



## *Mak Yong*, a UNESCO “Masterpiece”

### Negotiating the Intangibles of Cultural Heritage and Politicized Islam

*Mak yong* is a Malay dance drama once performed for entertainment and healing ceremonies by itinerant theater troupes that traveled throughout northern Malaysia, southern Thailand, and the Riau archipelago of Indonesia. Incorporated into national displays of Malaysian cultural heritage since the mid-1970s, *mak yong* was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005. The UNESCO intangible cultural heritage (ICH) designation for *mak yong* was filed and accepted while *mak yong* was officially banned in its home state of Kelantan. The validity of *mak yong* as a symbol of Malay culture, and its ban in Kelantan for religious reasons, are frequently debated in Malaysia. Malaysian *mak yong* provides a case study of the divergent ways in which administrative and local communities of practice implement the ICH concept of “safeguarding” in a highly charged political-religious field. International UNESCO designation, ICH safeguarding, and international human rights discourses have to contend with Malay ethnic nationalism and political Islamic movements that have alternatively sought to eradicate the art through bans or remake *mak yong* in their own image.

KEYWORDS: Intangible cultural heritage—UNESCO Masterpiece—Islam—politics—nationalism—communities of practice—safeguarding

*Mak yong*, a form of Malay theater, was proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005 and incorporated into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. As Michael Dylan Foster notes, “in some places a UNESCO designation is seen as a financial boon, in some places it is a point of pride and identity, in some places it is a burden, and elsewhere it is merely an adornment” (2015, 10). In Malaysia, the *mak yong* UNESCO designation has been scripted into the drama of Malaysian political theater. The decision to nominate *mak yong* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity was made at a time when the Malaysian federal majority party of United Malay National Organization or UMNO was engaged in a tense political battle for the votes of the Malay Muslim majority with Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS, the Islamic opposition party in power in *mak yong*'s home state of Kelantan. Citing *mak yong*'s links to ritual and pre-Islamic religious systems, transgendered performance, and the prominent role of women as performers, PAS banned *mak yong* in Kelantan in 1991 under the same law that banned acts of vice such as prostitution and gambling (Hardwick 2013; Khoo, Tikamdas, and Wong 2003). While the selection of the embattled form by UNESCO brought *mak yong* international visibility and encouraged the development of a federally supported national form, the UNESCO declaration and subsequent inscription have had a marginal effect on its continued viability as a community-based art in Kelantan.

#### THE MACROCOSM: *MAK YONG*, UNESCO, AND THE STATE

Valdimar Hafstein notes “[o]ne of the major controversies in the Intergovernmental Meeting of Experts that drafted the Intangible Heritage Convention concerned the relationship between this government and the communities that practice it, in particular the role of these communities vis-à-vis that of states” (2014, 30). This article provides a case study of how the politics of nationalism, Islamism, and intangible cultural heritage has affected the way in which *mak yong* continues to be taught and performed in Malaysia. I begin by investigating how one lineage of Malaysian *mak yong* performance went through a process of codification and simplification as it was incorporated into the curriculum of Malaysia's Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK), the National Arts Academy, which would later become

Akademi Seni, Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA), the National Art, Culture, and Heritage Academy. I then examine how the 2005 UNESCO declaration and 2008 inscription of *mak yong* as intangible cultural heritage affected the development of a national form of *mak yong*. I explore how Malaysian political Islamic movements have led both to outright bans of traditional performance and attempts to create a “sharia-compliant” form of *mak yong* currently under the review of Kelantanese religious authorities.

Shifting my perspective from an analysis of top-down national and state interventions that seek to transform Malaysian *mak yong* to suit national, state, and political religious interests, I turn to investigate how the designation of *mak yong* by UNESCO as a “Masterpiece” of intangible cultural heritage has affected the experiences of traditional stakeholders and communities of practice (Adell et al. 2015). Jean Lave notes “[m]y work as a whole attempts, it has been said, to excavate the politics of knowledge that inform theories of learning, and to reconceive learning in/as transformation, and as itself always a cultural/historical practice” (2019, 4). A community of practice is a process of social learning that takes place when people with a common interest over a long period of time share strategies and determine innovations (Lave and Wenger 1991). In *Learning and Everyday Life*, Lave clarifies that communities of practice can be found “[w]herever people engage for substantial periods of time, day by day in doing things in which their ongoing activities are interdependent, [and] learning is a part of changing participation in changing practices” (Lave 2019, 119). Nicolas Adell, Regina Bendix, Chiara Borolotto, and Markus Tauschek apply the term “communities of practice” to describe the individuals on multiple levels that work together in the heritage-making process (2015).

On the local level, people committed to maintaining or reviving a particular tradition can be viewed as forming interdependent communities of practice that may be motivated by shared political or economic interests (Adell et al. 2015). Through an interview with Pauline Fan, Creative Director of the Malaysian non-governmental organization PUSAKA (a Malay term that can mean heirloom, heritage, or legacy), I examine how *mak yong* artists in the state of Terengganu are working together on a grassroots revitalization program to empower traditional performers whose community continues to value traditional forms of transmission and ritual aspects of performance. I also explore how the interrelated traditional and national *mak yong* communities of practice are mindful of how they are “situated in context,” and how they are in the process of engaging shifting personal, historical, political, and religious fields, intentionally transforming their art as they embody it and teach it to the next generation (Lave and Wenger 1991, 4). Finally, I draw upon my own long-term ethnographic research with Kelantanese *mak yong* practitioners to explore how they are negotiating traditional concepts of the body, etiologies of illness, and political interpretations of normative Islam in Kelantan, remaking *mak yong* in ritual contexts.

Ownership of intangible cultural heritage is often contested in Southeast Asia, where nation-based UNESCO nominations have resulted in regionally shared art forms being claimed as a source of nationalist pride by a particular country (Foley 2014). *Wayang*, traditional drama, was proclaimed a masterpiece in 2003, upon

the nomination of Indonesia. *Mak yong* was proclaimed a Masterpiece in 2005, upon the nomination of Malaysia, despite the fact that *mak yong* is also a form of *wayang* and that related *mak yong* traditions continue to be performed in Southern Thailand and the Riau archipelago of Indonesia (Foley 2014). Theater scholar Kathy Foley explains that the UNESCO “convention is predicated on the bottom-up view of community ownership that a beneficent government supports and facilitates. . . . But the convention itself has the rather contrarian tendency of putting a flag on arts that in the past were part of a shared cultural circle, but are now separated by nation-state boundaries” (2014, 383). When examining the relationship between states and communities, subjugation and empowerment, heritage and the ability to govern, folklorist Valdimar Hafstein asks the poignant question “when is protection *not* a means of dispossession?” (2014, 6; 2018). I investigate these themes through the debates that surround the creation of a cosmopolitan form of Malaysian *mak yong*.

*Mak yong* inspired the imagination of Malaysia’s political elite in the early 1960s as they sought Malay art forms that could serve as symbols of an independent postcolonial nation-state (Hardwick 2013). Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard, a British colonial officer who became a scholar of Malay culture, published highly romanticized writings on *mak yong* describing it as a classical dance-drama that entertained Patani and Kelantanese sultans from time immemorial (1960, 1969, 1972, 1974, 1983). These colonial and postcolonial musings appealed to budding Malay nationalist sympathies, and *mak yong* was incorporated into national interpretations of heritage in the 1970s (Khoo, Tikamdas, and Wong 2003; Hardwick 2013). More than thirty years before an official UNESCO designation, a version of *mak yong* was incorporated into presentations of Malaysian nationalism (Khoo, Tikamdas, and Wong 2003; Hardwick 2013). This process was driven in part by the race riots of 1969 and the development of a New Economic Policy that foregrounded Malay supremacy and affirmative action programs for the Malay Muslim majority (Khoo, Tikamdas, and Wong 2003).

The continued support of *mak yong* by the Malaysian federal government as a symbol of the nation and its ban in 1991 by PAS, the Muslim opposition party that currently rules Kelantan and Terengganu, created significant political friction. Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, UMNO and PAS aggressively competed with one another for the votes of the Malay Muslim majority of Kelantan. UMNO presented itself as a champion of Malay cultural heritage, while PAS justified banning *mak yong* to discourage polytheism and other aspects of the performance it judged as contrary to its interpretation of appropriate Islamic practice. The conflict between PAS and UMNO meant that *mak yong* became a highly charged political symbol that seemed to pit Malay ethnic nationalism against Islamic fundamentalism. Indeed, Eddin Khoo, the founder of PUSAKA, a non-governmental organization dedicated to the documentation of traditional performing arts, argued in 2003 that the ongoing marginalization of traditional Kelantanese performers was “driven by the ideological race in Islam, part of the race for Malay supremacy between two parties that has been very competitive” (Khoo, quoted in Khoo, Tikamdas, and Wong 2003, 31).

This, however, is a rather simplistic reduction of the complexities of political theater at play regarding the recognition of *mak yong* as a UNESCO “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” An episode of this ongoing drama occurred in September 2017 when the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Karima Bennoune, was invited to Malaysia by the Malaysian federal government. Bennoune spent eleven days in Malaysia, meeting with sixty-two different governmental organizations, performers, and cultural groups. The following excerpts are from her formal report filed on September 21, 2017 and published on the official website of the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Bennoune argues “cultural rights are not tantamount to cultural relativism. . . . They are not a license to impose identities or practices on others or exclude them from either in violation of national law” (Bennoune 2017). After outlining the scope of the UN’s concern with cultural rights, Bennoune addresses her specific findings regarding the effects of the PAS bans on traditional arts in Kelantan:

Of particular concern are the bans and restrictions in the State of Kelantan, that target strong living heritage practices and their practitioners, that have contributed to the international reputation of Malaysia and its inscription on the UNESCO world representative list of intangible cultural heritage. These restrictions and the negative discourse around them and their practitioners have already threatened the transmission of these art forms. . . .

The bans on *Mak Yong*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Main Puteri* and *Dikir Barat*, and the restrictions on women performing for mixed audiences in Kelantan must be lifted without delay. Steps must also be taken to make up for the negative impact – including stigma – caused by these bans and restrictions and to support these art forms and their practitioners in close consultation with the latter. . . . Measures should be taken to provide better understanding and explanation about the meaning of these practices, and their long histories in Malaysia to overcome prejudicial views about them. In doing so, it is important not only to focus on the ritual elements but also on the social function these arts play in society, as spaces to engage in an intergenerational manner, to explore and discuss problems and difficulties, as well as shared human universal experiences.

(Bennoune 2017)

Displeased with the findings of a UN representative whose statements were perceived as a direct challenge to the administration of their state affairs, the Menteri Besar of Kelantan, Datuk Mohd Amar Nik Abdullah responded “[i]t is our own policy not to allow mak yong performance in Kelantan. If one wants to perform mak yong outside of Kelantan, there is no problem . . . we follow our policies” (Farhan Darwis, September 22, 2017). The response of Datuk Mohd Amar Nik Abdullah echoes the defiance of other Islamist organizations including the Taliban, the Islamic State, and Ansar Dine, who have used the UNESCO world heritage list to focus their destruction of statues, archaeological sites, and religious buildings perceived as a challenge to their particular political-religious agendas. These attacks also became symbols of their disregard for UNESCO and contempt of the West (Hafstein 2018). Formal UNESCO recognition raises the profile of

heritage sites and intangible cultural heritage and elevates it to the world stage, however, this listing process also invests these sites and practices with cultural symbolism that can lead to targeted list-based iconoclasm (Hafstein 2018, 84).

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MALAYSIAN NATIONAL FORM OF *MAK YONG*

The study of *mak yong* as a form of secular entertainment has been incorporated into the arts curriculum of several major Malaysian universities. Many traditional *mak yong* performers have been commissioned to travel from rural Kelantan and Terengganu to academic institutions in the urban centers of Kuala Lumpur and Penang to teach Malaysian undergraduates. In these institutions, large class sizes, a comparatively short period of study, and bias against ritual aspects of the form hinder the ability of rural *mak yong* masters to convey more than basic techniques in *mak yong* staging and dance. On March 23, 2018, I interviewed Mohamad Kamarulzaman Taib, who at that time was the head of the Centre of Traditional Performing Arts at ASWARA.

Mohamad Kamarulzaman began working at ASWARA, then known as ASK, in 2001 and in 2005 became involved in the development of a *mak yong* curriculum and the study of traditional theater at the institution. Reflecting on how the designation of *mak yong* as a form of intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO had affected the curriculum ASWARA used to teach *mak yong*, Mohamad Kamarulzaman explained:

The recognition of this as ICH has helped from the perspective of promoting *mak yong*, yes. But in terms of development of curriculum in the guidance of generations of the students of ASWARA, it did not really directly affect it because ASWARA created its curriculum all the way back in 1996. And it has flourished from then until now. So, ICH, the recognition of ICH in 2005 really helped to develop audiences and also to build appreciation of the community for *mak yong* in Malaysia. I think it is not directly [related] to syllabus or curriculum in tertiary education. . . (Mohamad Kamarulzaman Taib, interview with the author, March 2018)

In his view, the focus of study remains “the issues that are related with oral tradition in *mak yong*.” As he continued, “It very much goes toward the physical route like dance, or costume, issues related to staging. Not issues that are related to the substance of spirit, or the *semangat* of playing *mak yong* itself” (ibid.).

Because most students at ASWARA only approach *mak yong* at an introductory level, the focus tends to be on the external aspects of *mak yong* such as costume or dance rather than on the study of the traditional philosophy that underpins the form, or on the oral artistry of its poetry, or the continuance of the oral tradition. Mohamad Kamarulzaman observed “the structure of the curriculum, the syllabus that there is, does not take students far regarding issues that are related to *semangat*, philosophy, and vice versa into the study of the formalized speeches of *mak yong*. They look more to the structure and form that there is, the elements that establish this performance. . .” (ibid.). The first person to teach *mak yong* at ASWARA was “the late and blessed Khatijah Awang,” who was a member of a

troupe, Kumpulan Seri Temenggung, “that had already changed *mak yong* and made its performance suitable as a form of performance for stage, not a traditional performance in a simple roofed farm building or its type. So, the structure of performance that the late and blessed (Kak Jah) instructed to the students of ASWARA already followed the staging for a formal audience, not staging to affect *semangat* or spirit” (ibid.).

Mohamad Kamarulzaman noted that early ASK *mak yong* students who were under the guidance of the late Khatijah Awang already had skills in modern Malaysian acting techniques, which they combined with traditional *mak yong* acting, altering the form of *mak yong* performance. He then explained that the traditional language of Kelantanese *mak yong* was also simplified for ASWARA students. The majority of ASWARA’s students are not from Kelantan but rather Sabah and Sarawak, so they were unable to train to perform in the Kelantanese oral tradition. Instead, they use scripts, memorizing dialogue:

So, students memorize dialogue, they don’t understand this dialogue in the context of *semangat* or the symbols or emblems that are behind it, but solely from the perspective of text as they see it. And through the study from 1996, *mak yong* became simplified. Only maintaining a few important things that could not be discarded. But from the perspective of the oral-formulaic expressions, from the perspective of changing the repetition and structure of the dramatic performance, this was shortened and became one story structure to stage for audiences in Kuala Lumpur. (ibid.)

*Mak yong* performances were once performed by traveling folk troupes, who often would perform multiple episodes of complex epic tales over a series of days. In the process of condensing the lengthy traditional form into short one-to-two-hour performances, many of the aspects of traditional *mak yong* artistry were edited out of the performance, with the opening sequence of songs and dances highly attenuated and the improvised clowning sessions reduced to facilitate simplified narratives.

Elaborating on the chronology of the development of the national form, Mohamad Kamarulzaman explains:

So from 1997, the first staging at ASK, and moving to when *mak yong* entered Istana Budaya, it entered into the national stage in 1998. Then it entered Pangung Negara in 2003. They had already taken the structure of the performance from Kumpulan Seri Temenggung because those who brought it into Istana Budaya were the generation that were educated at ASK. So, the lineage of performance practice, it flowed to Rosnan Abdul Rahman. Who also studied with Fatimah Abdullah which, Fatimah Abdullah also took part in bringing, took part in teaching the style of Kumpulan Seri Temenggung. So, we see one uniformity in the way in which *mak yong* is played that has been standardized at the national level lah. The *mak yong-mak yong* of the village flourished as usual and became another form that was different from the national, that at the national level. (ibid.)

In the thirteen years since the UNESCO declaration, the Malaysian federal government has touted the UNESCO brand to support the creation of glossy codified

performances by elite performers in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur. As Mohamad Kamarulzaman emphasizes, the form of *mak yong* taught at ASWARA is highly scripted and focuses on the refined dance movements of professional performers, elaborate glittering costumes, Western forms of staging, and condensed performances. While some elite Kelantanese traditional practitioners, including the late Khatijah Awang or Fatimah binti Abdullah, have been incorporated as teachers into academies like ASWARA, these performers trace their lineage back to Kumpulan Seri Temenggung, a *mak yong* troupe incorporated into Malaysian nationalist performances since the 1970s. As Mohamad Kamarulzaman notes, traditionally trained performers who teach at ASWARA are encouraged to teach an urban form of *mak yong* that has been adapted to suit Western notions of acting, simplified linear stories, and a proscenium stage. Unlike *mak yong* performed by artists of oral tradition, the scripted urban form neglects to engage the *angin*, or wind of performers, an internal force understood in traditional East Coast Malay philosophies of the self to be the force that drives individuals and animates human desires. Mohamad Kamarulzaman explains that these urban performances lack *semangat*, or spirit, in that they are unable to foster the intense interpersonal connections and reactions between the performers and the audience that are indicative of community-based *mak yong-main 'teri* healing performances. Aside from limited contracts to teach at elite institutions, or invitations to participate in the occasional performances of rural *mak yong* sponsored by elite researchers, few material benefits of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage designation have trickled down to the often impoverished Kelantanese and Terengganu masters of the oral tradition.

The recontextualization of the art from a lineage-based folk performance learned over a lifetime of observation, introspection, personal inquiry, and apprenticeship to a master teacher, to become a term-limited college diploma course taught in the context of an urban institution of higher learning inhibits the desire of some traditional *mak yong* performers to educate their students in the unique philosophy of the body that underpins their art. The late Ali bin Ibrahim, a *mak yong* master and contract instructor of *mak yong* at many Malaysian universities, used a metaphor of the body to describe the level of knowledge that he was able to impart to his non-Kelantanese Malaysian university students. Ali Ibrahim explained that the knowledge of university students only extended to the *kulit*, the skin, the shallow outer covering of the form. The *darah daging*, or the flesh and the blood of *mak yong* performance, knowledge of its connection to Kelantanese Malay conceptualizations of the body essential to understanding *mak yong's* healing function in ritual contexts, Ali Ibrahim reserved for a handful of select students who made the long journey to study with him at his home in Kelantan.

#### REQUESTS TO RE-EVALUATE THE PAS BAN: UN CULTURAL RIGHTS AND "SHARIA-COMPLIANT" *MAK YONG*

In Malaysia, over the last thirty years, changing perceptions of normative Islam have been increasingly influenced by Wahabi and Salafi interpretations of Islam brought to Southeast Asia by scholars and students who studied in the Middle

East. These perceptions of appropriate Islamic practice have been politicized in Kelantan, where there has been legislation passed to regulate women's clothing and enforce the segregation of men and women, even in public queues. Citing the links of *mak yong* to ritual and pre-Islamic religious systems, PAS leaders argue that traditional *mak yong* performances are *syirik*, or polytheistic, a charge of heresy that is abhorrent to contemporary *mak yong* practitioners who consider themselves faithful Muslims. PAS leaders also object to the prominent roles of women in *mak yong* performances, arguing that their presence on stage is inappropriate and leads to an immoral objectification of female performers. PAS officials also object to *mak yong* actors and actresses performing transgendered roles, or wearing transgendered costumes. The costumes of female *mak yong* performers have also come under scrutiny, particularly the bare shoulders, arms, and uncovered heads of actresses wearing costumes evocative of a historical period in which Kelantanese women *pakai berkembang*, or wore a sarong or tubular length of fabric wrapped around the chest and secured underneath the arms and may have only covered their heads with an additional sarong or length of unsewn cloth when they left their homes.

On May 14, 2018, ASWARA and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) staged a performance of the *mak yong* play *Sindong*, for the Kelantanese state Mufti Datuk Mohamad Shukri Mohamad. The rector of ASWARA, Prof. Datuk Ir. Ts. Dr. Mohd Rizon Juhari, and UMK professor Dr. Zaliman Sauli were also in attendance, as were other performers and faculty members from ASWARA and UMK.



FIGURE 1: Members of *Warisan Kumpulan Sri Temenggung* directed by Saari bin Abdullah wear costumes evocative of Kelantanese princess Che Siti Wan Kembang, who was famous for *pakai berkembang*, wearing a tubular upper garment that left the shoulders and upper arms exposed. Photo credit: Lim Chuen Ming, June 4, 2005.

The performance was accompanied by a short lecture by Nik Mustapha Nik Md Salleh, and there was a brief exchange of ideas and advice given by the state Mufti.

Observers noted that everyone was committed to civil exchange, but that the discussion ended without a clear outcome. The Mufti provided the academic performers a general rule of not transgressing *syariah* and *aqidah*. After the performance, representatives from ASWARA and UMK invited the Mufti to review and discuss the permissibility of *mak yong* in Islam but were told that the Mufti would review the issue with Kelantanese state religious authorities and would only give an answer regarding potentially repealing the PAS ban on *mak yong* for a sharia-compliant form of the dance drama in 2018.

The choice of story and the costuming of the performers were carefully cultivated for the presentation of a polite, sharia-compliant form of *mak yong* for the Kelantanese Mufti. The *mak yong* tale *Sindong* is a folktale based on the Western tale of Cinderella. Unlike the tales of *Dewa Muda* and *Dewa Pechil*, the stories most often incorporated into *mak yong-main 'teri* healing rituals, *Sindong* was performed almost exclusively for entertainment before the 1991 ban, meaning that concerns regarding problematic ritual performances were sublimated. Female performers appeared on stage in the roles of *pak yong* (prince or king), *mak yong* (queen or princess), *dayang* (female courtiers), and *inang* (female commoners). The two women performing as *pak yong* wore carefully selected black head coverings under their princely crowns to be sure that their head, hair, and neck were appropriately covered. They also wore long-sleeved black-colored leotards to obscure their forearms, as the upper garment of the *pak yong* costume is cut to end at the elbow. The *mak yong* and *dayang* wore loose-fitting *kebaya* and *baju kurung*. On their heads, close-fitting spandex black head coverings were tied to simulate the traditional snail-shaped bun often worn by noble ladies. These garments, *anak tudung*, are usually worn inside a *hijab* or headscarf. In this black close-fitting style the black headcovers are often referred to as “ninjas,” as they give performers a ninja-like appearance before they add accessories. The black ninja *anak tudung* were long enough to cover the neck of the performers and were tucked into the neckline of an elaborate *la*, a traditional beaded collar that falls over the chest and is fringed with pom-poms. Smaller crowns and elaborate hair pins were attached to the black “ninja” head covering. Actresses portraying *inang* wore a tight-fitting black “ninja” that covered their hair and neck, with an additional sarong loosely draped over their heads.

After viewing the performance, *Utusan Online* reports Mufti Datuk Mohamad Shukri Mohamad stated:

[E]ven though the elements of worship may have been deleted, there are some [aspects] that need to be improved from the perspective of costuming, storyline, and character-type that needs to be played according to gender. We need to keep in mind both revelation and common sense. In fact, when we obey the revelation it is the true art. For example, if I am a painter and I paint a nude woman, at that time, even though it is considered art, from the Islamic point of view it is not considered an art because it contradicts revelation. (Asma Hanim 2018)

Members of the Kelantanese fatwa review board officially lifted the twenty-eight-year ban on *mak yong* on September 25, 2019. PAS officials argue that it is compulsory for *mak yong* performers to dress modestly and cover *aurat*. Organizers will need to ensure separation is maintained between men and women onstage and in the audience, and no elements of worship are allowed to be included in the performances (Sharifah Mahsinah, September 25, 2018). International cultural rights advocates and those who champion freedom of expression in performance view this development with increasing skepticism. Of primary concern is the exclusion of female performers from public *mak yong* performances in PAS states. Indeed, the repeal of the PAS ban opens the door for the intensified regulation of traditional *mak yong*, as PAS claims it as the cultural patrimony of the Kelantanese state. Despite the threat of dispossession implicit in the embrace of heritagization of *mak yong* by PAS, there is some hope among professionally trained Kelantanese performers who live and work in Kuala Lumpur and Kelantanese graduates of ASWARA that the repeal of the official ban on *mak yong* in Kelantan might allow performers to return home and earn a living performing in their home state.

#### PUSAKA AND COMMUNITY-BASED *MAK YONG* REVITALIZATION IN TERENGGANU

In the neighboring state of Terengganu, PUSAKA, an NGO that works with masters of traditional Malaysian performing arts to support the viability of traditional performing arts at a community level, has chosen to support a grassroots revitalization of *mak yong* with *Cahaya Matahari*, a well-known traditional *mak yong* troupe from Kuala Besut. This revitalization program places an emphasis on the



FIGURE 2: ASWARA, USM, and UMK *mak yong* performers performing the opening dance of the *Menghadap Rebab* at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan for the review of the Kelantanese State Mufti Datuk Mohamad Shukri Mohamed. Photo credit: Dr. Raja Iskandar bin Raja Halid, May 14, 2018.

role of women and intimate interconnection between performers and the community. PUSAKA's programs focus on the documentation of traditional art forms and the support of training projects for youth to aid in the transmission of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next. PUSAKA also brings the performances of traditional Malaysian performing artists to new local and international audiences.

Khoo has recounted his personal motivations for founding PUSAKA. In 1992, Khoo was working as a cultural journalist for the Malaysian English daily newspaper *The Star*. Through his work he became familiar with the bans on traditional performing arts in Kelantan that were enacted by PAS in 1991. In 1991, Khoo who holds a degree in Islamic thought and philosophy, was drawn to explore the way Islam was being incorporated into Kelantanese politics. As he explains in a 2011 interview:

One of my main interests about Islam was to look at the particular experience of the Malays with Islam. Mysticism, Sufism, and the history of the Malays in Islam. And then all of sudden, the essence of the Malay experience of Islam was deemed haram! And you began to see the development of a very Salafi Wahabi kind of attitude taking over. Very un-Southeast Asian in nature.

By the time it began to affect traditions such as wayang kulit and Mak Yong, which had very strong foundations, not just in performance but in ritual, by which people kept alive their belief systems – I found that such thinking was a desecration.

So I went to Kelantan to do some reporting. I was interested in puppetry, and then I met the puppeteer, Abdullah Ibrahim. That man was so infectious that I ended up spending the next 15 years of my life with him until he died. And now I carry on the work. (Khoo, quoted in Surin 2011)

Pauline Fan, PUSAKA's Creative Director, explained that PUSAKA attempts to engage performers and audiences on a variety of levels and that the organization sponsors tours, public forums, and fosters conversation regarding culture and the arts in Malaysia. Unlike the ASWARA instructional model that isolates traditional performers from their troupes to teach large numbers of Malaysian undergraduates in an institutional setting, PUSAKA worked with funding from the Asia Foundation with the Kuala Besut troupe in situ to ascertain what its most pressing needs were. The troupe's leader, Siti binti Dollah, desired to train the younger female members of her family in the practices of traditional *mak yong*. This process included a *sembah guru*, or ritual performance that honors a student's lineage of teachers, ritually transfers knowledge, and is the traditional way of legitimizing a performer as an initiated practitioner. As Fan explains:

[W]e started working with this particular *mak yong* troupe actually, decades ago. . . . [A]s time went on, the biggest challenge wasn't so much the bans anymore, because the authorities after the first few years they weren't really clamping down too hard. But the main concern for the performers, I think was to make sure that the next generation actually absorbed the knowledge in a complete way. And so, they had the three granddaughters of Che Ning, at the time that we started

working. . . . When I first went up to see the *mak yong* performances then they had that kind of instinct and of course they had the *angin*, and they have inherited all the *angin* from their grandmother, in particular. So, their *angin* was really strong and they would leap into the *panggung*, especially during the ritual performances, but they weren't properly trained in the art of the *mak yong*.

So, as time went on that became something that Mek Ti, and especially after Pak Su Mat passed away, I think that they were really concerned about who was going to take over the main role of the *pak yong*. And so, Mek Ti actually said "Is there some way we could do a kind comprehensive program, that we can teach Rohana to really take on that role, and do all the right rituals and everything and really pass on all that knowledge to her?" So we, we managed to convince the Asia Foundation, to actually do this as a grass roots project, as a kind of community empowerment project. They don't usually give that much in culture, but they saw this as a community empowerment project. And that is how we kind of framed it, you know, that this project is about empowering, especially these young women, who want to, to actually take charge and also get to know and revitalize their cultural heritage. And part of that is to participate in it again, there has been a disconnect, partly because of the ban and partly because of other challenges as well. So our main concern was that, particularly the young women, of course young men as well because they are musicians as well, but particularly the young women who were in that family.

So, the project was broken up into a few stages. The first stage was the process to learn the basics of the *Menghadap Rebab*, that was the most important thing. After that to also learn how to carry stories in character, so now they are able to kind of carry the two major stories of *Dewa Pechil* and *Dewa Muda*. They kind of know bits and pieces of some other stories, but those are the two that they can actually perform properly. There are also besides the three sisters, there are also all these *dayang-dayang* who are being trained. And it kind of culminated in 2016 [when] we actually did the *sembah guru* for Rohana, and that was an important part of that whole project because it did really just say that she was ready to go on and it kind of *menghalalkan ilmu* that she was learning, so that was important, and we documented that as well. Subsequently, the project is still on-going, so it is in a different phase. After the *sembah guru* the learning of the art is still going on, slightly in a less intensive manner, but it is still happening. . . . [W]e really wanted them to be able to speak about their own tradition . . . [p]eople like Rohana, they were kind of unsure about how to talk about the *mak yong*. And there were a lot of questions that were coming to them during a workshop about the origins of the *mak yong* and the symbolism of some of these things. But of course, and they might know it, but they don't know how to talk about it. And so, we actually, the last part of the project was actually kind of to do workshops with them, not to teach them how to say it, but to kind of work through it with them. So that, in a kind of community setting where Pak Agel can kind of coach them and they explain and discuss things, but for them to really get that sense of confidence that they know how to talk about it, not just how to do it. And then it becomes a kind of complete knowledge. . . . And also some of the young boys in that community, we are teaching them how to use

very basic kind of video, to document their own traditions and interesting things to feel proud about their own narrative and own heritage.

(Pauline Fan, interview with the author, March 2018)

Contrasting PUSAKA's approach with that of ASWARA, Fan noted that the institutionalized form of *mak yong* codified the tradition in an effort to create a canon, which took away from the spontaneity and diversity found in traditional practice. She also explained that the traditional form of *mak yong* was connected to the East Coast Malay concept of *angin*, a strong motivational force understood to be inherited from generation to generation, particularly in performance lineages. Traditional performances engage audience members and performers on both an aesthetic and metaphysical level, as their performances have the power to move the winds that reside within each individual. Fan continues:

And I just feel always that beauty of the art resonates a lot more if it is not so codified and if you do really allow the *angin* of each performer to emerge. And does take, even for the part of the audience, I suppose, the audience needs to be able to understand that, and to be able to absorb that it is not a spectacle. That they are not watching, they are not there to see a spectacle. They are actually there to engage and to *gerak angin* [have a metaphysical and psychological exchange] with the performers and that is part of the experience. So, educating the audience is also important. (ibid.)

Weighing the impact of the 2005 UNESCO declaration on the traditional transmission among members of the Besut *mak yong* community, Fan observes that the international recognition was good on some level, as it alerted the world community to the existence of *mak yong*. However, she then touches on the issue of dispossession of original communities of practice by the state (Hafstein 2014, 2018; Foley 2014). Theater scholar Foley explains “[t]he weakness of the convention is that it depends largely on the national and local governments for identifying art forms, helping evolve preservation plans, and perhaps, most crucially, funding strategies . . . most of the core UNESCO funding and activities seem not to have gone to the arts and artists, but to administration and workshops for government officials involved in ministries of culture, art, tourism, or the arts and/or NGO workers” (2014, 376). Fan elaborates on this point, noting:

unfortunately one of the things about UNESCO is that it works through the state and the state is not of course always the best agent to carry out these things. Because the state has its mechanisms and its own way of operating and it is not always the best and most conducive to helping, really making a lasting effect on the communities. So unfortunately, what I have seen, I think that part of the effect has been that, the efforts have been to institutionalize the form and say that this is one of our “national” traditions, that should be in the academies and that should be institutionalized and on the big stage, and that kind of thing. . . . And also reaching out to people like Mek Ti or other communities in Kelantan, and really reflecting their everyday lives. Because a lot of these communities are still living . . . in really destitute conditions. . . . If I would hope that if the state could do anything, maybe, kind of put together some kind of program that

could really help these practitioners. And not as a form of charity, but as a form of really appreciating that they are masters of a certain tradition, and that they should at least be supported to teach.

(Pauline Fan, interview with the author, March 2018)

Fan questions UNESCO's reliance on the Malaysian state and its mechanisms for the distribution of funding and organization of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding programs, arguing that this reliance accelerates and internationally legitimizes a process of institutionalization of *mak yong* as a national tradition while it continues to leave traditional practitioners destitute and disenfranchised.

#### ENGENDERING PERFORMANCES: *MAK YONG* AND CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER NORMATIVITY IN PAS-CONTROLLED KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

In Kelantan and Terengganu, PAS has highlighted female and transgendered performance as issues impeding the acceptance of *mak yong* as a sharia-compliant art form. It should be noted that many individuals that perform transgendered roles in *mak yong* often live private lives that conform to local notions of gender normativity. On May 9, 2018 the ruling coalition of Barisan Nasional collapsed during the 14th General Election and Terengganu voted in PAS as its ruling party. In September 2018, PAS representatives in Terengganu met with the leaders of *Cahaya Matahari* and informed them that they would no longer be permitted to perform *mak yong* publicly with both male and female performers. Following the Kelantanese model, PAS's guidelines in Terengganu dictate that female singers and dancers can only perform for an all-female audience in a closed environment while men can sing and dance for a mixed audience.

Changing perceptions of appropriate roles of women and female modesty is not exclusive to the Kelantan and Terengganu, but is occurring throughout Muslim Southeast Asia as Middle Eastern political Islamic movements become increasingly influential in the region (Hardwick 2013). In her ethnography *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, ethnomusicologist Anne K. Rasmussen examines the important role of women in Indonesian Islam (2011). In her last chapter, "Rethinking Women, Music, and Islam," Rasmussen notes how the modern reform of Indonesian Islamic practices has reframed female public performance from the everyday to the problematic, as women's voices and bodies are redefined from *biasa saja*, or ordinary, to *aurat*, or something shameful to be concealed. Rasmussen notes that in Indonesia "the presence of active Muslim women is part and parcel of local 'traditionalist' practice . . . it is more often the 'traditional' camp that is tolerant, moderate, and more likely to lean toward egalitarianism, particularly in regard to women's public works and public performance" (Rasmussen 2011, 239). Rasmussen goes on to state "The notion that Islam as it is practiced in the Arab world is better than that which is practiced in Indonesia is a common rationale for the proscription of aspects of Indonesian culture that have been part and parcel of Islamic life for centuries, for example women's participation and agency, local languages and customs, and performance genres, including music, dance and theater, that may be seen as local or Islamic or both" (Rasmussen 2011, 240).



FIGURES 3 and 4: Family members, students, and friends of Nisah binti Mamat perform the *Menghadap Rebab* during her *sembah guru* at her home in Kampung Gabus To' Uban, Pasir Mas, Kelantan. The three-day *sembah guru* performance honored the performative lineage of Nisah binti Mamat and ritually confirmed her as an initiated practitioner who could perform *mak yong* both for entertainment and healing. Photo credits: Lim Chuen Ming, February 18, 2006.

Fan discusses the changing perceptions of the role of women in East Coast Malay society, highlighting her views that PAS bans on *mak yong* performance are directly related to the socio-political attempt to redefine traditional Malay Muslim gender roles, further constraining the historic public, economic, and politically powerful roles of women.

I do think that gender was one of the main reasons that the *mak yong* was banned, for sure, for sure. Because of course, we know that the traditional Kelantan woman is a very strong presence, both in the local economy as well as in the household. But also in the mythology, in the kind of mythological imagination of the Kelantanese. The woman is definitely a powerful figure. And that is definitely one of the reasons why PAS did crack down on the *mak yong*. All this ritual-ritual thing for sure, but also just the place of woman. For sure and they were definitely trying to redefine that with their own interpretation of what “good Malay Muslim women” should be. And not this powerful kind of [figure]. Which is totally antithetical to what the natural nature of the Kelantanese women is. (Pauline Fan, interview with the author, March 2018)

Ironically, the prominent role that women have played in Kelantanese *mak yong* performances for the last one hundred years can be traced to a reevaluation of performance practice in response to the Islamic social mores of the Kelantanese royal court of the early 20th century (Hardwick 2013). The performance of the refined male lead by women was an innovation introduced to *mak yong* in 1912 during the period of royal sponsorship (Ghulam-Sarwar 1976; Mohd Anis 2005). In 1923, Long Abdul Ghaffar, the youngest son of Sultan Muhammad II of Kelantan, created Kampung Temenggung, a village that became a center of traditional Kelantanese performing arts (Ghulam-Sarwar 1976; Mohd Anis 2005).

Contemporary *mak yong* performers attribute the early 20th-century shift from male to female performers to their predecessors’ desire to follow Islamic custom, as it is considered inappropriate for a non-related male to touch a female, even within the context of a dramatic performance (Hardwick 2013). This problem was solved by the expansion of female participation in *mak yong* to all major refined leads. Thus, male participation in *mak yong* was restricted to the role of unrefined characters like clowns and musicians. While early 20th-century interpretations of Islamic practice in Kelantan actually expanded the role of women in *mak yong* dramatic performances in the Kelantanese court, the contemporary PAS interpretation of Islam discourages all female public performance (Hardwick 2013).

Siti binti Dollah, leader of the *Cahaya Matahari*, found the PAS ban on *mak yong* performance in Terengganu particularly troubling, as her troupe had, like Kelantanese troupes, historically adapted its performances to include women in the lead refined roles. Siti noted “The ones who perform are me, my children, their husbands, nephews, and grandchildren. All are my family members and yet I cannot perform” (*Today*, 2018). In traditional lineage-based troupes like *Cahaya Matahari*, lead women players perform with husbands and *mahram*, or closely related kin that they would be forbidden to marry under Islamic law. Physical touch between close family members and married couples is not forbidden, thus performing with close family members was an adaptation of performance practice by traditional *mak yong* troupes created to comply with traditional Islamic customs that has been disregarded by PAS rulings that issue blanket bans on female performances.

Male performers like Rosnan Rahman have taken over refined male leads from female performers in many government performances. In 2019, Rosnan began a movement to create his version of a “sharia-compliant” *mak yong* that would be

performed exclusively by male performers. The inaugural performance of an all-male *mak yong* took place on April 26, 2019 in Kelantan and was supported by JKKK, the National Office of Arts and Culture. The *mak yong* story of *Raja Besar Ho Gading* was chosen as it is a tale of seven princes, and all references, songs, and dances referring to female roles and characters were eliminated. Male performers were required to perform without stage makeup to be “sharia compliant.”

Rosnan’s attempt to create a male-only *mak yong* for public performances in Kelantan has been viewed with suspicion by traditional and elite *mak yong* performers, who argue that Rosnan is capitalizing on the political situation while further marginalizing female performers. Rosnan’s efforts were discussed by traditional and elite *mak yong* performers gathered for a *Segar Angin* (wind healing) *mak yong* workshop and performance held at UMK in Pengkalan Chepa from April 22–25, 2019. Most performers were against the creation of an all-male *mak yong* for Kelantanese public performances as they viewed it as unnecessary. They argued *mak yong* performances in the guise of *main teri* healing performances continue at the private residences of people suffering social and psychological illnesses in Kelantan despite the current bans. UMK is also in the process of developing programs like the *Segar Angin* event to provide venues for modestly attired female students and *mak yong* performers to perform on college campuses in Kelantan.

While traditionally trained male *pak yong* performers like Kadir bin Dollah embody a grace in their movements as refined male leads that allude to the gender fluidity often embodied in traditional *mak yong* performance, the debate surrounding Rosnan’s premier of an all-male *mak yong* troupe sharply delineated what Malaysian performers view as acceptable boundaries of transgendered performance in *mak yong*. Women performing as refined male leads with costumes modified to cover *aurat* are understood to be historical holdovers of early 20th-century Kelantanese court sponsorship, and men performing as unrefined maidservants for comedic effect are viewed as an acceptable aspect of transgendered performance



FIGURE 5: *Mak yong* performers from ASWARA, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, and Universiti Sains Malaysia, performing the *Menghadap Rehab* at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan together with traditional performers from Southern Thailand and the Riau Archipelago of Indonesia for the *Segar Angin* performance. Photo credit: Patricia Ann Hardwick, April 24, 2019.

in the rural *mak yong* tradition. However, many practitioners voiced concerns on Facebook and other forms of social media that Rosnan's all-male troupe created potential for male-identified performers to embody the refined female roles of princess and palace ladies-in-waiting. The mere possibility of this in the current political climate was viewed as highly undesirable by many in both the traditional and urban *mak yong* performance communities, as they felt that it would give the PAS governments of Kelantan and Terengganu additional rationale to crack down on *mak yong* performances in the two East Coast states. The twenty-eight-year ban on *mak yong* performance was officially lifted by PAS in Kelantan on September 25, 2019. According to PAS requirements for "sharia-compliant" *mak yong*, women will not be allowed to appear onstage with men (Sharifah Mahsinah, September 25, 2018). It thus appears that PAS has chosen to endorse *mak yong* performed only by male-identified performers.

#### KELANTANESE *MAK YONG-MAIN 'TERI*:

##### RE-ENVISIONING ETIOLOGIES OF ILLNESS AND THEORIES OF THE SELF

The twenty-eight-year-long PAS ban on *mak yong* performance all but obliterated the folk entertainment form in Kelantan. Adept negotiators of the social and spiritual realms, individual traditionally Kelantanese artists have continued to perform and transform the *mak yong* tradition in rural Kelantan throughout the period of the ban, adapting it to survive in the contemporary political and social climate. Some traditional *mak yong* masters have continued to engage with their art through instruction of the official formalized version of *mak yong* in academic institutions. Others who have chosen to stay in Kelantan channel their performances into ritual *mak yong-main 'teri* healing events or have chosen to join Kelantanese Menora troupes headed by ethnic Thai troupe leaders living in Kelantan.

*Main 'teri* ritual performances have been used for generations by Kelantanese practitioners to treat spiritual disturbances, psychological conditions, and social disruptions. The term *main 'teri* is thought to be a shortened form of *main puteri* or *main peteri* (Laderman 1991). While some practitioners speculate that the term *main puteri*, to play the princess, originates from tales that link the birth of the genre to the legendary Kelantanese princess *Puteri Saadong*, researchers and performers that choose to emphasize the healing aspects of the performance often interpret *'teri* as a shortened form of the Kelantanese Malay word *peteri*, meaning to solder (Laderman 1991). Associating *main 'teri* with the metallurgy technique of soldering contributes to some practitioners' understanding of their art as a means to repair broken bodies and make whole fractured souls (Laderman 1991).

*Main 'teri* currently coexists with contemporary medical practice in Kelantan as a complementary healing system based on traditional East Coast Malay understandings of the body (Hardwick 2009). *Main 'teri* patients often seek medical care from certified doctors for their ailments first, turning to *main 'teri* practitioners only if they find that their condition is unresponsive to or untreatable by medical practice. Kelantanese healers regard each individual human body as a miniature state, metaphorically referred to in *main 'teri* as a royal palace ruled over by an embattled sov-

ereign: the human person is a microcosm that reflects the social macrocosm, full of contending forces. Intrigued by the symbolic system at play in *main 'teri*, anthropologist Clive Kessler theorized that *main 'teri* ritual events were a form of political negotiation as ritual specialists seemed to wage an internal battle for a patient's health through the use of political metaphors (1977). Characters that are evoked and embodied in *mak yong-main 'teri* healing performances are considered metaphors for the human embryo, the human placenta, the birth waters, and the amniotic sac.

Malaysia and Indonesia have been experiencing a postcolonial Islamic revival since the mid-1970s, which has resulted in a proliferation of religious movements and the introduction of particular interpretations of Islamic theology and Islamic practice into local and national politics (Hefner and Horvatich 1997; Daniels 2009, 2013). Part of this process of renegotiating traditional belief systems in response to changing perceptions of Islam in Southeast Asia involves reframing long-standing concepts of supernatural beings as agents of disease. Many contemporary Kelantanese healers openly discuss the supernatural beings addressed, described, and confronted in *mak yong-main 'teri* healing rituals as symbols or metaphors of an internalized physical or social dysfunction materialized in the body of a patient.

## CONCLUSION

Folklorist Dorothy Noyes describes heritage as a byproduct of identity politics, part of the spectrum of nation-state reification of vernacular culture. "As a privileged mode of local economic development under globalization, heritage builds upon the earlier history of folklore as the medium of political recognition within the nation-state. In the course of this history we can see a progressive focusing and stiffening



FIGURE 6: *Mak yong* performers Supiah binti Mat Ali (left) and Rohimah binti Zakaria (right) lead their patient (center) through a therapeutic *mak yong-main 'teri* healing performance in rural Kelantan. Photo credit: Patricia Ann Hardwick, May 28, 2005.

of local culture, first as folklore, then as heritage, with a gradual reduction of local culture's functionality to the assertion of differential identity" (2016, 181). Bendix argues that it is crucial for UNESCO and heritage specialists on the ground to reflect on "the fact that heritage policies are embedded in the broader practices of cultural sponsorship. These have a history, both local and national, individual and global. The impact of UNESCO's heritage interventions ought to be reflected further within these parameters" (Bendix 2014, 231). An investigation into the issues surrounding the inscription, heritagization, and subsequent attempts at "safeguarding" Malaysian *mak yong* provides an example of the divergent ways in which patronage is embedded in local, national, and global politics, history, and even religious practice. This case study also examines how administrative and local communities of practice implement the ICH concept of "safeguarding" a controversial form of ICH in a highly charged political-religious field. International UNESCO designation attempts at ICH safeguarding, and international human rights discourses contend with Malay ethnic nationalism and political Islamic movements that have alternatively sought to remake *mak yong* in their own image or even to eradicate the art through religious bans. Since *mak yong*'s ICH designation in 2005 and inscription in 2008, Malaysian federal government patrons have developed *mak yong* into an elite form of cultural patrimony, and cultural traditions of healing and possession are dispossessed by national re-imaginings and outright bans on traditional performances. The federal government has also used the UNESCO designation of *mak yong* to counter the Kelantanese PAS opposition party.

In 2018–19, the religious authorities of the Kelantanese PAS opposition party considered rescinding the twenty-eight-year-old ban on *mak yong*. PAS officials announced the lifting of the PAS ban on *mak yong* on September 25, 2019, provided performances follow their provisions that require a separation of men and women, appropriate modest dress, and no element of worship in performances. *Mak yong* is going through yet another transformation, and traditional performers another cycle of dispossession as PAS patrons reimagine *mak yong* as a Kelantanese cultural patrimony, remade to fit PAS's understandings of revelatory Islamic practice. There are indications that this process will include a further disenfranchisement of female *mak yong* performers as women's bodies, voices, and public performances are being increasingly defined as *aurat* in both Kelantan and Terengganu. Attempts by *mak yong* performers to comply with changing notions of *aurat* include a range of adaptations from costumes carefully redesigned to conceal all parts of a female performer's body except the face, hands, and feet, to the complete ban of all public female performances.

However, as Adell, Bendix, Borolotto, and Tauschek remind us, communities of practice exist on both the administrative and local levels (2015). Malaysian NGOs like PUSAKA have worked with international foundations like the Asia Foundation to create programs that promote community engagement and reinforce the strong role of women in these traditions despite the PAS bans. In the private homes and hearts of Terengganu and Kelantanese patients and practitioners, *mak yong* artists have begun to take the "safeguarding" of their traditions into their own hands. Siti binti Dollah and Kadir bin Dollah have worked with PUSAKA

to educate Rohana and two other granddaughters of the late *mak yong* star Che Ning in the traditions and rituals of *mak yong* particular to their familial and performance lineage. In rural Kelantan, *mak yong* performers have survived the PAS ban by channeling their artistic talents away from entertainment into the practice of traditional healing. *Mak yong-main 'teri* performers in Kelantan continue to acknowledge the existence of a parallel supernatural world, but they have begun to emphasize that supernatural beings are but metaphors for human desires. These are just some dynamic ways in which local communities of practice are drawing upon their experiences to adapt the ways they speak and think about *mak yong* as they attempt to safeguard it in an era of rapid political and religious change.

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#### AUTHOR

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