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Boria

A Form of Malay Theatre

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Baria

A Form of Malay Theatre

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University of Malaya



Local History and Memoirs
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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Introduction

The Concept of a Malaysian Culture

Malaysia was created as a political entity on 16 September 1963 from fourteen states: the nine hereditary Malay sultanates (Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Trengganu), the three former members of the British Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang and Singapore) and the two British crown colonies of Sabah (formerly British North Borneo) and Sarawak. (Singapore seceded in 1965.) The term “Malaysian” is used here, regardless of ethnic designation, to refer to all citizens of Malaysia.

For the government, the creation of Malaysia was understood to mean not only a political unification of the diverse territories, but the beginning of a new cultural unity. From their viewpoint, Malaysia was a product of evolution from a common heritage. Malaysians are seen as having “had a common background from the earliest historical times and having been subjected to common cultural influences” (Ministry of Culture, n.d.). However, Malaysians are considered as comprising two main categories of citizens: indigenous and immigrant.

The Malays, Dayaks, Dusuns and other indigenous peoples of these territories are all descended from the same ancestral Malaysian race which appears to have migrated, in pre-historic times, from the Asian mainland in the regions of the Yunnan Plateau into the lands of what is today Malaysia.

The immigrant elements among the peoples of Malaysia are almost the same in all these territories though the proportions vary. The Chinese, Indians and Eurasians are found everywhere. They represent the recent streams of immigrants during the past century or so and the descendants of more ancient immigrants who came to these lands in the pre-European era (Ministry of Culture, n.d.).

The implication of this statement is that two distinct groups of Malaysians — indigenous and immigrant — actually exist, and that the indigenous peoples are the more deep-rooted in Malaysia. However, between the two categories one is not seen as culturally “pure” or “isolated” from the other; rather they are considered as having transformed cross-culturally by the assimilation of cultural elements in a multi-ethnic society. The constitution adopted Malay as the official language of the nation with English next in importance in 1965, and emphasized the importance of the Malay group within the indigenous category of citizenship. Under the umbrella of Malaysian culture two main types of cultural forms belonging to the indigenous category were considered important: *kebudayaan teras* (root culture) which are those forms already rooted and popular among the Malays, and *kebudayaan suku* (regional culture) which becomes so because they have remained a small group activity within certain regions only. Other cultures, that is, immigrant type cultures, were to be allowed to find expression in the communities and regions as part of the country’s encouragement of the new nation’s artistic and intellectual activities. Under this policy traditional cultures were re-interpreted or given new life and new ones found opportunities for expansion.

Not surprisingly such activities led to a more diversified culture, which appeared paradoxical in relation to the government’s aim of a united Malaysia. The very nature of the multi-ethnic Malaysian society supported a diversity of artistic traditions that although interacting, had remained highly tangential to one another. Indigenous cultures had, directly and indirectly, incorporated varying elements from many cultures including Indian, Indonesian, Thai and Chinese, among others. In particular where there had been close contacts as, for example, in areas along the Thai border where Thai and Malay communities had intermingled for centuries, or among the *Baba* and *Nonya* Chinese of Malacca, the culture of the Malaysian indigenous communities had been strongly influenced by other traditions. Though they offer an enriching process, the exposure to and the adaptation of cultural forms could only lead to a diversification of Malaysian indigenous culture into communal-type cultures, creating more and more *kebudayaan suku*. The indigenous people themselves in

actuality are also diversified and identifiable according to locality or dialect, besides being further differentiated by their origins into Javanese, Bugis, Minangkabau, Dayak, Murut, Semang to mention only a few (Roff 1967, pp. 36–7). In the cultural “melting pot” are included the immigrant ethnic groups of Malaysians, especially the Chinese and Indians who constitute a significant proportion of the population. They, when allowed to indulge fully in their preferred cultural activities, have maintained traditions reflecting more of their ethnic origins than of the indigenous cultural environment. This diversity is again broadened by the cultural divisions among the Chinese and Indians themselves, based on their village of ancestry, regional origins, religion, dialect/language group, clan or occupation (Turnbull 1972, pp. 107–8). It must be recognized then that among the three major ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians broadly responsible for creating a diversified cultural tradition in West Malaysia, there are within each group further differences of locality, language, religion and origin which amplify the cultural distinctions that can be made within Malaysia.

In the early years of Malaysia, the paradox of government support for the arts in the national interest which led to more rather than less diversity was not considered to be of immediate importance. An atmosphere of goodwill and tolerance persisted until the political tensions among different communities exploded into racial riots on 13 May 1969 (National Operations Council, 1969; Tunku Abdul Rahman 1969). The overall effect of the May 13 Incident as it is known, was an immediate pressure on the government to seriously consider the state of the society as a whole and its future as a multi-ethnic nation. The first step towards reuniting the troubled country was the introduction of five nationalistic precepts, known as *rukunegara*, which later became the government’s guiding principles in a national philosophy aimed at improved political, economic, social and cultural relationships in Malaysia.

On the socio-cultural level, the government, striving for unity in diversity, called for a national cultural streamlining, A new Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport was formed with a department in each state, and held responsible for conceiving and implementing a suitable policy.

The cultural sections of the state departments were initially involved in attempts to arrive at some understanding of the cultural ethnography. Traditional regional forms of performing arts were investigated and documented. New and exciting ones gained fresh impetus with financial support from the state departments of culture. At the national level, various regional forms of music, dance, songs, arts and crafts, theatre and so on were documented, each under their specific genres. Independent individuals assisted by carrying out serious cultural studies of art forms as their contribution to the documentation of a cultural heritage. Such activities not only involved writing the ethnography of Malaysian cultural traditions but further led to correlations with similar art forms existing elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The need to examine these correlations and to point out their regional differences, if any, led to an international conference in Kuala Lumpur in 1969, under the patronage of the Malaysian Government (see Mohd. Taib Osman, 1974). The general result of the conference and festival was a closer cultural understanding among the participating countries of Southeast Asia; and on the Malaysian national level, it led to a re-awakening of drama, music and dance. By 1971, the renewal of such activities was perceived as a need at the national level for certain existing forms to be taken as the national cultural heritage in the realization of a cultural identity.

Thus the problem of a national culture arose as an urgent topic for public consideration. In 1971, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport sponsored a national congress at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur with the then Prime Minister as patron. Well-known scholars and artistes were invited to expound their ideas on this concept (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, 1974). The congress accepted three major conceptual guidelines as a basis for the national culture. They are firstly, that the national culture of Malaysia should be based on the indigenous culture of its people. This implied that any immigrant-based culture could not be considered within this national cultural framework. Of the indigenous cultures Malay-based culture was selected by majority choice as the most important. Secondly, the congress accepted that certain traits from other cultures were important, especially those stemming from Chinese, Indian and other cultures within the country and if they were found

“suitable or sensible”, they could also be considered as a basis for national culture. The overall implication of the three conceptual guidelines, as far as national drama, music and dance were concerned, was that the forms must, theoretically, be Malay in essence with allowance for non-Malay participation and adaptation to cater for other than Malay audiences; and they must be within the bounds of Islamic rules and constraints. With these aims established, the realization of a national cultural identity became the new target. Incentives in the form of regular competitions from state to national levels using the media of radio, television and theatre, provided active participation for individuals and institutions alike in the attempt to achieve the new aims. Traditional forms of theatre, that were almost extinct or dead, were revived and shown on television; this helped to familiarize the people with the different types found in the various states of Malaysia. Encouragement was given to attempts at modifying existing forms and to creating new ones. The nation became enthusiastically involved in such activities. But the actual acceptance of any one type of every cultural genre, which was for some time the general trend, as the basis of a national cultural identity had not gone further than a dabbling with forms. For example, *joget*, a modern Malay dance type, has been performed with a mixed cast of Malays in Chinese dress, Chinese in Indian dress and Indians in Malay dress. In practice, generally, there has been only a loose adherence to the three basic concepts of a national culture.

This programme to create a cultural identity for the development of a new national culture obviously raises many problems. It is not difficult to criticize the guidelines that were adopted at the 1971 congress in Kuala Lumpur. The application of Islam as the all-important basis for the realization of a national culture became the main point of argument for Muslim devotees, which ended in using “Malay-Islam” in preference to “Islam”. The term “Malay-Islam” was aimed at reducing future complications over the conceptual guidelines. Islam in the true and orthodox sense is a belief in the oneness of God. Orthodox Muslim leaders frown upon mysticism and spirit worship in any form, whatever their purpose. Public performances of dance and drama that bring about sensual pleasure are also condemned. The term “Malay-

Islam” when used reduces the severity of the designated concept in terms of its religious connotation. In this study, it refers to Islam influenced by Malay culture, law and custom.

However, it is not my intention to criticize the three guidelines here. Rather taking as a baseline the political view that national demands increased emphasis on the cultural unity of the peoples of the state, I believe that it is vital we understand the nature of our actual cultural heritage of theatrical forms, however it may be defined for the purposes of national unity. Drama and music are not simply things to be collected and exhibited as specimens of cultural achievement in a museum nor are they curious attractions for the entertainment of tourists. They are life itself, dynamic not static, aspects of living societies not easily extracted from the social milieu. Any programme for cultural development must necessarily treat them as such, for development without understanding will be sterile.

The *Boria* as Malaysian Drama

There is a large, uneven and fragmented literature on Malaysian drama that goes well back into the nineteenth century. For the most part, the earlier works are literary in motivation. Their authors were essentially concerned with the collection of materials and with the understanding of drama by textual analysis. Much of the rest is concerned with the generally uncritical accumulation of data to service a range of hypotheses on cultural origins. Though literary analysis and origin theories are of limited concern in this book, the early material has its ethnographic values and is particularly important in providing a historical perspective for modern studies. *Boria* as a theatre has ancient roots in Malaysia. Though of Indian origin, it has until very recently not only been centred in Penang, but has through adaptive processes, become the one and only theatre of the Penang Malays. From this brief sketch I hope it is clear that serious studies of Malay drama are limited and a great deal of work remains to be done even to produce a comprehensive literary and ethnographic picture.

However, much more than this is desirable. If we return to the research implications of the national cultural concept, then

it is the socio-cultural aspects of drama which need to be investigated. Consider the case of *Wayang Siam* (Thai shadow play) as found in Kedah and Kelantan. Its presence among Malays there and elsewhere in its full form suggests that it has some social, cultural and psychological importance for these particular Malays. Tailored to their society, moulded through time, only among them does it have its full symbolic impact. Performed elsewhere in its Kelantan form it is something different, because it lacks its home audience, and hence the special relationship with that audience. To understand it then, we need to know not merely the form, but its methods of communication within its own particular culture and society. A simple point perhaps, but this holistic conception of theatre is not only necessary for broader and better dramatic studies, it also prevents the establishment of Malaysian drama forms nationally being hamstrung from its inception. Since each drama is part of a particular social fabric, a process in time, not a static entity, we risk, in isolating it from its original social milieu, producing national forms which are the lowest common denominators. From the national viewpoint then, there is a case for intensive local studies now, before the greater powers of the national media swamp the rich regional forms. *Boria* is such a form, professional and localized, but already through competitions, radio and television, it is moving onto a national stage, becoming both more amateur and narrowly professional in the process. It is therefore the overview that *boria* is symbolic of the social actions of its audience. The main basis of my analytical approach is that of Kenneth Burke's treatment of symbolic or "representational" action (Burke 1957, pp. 3-120), and also that of Turner who views such art forms as

those liminal ... forms of symbolic action, those genres of free-time activity, in which all previous standards and models are subjected to criticism, and fresh new ways of describing and interpreting socio-cultural experience are formulated (Turner 1974, p. xv).

From the viewpoint of symbolic action as both "representation" (from Burke) and "instigation" (from Turner) the question posed throughout will be how the structure, content and functions of *boria* relate to the socio-cultural milieu in which it is found. In particular I attempt to establish how *boria* contributes not

only to the maintenance of tradition, but also to moulding, channeling and redefining of traditional social values and action into a modern form. This approach comes close to that taken by Rosemary Firth when she wrote:

Popular art forms have as important a part to play in maintaining tradition as in popularizing change: in fact they can act as a powerful solvent between the old and the new (Firth 1966, p. 189).

The communicative element of symbolic interaction between actor or performer, and audience in a live theatre is more direct than in other media. The constant repetition of similar theatre shows within a single community influences group solidarity, while acting before an audience especially when both actors and audiences belong to a single social group or region, allows a particularly meaningful interactive process between its participants. The medium of interaction to be investigated is the employment of verbal symbols of narration and non-verbal symbols in the usage of facial expressions, bodily gestures, and representation of role by attire.

The *boria* of Penang was determined by form and genre as theatre. As a form today it consists of two dramatic elements — a farcical comic sketch and a song and dance finale — both embodied in a thematic whole. As a genre it is the popular theatre of the Penang Malays. Nowadays it is also enjoyed as a live show in other regions of Malaysia such as neighbouring Kedah and Perak. It has a growing importance as a show in other media, particularly radio and television. In all these shows the actors are mainly Penang Malays, who were either from or still live in Penang. Its expansion in the wake of cultural nationalism demonstrates not only the lack of any other regional forms but its propagative possibilities, though the change in audience in particular should present problems for the actors and performers which may modify it considerably. This is a possibility worth further investigation, but in this study it is restricted to *boria* performed in dialect by Penang Malays within their communal contacts in Penang. This narrowing down is considered essential in view of the fact that *boria* originates, is maintained, and finds expression in Penang. Indeed it is totally identified with Penang Malays.

The intention here is to show that studies on Malaysian theatre can be improved by adopting an approach which draws on insights provided by social anthropology. The problems are manifold. At one level they are those of writing modern ethnography; at another they are testing concepts evolved in the study of symbolism in the context of a particular theatre and in a particular society.

The methods and techniques employed are derived from the aims and problems of the study. Modern ethnography demands the elaboration of a set of analytical concepts and a field study. The need for analysis led to the adoption of a basically holistic approach deriving from social anthropology, while the particular subject matter invited an interdisciplinary viewpoint with useful concepts from studies of symbolism, ritual and drama. The need for fieldwork demanded not just the usual gathering of texts from shows or audience reaction surveys but also a study of the show within its social context. This in turn led to the use of fieldwork methodology to gather data not only on the form but particularly the social background of the people. The method of participant observation and interviews were employed in the gathering of pertinent information.