

Healing Performances: Ethnographic Concepts and Emic Perspectives

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Abstract—This paper looks at healing performances as ethnographic expressions of local knowledge and culture embedded within the Malay psyche and *gemeinschaft*. As society develops and progresses, these healing performances are caught within conflicting trajectories which become compounded by the contestations of tradition, religious concerns, locality and modernity. As exemplifications of the Malay ethos, these performances practice common rituals, cater to the innate needs of the practitioners and serve the targeted, closed, local community. This paper traces the ethnographic methods in documenting these practices as rituals of healing in a post-modern world. It delineates the ethnographic concepts used to analyze these rituals, and to semiotically read the varied binarial oppositions and juxtapositions. The paper concludes by highlighting the reconciliatory processes involved in maintaining these ritual performances as exemplifications of the Malay ethos playing an important role in the re-aligning, re-balancing and healing of the Malay community's psyche.

Keywords—*Angin*/winds, *Semangat*/spirits, Traditional Theatres, Trance.

I. INTRODUCTION: HEALING PERFORMATIVITIES AND WORKING PARAMETERS

THIS paper is concerned with the rituals of traditional performances which function as healing performativities in the evolution and development of local knowledge, wisdom and Malay aesthetics [1] in its pre-modern times. Products of the agricultural community done by the small-scale farmers, fishermen, rubber-tappers and odd job workers; these are the *gemeinschaft* of the local and closed Malay community. Each of these artistic, creative representations is intertwined as seen in the functions they fulfill to the communities they represent and serve. These societies are inspired in their imaginings and creativity by the dominant natural environment they all share, the oral traditions, legends, and myths which continue to inspire the creative impetus and impacted the collective conscience of these communities. These traditional Malay curing rituals were created to be played (*dimainkan*) [1] as Malay village communal play/production whether they are called: *makyung*, *mainpeteri*, *makyung-peteri*, *mekmulung*, *saba*, *rodan*, *ulek mayang* or *wayang kulit*. They all share common traits, fulfill common needs and serve the community at large by healing and curing members of the community.

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Performed on specially made make-shift/temporary stages known as the *bangsal*, these are usually small, hut like structures, with thatched roofs, without a raised stage, lightings, sounds systems or even seats for the audiences. Yet these performance spaces must have rituals to open (*buka*-) and close (*tutup panggung*) [2] the stage. The ritual of *buka panggung* is to welcome and ceremonially invite the supernatural beings and the invisible "teachers" to participate in the theatre performance, to request their permission and to seek their blessings. This is to ensure that these beings will not disrupt the performance or disturb the players and audiences. "Opening the Stage" is also a ritual to honor these nether beings. These rituals are accompanied by the recitation of *mantras*, the serving of specially prepared food and prepared artefacts to accommodate the healing processes. The ritual of closing the stage is to thank the supernatural beings and to ceremoniously send them off at the end of the play. In all these healing rituals, the most important element is the calling of the supernatural beings to enter into the body of the medicine man, known variously as the *tokputeri*/*tokminduk*/*tokbomoh*/*bobohizan*/*bobolian* to enable him to make a correct diagnosis and find a cure for the sick person's disease. It is also to re-centre, re-align, and re-balance the souls and spirits, not only of the doers/practitioners, but also members of the audience who have lost consciousness and have gone into a trance and have entered the world of the unknown. Later, at the end of the curing performances, these people would "awaken" and come out and come back from that unknown world, or from wherever they had been, spiritually, to re-enter the world of everyday reality and of consciousness, as they physically come out of their trance, become aware and conscious. More importantly, they are now healed and whole again.

The audiences are not regarded as guests for they are part of the performing community, and have indirectly or directly, contributed to the making of the theatre production and the healing processes which involved many steps and layers, adhering to principles and curing protocols. This does not apply to etic [3], "outsiders" who are not from, or part of the matrix of the emic doing community. Thus, when a researcher sees a traditional Malay curing performance on site, often he/she does not consider himself/herself to be an "audience" in the formal sense of the word; he/she is more the etic observer, the investigator, the outsider "other" divorced from the doing, we/insider emic community/participants. Since the researcher is not part of, and do not belong to the culture of the theatre community, he/she is able to dissect the many aesthetical elements and see them as artistic, creative inventions of a particular community. Nevertheless, as an outsider-observer, it

is difficult for the researcher to be enfolded by, and to succumb to the aesthetics of the production and be embraced by its innate, quintessential being of the angin (wind), the semangat (geist/spirit), the presence of the nether beings or of the success and effectiveness of the healing processes. In general, researchers do not adhere to Coleridge's edict to "willingly suspend my disbeliefs" [4] for these "disbeliefs" are the tools enabling me to see, read, situate and analyze the healing processes, the signifiers and the concomitant signified contextually.

II. ETHNOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS: READING CURING RITUALS, EMIC AESTHETICS AND MALAY MIMESIS

Since Aristotle, it has been acknowledged that theatre is a complex and challenging process of mimesis [5], further compounded by the fact that theatre is a collective effort, dependent on the abilities and talents within the community. Mimetic efforts are clearly discernible in traditional Malay healing performances which have amalgamated the empirical world with the spiritual world, the conscious world with the unconscious world, the natural world with the supernatural world, reality with illusion [1]. As such, the mimetic processes of Malay traditional healing performances and performativities happen along different trajectories, for they involve not only the actors/doers of rituals but also the deeds of the medicine man, his helper-interpreter, the musicians, the supernatural beings/spirits and other participants, in the physically and spiritually demarcated performance space. It encompasses also, by extension, the audience and the community of onlookers in their viewing spaces. These healing rituals and performances are manifestations of local knowledge and wisdom which can be one of the means of delving into the ethos and quintessential being of a society and its culture, although these may not be blatantly discernible or exhibited. These varied curing/healing rituals and performances belong exclusively to the many different Malay communities of Malaysia. As mimetic products, they exhibit local knowledge through local creativity, within their very own culture and society. Understandably, these different communities vehemently protect and prevent the forms, contents and aesthetics of such local knowledge from changing, evolving and ultimately becoming "modern". These healing performances are the collective, artistic, cultural products, the curing forms and rituals of the Malays from the different states in Malaysia, which were created by and for them. They are not played for the appreciation of the "other", namely the community outside of the doing states, who would not be able to penetrate the closed exclusivity of the doing emic communities nor understand the various local dialects. These etic others, are still the "other", although they come from within the national community. These etic observers would not be able to amalgamate the local wisdom, understand the story, appreciate the songs or enjoy the risqué jokes, for they do not speak the same language/dialect, even though they might be able to appreciate the healing phenomena.

For the local, emic society, these cultural, artistic, functional products of the village communities help to foster social interactions, strengthen the *esprit de corps*, heal their illnesses, balance their *angins/winds*, adjust their *semangats/spirits* and make them whole. These closed events of a very exclusive nature, happening within the enclaves of village communities will further enhance their feelings of togetherness and empower their sense of being "us". The individual is both powerless and unwilling to change and transform these collective, emic aesthetics and healing functions to include the "others", even from within their own country. These different healing performances incorporate music in the form of a Malay orchestra comprising of the *rebab, kesi, canang, seruling*, drum, gong either as stringed, membranous or wind instruments which are simply made, crafted and played by self-taught village artistes. They tell stories which are based on local myths and legends, singing songs and performing healing mantras and rituals in a dialect which only they can understand and appreciate. These closed characteristics prevent these curing rituals from being able to accommodate change and develop according to the new, progressive and challenging times. Another aesthetic aspect of this healing theatre are the dialogues, the coming in and out of character, the interchangeability of characters happening amongst the *tokbomoh*, his assistants/interpreters, and the supernatural beings as manifested through the dances or movements and gestures which they make when communicating with the sick person (and or, with the many spirits disturbing or inhabiting the body of the sick person) [6]. The dance-acting movements, the dialogues, the breaking into songs, the coming out and getting into character either as the *tokbomoh* (called by various names depending on the curing performances found in the different states, or supernatural beings, all exhibit forms of local knowledge and aesthetics which are spellbinding and unique, and are aimed at the sick person, members of the immediate and extended family and or the audience and community at large [7], [8].

III. HEALING PERFORMATIVITIES: CONTESTATIONS OF TRADITION, RELIGION AND MODERNITY

Performers in traditional healing rituals are almost always touched by the *angins/winds* and *semangats/spirits* to enable them, not only to perform, but also to become unconscious and enter into trance at the climax of the play. This affects not only the emic performers but also some members of the audience. When this happens, players leave the realm of performance and of staged reality, while the audiences leave the everyday realm of social reality, from within their viewing spaces, to enter the realms of the unconscious, or of the supernatural, or of the spiritual. All these become possible when they enter into a trance and become unconscious [7]-[10]. These phenomena have transformed traditional curing rituals into controversial performances and traditional contestations of cultural aesthetics, the Islamic religion and state, religious power because the doers/performers of healing performativities are village artistes, whose religion is Islam, yet they produce creative, syncretic, imaginary works and

indulge in their artistic pursuits derived from their inherited *semangat*/soul/ spirits, the call of their *angins* (winds) and Langkasuka aesthetics based on animism and the Hindu-Buddha religion [1].

Traditional healing performances continue to confront these controversial problems and contestations for these performances are the innate, cultural, traditional heritage of the Malays which also serve to cleanse, heal, balance and make well, both the local individuals and the community at large.

When the culture and the society of a community change, the aesthetics too would evolve and change; but where curing rituals and traditional performativities are concerned, this did not happen, for the aesthetics, beliefs and curing elements of traditional Malay theatres born, bred, nurtured in the *bangsals*, have remained static, closed and time warped. Even before the state government of Kelantan started to censure and legally prohibit the doing of these traditional curing performances, the artistic form itself has exhibited its inability to either, strongly maintain or change the form of the performances. State policies only serve to hasten its demise. The real cause for the dearth of traditional performances are their closed aesthetics, their local, emic proclivities, their inability to attract young audiences outside of their community/state and their failure to encourage and please new audiences even from their very own, closed community. Youths from these communities have become disgruntled, uninterested, and are no longer appreciative of these traditional healing performances. These traditional Malay performances have also been labeled as *haram* (forbidden in the religious sense of the word), and therefore sinful to be doing them as they contain unIslamic elements and go against the very core of the Islamic religion because of the involvement of the numerous spirits who had to be cajoled, bribed, feted.

A contradictory dilemma emerges, for although legally banned (in the state of Kelantan), Malay, traditional, healing practitioners, away from prying state eyes and without, (sometimes with), state knowledge, still continue to be performed, for **not** performing these healing rituals, will make the practitioners become unwell. When they are touched by the winds/*angins* and spirits/*semangats*, they must assuage all these so as to heal their ills, balance their spirits and make them feel better and whole again.

IV. TRADITIONAL HEALING PERFORMANCES: CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE

Nowadays, traditional and curing performances continue to be confronted with various problems and challenges, even as they attempt to perpetuate the closed paradigms of their performativities. The foremost challenge comes in the form of a variety of modern, technologically advanced aesthetics which seem to appeal to the young and the "other", etic communities. The "old", "unmodern" healing practices are no longer functional when hospitals and modern cures are easily available. The young are further empowered for they have the sanctions and blessings of the Islamic religion not to get involved. The second challenge lies in the fact that the

makers/doers of traditional performances are already very old, exhausted and lacking the energy, vitality and imagination to train new apprentices or to make these curing performances relevant to their now modern community and society. In their old age, they, too, seem to repent and realize that they no longer want to be involved or even talk about these healing performances as they seemed to want to prepare for their own deaths. This becomes more pronounced for those practitioners who are sick or have been medically diagnosed to be ill. The third important challenge comes from within traditional performances themselves: from the forms, the aesthetics, the belief systems and the rituals of these performances. The fourth factor is the religious edicts and polemics issued against curing rituals and performances. There is this ying-yang attitude, a tussle of tradition, culture, religion, state power. These are the many constructs and trajectories within which healing performances must negotiate.

V. CONCLUSION AND POST-SCRIPT

What is obvious is that we are now entrapped in a vicious circle where the banning and encouragement/perpetuation of traditional curing performativities exist within two differing polemics and along a continuum of conflicting needs. This continuum of oppositions lies in the awareness that traditional healing performance structures and performativities are unique exemplifications of local knowledge and present interesting and unique aesthetics which must be nurtured, rehabilitated, rejuvenated so as to enhance their forms and structures as the nation's cultural heritage, tradition and ethos of the Malay community. But the contestations are too many for they exist not only within the performance matrix, religious edicts, emic closeness, but also, amongst the practitioners themselves. They, above all, must contest with their own needs, *angins*, *semangats* and ultimately their religious beliefs and personal regrets, if any, consciousness and conscience.

Ultimately, what is important is the notion and the sense that these emic doers are healed, and that by extension, members of the community are also re-balanced for they have been re-aligned through the processes of these healing ritual performances. At the end of these performances, amongst the community, there emerges a sense of wellbeing and of the community becoming well and restored. Ultimately perhaps, this is what makes healing performances important. What needs to be asked are: for how long will they last? What are the future constructs of these healing performances as they must surely re-negotiate, re-align and perhaps even re-construct their ethnographic importance not only amongst their emic doers and community, but also amongst the etic observers and commentators. Will they just become cultural relics in a post-modern world, or just academic subjects in institutions of higher learning?

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