phran Bun wore a red mask during the performance. The two nursemaids, Nang Ho Mok Ren and Menang Dok Mai wore white masks.

When the king saw Mesi Mala dancing, he exclaimed, 'Oh, how beautiful she is!' In appreciation, he gave her his crown, the *sert*. When after a while, he further exclaimed, 'She's really beautiful!' he presented her with his beaded overalls, the *thap suang*.

Fallen under her spell, the king wanted to take Mesi Mala as his wife. The shaman, however, quickly revealed, 'Your highness, this is your daughter, Mesi Mala.' The king was speechless for a while. Recovering from shock, he replied, 'If that is the case, I will give her my sword as well.' He then built a permanent stage for Mesi Mala and gave her part of his kingdom . . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Ah Perm, 23 January, 1986.

Ah Perm, the forty-six year old leader of the Rombongan Menora Thai Malaysia (the only troupe left in Penang), unfolded this *Menora* story to me as his twenty-four member troupe arrived at the shrine of Datuk Musang<sup>3</sup> in Tanjung Tokong, Penang, to celebrate the Datuk's birthday which falls on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month of the Chinese lunar calendar.<sup>4</sup> Three days of *Menora* were to be performed.

While Ah Perm supervises the unloading of props and musical instruments from the van to the makeshift stage built specially for the three-day performance, he continues, "What I have just related is the origin of the *Menora* as my father told me years ago. Mesi Mala's spirit still prevails during performances and invocations are addressed to her and to other deities present." It is believed that the secrets of the *Menora* have been passed down from generation to generation since Mesi Mala's time. Ah Perm further emphasizes that this is the reason why the *Menora* troupe is always a family affair. His own troupe, the Rombongan Menora Thai Malaysia, for instance, was started by his father Menora<sup>5</sup> Khai and his father's friend Pa' Chan Dee many years ago. Subsequently, the troupe was passed down to Ah Perm and

Pa' Chan Dee's son, Nai Wan Dee (62).

Ah Perm and Nai Wan Dee have in turn been handing down their knowledge of the *Menora* to their children and to their respective families. Ah Perm first taught his eldest daughter, Prakong, the art of *Menora*. His son, Term (18), now plays one of the clowns. Ah Perm is also training his youngest daughter, Suni (15), whom he hopes will replace him as teacher and manager of the troupe one day. "My granddaughter, Prakong's eldest daughter (4), follows us to all our performances and can play the *krek* now!" proclaims the proud grandfather.

Nai Wan Dee, too, has taught his son, Thawatt Aronratana (31), who is married to Prakong (Ah Perm's daughter), the staging of *Menora*. Nai Wan Dee's own wife, Seah Bee (57), plays the *krek* and is in charge of make-up while his daughter, Sabai (34), acts in *Menora* in newly-created stories.<sup>6</sup>

Besides family members, Ah Perm has a few disciples like Chem (21) and Nu Phan (35) who are "qualified" *Menora* actors, and Kim Lean (23), a graduated *Menora* actress. Most of the members of the troupe have left the care of their small plots of *padi* land or their small holdings of rubber trees to relatives for the next three days. Those who are usually employed have also taken the necessary leave.

#### THE SHOW: PERFORMANCE SEQUENCE

It is 11 A.M. Children and elderly people swarm the temporary wooden-stage to welcome the arrival of the troupe.

The troupe quickly finishes setting up the instruments. The *cing* (two thick cup-shaped hand cymbals joined by a cord) and the *mong* (a pair of small knobbed gongs suspended in a box) are placed on the left side of the stage (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 4). These two instruments are played by one musician. The performer strikes the boss of each *mong* with a padded stick using one hand, and strikes or dampens the two hand cymbals with the other. Next to the *cing* and *mong* are the *krek* (a pair of wooden sticks hit together) and the *klong* (a barrel shaped doubleheaded drum). The two drum heads are covered with cow or buffalo hide fastened with nails. Two supporting rods elevate the drum on one side. The *klong* is struck with a pair of sticks.

On the other side of the stage are placed the *pi* (a reed instrument) and a pair of *thap* (single-headed vase-shaped drums). Each drum is held in a horizontal position, and is struck by one hand. The other hand is used to cover or open the base to produce various timbres of sound.

The musicians take their place. The *tang kreng* (putting down of

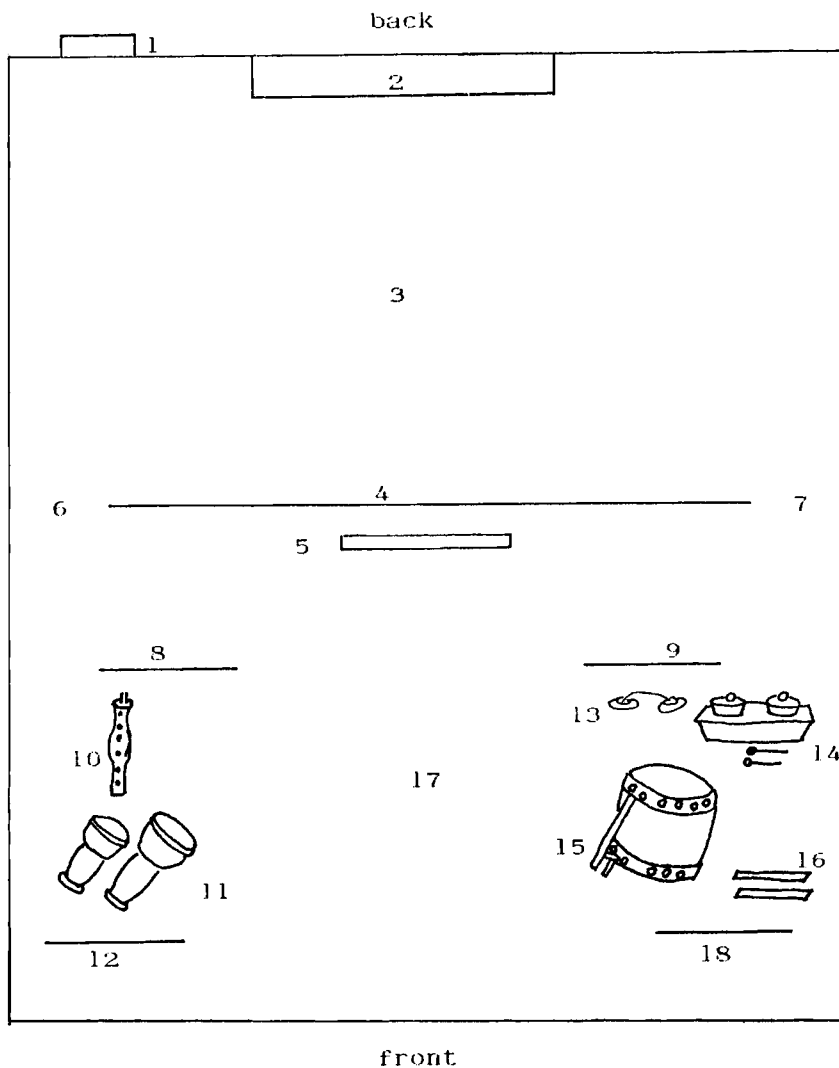


Fig. 1. Layout of stage. 1 stairs, 2 altar, 3 changing area, 4 backdrop, 5 stool (throne), 6 entrance, 7 exit, 8, 9, 12, 18 side wings, 10 *pi*, 11 *thap*, 13 *cing*, 14 *mong*, 15 *klong*, 16 *krekh*, 17 acting area.

instruments) is performed to notify Datuk Musang that the troupe has arrived. Variations of *phleng dern* (walking tune) and *phleng ram* (dancing tune) are played.<sup>7</sup> Now that the two spirits, that of Mesi Mala and Datuk Musang have been notified, the performers go about hanging up the backdrops (forest scene and palace scene), curtains and side-wings, and putting mats on the floor. They set up a table at the back



Fig. 3. Menora Chem dances the *ram na man* (curtain dance).



Fig. 2. *Ang-bin* (red-face) clown acting as the medicine man.



Fig. 4. The *Menora* stage and audience.

of the stage as a temporary altar for Mesi Mala.

When everything is set, *berk rong* (opening of the stage) is conducted. This ceremony is performed only once before the first performance. The host, Loh, brings to the stage five red candles, a plate of *sirih* (betel leaf) and a red packet on a tray. One *kemei* (bangle) is placed on each *thap* while three *lep* (nails), three folded *sirih* and one lighted candle are laid on each *klong*. In front of the sacred *sert* (the symbol of highest award worn by Mesi Mala), are arranged a lighted candle and a folded *sirih*. The blind cousin-brother of Ah Perm, Din Klew (74), the oldest member of the troupe, chants prayers to Mesi Mala and blesses the instruments. At the end of this ceremony, the musicians hit their instruments three successive times. Everyone then takes a short rest.

As it approaches 1 P.M., the stage begins to bustle again. While the performers put on their colorful costumes, the music begins. The same sequence is repeated during all performances. The musicians take up their instruments and ' *khern klong* ' (start the drum *klong*), ' *khern pi* ' (start the wind instrument *pi*) and ' *khern thap* ' (start the drum *thap*). They play the introductory piece announcing to the neighborhood that the show is about to begin. Soon the musicians switch to various other pieces frequently used in the *Menora* performance, mainly the *phleng thone* (simple playing), *phleng dern* (walking tune for rough characters) and other *phleng* (tunes), and finally end with the *cherd*, a piece for spiritual beings. This piece is also used when a deity appears on stage, when a character flies like a bird, or during fighting scenes when the help of a deity is required. After a brief pause, the musicians close this first part of the performance with the *long thap* (stopping the drums).

In the meantime, all the performers pray to Mesi Mala at the temporary altar on stage. They then kneel and bow to the elderly people and senior members of the troupe before they put on their make-up. The purpose of this ritual is 1) to pay respects to the master, the senior actors, and actresses and 2) to ask for their forgiveness in advance, in the event the performers commit errors or should their performances not come up to par.

The blind Din Klew, wearing only a shirt and sarong, is once again led out to perform *kart rong* which is both a prayer to Mesi Mala and an invocation to the spirits and *keramat* to protect as well as to enjoy the performance. Sitting cross-legged on stage, Din Klew recites a prayer in Thai. He is accompanied by the *cing* and the *kreik* and later by all the other instruments. After about thirty to forty-five minutes, he chants ' *khern kreng* ' (start the instruments), ' *khern thap* '

(start the *thap*), ' *khern klong* ' (start the *klong*) and the *phleng dern* (walking tune) is rendered. Din Klew gropes his way to the side of the stage. He picks up the *krek* and plays with the musicians.

Ah Perm too joins the musicians taking over the *thap*. His daughter, Suni, is dancing the apprentice dance known as *ram klang rong* (Center Stage Dance) and he wants to play for her. Suni cannot wear the *sert* (crown) and the *thap suang* (beaded shirt) yet, as she has not graduated as a *Menora*. She wears the *hang hoong* (tail), and dances and sings about what she sees ". . . I see a flower, a lotus flower, it has just opened, it is so beautiful, I feel like picking it . . ." Ah Perm translates the Thai verse into the Hokkien dialect so that the audience may understand the song. Suni dances and sings a few other scenes. As soon as she finishes, Ah Perm rushes to the back and puts on his own make-up and costume.

From backstage, this afternoon's graduated performer, Menora Chem, begins singing verses to introduce the *ram na man* (curtain dance. See Fig. 3.). He walks onto the stage bedecked in full costume—*sert* (crown), *thap suang* (beaded shirt), *hang hoong* (bird's tail), *lep* (long fingernails), *kemei* (bangles), *pha nung* (strips of cloth) and *song sai wan* (beaded strips). He begins to dance.

When Menora Chem finally sits down, the story proper for the afternoon begins. By this time, the size of the crowd has increased. Many members of the audience know that the *ang-bin* (red face) clowns would soon appear.

Again, from backstage, Ah Perm gives the background of the story in both Hokkien and Malay:

Ladies and gentlemen, this afternoon's story *Phra Rot Jo Sit*, a true story, is one of the oldest and most popular *Menora* stories. It is about a rich childless couple who was granted twelve girls successively after praying to the spirits. The girls soon used up all the money, since they ate a lot. No longer able to feed them, the old man packed twelve packets of rice (actually only one packet had rice, the others were filled with sand) and brought his twelve girls to the jungle. They were left to wander in the jungle. Crying, they shared their one packet of rice. After a while they reached a pond. Eleven of the sisters mischievously poked the eyes of eleven fishes with twigs while Nang Po Wak Di, the youngest poked one eye of a fish.

They continued their journey and soon reached the territory of a giant, Sun Sa. When Sun Sa saw the girls resting under a tree, he did not have the heart to eat them. Instead, he brought

them home and took care of them as his own children.

One day, when Sun Sa was out hunting, the twelve sisters decided to take a walk. They met an old man who told them that the giant ate people. Scared, the sisters ran away. After a week of hunting, the giant came back and was annoyed to find the twelve sisters gone.

Meanwhile, the girls had reached a river. As they swam, Phra Rot Jo Sit, the king, came hunting. He fell in love with the twelve sisters immediately, brought them back to his palace and married them. Soon all twelve became pregnant.

In the meantime, Sun Sa, the giant, had followed the twelve girls to the courtyard of Phra Rot Jo Sit. When he saw the twelve sisters playing with the king, he grew very angry and jealous. He changed himself into a very beautiful maiden. When Phra Rot Jo Sit saw her, he fell in love and took her as wife number thirteen.

The twelve sisters hated this new wife. They spat at her and ill-treated her. So Sun Sa had their eyes gouged out. That was to pay for the sin they had committed when they poked the eyes of the fishes in the pond. Nang Po Wak Di had only one eye gouged out.

The twelve sisters were sent to the land of the giants where they had to live in a cave. The eyes were all sent to Sun Sa's daughter. One by one the twelve sisters gave birth to babies. Except for Nang Po Wak Di, all ate up their own babies because they were so short of food. Nang Po Wak Di lied to her sisters that her baby had died during childbirth. In this way she saved her child who was named Phra Rot Noi.

The gods were pleased and so took care of him. They sent a fighting cock, a prized possession. Phra Rot Noi began to travel with his cock and entered it for cockfights. Whenever his cock won, he would ask for twelve packets of rice for his mother and his aunts. But Sun Sa, the giant, soon found out about all this.

And now today's performance begins. Come and see what happens to the queen who is in fact Sun Sa, the giant.<sup>8</sup>

As *Menora* tradition compels, Menora Chem starts the story by introducing himself as Phra Rot Jo Sit. He then leaves the stage and makes way for the queen (Sun Sa—the thirteenth wife) to sit on the throne. Her servant stands by her side. She introduces herself and declares that she is afraid that Phra Rot Noi might kill her when he grows up. She has a plan to get rid of him. First, she pretends she is sick. Whereas the queen speaks in Thai Ah Perm translates each of



her lines into Hokkien.

This afternoon's performance revolves around the king and his *ang-bin* (red face) clowns trying to find out what is wrong with the queen. Finally, Phra Rot Jo Sit orders the clowns, Khun Keow and Khun Krai,<sup>9</sup> to look for a medicine man to cure the queen (Fig. 2).

Music is used to accompany the movement of characters especially when they are walking or dancing and to create the correct mood. In addition, ad lib beating of drums and cymbals adds emphasis to what is being said, or underscore the punchline of a joke.

So, while a tale which is centuries old is acted out with performers singing poetry to different melodies, the *ang-bin* appear to explain what is happening and joke in a mixture of Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, and English. Humorous situations are often created when the *ang-bin* clowns

- 1) play with literal translations of words:  
e.g., Khun Keow asks Khun Krai to look for a *Tok Bomoh* (meaning an old shaman in Malay) but Khun Krai says he does not know any *Tok Bo Moh* (meaning a hairless old man in Hokkien);
- 2) try to speak in broken English:  
e.g., Khun Keow asks the *bomoh* "what is your name?" He replies, "My surname [is] 'Half,' my given name 'Past-six.' Khun Keow then turns around and laughs, "Oh your name [is] Plastic *long* (plastic bag in Hokkien)," or
- 3) carry-on in antics like slapping someone violently on the back, walking with a funny bent, wearing funny shoes, falling over, etc.

Ah Perm stresses that in predominantly Chinese areas of a town, the *ang-bin*'s role is emphasized because they act as translators as well. From this point of view, the clowns' role can be seen to be extremely important. By and large, the clowns must be able to speak Hokkien or Cantonese, the dialects of the local Chinese and perhaps a sprinkling of English in addition to Thai and Malay.

As the clock in the house nearby strikes 5 P.M., Ah Perm (acting as Khun Keow) comes forward and performs the *hai phorn* (requesting for blessings). From the deities present (especially Datuk Musang and Mesi Mala), he asks for permission to stop and for blessings for all who are present. He also advises children to be good and to study hard. Ah Perm usually sings this in Hokkien in Chinese areas and in Malay in Malay areas. Before entering backstage he takes off his mask.

Finally, Nora Chem performs the *ram lerk* (final dance). It is now 5:05 P.M. and time for a break. During this break, the performers take a shower, rest a while, eat their dinner, and prepare for the next

performance which begins at 8 P.M.

The performance on the second day is essentially the same as the first. At about 1 P.M., the musicians *khern klong*, *khern pi*, *khern thap*, calling the audience to come for the afternoon show. Backstage, the performers go through the rituals of praying to Mesi Mala and bowing to the elders. Then the *kart rong*, *ram thong rong* and *ram na man* are performed. After this, the story of Phra Rot Jo Sit resumes.

The clowns continue to look for a medicine man (*bomoh*) to cure the queen. They hear that there is a reliable one living quite far away. A good half hour passes by while the *ang-bin* clowns, Khun Keow and Khun Krai and two others, decide on what to take with them and which route to travel on. When they reach their destination, they spend another hour trying to persuade the medicine man to follow them. The story ends with the medicine man and the clowns arriving at the palace of Phra Rot Jo Sit. However, the *bomoh* is unable to cure the queen of her strange illness and is finally sent off. Ah Perm comes forward and performs the *hai phorn*.

The climax is reached on the third night which coincides with the actual birthdate of Datuk Musang. A big *kenduri* (feast) is to be held. Offerings of fruits, flowers, *nasi kunyit* (yellow rice), curry chicken and various kinds of cakes are placed in front of Datuk Musang's shrine while each devotee offers joss-sticks to him.

The *Menora* performance begins at 6:30 P.M. with the *khern klong* followed by the *kart rong*. At about 7:30 P.M., all the performers come down from the stage and walk to the shrine to *ho siew* (pay homage) to Datuk Musang. Surin is to dance the *ram wai kru* (Homage to Deity Dance) or *sip song tha* (Twelve Patterns Dance), the same dance that is performed to pay homage to the Menora Mahaguru or teacher, Mesi Mala.

*Sirih* is presented to Ah Perm (the teacher of the troupe) and to Surin (the dancer) by Loh, who is acknowledged as the 'interpreter' and 'mediator' of Datuk Musang. After the dance, the performers return to the stage to continue with *ram thong rong* and *ram na man*.

At this point, the *kenduri* begins. Loh brings part of the offerings (food) and *sirih* to the stage for the performers. Everyone present partakes of the meal for the sake of peace and prosperity.

While devotees, through Loh, seek advice from Datuk Musang concerning their respective illnesses and other personal problems, the story of Phra Rot Jo Sit continues. In condensed form, Ah Perm relates to the audience what has transpired over the past two days' performances. He then summarizes tonight's story:

Sun Sa tells the king that in order to get well, she needs to eat a fruit called *buah limau tau salak* which can only be obtained from a far away place called Kota Serang Semut where the giants reside. 'Your son, Phra Rot Noi can fetch the fruit for me,' she adds.

So Phra Rot Noi is sent to the land of the giants to get the fruit. Before he leaves, Sun Sa hangs a note written in her own language (the language of the giants) around the horse's neck, 'If this boy arrives in the morning, eat him in the morning; if he arrives at night, eat him at night, eat him all up!'

On his way to Kota Serang Semut, Phra Rot Noi stops for a rest. One of the good deities (Ti Kong: God of Heaven) sees the message and changes the instructions to, 'If this boy arrives in the morning, serve him in the morning; if he arrives at night, serve him at night, do not harm him.'

As a result, Phra Rot Noi is served day and night on arrival at the land of giants. Sun Sa's daughter even returns the eyes of Phra Rot Noi's mother and aunts when asked by Phra Rot Noi. Overjoyed, Phra Rot Noi returns home and fixes the eyes for his aunts and his mother. However, he refuses to see his father. The king is very angry and orders his warriors to arrest Phra Rot Noi.

And so, on with tonight's performance . . . .

Khun Keow and Khun Krai, the *ang-bin* warriors, take half an hour to decide how they should catch Phra Rot Noi: with a knife, a lasso, a sword, or what? Finally when they arrive, Phra Rot Noi's mother and eldest aunty (Ah Perm wearing a white mask) plead with them not to take Phra Rot Noi. They tell the warriors their sad story, of how their eyes had been gouged out, how they were banished, how they were so hungry that they had to eat their own babies, and so on.

While mother, aunty, son, and warriors are crying, Ah Perm asks for permission to end the show early. It is already 10:30 P.M. and they have been performing since 6:30 P.M. Everyone is tired, he says. He sings the *hai phorn*, the request for peace and prosperity from the gods. Once again, for the last time, he advises the children to be good and to study hard.

Finally, Din Klew is again led out to the centre front of the stage to perform the *boo char* (closing ceremony). The *sert* is placed on a *thap*. Prayers are chanted. Spirits from both sides are thanked for coming to watch the performances and for protecting them from evil spirits in the locality. Holy water is prepared from water mixed with flowers. It is then given to the devotees and performers so that they

may cleanse themselves and ensure that all will have a good year.

PAST AND FUTURE: PROBLEMS OF SURVIVAL

Backstage, Ah Perm sighs a sigh of relief and satisfaction. The performances these past three days have gone well. He had played multiple roles—director, producer, leading actor, translator, teacher and musician—he looks tired indeed. More relaxed now that all is well, he confides some of his inner thoughts to me, “We have gone through hard times. At one stage, we could not even afford instruments. Nai Wan Dee, Din Klew and I had to use our voices to produce sounds. To imitate the *thap*, we would sing

[cap cap dung ting]

The musical notation consists of four notes within square brackets. The first two notes are quarter notes labeled 'cap', the third is a quarter note labeled 'dung', and the fourth is a quarter note labeled 'ting'.

and to imitate the *klong*, we would sing

[dug ge dug ge dug ge dug ge dug].

The musical notation consists of eight notes within square brackets. The notes are quarter notes labeled 'dug' and eighth notes labeled 'ge'. The sequence is: 'dug' (quarter), 'ge' (eighth), 'dug' (quarter), 'ge' (eighth), 'dug' (quarter), 'ge' (eighth), 'dug' (quarter), 'ge' (eighth), 'dug' (quarter).

But we persevered. We did not want our cultural heritage passed down from our fathers to die out.”

“At the same time, we did not receive much response from the people in Penang. The audience used to say that they did not understand the *Menora*. Hence, how could they be expected to welcome, receive, or respond to it,” continues Ah Perm. To solve the problem, Ah Perm and Nai Wan Dee made the *ang-bin* clowns speak Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, English, and sometimes even Tamil. Whenever the king or queen spoke, the dialogue was translated into Hokkien, Cantonese, and Malay. The clowns also involved the audience by asking them questions and having them respond to these questions. Slowly, the *Menora* began to draw the crowds. People began to cry and laugh when they came to watch the *Menora*. “Today, many Chinese bring their grandchildren to the performances. The stories are didactic and we try to impart morals. We advise the children in the audience to study hard,” adds Ah Perm.

Presently, Ah Perm and Nai Wan Dee have all the instruments, props, and costumes. They have an audience, but new problems have cropped up. According to them, it is not easy to sustain a group like this. First, it is extremely difficult to find someone who is willing to undergo the rigorous training necessary to “graduate” as a full-fledged *Menora*.

During the period of apprenticeship, the disciple stays with the

teacher, works with him during the day, learns *Menora* at night, and earns some pocket money from him. There are three stages of training involved:

1. *Hua Chook*. This stage runs from the beginning of one's apprenticeship to the age of seventeen. The trainee keeps his hair long (a male trainee ties his hair in a knot in front) and learns the art of dancing. At the end of this stage, there is a ceremony where *sirih* is given to the teacher in full costume or to an elder in the troupe. The apprentice now moves on to the second stage of training;
2. *Cham Pa*. The trainee can now wear the *hang hoong* (tail) and the strips of beads around his/her neck. The trainee learns the twelve patterns of dance (homage to the teacher), various other dances, stories, instruments and the requirements to be a *Menora*;
3. *Menora*. When the apprentice turns twenty-one, the graduation ceremony is held. *Menora* performances are held in the house for three days. The hair of the male apprentice is cut off. The female apprentice is allowed to keep her hair. He/she has to perform various dances and stories at three temples and three houses. If the apprentice fails to perform any of the dances or the stories, he cannot graduate and has to learn more. If he passes the test, he becomes a full-fledged *Menora*.

During this period of training the trainee must be 'pure' and must refrain from having sexual relations with any one. "If the trainee has sinned, when he/she wears the crown, blood may come out of his/her face or something untoward may happen. Many of our young people cannot stand the rigor and discipline involved in the training," declares Ah Perm.

Secondly, *Menora* apprentices are hard to come by because the income of a *Nora* actor or actress is not much on the average. The troupe receives M\$3,000-4,000 for three days of performances. Out of this, transport (about M\$200) and food (about M\$300) are provided for all the individuals. The remainder is then divided into shares as follows:

- main actor/actress—1 1/2 shares
- supporting actor/actress—1 1/2 shares
- comedian—1 1/2 shares (leading role), 1 share (non-leading role)
- musician—1 share
- owner—1 1/2 shares (he usually performs as well)
- apprentice—3/4 share
- maintenance of property (instruments, props, costumes)—1 share

There are usually twenty to twenty-five members in the troupe.

Finally, it is difficult to keep a fully trained *Menora* because "outside influences are too great. When they reach seventeen or eighteen years, many of our children drink and party with their friends. That

usually marks the end of their *Menora* career. After they get married, many drop off. My own daughter, Prakong, has not been acting since child birth," adds Ah Perm. After a moment of silence, he sighs, "My only hope now is in my youngest daughter, Suni. If she loves our heritage, she will continue acting even after she marries."

He gets up and joins the others as they pack up to leave. The musicians perform the *jok kreng* to let Datuk Musang know that they are leaving. The audience goes its own way. No one cares to ask for the ending of the story. It is not important. They enjoyed the show: the dancing, the singing and especially the jokes of the *ang-bin* clowns.

And so end the three-day celebrations. But for Ah Perm and his disciples, the training, the search for new ways to attract audiences and to recruit new disciples continue. The following day, they must start preparing for the next performance to be held in the heart of urban Penang next month—a performance for the birthday of another Datuk Kong called Datuk Hitam.<sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Penang is one of the few areas in Malaysia with a Chinese majority. Out of a population of 476,041 inhabitants on the island itself, 68% are Chinese, 24% are Malays, 5% are Indians and 3% are Europeans, Eurasians, Arabs, Bengalis, and others (figures of the 1980 population census, *Star* 22 Dec., 1981). Penang is also one of the oldest overseas Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia.

2. This is a folktale concerning the origins of *Menora* as told by Ah Perm. Ah Perm does not remember the name of the country nor the name of the king. This story was related to him by his father when he was small. A similar folk tale about the origin of *Menora* in Kedah has been documented by Ghulam Sarwar Yousof (1982, 59–60). According to Yousof, the king's name was Thau A Thit, his wife was Armit and the island Mesi Mala landed on was Pulau Kacang. After sending Mesi Mala away, King Thau A Thit's kingdom was hit by an unknown disease. Many people began to die. When brought for consultation, the shaman declared that it was only through having a *Menora* performance that the people could be saved. True enough, as the story goes, after Mesi Mala's troupe performed, the country was saved.

For other accounts of the origins of *Menora*, see Chan (1984, 8–16), Yousof (1982, 53) and Ginsburg (1972, 170). Ginsburg claims that the term *Menora* comes from the name of a heavenly bird maiden, Manohara, who married a human prince called Suthon (Sudhana in Sanskrit). This story is found in the Jataka tales.

3. Datuk Musang is the name of a Datuk Kong, a type of Malaysian earth god to whom Muslim characteristics are often attributed. (Both terms *datuk* and *kong* mean grandfather, the former being the Malay term and the latter its Hokkien equivalent). Loh, the chosen "interpreter" and "mediator" for Datuk Musang clarifies further that the Datuk Kong are "humans who have died and who have been reincarnated in spiritual form."

Datuk Musang is known in Penang for his miraculous cures. Loh himself came to know of Datuk Musang while he was looking for a cure for his mother's illness

about eleven years ago. After consulting with Datuk Musang, Loh's mother was cured of her illness. Since then, Loh has been working as a full time "possessed interpreter" for Datuk Musang. He "interprets" the advice of the Datuk for devotees seeking help. Those who have been cured of illness or who have had their wishes granted come together each year to have a *kenduri* (feast). They also stage the *Menora* for Datuk Musang during his birthday.

4. A form of theatre that has religious functions, the *Menora* is often performed to celebrate the birthday of the Datuk Kong, to cure sickness and to celebrate Siamese temple festivals. It is also performed during weddings.

5. The term *Menora* is used to mean the theatre form as well as the graduated performer. The shortened version *Nora* is also used often.

6. Both Ah Perm and Nai Wan Dee train all their respective children to become graduated performers (see above for a description of the training). The graduated performer can then play any role in the *Menora* story (the main roles being the king, queen and clown). However, if (for reasons given above) the trainee does not graduate, he can still perform the clown role or other minor roles. However, he cannot wear the *sert* (crown). He also cannot play the role of the king nor dance the *ram na man* (curtain dance) which is performed by the graduated performer before the story begins.

7. I was told that before leaving the house, the troupe had performed *jok kreng* (lifting of instruments) and burnt joss-sticks to inform Mesi Mala that the troupe was ready to leave.

8. See Chan (1984, 68-79) who documents a similar story entitled Putera Sri Buana, performed in Kelantan.

9. These are the two main clowns in stories with kings and queens. They double up as warriors. Usually one or two more clowns are added but these do not have specific names.

10. This paper is essentially based on the three-day *Menora* performances which I observed at the shrine of Datuk Musang in Tanjung Tokong from the 22nd to the 24th of February, 1986. Hokkien was the main dialect used.

Subsequently, I have been able to substantiate this account with additional interviews and observations of other *Menora* performances by Ah Perm's troupe in Penang as well as performances by another troupe from Baling, Kedah.

I wish to thank Mr. Loh, the chosen "mediator" for Datuk Musang who introduced me to the Rombongan *Menora* Thai Malaysia and spent hours discussing Chinese religion (specifically Datuk Kong) and the *Menora* with me. To Ah Perm, the leader of the Rombongan *Menora* Thai Malaysia, who patiently explained everything that happened during the performances, I owe special thanks. I would also like to thank Thawatt Aronratana who helped make sense of the music played during the *Menora* performances. To all the other members of the Rombongan *Menora* Thai Malaysia who accepted me warmly and shared with me many hours of fun and laughter, I express my gratitude.

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