

# Main Puteri Traditional Malay Healing Ceremony

M. G. Nasuruddin, S. Ishak

**Abstract**—This paper deals with the traditional Malay healing ritualistic ceremony known as *Main Puteri*. This non-invasive intervention uses the vehicle of performance to administer the healing process. It employs the performance elements of *Makyung*, that is, music, movements/dance and dramatic dialogue to heal psychosomatic maladies. There are two perspectives to this therapeutic healing process, one traditional and the other scientific. From the traditional perspective, the psychosomatic illness is attributed to the infestations/possessions by malevolent spirits. To heal such patients, these spirits must be exorcised through placating them by making offerings. From the scientific perspective, the music (sonic orders), movements (kinetic energy) and smell (olfactory) connect with the brain waves to release the chemicals that would activate the internal healing energy. Currently, in *Main Puteri*, the therapeutic healing ritual is no longer relevant as modern clinical medicine has proven to be more effective. Thus, *Main Puteri* is an anachronism in today's technologically advanced Malaysia.

**Keywords**—Exorcism, *Main Puteri*, Shamans, Therapeutic Healing.

## I. INTRODUCTION: OF SHAMANS AND HEALINGS

IN ancient times before the advent of scientific medicine, the arts played an integral role in the healing process of a community. Movements, sounds (music) and role play were used by the Shamans in healing ceremonies to ward off and to exorcise evil spirits, to invoke the spirits to bestow good fortunes on the community. In the case of illness such healing ceremonies were combined with the use of traditional herbs (which were in fact medicinal plants that contain drugs) to cure certain ailments.

Thus, the shamans employed both oral (invasive) and non-invasive interventions to address both the physical and the psychological self. Traditional medicines as prepared by the Shamans were the precursor of modern day scientific pharmacology. While the diagnostic process employed then depended on the invocation of the spirits as well as the empirical methods of diagnosis developed by the Shamans through the years of involvement in healing process, it has today been replaced by modern scientific diagnostic methods of identifying and treating the illness.

Thus, with the advent of scientific knowledge and technology, the arts as a source of therapeutic healing has been neglected and is now almost forgotten and considered as irrelevant. Only in certain communities in the east as in

Malaysia and Indonesia, and in the West in Mexico and South America, such traditional healing are still being practiced. Such practices are found in rural societies where modern health care is inadequate or beyond the reach of common people.

In Malaysia, therapeutic healing has for ages been a feature of traditional medicine. It is practiced in Kelantan in the form of *Main Puteri* which uses, the music, movements and spirit genealogy of *Makyung* (a traditional theatre which incorporates dramatic dialog, music and dance) to heal psychosomatic maladies [1]. Such healing ceremonies associated with traditional theatres, which are both individual and communal affairs abound in the rural areas.

A *Wayang Kulit* (shadow theatre which uses puppets whose shadows are projected on to a screen) performance can be performed to redress individual cerebral tensions or imbalance resulting in depressions by way of reactivating or reinstating his *Semangat* (*Angin*) or spiritual energy.

Alternately, the community may elect for a communal cleansing ceremony (*SemahKampung*) by having any one of the traditional theatre performances, such as *Wayang Kulit*, *Makyung*, *Mek Mulung*, *Wayang Jawa*, *Barongan/ Kuda Kepangor Menora* over a period of three, five or seven days. This cleansing ceremony also involves exorcism.

### A. Main Puteri As Therapeutic Healing

*Main Puteri*, a traditional therapeutic healing process, treats mainly psychosomatic ailments, psychological neurosis, depression or those who needs to revitalize their psychic energy called *angin*. Ailments, supposedly the result of being possessed by malevolent spirits, have led to the need to exorcise these evil elements to cure the sick person.

The psychological ailments, which manifest itself in the form of depression, strange behavior patterns, are the result of social, marital problems and necromantic arts. Then there is the *angin* or *semangat* ailment that causes internal imbalance of the spiritual energy.

The *angin/ semangat* or internal psychic energy in a person is the result of the cumulative experiences of the family, their ancestors and their environments [2]. For example, the siblings of *Makyung* performers inherit from their parents or grandparents or great-grand parents the *Makyung* cultural and spiritual psychic energy. This psychic energy will have to be activated periodically through attending or participating in *Makyung* performances. They would feel listless and lethargic if their mental and physical selves do not reverberate with the music, movements and the *ucap* (dialogue and chanting) of a *Makyung* performance.

*Angin/Semangat* is the psychic energy of a person. Unlike the BP, ECG, ECC, which can be measured, psychic energy cannot be qualitatively accounted for it permeates the self that

Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin is with the Long Range Research Grant, (LRGS) Ministry of Education, Government of Malaysia (e-mail: mdghouse\_nasuruddin@yahoo.com).

Solehah Ishak is with the Faculty of Film, Theatre & Animation, University Technology MARA and has a Long Range Research Grant (LRGS) from the Ministry of Education, Government of Malaysia (e-mail: solehah\_ishak@yahoo.com).

consists of the mind and the soul as well as the physical brain. The physical and emotional behavior of a person reflects the state of the psychic energy [3].

Traditionally, it is believed that when the psychic energy is in a state of imbalance, the person exhibits psychosomatic cerebral and emotional aberrations and inconstancies, which are explained as being possessed by spirits/demons and other beings from the nether world.

Usually such belief is embedded in the religious cultural matrix of the communal psychic. As a result, psychosomatic maladies are attributed to the work of spirits through possession or activities that have provoked the wrath of the spirits. This is a convenient and accepted practice of explaining any deviations from the normal behavior consonant with the communal belief system.

Thus elaborate exorcism rituals are created and installed by the shaman whose standing in the community is based on his efficacy and ability to cure the sick person. Such ceremonies involve elements of performance such as music, movements, acting and "trance". Through the use of these performance elements, the Shaman is able to exhibit his prowess and become a master of ritualistic complications that gives him an exclusive status. This is so because not anybody can master these performance elements and also connect with the nether dimensions [4].

To identify these spirits, the Shaman employ movements, masks, idols, vocal inflexions or other paraphernalia. For example, its roar and movements represent the spirit of the tiger; likewise the spirit of the serpent and other creatures associated with the spiritual dimension will be represented with their own characteristic movements and sounds. Thus the shaman imitates these performance elements to give a visual image of the spirits in order to facilitate the patients and the audience to believe in his healing efficacy. When there are masks designated to particular spirits (spirit masks), the shaman wears them to facilitate him into the role of the spirit and convince the audience of its authenticity.

This spirit genealogy is animistic based which accords a spiritual presence to almost all natural phenomena and certain man made artifacts such as masks, idols and other iconographic representations. The main spirits are those of the forest, mountains, rivers, rain, thunder, and the four elements of air, water, fire and earth. Next comes the animal spirits like those of the tiger, monkey, snake, elephant and others.

These spirits are both benevolent and malevolent. There are also the spirits embedded in the *Wayang Kulit* and *Makyung* performances. From the *Wayang Kulit* we have the spirits of the main characters such as Sri Rama, Ravana, Batara Guru and from *Makyung* we get the spirits of Jin Selakah Tunggal Makan Nasi Mentak, Dewa, and Muda [5].

These spirits are invoked and consulted so as to determine the nature of the patients' ailments.

This particular *Main Puteri* combines the healing ceremony with the performance of a *Makyung*. The elements in this healing ceremony are the musical ensemble, the Tok Minduk and Tok Teri, and the offerings.

A traditional musical ensemble consisting of a *rebab*, a pair of *gendang*, and a pair of gongs form the standard *Makyung* musical ensemble [6]. For the *Main Puteri* healing ceremony additional instruments, specifically those of the *Wayang Kulit* instruments such as the *serunai*, *gedombak*, *geduk*, *canang* are used and are brought to the healing arena. It also serves to accompany the chanting, singing and the movements of the Tok Minduk and Tok Puteri.

## II. THE ROLE OF TOK PUTERI AND TOK MINDUK

Tok Puteri is a Shaman who serves as an intermediary between the inhabitants of the real and the nether world. Tok Minduk, who can also be the *Rebab* player, is Tok Puteri's partner and sounding board for it is he who engages and guides the Tok Puteri to the relevant spirits.

The household and patients who organize this healing ceremony will prepare an assortment of food and paraphernalia as offerings to the invoked spirits. It also includes the recitation of mantras.

The first stage is the opening ceremony in which the shaman recites the prayers and mantras to placate the spirits of the four corners and those of the earth, air (wind), fire and water as well as the spirits of the forest and the *kampongs/villages* to solicit their blessings for the healing rituals. One is the *Buka Panggung* (Opening Ceremony) which is a process to sanctify and consecrate the physical elements of the performance, namely, the space, the musical instruments, the offerings and those involved in the healing process. These are the Tok Minduk, Tok Puteri, musicians and *Makyung* performers as well as the audience.

Stage two is the consecration of the musical instruments, the *rebab*, *serunai*, drums and gongs. The Shaman and the musicians believe that each instrument has its own spirit and thus has to be evoked to affect a sonorous and enchanting sound. This is done by using a lighted candle so as to "smoke" these instruments by turning over the flame. Each instrument is then sounded. When all the instruments have been consecrated, the ensemble plays a musical piece heralding the third stage of the ceremony.

In stage three, the ensemble plays a musical interlude, not only as a warm up, but also to prepare the patients and the audience. It is also to announce the imminent commencement of the healing ceremony. The musical pieces played are selected from the *Makyung* repertoire, such as *Kijang Mas*, *Saudara*, *Mengambun*, *Mengulik*, *Sedayong Pakyung*, and *Sedayong Makyung* among others.

In stage four, the Tok Puteri does the preliminary invocation of the spirits accompanied by the *rebab* and the musical ensemble. This is the preamble as the Tok Puteri prepares himself for the task of identifying the spirits that have caused the illness.

The end of this invocation marks the beginning of stage five when the patients are led in and are seated in the centre of the performance area behind the Tok Puteri, as they face the Tok Minduk (the *rebab* player).

This is followed with the process of identifying the malevolent spirits that are responsible for causing the illness

of the patients. The Tok Minduk who is the *rebab* player assists the Tok Puteri in identifying the spirits by engaging in a dialogue with him. It is executed in the following manner.

The Tok Minduk, accompanied by the musical ensemble, plays one of the *Makyung* songs such as the *Kijang Mas*, *Saudara*, or *Kisah Barat*. The Tok Puteri sings the aria while the Tok Minduk and the musicians provide the choral responses.

After the *Makyung* musical piece, the *serunai* (end blown flute) player comes in playing the song of *Laguperang* that accompanies the gyrating movements of the Tok Puteri as he attempts to contact and identify the spirit that has caused the illness. He gyrates shaking his head, body first in a sitting position, then in a standing position before he finally starts to heaves and shakes his torso move around. At times the Tok Puteri is on all fours, crouching on the floor as he swings his head from side to side.

Now possessed by the spirit, the Tok Puteri then sits facing the Tok Minduk who asks the spirit to identify itself. After a series of dialogue in the vein of a *Makyung* performance (acting), the spirit is finally identified, but it turns out that it is not the one which is responsible for the patients' illness.

The Tok Puteri then repeats the movements accompanied by the *serunai* and the ensemble to release the spirit that had just possessed him. At the same time he explores the nether world to locate the spirits which are responsible for the patients' illness.

After the previous spirit has left, another spirit would then possess the Tok Puteri again. He faces the Tok Minduk who poses him a series of questions to ascertain the identity of the spirit. If it is still not the right one, the Tok Puteri repeats his movements and dialogues with the Tok Minduk until the correct spirit that has caused the illness is identified.

Following the identification of the spirit which has possessed the Tok Puteri, it is the spirit's turn to then ask the Tok Minduk why it has been invoked. The Tok Minduk explains to the spirit that the reason for it being invoked was because it has caused the illness of the patients. The spirit then sets the conditions for it to vacate the body of the patient or patients.

It demands food like white chicken, yellow rice (*nasikunyit*), coins, threads, etc. A "bargaining" session then takes place between the spirit represented by the Tok Puteri and the Tok Minduk. After both parties agree to the terms, the Tok Puteri executes his shaking and vibrating movements in a standing position and sometimes on all fours, in a kneeling position.

The Tok Puteri then touches the heads, shoulders, backs and legs of the patients. At this juncture the patients start to move, shaking to the accompaniment of the musical ensemble. They shake their heads, bodies and arms in a sitting, kneeling, standing position and walking position. These movements are heightened movements ranging from normal to aggressive movements.

From the traditional perspective, the patients move in such a manner because of the process of cleansing and exorcising the spirit or spirits that have possessed them. The shaking

movements indicate the vibrations caused by the spirit as it resists the exorcising efforts, but eventually it leaves. This is then followed by more gyrations and vibrations, which supposedly discharge the negative elements (toxic) left by the spirits.

The body movements of the Tok Puteri and the patients provide the visual elements of healing, representing forces within and without the patients' bodies reacting and interacting. Such visual spectacle gives credence to the Tok Puteri's healing prowess.

At the end of this segment, the ceremony pauses and the patients leave the *bangsal* (performance area) to enter the house.

They emerge after an interval of 15 to 20 minutes, dressed in the full finery of *Makyung* performers, specifically the lead character, Pakyong and the chorus, the Jong Dong Dang (Ladies-in-waiting) to begin stage six, which is the final segment of the healing process, that is, the *Makyung* performance follows.

For the first night a *Makyung* excerpt is performed usually the segment of the opening sequence up to the comic parts taking place between the Pak Yong and the *Perans* (clowns).

The second night of the ritualistic healing ceremony is much more elaborate with the offerings and props arranged in front of the Balai Persembahan (performance area).

The same introductory opening ceremony and healing protocol and process were repeated. After the healing ceremony the patients re-enter in *Makyung* costumes as Jong dang Dong (chorus) to begin the *Makyung* play of *DewaMuda*.

*Dewa Muda* is a mystical play combining both the real and the nether (*kayangan*) world, which is a different level of existence. It is regarded as a potent play that usually follows a *Main Puteri* healing ceremony.

The play lasted from midnight to dawn. At the end of the play, all the offerings and the props are carried to the river and floated down stream out to sea, symbolizing the exorcism of the spirits. With that the *Main Puteri* healing ceremony comes to an end. These patients are deemed healed at the end of the performance [7].

### III. CONCLUSION

*Main Puteri* is a dying therapeutic healing art, mainly confined to the older generation, who were brought up in the old ritualistic tradition, believing in the existence of spirits that affect their lives as well as believing in the *angin* in the psychic self which needs to be periodically balanced. It is now no longer an integral element in the life of the community.

In the old days when modern clinical medicine (read hospitals) were confined to certain urban areas and were not available in the rural hinterland, traditional healing was the main source of health care. But now with modern hospitals and government and private clinics with state of the art clinical treatment accessible to almost all of the population except those residing in the remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak, traditional healing ceremony like the *Main Puteri* has become an anachronism.

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