

Full-Length Article

The Body Becoming: Transformative Performance in Malaysian Mak YongPatricia A. Hardwick¹¹*Institute of Sacred Music, Yale University 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, USA***Abstract**

Mak yong is a Malay dance drama found in southern Thailand, northern Malaysia, and the Riau Islands of Indonesia. The form of *mak yong* currently performed in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan requires its practitioners to be storytellers, actors, singers, dancers, musicians, and in the context of ritual performances, healers. Drawing upon interviews with performers, this article will explore first-hand accounts of the embodied experiences of individual Kelantanese *mak yong* practitioners during their performances of the *Menghadap Rebab*, the opening song and dance of a *mak yong* performance. This article will examine how prayer is understood by many Kelantanese *mak yong* performers to be an important aspect of their internal performances and will investigate how individual *mak yong* performers engage traditional Kelantanese understandings of the body during their performances.

Keywords: *Performance, Transformation, Embodiment*multilingual abstract | mmd.iamonline.com**Background**

Scholars of ritual and healing performances emphasize the emergent quality of performance as essential to the physical, emotional, and temporal transformations that often take place during these events [1-3]. While music, dance, and the vocalized recitation of prayers are aspects of ritual that are externally observable, other aspects of transformative performances are internal to a patient or practitioner and involve the use of prayer, sacred imagery, and an engagement with individual and culturally specific understandings of the self [1,2]. Investigation into the embodied experience of a performer provides a unique perspective on simultaneous internal and external performance and the phenomenology of transformation that often takes place during ritual and healing performances [1-3].

Drawing upon interviews with traditional performers, this article will explore first-hand accounts of the embodied experiences of individual Kelantanese *mak yong* practitioners of their performances of the first opening solo of the *Menghadap Rebab*, the song and dance that preface a *mak*

yong performance in both entertainment and ritual healing contexts. I will examine how prayer and an engagement with sacred imagery are understood by many traditional Kelantanese *mak yong* performers to be an important part of their internal performances, and how this prayerful meditation can be physically referenced in a performer's externalized dance movements. I will also investigate how fetal gestation and birth are understood by many traditionally trained *mak yong* performers as intertwined with Kelantanese Malay theories of the body, and how individual performers describe their engagement with these concepts through internal imaginal performances while dancing and singing the opening dance of the *Menghadap Rebab*.

The Macrocosm: Mak Yong in Social Context

Mak yong is a form of Malay folk theater that is traditionally staged in the round (see note 1). Itinerant *mak yong* troupes once performed throughout the southern Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, the northern Malaysian states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, the Riau Islands of Indonesia, and briefly on the Indonesian island of Sumatra [4-8]. *Mak yong* performances incorporate music, dance, and slapstick humor, and begin with a series of eight or more songs and dances that introduce the stock characters of a king, a queen, clowns, and palace maid servants. After the danced preamble, the identity of the king and his country are announced to the audience via a formalized speech, which

PRODUCTION NOTES | Address correspondence to: Patricia A. Hardwick PhD, Institute of Sacred Music, Yale University 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511, USA. Email: hardwick.patricia@gmail.com | COI statement: The author declared that no financial support was given for the writing of this article. The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Note 1 This method of staging allows the audience to surround the performance and experience the event from multiple perspectives. The close proximity of the audience to the performance also provides an immediate connection between performers and the audience and allows audience members to observe minute details of performance practice.

signals the beginning of the dramatic performance of a particular tale associated with a divine sovereign. As a *mak yong* story progresses, other *mak yong* songs and dances are performed during scenes in which the lead character is sleeping or bathing, to highlight emotionally charged scenes, to signal the changing of scenes, or for walking or traveling [4,8].

Represented as a classical Malay dance drama used to entertain the rulers of the Malay sultanates of Kelantan and Pattani from time immemorial, *mak yong* has been incorporated by the Malaysian federal government into Malaysian interpretations of national heritage since the 1970s [7,9]. Outside of Kelantan, the study of *mak yong* as a form of secular entertainment has been incorporated into the arts curriculum of several major Malaysian universities as well as ASWARA, the Malaysian National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (see note 2). Despite the attention that *mak yong* has received at the national level in Malaysia, *mak yong* was banned in 1991 in its home state of Kelantan by PAS, the Islamic political party that controls the northern Malaysian state [7,9]. PAS banned performances of Kelantanese *mak yong* under the same statute they used to ban gambling and prostitution [7,9]. Citing the links of *mak yong* to ritual and pre-Islamic religious systems PAS leaders argue that *mak yong* performances are *syirik*, or polytheistic, a charge of heresy that contemporary *mak yong* practitioners who consider themselves faithful Muslims, find abhorrent [7]. 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 [7]. The continued support of *mak yong* by the Malaysian federal government as a symbol of the Malaysian nation and its ban by PAS in the opposition held state of Kelantan, has turned this UNESCO world heritage art into a highly charged Malaysian political symbol that seems to pit Malay ethnic nationalism against Islamic fundamentalism

Note 2 While many traditional *mak yong* performers have been commissioned to come from rural Kelantan and Terengganu to academic institutions in the urbane centers of Kuala Lumpur and Penang to teach large groups of eager Malaysian undergraduates, large class sizes, a comparatively short period of study, and bias against ritual aspects of the form hinder the ability of village *mak yong* masters to convey more than basic techniques in *mak yong* theatrical performance. The re-contextualization of the art from a folk performance learned over a lifetime of observation, introspection, personal inquiry, and apprenticeship to a master teacher, to a term-limited college course taught in the context of an urban institution of higher learning inhibits the desire of traditional *mak yong* performers to educate their students on 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. Pak Ali explained that their knowledge only extended to the skin, the shallow outer covering of the form. The flesh and 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 Pak Ali reserved for a handful of select students who made the long journey to study with him at his home in rural Kelantan.

[7]. While the twenty-three year old PAS ban has all but obliterated the rural entertainment form of *mak yong*, *mak yong* performances do continue in Kelantan, incorporated into Kelantanese *main 'teri* healing rituals [6-8].

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* [10]. 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* [11], 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 [10]. 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.

Main 'teri currently coexists with Western medical practice in Kelantan as a complementary medical system based on traditional East Coast Malay understandings of the body [8]. *Main 'teri* patients often seek Western medical care for their ailments first, turning to *main 'teri* practitioners only if they find that their condition is unresponsive to, or untreatable by Western medical practice [6,8]. 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 sovereign: the human person a microcosm that reflects the social macrocosm, full of contending forces [8,12]. 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 [1].

The Microcosm: Visions of Transformation during the *Menghadap Rebab*

Mak yong performances for entertainment or ritual healing are always begun with a performance of the song and the dance of the *Menghadap Rebab*. A performance of the *Menghadap Rebab* is divided into two main parts [4,5,13]. The first section of the *Menghadap Rebab* consists of several verses sung by the *Pak Yong*, the lead performer that takes on the role of the king, and is musically guided by the melody [13]. This melody is open to an individual *Pak Yong*'s expansion and contraction of the timing of individual notes as well as personal vocal embellishments [5,13]. A series of eight beat gong cycles or *gongan* that foreshadow the musical structure of the second section of the *Menghadap Rebab* replace the melody as the defining structure of the second solo [5,13]. The second part of the *Menghadap Rebab* consists of the dance of the *Menghadap Rebab* and is musically structured by eight beat gong cycles, repeated four times to form a thirty-two beat

structure that continues until the end of the piece [5,13]. The names of the dance movements of dance of *Menghadap Rebab* as well as the majority of their symbolic significance are derived from the lyrics sung by the lead performer, or *Pak Yong*, and the dance movements of the *Menghadap Rebab* are often interpreted by traditional performers as an embodiment of the poetic verse encapsulated in the lyrics [5].

I have documented the movement vocabulary of the *Menghadap Rebab* and explored the structural and symbolic links between its sung lyrics and dance movements at length in previous work [5]. In the following discussion, I want to move beyond examinations of surface symbolism of mimetic movement to investigate how performers understand aspects of their sung and danced performances to be external kinesthetic representations of internal performances of personal prayer and individual philosophical reflection on traditional Kelantanese understandings of the self.

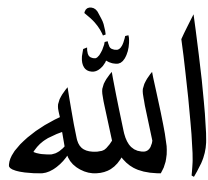


Figure 1: The word Allah written in Arabic.

Many *mak yong* performers acknowledge that their dance performances can include kinesthetic embodiments of prayer. The late *mak yong* master, Ali bin Ibrahim, or Pak Ali identified two movements that he referred to as *ibu tari*, the mother movements, the foundations of *mak yong* dance. The first movement, often referred to as the point of beginning, is the opening movement of the dance of the *Menghadap Rebab* and is repeated before the beginning of each new verse. The movement of the point of beginning is understood by many performers to be a physical inscription of Allah (Figure 1), its repeated performance an embodied reminder of the omnipresence, unity and greatness of God (Figure 2) [7,8]. The meanings attributed to the second mother movement, sometimes referred to as four are multivalent (Figure 3). The four raised fingers symbolize the four essential elements of earth, water, fire, and wind that are understood to compose the human body according to Kelantanese Malay humoralism. The delicate curvature of the wrist and the hyperextension of the fingers in this position is a physical reference to the idealized refined masculinity of Maharaja Sri Rama, the lead character of the epic of the Ramayana featured in Kelantanese shadow puppetry. The often involuntary fluttering of the four raised fingers that occurs when a *mak yong* performer's hands are held in the position of four can simultaneously signify a refinement of movement, the pulse of the human heart, or

even an embodied response to an internal wind felt rising within a performer during performance that causes their hands to flutter involuntarily, much in the way that wind rustles the leaves of a tree.



Figure 2: A detail of the right hand of Fatimah binti Abdullah in the position of *titik bermula*, the point of beginning, a movement often understood to be an embodied representation of the word Allah written in Arabic script. Photo: Patricia Hardwick, 2004.



Figure 3: Pak Yong Rahimah binti Zakaria demonstrates a hand position that is often interpreted by *mak yong* performers as corresponding to earth, water, fire, and wind, the four elements that compose the human body. This hand position can also be interpreted as representative of the five daily prayers required of Muslims, or the five pillars of Islam. Photo: Patricia Hardwick, 2005.

The Role of Music in Raising the Internal Winds

When *mak yong* performance is incorporated into *mak yong-main 'teri* healing rituals, *mak yong* songs are performed in *cara 'teri*, or *'teri* style [8]. Performing *mak yong* songs in *'teri* style involves speeding up the interlocking rhythms of the two *gendang* drums and adding the beaten brass percussion instruments of the hand held metal cymbals of the *canang*, and the *kesi* [8]. Variations in drumming speed are gauged by the *gendang* drummers to facilitate the raising of a patient's internal wind, or *angin*. Wind, one of the four humors understood to compose the human body, is a term used by Kelantanese Malays to describe internal human desire, and has been compared by medical anthropologist Carol Laderman to the western concept of temperament [10]. Few people are fortunate enough to obtain their desires, or live up to their personal talents; and this can cause a sense of imbalance in the force that drives an individual, as their wind becomes blocked. Symptoms of blocked wind are similar to those of psychological illnesses or depression as despondent patients are unable to sleep, and unwilling to eat or bathe. The bodies of once robust, healthy individuals suffering from illnesses of blocked wind are said to become wasted and thin and patients become unable to socially engage or independently care for themselves.

The goal of a *main 'teri* performance is assess to what type of blocked wind is causing a patient's affliction, and to facilitate its release through a ritual healing performance. A *main 'teri* performance begins by testing the various winds, beginning with the wind of *'teri*, then moving on to the wind of were-tiger, the wind of the midwife and the wind of the traditional healer, before continuing to the realm of the twelve demi-gods, a term used to refer to illnesses that can be cured through the performance of the traditional Kelantanese performing arts. The winds of the Kelantanese performing arts include the wind of dance, the wind of shadow puppetry, the wind of *mak yong*, and the wind of *silat*, a traditional Malay martial art. A performer of the Kelantanese traditional performing arts is said to deliver an inspired performance when they play with wind, channeling their passion into performance. Winds associated with Kelantanese traditional performing arts or with traditional healing professions including midwifery and the professions of traditional healers are understood to be hereditary and can be present in individuals without their knowledge. The descendants of traditional performers or traditional healers can thus be carriers of these winds, and may need to go through a *main 'teri* ritual performance to release ancestral winds that have become blocked as members of the younger generation rarely study traditional performance or healing practices.

There is a strong socio-psychological connection between the *gendang* drummers and a *mak yong-main 'teri* patient. According to Awang bin Omar, also known as Che Amat, a *mak yong-main 'teri* practitioner a traditional healer specializing in diseases of wind, the *gendang* drummers are

actually able to sense an individual patient's wind even before a patient is able to feel the wind rising within their own body. The addition of the metal cymbals of the *canang* and *kesi* syncopate to the interlocking rhythms of the two *gendang* drums. Performers credit their judicious control of this rhythmic complexity with enabling them to assist their patients to achieve *lupa*, or forgetting, an altered state of consciousness in which a patient's wind is said become unblocked, blowing freely within their body. During *lupa*, the state of forgetting, patients claim to be unaware of their dramatic actions. Patients are also unable to recall their actions after they have been released from their altered state.

Visions of Becoming: Imaginal Performances and the *Menghadap Rebab*

Recognizing the importance of thoughtful prayer, sacred imagery, and the power of the imagination to religious healing, American anthropologist Thomas Csordas states that "performance thus invites us- though we do not yet always accept the invitation- to go beyond the sequence of action and the organization of text to the phenomenology of healing and being healed [2]." Csordas examines how members of the American Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Catholics who have adopted ritual features of American Pentecostalism, employ "sequences of imagery not as elements in healing performance but as performances in their own right, as a kind of performance within performance that may not even be observable." [2] These events Csordas terms "imaginal performances" [2], that is, images, events, and visions that appear in the mind's eye of healers and patients and that are embodied during healing performances.

Many traditional *mak yong* performers actively describe the process of personal engagement with sacred imagery to be essential to the transformative power of a performance of the *Menghadap Rebab*. These imaginal performances were once regarded by *mak yong* performers as an important aspect of the *ilmu dalam*, or internal wisdom of *mak yong* performance. This section of the article will explore how two *mak yong* performers, Zainab binti Yacob, or Mok Jennab (see note 3)

Note 3 Zainab binti Yacob began to study *mak yong* in 1951 in the village of Kedemit, Tumpat, Kelantan under the tutelage of her senior relative Munah binti Bakar (Mek Munah). During a *mak yong* performance career that spanned over six decades in both ritual and entertainment contexts, Mok Jennab performed with several *mak yong* troupes including one headed by Mek Munah and her husband Pak Nik Hassan and another headed by Abdullah bin Awang and his wife Bidah binti Yusuf, or Bidah Bunga Tanjung. In 1968 Mok Jennab participated in the first *mak yong* performances to be documented on film by American ethnomusicologist William P. Malm. Her performances took her to the Malaysian states of Terengganu, Kedah, Selangor, Pahang and Kelantan. Her students include Siti Eshah binti Wan Mat Kib and Fatimah binti Abdullah. Mok Jennab died at the age of 85 in 2007 in the village of Kedemit, Tumpat, Kelantan.

and MD Gel bin Mat Dali (see note 4), or Pak Agel understand the engagement of prayer and visualization of sacred imagery as an important part of the internal performance of the *Menghadap Rebab*.

The *Menghadap Rebab* begins as performers enter into the performance space and sit in a cross-legged position known as *bertipuh* (Figure 4). The performer sits before the *rebab*, a three stringed spiked bowed lute that came to Malaysia from the Near East. The cross-legged position assumed by *mak yong* performers before the performance of the *Menghadap Rebab* is understood by many traditionally trained performers to mirror the fetal position assumed by an infant within the womb of its mother.

As Pak Agel explains: “The sitting position in the *Menghadap Rebab* is also symbolic of a baby within the womb [...] When we sit *bertipuh*, the two worlds have a similarity. When a baby is in the womb, it sits like this. After that when we face the *rebab* we also sit *bertipuh* and until we get to the stage where we pray. For Malays, as Muslims, we pray as we sit *bertipuh*. That is why the words ‘returning to tipuh’ it has a symbolic meaning [...] It represents an aspect of Islam” [oral interview with MD Gel bin Mat Dali, 2012].

In assuming the position of *bertipuh*, the position of a performer’s body echoes the position of the fetus in the womb, creating an embodied reminder of the miracle of each individual’s creation. Meditation on the power that brings life into the world while sitting in the position *bertipuh* can inspire sincere prayer and thanksgiving (Figure 5).

The late Mok Jennab, explained her personal process of prayer and reflection as she sat *bertipuh*, in the cross-legged fetal position before the *rebab*: “We enter into the *panggung*, we ask for our safety. Oh Allah, oh my God, I desire and pray that you will give long life, I don’t want anyone to make a mistake, I don’t want danger to befall anyone. Oh Allah, oh my God, it is not our power, but the power of Allah that enables us to be great performers. This is not to say that we perform for the fun of it. To perform this we ask for our safety, we ask for our old stories from our ancestors that lived before us. We sit like this as we did before when we asked, when we desired to come out of our place of origins. Out of our mother’s womb. We asked to come out of our mothers, we wanted to come out and see, to observe the heavens and the earth. That is why when a baby comes out it cries. [In this act] we ask that we are given safety and blessings, that our years will be many [...]” [oral interview with Zainab binti Yacob 2005].

Maternal imagery in *mak yong* is not limited to movement vocabulary or an individual performer’s personal engagement with sacred imagery, but resonates throughout the instrumentation of a *mak yong* orchestra (Figure 6). The

tetawak, or brass gongs, and the *gendang*, or the double-headed barrel drums covered in goatskin and cowhide both come in a mother-child pair (Figure 7).



Figure 4: Pak Yong Nisah binti Mamat sits in the position of *bertipuh* before the *rebab* during a *mak yong* performance in rural Kelantan. Photo: Patricia Hardwick, 2005.

The *rebab*, described by *rebab* maker Che Mat Jusoh, is a representation of a woman possessing a head, ears, neck, body, shoulders, chest, robe, hair, and feet [14]. A *rebab* is thought to possess female sexual characteristics including a waist, bottom, and even a single nipple [14]. Understanding the *rebab* in terms of female anatomy is linked to traditional myths told by *mak yong* performers of the creation of the first *rebab* out of the corpse of a devoted mother whose voice, reincarnated in the sound of the instrument, had the power to reach beyond death to soothe the broken heart of her pining child [13].

Note 4 MD Gel bin Mat Dali, or Pak Agel began to play music for *mak yong* performances when he was nine years old. Born into a *mak yong* family, he began to study acting techniques with his mother, Supiah binti Mat Ali and Ali bin Ibrahim. Pak Agel began to perform as a *mak yong* actor in 2000 and is exceedingly well versed in the philosophy of *mak yong* performance taught to him by his mother Mok Supiah and his formal teacher, Pak Ali.

Just as an infant waits quietly within its mother’s womb for the day of its birth, the *Pak Yong* or the lead performer, dressed as a divine king sits before the *rebab* on a blessed stage and waits for the sound of the *nyawa rebab*, the breath of the *rebab*, to breathe life into his or her song, the opening stanzas of the *Menghadap Rebab*: “A saga is about to unfold; There is much news to tell. Oh there arises a strong desire to hear That which I want to recount. A king, A country, Aaaaa He takes the trousers, wraps them about his legs. Our shirt we wrap around our body; The clothing sticks to the sweet skin. Ayo aaaa, Ayo We; We have finished our dressing, We hope the king wants to descend, Descend to walk, oh Miss! [. . .] He takes the trousers, and steps into them. The body enters the shirt. A sarong cloth, a man’s selendang, A cloth that is looped about body, tied at the waist, Seven times it meets its end, this cloth is named *cindai jate*” [oral interview with Zainab binti Yacob, 2005].



Figure 5: Abdul Kadir bin Dollah in prayerful contemplation before the *rebab*. Photo: Patricia Hardwick, 2006.



Figure 6: View one of a traditional mak yong orchestra. Instruments pictured from left to right: *canang-kesi*, *gendang anak*, *gendang ibu*. Photo: Lim Chuen Ming, 2013.



Figure 7: View two of a mak yong orchestra. Instruments pictured include the *gendang anak*, *gendang ibu*, *tetawak anak*, *tetawak ibu*, and the *rebab* played by Awang bin Omar (Che Amat). *Pak Yong*, Nisah binti Mamat. Photo: Lim Chuen Ming, 2013.

Malaysian theater scholar Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof argues that it is during the singing of these first stanzas of the *Menghadap Rebab* that the ritual legitimization and transformation of the *Pak Yong* from a mere performer into the character of the god-king takes place [4]. While Ghulam-Sarwar’s analysis of the transformative nature of the performance of the *Menghadap Rebab* for a *Pak Yong* is insightful, his observation only brushes the surface of the external transformation of the *Pak Yong* in relation to the role the actress will play during the subsequent performance of a tale. Interviews with Mok Jennab, and Pak Agel reveal that an internal transformation also occurs, as performers interpret the performance of this section of the *Menghadap Rebab* as a physical enactment of the story of our origins as human beings, each individual a

tiny metaphoric king, in the process of being clothed in royal regalia of flesh, bone, and skin within the womb.

Mok Jennab explains: “When we sit before [the rebab] and sing ‘a saga is about to unfold’, we relay a story about ourselves. We [infants in the womb] want to face people, to come out and see, observe the heavens and the earth. We recite about what God has done to our mothers, so that we may arise and come into being. . . at the time that we [sing] ‘they wilt as we carry them upon our heads,’ this is the time that we want to come out, come out of our mothers, as we come out, exit [from our mothers] our mothers fade, wilt. It is like two breaths, one has [vitality], one doesn’t have. We come out of our covering. If we don’t, we won’t be ready. That which we have, it comes out, exits, our placenta breaks, the baby cries [...]” [oral interview with Zainab binti Yacob, 2005].

Mok Jennab viewed her performance of the opening solo of the *Menghadap Rebab* as a reiteration of each individual’s own creation. She understood her sung accounts of the dressing of the *Pak Yong* to detail the development of a fetus within the maternal womb. To her, a performance of the *Menghadap Rebab* culminated in the symbolic rebirth of herself as an infant, brought into the world through great difficulty by a devoted mother. Mok Jennab held the view that life is cyclical: a child’s vitality waxes as its mother’s vitality wanes. This reiteration of one’s human origin was to her the power of the role of the *Pak Yong* (see note 5) [AUDIO].

Pak Agel eloquently elaborates on the multivalent meaning of the *Menghadap Rebab*, noting that the performance has meaning at a variety of levels (Figure 8). On the surface, the lyrics of the song of the *Menghadap Rebab* describe and the dancers kinesthetically embody the gentle sway of leaves, the blooming and fading of flowers, the swinging of a sarong cradle in the wind, the opening of a fighting cock’s wings, the uncoiling of a serpent, the raising of an elephant’s trunk. Yet, as Pak Agel explains, on a deeper level many practitioners understood these embodied representations as symbols of their own creation and birth.

“Truly the story in the song of the *Menghadap Rebab*, there is something for us to understand, but it is not always the same. One [level] of it tells of the natural world, and the like, because the lyrics mention trees, mention flowers, and also the actions of animals. [...] On a deeper level, it is as if we are speaking about

the story of birth, we are telling of the time that we ourselves as a child want to emerge from the being of our mother and so on” [oral interview with MD Gel bin Mat Dali, 2012].



Figure 8: MD Gel bin Mat Dali plays the ibu gendang during a mak yong performance in Kelantan. Photo: Patricia Hardwick: 2006.

An embryo within the maternal womb is understood by many Kelantanese healers as an incarnation of Dewa Muda, a divine demi-god, and the character of Dewa Muda is thought to be present in varying degrees in each individual. Dewa Muda is a personification of *nafsu*, or human desire and represents the immature aspect of ourselves, the eternal infant or inner child that is driven by desire rather than reason or rational thought. Kelantanese healers explain that the character of Dewa Muda, and by extension each individual human being, has three birth siblings that correspond to the placenta, the amniotic sac, and the birth waters. Most ritual healing performances of *mak yong* include episodes from the epic of *Dewa Muda* in which a patient, dressed in royal finery, embodies the character of Dewa Muda as a means to work through personal pathos. Skilled *mak yong* actors and actresses speak and sing on behalf of their patient and guide them through the dances.

Note 5 Please refer to the first audio link accompanying this article to hear Abdul Kadir bin Dollah, or Pak Kadir, one of the last traditionally trained male *Pak Yong* performing the entertainment version of the *Menghadap Rebab* with Rahimah binti Zakaria, Nisah binti Mamat, and Siti Eshah binti Wan Mat Kib. This audio recording was taken from the opening night of a performance of the *mak yong* play *Raja Tangkai Hati* that I commissioned and filmed from January 21, 2006- January 24, 2006 in the village of Gabus To’ Uban, Pasir Mas, Kelantan as part of my research. Pak Kadir begins to sing his version of the opening stanzas discussed above at 1.17. Pak Kadir currently resides in the state of Terengganu and is related to *mak yong* performers that migrated from the southern Thai state of Pattani into Malaysia in the mid-twentieth century. This recording captures the first time that he had performed the *Menghadap Rebab* as a *Pak Yong* in twenty-five years.

Dewa Muda's gender, like that of an infant forming the womb, or gender of a *Pak Yong*, is ambiguous, and only revealed when the character of Dewa Muda is named and personified by an individual in a *mak yong* performance.

As Pak Agel explains: "It is not certain if Dewa Muda is a man or a woman. Because we also, if now we have many scientists, when we want to know if the child in the womb is a boy or a girl we can go and get a scan, we can go and see, right? But in the time before, we did not yet know if [the baby] was a boy or a girl [...]. So it is within the *uchapkan* (the verses) of *mak yong*. 'The country has not yet been named, its identity not yet revealed' The body has not yet been named, before we break the story, Meaning that from there we have not yet begun [...] Meaning that when we go to a bit into the philosophy, we see these things, it is something like that thing with the representations in the womb. The child [in the womb] has not yet been named. We do not yet know if it is a boy or a girl [...] In a *mak yong panggung* it is not certain who will become Dewa Muda. If Manisah becomes Dewa Muda, meaning Dewa Muda is female, because Manisah is a woman, right? But if Pak Agel becomes Dewa Muda, meaning Dewa Muda is a male [...] Before this [the point in the performance that a performer or patient takes on the role of Dewa Muda] we cannot ascertain the identity of Dewa Muda, and whether [the character] is male or female" [oral interview with MD Gel bin Mat Dali, 2012].

The implicit process of transformation from human being to the avatar of a divine demi-god facilitated through the internal imaginal performances described by professional performers Mok Jennab and Pak Agel is made explicit in the context of a ritual *mak yong-main 'teri*. During a *mak yong-main 'teri* performance that I observed on August 14, 2005 in the village of Morak, Tumpat, Kelantan, professional *mak yong* performers Nisah binti Mamat and Siti Eshah binti Wan Mat Kib led patients Mek Bidah and her young daughter through a ritual version of the *Menghadap Rebab*. While Mek Bidah and her daughter are not professional performers, they are the descendents of *mak yong* performers and thus the recipients of the hereditary wind of *mak yong*. Mek Bidah and her daughter were diagnosed by the traditional healers with the wind of Dewa Muda. Aware of the strength of her hereditary winds, Mek Bidah made a vow to perform a *mak yong-main 'teri* every three to five years in order to release these winds and maintain her health.

As Nisah binti Mamat led Mek Bidah and her daughter through the process of transformation she sang of the excellent lineage of her patients, the incarnation of her patients in the womb of their mothers, the emergent identities of her patients as independent beings, and the ultimate ritualized transfiguration of her patients into the eternally youthful Dewa Muda, the son of the King of Java and the Princess of the Half-Concealed Moon. A transcription and translation of Mek Nisah's song of transformation is included below. Please refer to the second audio link accompanying this article to hear Mek Nisah's performance [AUDIO].

"La Young Royal, if you listen carefully then; if you listen well, oh so well oh. Because I want to relate to you Young Royal that you are a person of good lineage; your pedigree is that of wonderful Kings oh. Leaving one plane, la Young Royal you have much ahead of you then. Leaving one use, another use arises then. You arise, arise from your royal mother; Yes Young Royal you leave your royal mother. You arise as a child, you leave the child. You lose your name. Watch over our child, listen very carefully: your name is small Dewa Muda, from the air; your father's name is the King of Java; your mother's name is the Princess of the Half-Concealed Moon. They are people of good lineage that everyone has always approved of. Small Dewa Muda is a person of good lineage. You Young Royal must be watched over on the stage of Inu, the theater of Turas" (see note 6) [oral interview with Nisah binti Mamat, 2005].

Conclusion

A performance of the *Menghadap Rebab* combines metaphysical lyrics with prayerful movement, instrumentation representing the symbiotic relationship between mother and child, and the internal imaginal performances of *mak yong* actors, actresses, and patients to emphasize rebirth and renewal and to create a powerful performance of transformation in both ritual and entertainment contexts. This performance is a delicately spun web of prayerful thanksgiving, visions of renewal, metaphors of fertility, and rejuvenation woven together with carefully regulated percussion and stratified polyphony to facilitate an embodied experience of transcendence for its performers. This complex process of performance encourages seasoned practitioners and the patients they lead through ritualized performances to envision the recreation of their corporeal human existence through the metaphor of dressing a divine king, before inviting them to transcend their pedestrian human identity to embody the eternally youthful demigod Dewa Muda.

Before a performance of the *Menghadap Rebab*, the lead performer, or *Pak Yong*, physically echoes the descent of a demi-god from the Heavenly Kingdom as they enter the stage. Through its wafting, voicelike sound, the mother figure of the *rebab*, breathes life into the performance of the *Pak Yong* who sits before the *rebab* in a position that mirrors that of a fetus in the womb. During the opening aria of the *Menghadap Rebab*, a performer playing the role of *Pak Yong* engages in an

Note 6 The formulaic phrase, *panggung Inu, gelengge Turas*, the stage of Inu, the theater of Turas is often repeated in *mak yong* and *mak yong-main 'teri*. Inu is the prince of Koripan, a character found in the Panji cycle of tales whose stories and character are often intermingled with that of Maharaja Sri Rama in Kelantanese shadow puppet tradition *wayang siam*. Turas is the name once used in the now extinct Kelantanese shadow puppet tradition of *wayang jawa* to refer to the clown character known as Wok Long in *wayang siam*. Wok Long was created from the body dirt of Pak Dogol, also known as Semar, a beautiful demi-god that came to earth and in an act of compassion, transformed himself into a humble earthly form.

internal imaginal performance to reenact his or her own personal creation, the breath of the performer joining with that of a resurrected mother, in the form of the *rebab*, to sing of the miracle of the performer's conception and physical development. As the performer sings of the descent of the divine king from the Heavenly Kingdom, we learn from the narratives of Mok Jennab and Pak Agel that *mak yong* performers envision their own incarnation and descent from the womb, as they imagine their separation from their mothers to walk alone in the world of humanity.

Within the ritual context of a *mak yong-main 'teri*, the implicit transformation that is facilitated through prayer and the internal imaginal performances of professional *mak yong* performers like Mok Jennab and Pak Agel trained in *ilmu dalam*, the internal knowledge of *mak yong* performance is externalized and made explicit for patients. During a *mak yong-main 'teri*, *mak yong* masters dress their patients in the royal regalia of the *Pak Yong*, lead them through physical prayers embodied in *mak yong's* movement vocabulary, and sing to their patients a narration of their impeccable heritage, and their miraculous incarnation within their mother's womb, before they facilitate a patient's ritualized rebirth as the heavenly prince Dewa Muda, the eternal infant and personification of human desire.

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