

## **FOLK DANCE-DRAMAS AS HYBRID CULTURE IN THE THAI-MALAY BORDER REGION: NORA, MAKYUNG, AND MEK MELUNG**

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Some of the traditional folk dance-dramas that have spread across Thailand and Malaysia contain animistic and Brahminical cultural elements that predate the arrival of Theravada Buddhism and Islam. They are orally transmitted traditions performed by groups of performers and the exact dates of their origin are unknown. However, their transmission across time and space resembles the evolution of the ancient version of the mandala structure centered on Nakhon Si Thammarat. Following the establishment of the border between Thailand and Malaya and the adoption of Buddhism and Islam in each respective country, the Nora, Makyung and Mek Melung dance-dramas were adapted to conform to new lifestyles, urbanization, and changing political and religious norms.

*Keywords* : performing arts, Thai, Malay, Buddhism, Islam

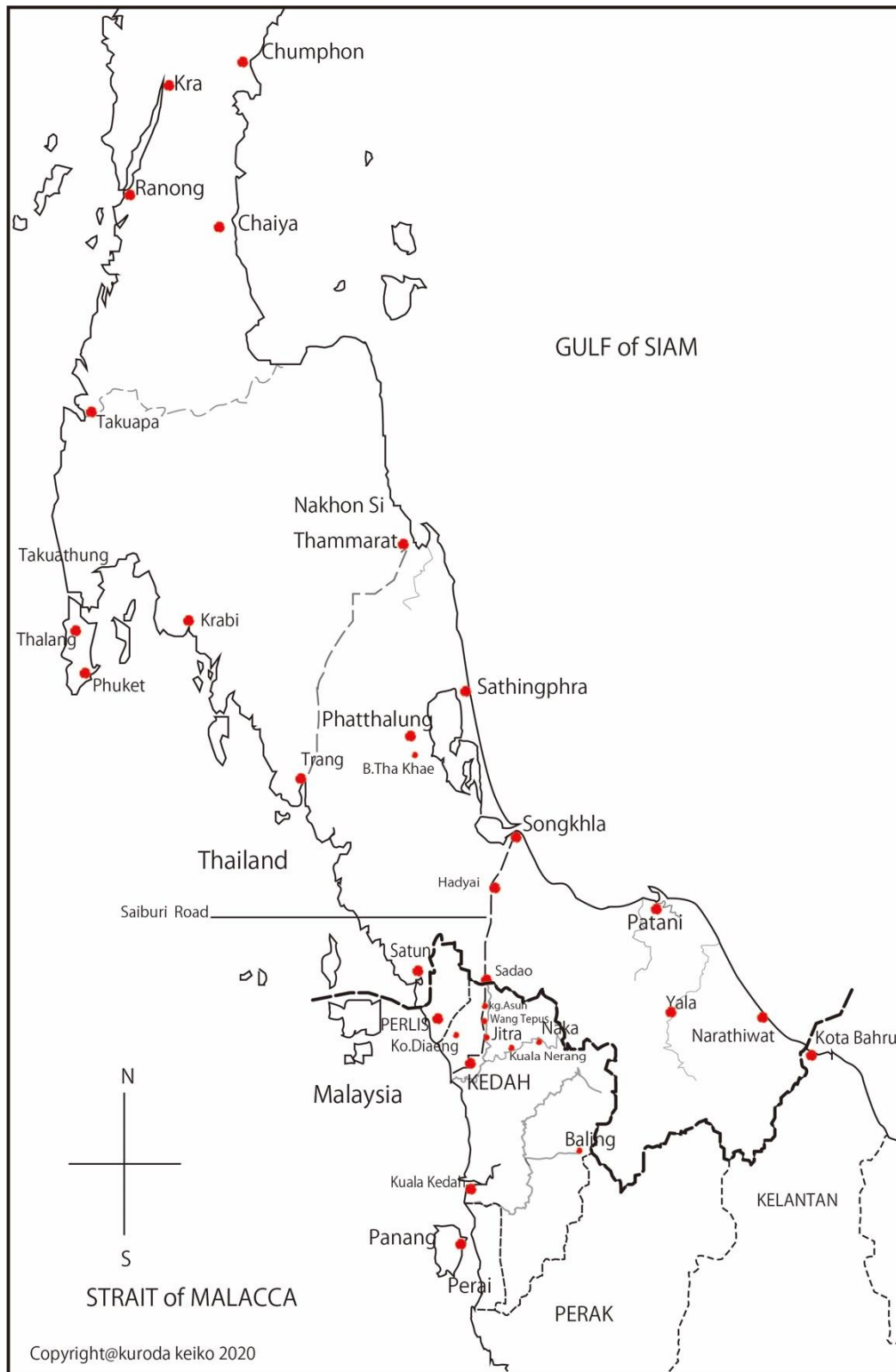
### **Performing Arts as Oral Tradition**

Folk dance-dramas are performed in both Southern Thai and Northern Malaysia. From the Thai perspective, these dance-dramas are regarded as unique to the culture of southern Thailand. According to the people of the northern states of Malaysia, however, these dance performances constitute a performing arts culture unique to the region.

Performing arts groups are active in both Thailand and Malaysia. They are both influenced by the ancient cultures of the region as well as Buddhism and Islam. These cultures reflect societies prior to the influence of Theravada Buddhism and Islam, with the Mon Khmer and Malay being the earliest performers in the area. According to Thai and Malaysian scholars, the origins of these art forms can be traced back 800 to 1000 years to the time of Langkasuka and Srivijaya.

Such theories, however, remain on the level of speculation, as there is insufficient historical data concerning dance-dramas to prove such claims. Although there are documents from the seventeenth century that discuss dance-dramas, the specific form and content of these performances remain unclear.

This paper attempts to provide a comprehensive historical understanding of the traditions of the Malay Peninsula and performing arts groups.



Map Southern Thailand and Northern Malaysia

**Characteristics of the Arts**

Dance-drama performances in the Malay Peninsula are thought to have originated from the lives

of rice farmers in villages. These performances reflect the life rhythms of rice farmers and are performed at weddings and various religious events during the non-growing season. Subsequently, these peasant performances were transformed into local court dances, which were performed for the enjoyment of nobility and at the funerals of kings.

The performance begins with a performer providing offerings to earth spirits and ancestral spirits while incantations are chanted. Next, either the performer becomes possessed or the individual who is to be healed is placed into a trance by the performer. At this point, music is played accompanied by dancing. The music is performed with a fiddle (*rebab*) two drums (*gendang*), flute (*serunai*), gong (*tetawak*) and a small bell (*canang*). As the music plays, the dancer acts out the story. Clown actors may also appear and perform an improvisational skit.

The performances are conducted in multiple languages, and performers chant incantations in ancient Khmer, Thai, and Malay dialects.

This traditional dance performance requires a specially built performance hall that serves as a ritual venue. In its authentic form, the performance may take from three days to a week to complete.

The motivations of audience members are varied; some come to be healed and others come to be entertained by the drama and comedy. The performance is generally held once a year.

The following section offers a brief description of each form of dance-drama.

### **Nora.**

Nora, also known as Nora Chatri and Manora, is a well-known form of folk dance-drama of southern Thailand. There are about 300 groups composed of 6,000 people who perform Nora in southern Thailand (Guelden 2018 : 23) According to Guelden, Nora has been passed down among the Nora lineage in Tha Khae Village, Phatthalung, southern Thailand.

Nora dance troupes have spread to Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Trang, as well as to Perlis and Kedah in Malaysia. It is popularly understood as a Buddhist dance. In Malaysia it is also known by the name Manora.

In particular, the Nora Bird Dance—which reenacts the story of the hunter and prince trying to catch the Seven Bird Maidens (Kinnari)—is popular. A Kinnari, which is one of the seven sisters of the heavenly maidens, is presented to the king by a hunter. Prince Raja Sithon is charmed by her and marries her. However, the prince's wife hears that the prince was sent to the battlefield to die because of jealousy and slander to his wife. The wife hears this and leaves home. The prince, who is still alive, sets out to look for her, and he is eventually recognized by his wife's relatives in Kinnara, the kingdom of birds.

The costumes feature long, twisted claws, stupa-shaped crowns, and shoulder coverings made of beads. The bird maiden wears a costume that mimics the appearance of a bird's tail and feathers. This performance was a popular form of mass entertainment in the 1980s.



Figure 1: Norah at Ban Tha Khae in Phatthalung  
([https://youtu.be/aQ6V1G4h\\_UI](https://youtu.be/aQ6V1G4h_UI))



Figure 2: Norah at Ban Tha Khae  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoyWwqguZks&list=RDZLp2ALcBUdg&index=2>)

### **Makyung (Main Puteri).**

Makyung is performed by Muslims and is often referred to as the Nora of Muslims. Originally a form of folk dance-drama indigenous to rural Kelantan, Tengku Temenggong Abdul Ghaffar, the son of Sultan Muhammad II of Kelantan, introduced it as a court dance in 1923. The royal family of Kelantan is connected to the Cabang Tiga family and the Patani royal family. The Sultan of Patani chose to reside in Kelantan during his period of exile. Therefore, the culture of Kelantan is often said to contain elements of Siamese origin, such as magic and love potions. Makyung is performed in

Kedah as well as in Terengganu (Madiha Ramlan and M.A. Quayum:159). Makyung is performed in the Malay language, a dialect of Patani Kelantan, which contains many loan words from Thai.

There are six main characters in the Makyung drama, including Pak Yong (female dancer), Mak Yong (female), Peran (male), a clown wearing a red mask, and another Makyung (female). Unlike the Nora, the dance is performed while seated; however, the performers wear costumes similar to those of Nora performers, including head dresses, beaded shoulder coverings, and a whip made of seven rotans that is held by the prince.

The Makyung performance also incorporates a magical healing ritual. However, this element—as well as other non-Islamic elements of the drama—are rarely performed in recent days. The Main Puteri, a witch doctor's dance, is performed as a healing ceremony.

The Makyung tradition was preserved until the 1960 and 1970. Subsequently, the PAS (Malaysian Islamic Party), a political party in Kelantan that was influenced by the Islamic Revolution, came to power and banned the non-Islamic elements of traditional dance-drama performances.



Figure 3 : Mak Yong (Makyung)





Figure 4: Mak yong in ritual

<https://www.newmandala.org/mak-yong-in-may-sembah-guru/>

### **Mek Melung.**

This folk dance is still performed in Kampong Baru in Wang Tepus, north of Kedah. Mek Melung is also performed alongside Hindu Brahminical rituals, during which performers are possessed by spirits. As a form of dance-drama performed in Malay farming communities since the 1970s, this performance has been particularly well preserved. This performance is also accompanied by a healing ritual during which an invocation is chanted to summon the spirits of ancestors and other spirits. According to Hanapi Dollah, these traditions are associated with twelve spirits that are considered to be spirits of the Malay world (Hanapi Dollah 2007)



Figure 5: Mek Melung of Kg. Wang Tepus in Kedah



Figure 6: Mek Melung in ritual



Figure 7: Mek Melung of Kg. Wang Tepus in Kedah

(<https://youtu.be/Wa8S21ZUyS8>)



Figure 8: Mek Melung performed by The National Department for Culture and Arts in 2018

(<https://youtu.be/pUpV02fI9mw>)

### **Wayang Kulit (Nang Thalung in Thai).**

In Malaysia, there are two types of puppet theater: Wayang Kulit Melayu, which originates from Java, and Wayang Kulit Siam, which originates from southern Thailand.

Johari b. Salleh's performing group in Asun Village in Kedah was formed in 1966 and has received government support to perform the story of Rama Khien. This group has also been giving lectures in Australia and abroad. Asun's group is Muslim and the members are from Kg. Khunluang. However, there are many Thai-speaking Muslim villages in this area. Asun's performer (Dalang) purchased more than 300 puppets in Songkhla, southern Thailand.. Moreover, as their activities expanded beyond the Kedah area to include other parts of the Malay Peninsula in the 1960s, they began performing in Malay instead of Thai. The new leader of the group also speaks Thai. However, the group began incorporating incantatory Brahmanic mantras into the beginning of their performances in the 1990s, and the group has since become notorious for its strong Islamic fundamentalist tendencies (Sohaimi & Omar 2010).



Figure 7: Wayang Kulit Seri Asun of kg.Asun in Kedah  
(<https://youtu.be/NevYnW8j-uM>)( <https://youtu.be/xPZ3QdHbw6Q>)

### **Hadrah.**

Hadrah, also referred to as Noge, is a dance of Persian origin performed by a group of men and accompanied by drumming and a male chorus. According to an interview in a village in 1991, there is a comical version of this dance featuring men dressed as women. A group that performs this comical version was formed mainly to provide entertainment for weddings and events in other villages (Kuroda 1992).

Hadrah was most popular in the 1950 and 1960s. According to Mohd Taib Osman, it is similar to Makyung and Menora. Similar to other dance performances, the Hadrah dance also begins with a ceremony. Items such as kimma leaves, burnt powder, coconut oil, 15-ringgit coins, rice colored yellow with turmeric, and candles are offered to the leader of the group. He eats some of these items



in order to commence the dance. The dance tells the story of a woodcutter who has lost his way and wanders around, beats woods with a bamboo stick and praying, and returns village safely. This dance is said to have begun as a celebration of his return (Mohd Taib Osman 1982).



Figure 7: Hadrah in Perlis

(<https://youtu.be/v6yHnFHe8I8>)

### **Jikey.**

Jikey, known as Likay in Thailand, is a dance-drama that features extremely flamboyant costumes. The origins of Jikey are unclear, but it may also exist as an Islamic ritual known as Zikir. Jikey has been introduced as a village performance, probably from India to the old port towns of southern Thailand, such as Tangburalinga and Nakhon Si Thammarat, where it has evolved on its own. The clown has also been incorporated into this dance as an important figure. The clown is an Indian character who wears a turban while the other performers wear stupa-shaped crowns, similar to Makyung and Makyung performances.

The Jikey was very popular in the late nineteenth century. The main characters include a hero (*phra*), a heroine (*nang*), a villain (*kong*), a villainess (*itcha*), and a joker. The performance is highly improvisational and concludes with a happy ending (Smithies 1971).

In Thailand, Likay is performed in Thai. In Malaysia, Likay is performed in Malay.



Figure 8: Jikey Kedah in Malay Style  
(<https://youtu.be/vcZBeM-3kmw>)



Figure 9: Jikey Siam in Thai Style  
(<https://youtu.be/pH4MBFwyBIs>)

### Hybridity and Origins of the Performing Arts

In the following section, I will discuss Nora, Makyung and Mek Melung in more detail. These art forms are based on animism and contain Hindu Brahmin elements.

## **Nora.**

The Nora dance-drama originates in Sathing Phra in the south of Wat Phakoo, which is the site of well-known archaeological artifacts. The Nora art form is believed to have originated from three temples located in the following villages: Wat Thakhura on the east side of Songkhla Lake, Wat Khian Bang Kaeo, and Wat Thakhae on the west side of Songkhla Lake. The village of Tha Khae—a Thai Buddhist community inhabited by the decedents of Phatthalung royalty who ruled from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century—carries on the tradition of the Nora Master.

The Nora tradition incorporates a variety of elements from various cultures. The Nora Master is male but he is accompanied by women. The Nora group of Thakae, the primary inheritors of the Nora tradition in southern Thailand, has a Nora stage within the grounds of the Wat Thakhae Temple and has been performing there for generations. Guelden considers their beliefs to be ancestral in nature, although they contain Buddhist elements. The ritual necessitates that performers be possessed by the twelve dancing Nora Masters, who represent their ancestors dating back to the Sathing Phra. According to the Nora legend, there is a Master who had twelve wives, and his wives were of Thai, Chinese, Lao, Burma, and Malay descent. His wives also followed various religions, including Theravada Buddhism, Maha Yana Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. His first wife was Mae Khaen Awn, a Theravada Buddhist, and his last wife was Mae Soi Dok Mak, a Chinese princess who was betrothed to an early Ayutthaya ruler. According to another legend, his last wife, Mae Jamjuri Sijura, was Muslim (Guelden 2019: 292).

Nora performing arts groups are present in Malaysia, where they perform the Manora dance in the Thai Buddhist villages of Ko Diaeng, Naka, Jitra and Pedu in Kedah (Ghulam-sarwar Yousof, 1982: 53). These villages are migrant peasant villages in southern Thailand that have existed for about 400 years (Kuroda 2015). However, there are restrictions on performing in Malaysia. The Malaysian government only allows Nora performances in Thai temples for seven days at a per visit. However, no romantic plays are allowed and drinking is prohibited.

The Nora performances are also important for facilitating possession by spirits. A Nora Master is able to be possessed by multiple deities. People participate in Nora performances in order to be possessed by the spirits of their ancestors or to be treated for illness. Because Buddhism does not prohibit possession, it is compatible with Nora performances. Also, Guelden claims that the Buddhist concept of reincarnation is irrelevant to Nora performances, and interprets possession in this context to be ancestral in nature.

Nora groups are invited to perform at events or markets in the temple "Wat Takura". Before the ceremony begins, Buddhist monks recite the sutra and make offerings. However, as dictated by principle, Buddhist monks do not participate in the ceremony itself. The performance is designed for participants to make prayers, and many people participate in it for the sake of their ancestors.

In some cases, Muslims participate in the event to be treated for illnesses. In a case from 2016, a Muslim woman was possessed by her Muslim ancestor during a Nora ritual. Although Muslims are

taught to believe in only one God, she was possessed by Nora's Muslim ancestors, Tok Adam, Sithnyaawaa, Himumii, Jan Jurn, Jan Sri Juraa (spirit) and others, who became possessed by "something that lives in their bodies." And she was cured by participating in Nora's rituals (Guelden 2018: 232). The Nora dance-drama also refers to the ancestral myth of the famous Lady White Blood of Phatthalung. According to this myth, Princess Phatthalung became pregnant in a dream under the influence of a Hindu god and her father banished her to a raft in Lake Songkhla, where her son was born and became a good dancer. Subsequently, she was reunited with her father, and the princess and her son returned to their country.

The Nora dance-drama is a method for showing respect to earth spirits, Hindu gods, and ancestral spirits. Nora serves to guard the morality of her descendants. If descendants violate either social norms or morals, they are given a warning in the form of accidents, illnesses, and natural disasters. If the Nora Master makes reforms unsuitable for a place of ritual or possession, a spirit may appear in a trance or an unexplained accident may occur as a form of punishment.

### **Makyung.**

Makyung is a Muslim dance-drama performed mainly by women. The master role is also performed by a woman. This dance-drama tradition is related to the spiritual world of pre-Islamic Malay people. Makyung is a prayer to the spirit of rice, and is considered to have originated in rural areas.

Makyung is believed to have originated in Greater Patani. It is said to also exist in Kedah, Satun, and Perlis on the west coast of Malay Peninsula where it is believed it was created by Lord Makyung Laut. It also exists in Riau and Medan (Rahimidin Zahari, 2011: 3)

Makyung is said to include twelve dance titles. The original myth of Makyung is the story of Dewa Muda and Puteri Ratna. In this story, Dewa Muda was told in a dream to hunt a golden deer. He did not know what to do even though he consulted his attendants Peran Tua and Peran Muda (both clowns). He received a message from Princess Puteri Ratna Emas. Later on, the prince had many adventures before he married the princess.

The performance is based on various folk tales. The title of the dances are as follows:

Cerita Dewa Muda, Dewa Samadaru, Dewa (Raja) Sakti, Dewa Indra, Indra Dewa, Anak Raja Panah, Anak Raja Gondang, Gading Bertimbang, Raja Tangkai Hati, Raja Muda Lakleng, Raja Muda Lembek (Putri Ratna), Raja Besar Dalam Negeri Ho Gading, Bedara Muda, In Riau, Serdang, Megat Sakti, and Tuan Puteri Ratna Emas. There are additional stories about Gunung Intan, Wak Peran Hutan,, and Raja Muda Lembek.

Many of the stories of Makyung are borrowed from the stories of Manora (Nora Chatri), Wayang Kulit Melayu, and Bangsawan (Anisah Kartika Putri, Suyitno, Muhammad Rohmadi: 2019). Makyung also has a section with chanting, but much of this tradition was lost due to bans by authorities. This is discussed in more detail below.



### **Mek Melung.**

Mek Melung is said to have originated in Ligor (Nakhon Si Thammarat). It was introduced more recently in public than Nora and Makyung. According to tradition, it was brought to Kedah during the war between Kedah and Siam in the eighteenth century. Mek Melung was said to spread to Kampung Perit, Kurung Itam, Kuala Nerang, Kampung Belukar Mulung, Kampung Paya Keladi, Kampung Wang Tepus, and Jitra Kedah. It also spread to Kampung Baru in Wang Tepus, which is a village where the festival is still practiced by villagers (Mohamad Luthfi, 2011: 64).

These villages are all located in a Thai-speaking Muslim area located along Saiburi Road, a land trade route between Siam and Kedah. Asun and Kampung Khunluang in Wayang Kulit are also in the same area.

Luthfi suggests that Mek Melung may have developed into a dance-drama form in Ligor before spreading to Kedah (Mohamad Luthfi, 2011, 2016; Jamalludin 2020). Kota Mengkhuang, a village next to Kampung Baru, is known as the place where Muslim royalty settled and built a castle (Kota) in the 18th century after fleeing Ligor (Kuroda 2019). Luthfi's research shows that the following origin stories have been passed down orally.

One of the orally transmitted stories related to the origins of Mek Melung states that Puteri Bongsu, the youngest daughter of Raja of Ligor, who had seven beautiful daughters, was hated by her jealous sisters. Her sisters pressured their father, Raja Ligor, to exile her from the kingdom. In exile, Puteri Bongsu wandered around with the maidservant who cared for her. From her maidservant, Puteri Bongsu learned how to tell stories, sing, and dance. She grew into a beautiful maiden and provided entertainment to the people as a *Penglipur lala* (a "healer of afflictions") while moving from one village to another singing folktales. Her performances were well received by villagers in Kampung Baru, Wang Tepus (Luthfi 2016: 63).

According to another tradition, Mek Melung is said to begin with the story of a couple from Kedah. Disappointed and disliked by their in-laws, they settled in Ligor. Pak Mohar and his wife Bunga cultivated rice paddy fields and grew "padi-uma (dry land rice)" in the hills. Soon, Bunga became pregnant. An old woman who called herself Bidan Ketujuh appeared. She prophesied that the child would be "great." With the assistance of Bidan Ketujuh, Bunga gave birth to a daughter named Mek Julong. When she grew up, Mek Julong became a skilled dancer. Pak Mohar made a drum to accompany his daughter's dancing. People were fascinated by this spectacle and began to beat the drums and play the flute. This performance later became known as "Mek Melung" (Luthfi 2016: 64).

The Mek Melung dance is performed by men and women. It also includes twelve different dances and shares certain similarities with Makyung. The four versions that are currently performed are Malim Bongsu, Dewa Kaca, Cahaya Bulan, and Dewa Muda.

The oral transmission of the Nora, Makyung, and Mek Melung dances can all be linked to the cities of Sathing Phra and Nakhon Si Thammarat, which were located at the trade route since the

ancients. . Both dances are believed to have been kept alive by the descendants of residents of ancient cities influenced by Hindu Brahman and Mahayana Buddhism, respectively. Nora performances are believed to have originally began in the west coast of Malaysia in Trang Province and Perlis state.

The mantra used in Nora performances is linguistically difficult to understand and cannot be identified as either Thai or Malay. In fact, it is believed by some to be the language of the Chao Lee people, a sea gypsy community on the west coast of Malay Peninsula (Guelden 2019: 318). The Chao Lee people of this coastal area may share the Malay language of the Urak Lawei (Orang Laut) clan. The history and distribution of these "sea gypsies" suggests that this is a plausible explanation. According to the legend of Princess Mahsuri on Langkawi Island of Kedah, she was suspected of committing adultery . When she was executed with a spear, white blood flowed from her chest, and proved her innocence.. It is known that the descendants of the princess are the present-day Muslims who migrated to Phuket (Kuroda 1996).

Although the spread of Makyung is often associated with the court culture of Patani/Kelantan, there are dance groups in Terengganu and Pahang on the east coast, which is the cradle of Nora and Makyung, The City of Nakhon Si Thammarat has its own national network of mandalas, with surrounding with the 12 satellite cities bearing the equivalent of the Twelve Zodiac titles.<sup>1</sup>

The Mandala network centered on Nakhon Si Thammarat with 12 satellite cities coincides with the areas propagated by Nora, Makyung and Mek Melung. These performances are still observed, demonstrating the spread of Hindu Brahmin performing arts culture in this area.

### **The Challenges of Modernization**

Each dancing group has experienced hardships due to the changing times. In Thailand, 80 percent of the population is Buddhist and Buddhism has become the state religion. In Malaysia, Islam is the state religion. However, despite the different religious compositions of the countries, they are in similar situations.

#### **Nora in Thailand.**

Nora serves an integrative role for Buddhism in Thailand. After the fall of Ayutthaya in the late eighteenth century, King Taksin, who rebuilt the Siamese court and later the Ratanakosin dynasty, tried to recreate the cultural Siamese court. Nakhon Si Thammarat and Nora, who preserved the old traditions of Buddhist culture, were invited to the central court. Likewise, Wayang Kulit was introduced from Phatthalung to the capital city and became known as "Nang Thalung," that is, Phatthalung's shadow play.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the sixteenth-century Southern Thai Chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat and the Chronicles of Phra That Nakhon, Nakhon Si Thammarat was surrounded by a chain of twelve inter-linked cities, or Mueang, on the Malay Peninsula, called the Naksat cities. Narathiwat (Rat), Pattani (Ox), Kelantan (Tiger), Kedah (Dragon), Phattalung (Snake), Trang (Horse), Chumphon (Goat), Krabi (Monkey), Tha Chana (Rooster), Phuket (Dog), Kraburi (Pig).

The performance group that inherited the traditions of Tha Khae of Phatthalung, the ancestral land of their ancestors, continues to perform Nora as a hybrid art form, preserving the heritage of animism, Brahmanism, Buddhism and Islam. For example, one of the ancestral performers, Phaw Gae, is both Thai and Muslim—a combination of Thai men and Muslim women (Guelden 2018: 103). Invariably, pigs are an essential offering in rituals, but they are not used when Muslims are undergoing possession (Guelden 2018: 99).

The most important function of Nora is possession and healing. Because of the constant demand for such services, Nora groups have survived the threat of extinction on account of their charismatic Nora Master and his successors. Under Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram's "Ratthaniyom" cultural movement in the mid-twentieth century, Central Thai-based practices and "civilized lifestyles" were encouraged. The Nora Master overcame cultural environment by playing Nora in a Western suit.

The Nora Master's Somphum says that the inclusion of various gods and religions is not alien to Nora. The medium Songphum said he was possessed by the guardian spirit Tua Pae Gon and Jii Gong, the gods dressed like beggars in orange robes, the tiger gods associated with good luck and fertility, the Chinese Goddess Guan Yin, One Thousand Hand Guan Yin, the warrior Guan Yu, the young guardian Naja, and the Hindu god Ganesh. Most of the Chinese deities tended to speak in a dialect of Hokkien, but at the Nora ceremony they spoke in Central Thai dialect so that the audience could understand them. However, possessed mediums who speak Thai rather than the language of spirits are often seen as inauthentic (Guelden 2018: 121). Hybrid Inclusiveness is a Strategy for the Survival.

The Nora Master thought that there was a limit to how much money the family could keep. Therefore, he entrusted the Nora dance hall and its management to a committee that was established in 2001. This committee is responsible for the preservation of all the ceremonies and management of property, which had been supported by the family business. However, changes in the nature of the Nora performance by the treasurer and the committee made it clear that the performers themselves were in a trance, and they protested against the changes, claiming that they differed from tradition.

In 2011, the local government and the Agency for Cultural Affairs started to manage the funds of Nora performances. The governor was criticized for exploiting the Nora tradition for political reasons, and the family members belonging to the Nora performance group opposed it on the grounds that it went against the essence of Nora. The government's efforts were motivated by the popularity of Kin Cee (Nine Emperor God Festival: the Vegetarian Festival) among tourists in Phuket, and the participation of Chinese people from Malaysia and Singapore. The goal was to enable Phatthalung Province, which does not have any special projects, to benefit from tourism in the area. In addition, the value of Thai culture has been recognized, and there is a movement to preserve Nora dance-dramas as an art form and teach it to students in art departments at universities.

In 2012, there was also a movement to have Nora listed as a UNESCO Intangible World Heritage. As a result, the Khon Masked Dance Drama was registered as an intangible cultural heritage in 2018.

However, following the death of the Nora Master and his replacement by a successor, a movement to return to nostalgic and "traditional" Nora has emerged. In other words, at present, the preservation of Nora dance-drama as Thai "Art" and the restoration of the original Nora group are mutually supportive developments.

### **Makyung in Malaysia.**

In Malaysia, beginning with Makyung, the transmission of performing arts in rural areas has become difficult. In particular, the changing lifestyles of farmers in rice-growing areas such as Kelantan and Kedah has presented a serious obstacle to the survival of this tradition.

Similarly, peasant entertainment such as Hadrah flourished in the 1950s, and some rural groups were invited to perform in other villages. However, following the "green revolution" and the double cropping of rice paddies in the 1960s, the non-growing season shortened and other entertainment forms, such as television, became available, causing a decrease in the number of performances.

In Malaysia, the strictness of Islamic practice has had the most significant impact on traditional performing arts. Areas such as Patani, Kelantan, and Kedah are now known for their commitment to Islamic practice. It was only after the second half of the nineteenth century that Arabic and Malay books from Mecca were brought to Pondok, which is an important center of education. Subsequently, the practice of Islam began to spread (Kuroda 2020).

The Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 divided the region and established national modern borders. Patani became a Muslim minority in a Buddhist country. Likewise, as Muslim areas, Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis were socially required to conform to Islamic life. The management of culture by the state was also influenced by the neighboring Thai "Ratthaniyom patriotic movement." The two countries displayed different cultural orientations. For example, in the Siamese Buddhist village of Kedah residents were allowed to perform the manora, which is a traditional performance, but not the Ram Wong dance, as Ram Wong was judged to not be traditional culture of the Malay Peninsula. Indeed, since 1941, Ram Wong dance has been conceived of as a Thai national cultural dance.

Performing arts featuring pre-Islamic cultural elements, such as Makyung and Wayang Kulit, have been regarded as un-Islamic by the Shariah Court due to the global tightening of Islamic practice following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the rise of the Islamic party PAS in Kelantan Province. As a result, these performances were banned. In 1998, Makyung was banned from being performed in public places in Kelantan because it contains un-Islamic story elements. In particular, it is forbidden for female performers to wear costumes that reveal their forearms, upper arms, or hair, and to dance on the same stage as men. In the Makyung story, the appearance of the god Dewa was considered un-Islamic. By the 1990s, not only in Kelantan, but also in Kedah, the "traditional arts" had become a "museum exhibit."

Outside of Kelantan, in areas such as Narathiwat and Yala in the former Patani Kingdom of Thai, which borders Thailand, as well as in the Malay-inhabited areas of Patani where Makyung, Dikir Balat,



an Main Puteri are performed using Patani/Kelantan dialects, the performers are actively performing the traditional arts.

An attempt was made to revive Makyung as an art form by recognizing its value as indigenous Malay culture. Makyung was declared a "Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO in 2005. After it was officially recognized (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2014), some Makyung were transmitted to Indonesia, and there was some disagreement over its inclusion on the National Intangible Heritage List.

Some have criticized modernized Makyung for omitting ritual aspects and diverging from its original form for the purposes of modern staging (Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin, November 29, 2019). Nevertheless, the ban on staging the play in Kelantan was lifted on September 25, 2019. During the 28 years that the ban was in effect, the performers became old and many of them were unable to pass on their skills to the younger generation.

Makyung performers continue to use witch doctors such as Bomoh and others, although they publicly deny that it is un-Islamic. Moreover, they claim that their recitation of verses from the Qur'an at the beginning of the ritual does not deviate from Islamic norms. Makyung performers survived only briefly as performers of the Main Putri, a magical healing ritual.

### **The Fate of Mek Melung.**

Mek Melung, which is similar to Makyung, has miraculously survived in Kedah, where Islamic practice has also become more rigid. The area where Mek Melung is played was, until the first half of the twentieth century, a Thai-speaking Muslim area and is located along the inland trading land routes. This area includes speakers of the southern Thai and Kedah dialects of Malay. The practice of Islam among southern Thai Muslims was less strictly enforced until the middle of the nineteenth century, during which time residents participated in the same events as Buddhists. ( Kuroda 2018 ).

They lived in harmony with the Siamese culture, and interacted closely with Siamese Buddhists who would migrate from southern Thailand, and some converted to Buddhism. For this reason, they were called *samsam*, meaning "not faithful Muslims." They had relatives on the Thai side of the border and used the southern Thai dialect of Thai as their daily language. Asun's group in Wayang Kulit also belong to this identity of Thai-speaking Muslims.

In a survey in the 1990s, they claimed their identity as Malay Muslims and emphasized that they had assimilated into the Malay majority of the Muslim nation, overcoming the stigma of unscrupulous Muslims (Kuroda 1995). The historical relationship between Siam and Kedah is generally explained with reference to the fact that Siamese speakers who emigrated from Siam are both Muslims and Buddhists, and many of the place names are of Thai origin. This has likely survived due to this relationship and local understanding.

In 2014, Mek Melung was recognized as a cultural heritage by the Kedah State. An arrangement of the play was performed by a performing group. Some of the Malay audiences who saw this show

enjoyed it as "Malay culture," while some of them rejected the trance-like performance in the opening ceremony as un-Islamic.

In recent years, Mek Melung has not been performed in Wan Tepus, and combined with a lack of interest in non-Islamic culture, it is feared that it may disappear as performers get older and are not replaced by a new generation of performers.

### **Attempts to Save the Performing Arts**

The geographic distribution and origins of these dance-dramas predate both Buddhism and Islam. They have spread across the Malay Peninsula while incorporating elements of Theravada Buddhism and Islam. This hybrid culture has made them unique and has attracted people.

The "traditional" performing arts have to adapt to changes in everyday life. When they are no longer needed, they are destined to decline and disappear. However, they can also adapt and survive in a new climate.

The Nora dance-drama is meant to heal those who participate, and these healing rituals are demanded by the people. Nora has a chance to survive among the people both as entertainment and in films and other forms of entertainment. The Hindu-Brahmic elements of Nora can exist within the Thai Theravada world. Nora has often experienced times of crisis when there was a lack of money, donations, and sponsorship to sustain performance activities. Income from performing healing rituals and amulets are also important. Although the support for and political use of Nora by the Ministry of Culture was inevitable, the Tha Khae Nora group has attempted to return to older performance styles after modernization in order to preserve the "spirit of Nora rituals at the core."

In the case of Makyung and Mek Melung, rather than changes to everyday life, strict Islamic practice and change in people's values have caused the public to lose interest in performing arts that contain "un-Islamic" elements. Main Putri in Thai Muslim areas supports Malaysian Makyung performers both technically and financially. Asun's Wayang Kulit has been working abroad and has gained support selling visual products as DVD.

One way for the classical performing arts to survive is to be recognized as an intangible world heritage. Makyung and Mek Melung have been recognized as "classical performing arts" by outside bodies that have recognized their cultural value as unadaptable to changes in modern lifestyles and values.

Since the 1950s, governments around the world have begun to declare certain traditions within specific regions as national heritage properties. UNESCO, the international organization that oversees this classification, introduced the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2001, and with the support of UNESCO, many traditions around the world began to seek international heritage status (Jamalludin.171-172). Recognition as a world intangible heritage site can assist political strategies to promote cultural tourism.

Both Thailand and Malaysia experienced rapid urbanization since the late 1990s, and their

historical landscapes and cultures are being lost to rural development. In recent years, there has been a movement to restore and preserve this disappearing "culture."

In Malaysia, the Cultural and Economic Development Agency (CENDANA), established by the Malaysian government in June 2017, is actively supporting culture and aims to improve the cultural and creative economy by redirecting private investment into the performing arts sector across the country. One of the main objectives of fostering cultural activities is to create a broad job market and support national economic growth. The CENDANA is empowered to conduct concerts featuring various traditional performing arts in urban areas and offer a form of cultural tourism to domestic and international tourists and local audiences (CENDANA 2017).

In order for The Folk Dance-tradition to survive, it needs to be reborn as a contemporary art industry while retaining its unique elements. Nora in Thailand as well as Makyung and Mek Melung in Malaysia are all in the midst of this process. Countries with borderless performing arts are competing for world heritage status in order to get them better branded as national property.. For whom does culture exist?

## Appendix

You can watch these performances as videos.

Video of Nora in 2019 in Phatthalung, Tha Khae village: [https:// www.youtube .com/ aQ6V1G4H\\_UI](https://www.youtube.com/aQ6V1G4H_UI)

UNESCO's video explaining Makyung: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/Makyung-theatre-00167>

Mek Melung in Malaysia Wantepus 2011: <http://youtu.be/Wa8S21ZUyS8>

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